

**Accidents Without Subjects:
Classical Logic, Eucharistic Doctrine, and the Limits of Metaphysical Explanation**

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Abstract

In this study I investigate the metaphysical, logical, and epistemological tensions generated by the classical doctrine of transubstantiation, focusing especially on the Thomistic claim that in the Eucharist the sensible accidents of bread and wine remain without their natural subject. I identify this configuration as the “inverse” of divine simplicity whereas God is “a substance without accidents,” the Eucharist presents “accidents without a subject.” I further examine whether the classical framework of substance and accident, act and potency, immutability and simplicity can coherently sustain such an inversion or whether it requires conceptual exceptions that exceed the limits of metaphysical explanation. Methodologically, the study employs comparative metaphysics, textual-historical analysis of patristic and scholastic sources, and cross-tradition theological comparison (e.g., Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, and Zwinglian). This is further supplemented by contemporary logical evaluation, scientific-philosophical critique, and biblical analysis of the sensory, public pattern of miracles in Scripture. These methods allow assessment of both the internal coherence of the Thomistic model and its external plausibility in light of modern metaphysical and empirical expectations. The study also evaluates Aquinas’s proposal that dimensive quantity serves as a metaphysical “placeholder” enabling accidents to persist without a subject. It considers whether this resolves or simply relocates the logical problem, especially when contrasted with biblical miracles that engage the senses in ways the Eucharistic change does not. I further aim to clarify the conceptual architecture of the doctrine and to evaluate its defensibility across philosophical, scientific, and ecumenical contexts. The goals are to produce a clearer account of the commitments required to affirm transubstantiation, the tensions inherent in sustaining accidents without a subject, the comparative strengths of alternative Eucharistic models, and the epistemic reasons the doctrine persists as a “mystery of faith.” Ultimately, I argue that while transubstantiation is internally coherent within its Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, it remains the most metaphysically demanding model of real presence, and therefore, one whose acceptance depends less on demonstrative reason than on one’s epistemic position toward ecclesial authority, metaphysical realism, and the theological logic of trust.¹

¹ From the outset readers might *feel* tension in this claim; however, I will point out that this is not contradictory. It is a distinction between coherence (no internal contradiction) and epistemic justification (how one comes to accept it). In other words, the point I am stressing is that the model works *if* you grant the metaphysical premises. But those premises themselves require a certain epistemic posture (trust in ecclesial authority, metaphysical realism, etc.). Thus, this is philosophically sound.

1. Introduction

The doctrine of transubstantiation occupies one of the most philosophically intricate positions in the history of Christian thought. It stands at the intersection of classical metaphysics, biblical interpretation, and ecclesial authority, requiring theologians to navigate categories that, as we shall see, stretch the limits of human reason. At the heart of the doctrine lies a striking claim: that in the Eucharist, the substance of bread and wine is wholly transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ while the sensible accidents remain unchanged. As this paper notes, configuration produces a metaphysical inversion of divine simplicity, for whereas God is “a substance without accidents,” the Eucharist presents “accidents without a subject”. This inversion raises profound questions including the coherence of Aristotelian categories, the nature of divine causality, and the epistemic boundaries of sacramental theology.

Classical Christian metaphysics (e.g., that especially as articulated by Augustine, the Cappadocians, and Aquinas) distinguishes sharply between substance and accident, actuality and potentiality, simplicity and composition. These distinctions further ground the doctrine of divine simplicity according to which God is immutable, non-composite, and pure act. This paper seeks to summarize this framework succinctly that if God is immutable... He cannot undergo the changes implied by accidents, and if He is simple, He cannot be composed of substance and accidents. Yet the Eucharistic miracle appears to reverse these principles by sustaining accidents without their natural subject, a move Aquinas attempts to defend as a unique divine act that suspends the ordinary dependence relations of created being.

Thus, this paper examines the logical, metaphysical, and epistemological tensions generated by this doctrinal claim. It explores the internal coherence of the Thomistic model, the challenges posed by modern scientific and philosophical frameworks, and the degree to which the doctrine aligns (or fails to align) with the biblical pattern of miracles, which are consistently public, sensory, and empirically verifiable. As this paper points out, biblical miracles engage sight,

hearing, touch, taste, and smell, whereas the Eucharistic change is defined precisely by the absence of any sensory alteration. This contrast raises the question of whether transubstantiation represents a coherent extension of biblical supernaturalism or a metaphysical exception sustained primarily by ecclesial authority.

The study also situates the doctrine within the broader ecumenical landscape by comparing mainly Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, and Zwinglian models of Eucharistic presence. This research also evaluates alternative metaphysical frameworks such as personalist, relational, symbolic-realist, and even quantum analogies, and goes on to assess their strengths and weaknesses relative to the classical account. Finally, it considers whether transubstantiation remains logically defensible in a post-Aristotelian intellectual environment or whether it functions primarily as a “mystery of faith,” i.e., a doctrinal commitment that transcends but does not contradict reason.

Therefore, by tracing the conceptual architecture of divine simplicity, the metaphysics of substance and accident, the biblical logic of miracles, and the epistemic claims of ecclesial authority, this paper seeks to clarify the philosophical stakes of Eucharistic doctrine. Its aim is neither polemical nor just historical but analytical. Thus, it is to illuminate the internal logic of the classical model, to identify its points of tension, and to evaluate its coherence in light of contemporary metaphysical and scientific standards. In doing so, it asks a question that lies at the heart of Christian sacramental theology: What does it mean to affirm a real presence that is metaphysically radical, empirically undetectable, and theologically indispensable?

2. Divine Simplicity and the Absence of Accidents in God

The Concept of Divine Simplicity

Within the classical Christian tradition (articulated particularly by Augustine in the West, the Cappadocians in the East, and later by Thomas Aquinas in the middle ages) the doctrine of divine simplicity encompasses the theological claim that God possesses no accidents whatsoever. This doctrinal teaching stands in deliberate contrast to the metaphysical structure of created beings for whom the distinction between substance and accident is both real and necessary. And although Aristotelian metaphysics treats “substance” as the bearer of accidents, classical theism insists that God is not a substance in the same genus as creatures but is instead *actus purus* (Pure Act, or Pure Actuality, or the Purely Actualized Actualizer) whose mode of being excludes the very conditions that make accidents possible. The exclusion of accidents from the divine nature logically follows from three interlocking metaphysical principles: immutability, non-composition, and the absence of potentiality.²

The First Principle: Immutability

The first principle (immutability) arises from the classical principle that accidents necessarily imply change. For example, in Aristotelian ontology an accident is that which may be present or absent without altering the essence (or substance) of a being.³ To acquire or to lose an

² Aquinas treats divine immutability, simplicity, and pure actuality as conceptually distinct yet inseparable doctrines. Immutability is affirmed because any change implies a transition from potentiality to actuality, which cannot occur in a being whose perfection is complete and lacking nothing. Non-composition (or divine simplicity) follows from the principle that any composite requires a cause to unite its parts and therefore cannot be the First Cause. Absence of potentiality is grounded in the claim that God is *actus purus* since potentiality implies imperfection, dependence, and the capacity for change. Although each doctrine can be defended independently, classical theology proper holds that a being who is immutable must lack potentiality, and a being without potentiality must be simple, and therefore, all three converge in the affirmation that God cannot possess accidents.

³ In classical metaphysics, everything that exists is or has being, since “being” (*ens*) is the most fundamental and universal predicate. To exist is simply to participate in being and to fail to exist is to fall into non-being which has no actuality, form, or essence/substance. Because being and non-being exhaust all possible modes, the principle of the

accident is to undergo a transition from one state to another. Aristotle notes that a change in accident thus presupposes a being that is capable of receiving new purposes (which in turn presupposes a state of potentiality).⁴ During the scholastic period Thomas Aquinas adopted this framework and argued that because God is absolutely perfect He cannot undergo any change whatsoever. Writing in his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas points out that “whatever is in any way changeable...is in some respect in potency,” and because God is pure actuality, “in Him there is no potentiality.”⁵ This metaphysical claim is reinforced by scripturally for example in the New Testament where the writer James notes that in God “...there is no variation or shadow due to change.”⁶ For Aquinas, immutability is more than just a revealed divine attribute⁷ of God but an absolute metaphysical necessity. In other words, a being that changes is not fully actual, and therefore cannot be the ultimate source of all actuality.

The Second Principle: Non-Composition

The second principle concerns composition. In Aristotelian logic an accident is a real ontological addition to a substance (not just some kind of modification). By definition a substance that possesses accidents is composite, that is, it is a unity constituted by a metaphysical core (its essence or nature) together with various accidental purposes. Thus, Aquinas argues that if God possessed accidents, then it would logically follow that He would be composed of substance *plus* accidents. Of course, if this was the case than God would cease to be absolutely simple and would contradict the classical doctrine that God is not composed of parts, properties, or principles but is

excluded middle applies. For example, a thing either is or is not; it either possesses being or it does not. There is no intermediate state between being and non-being because any such “middle” would itself require being in order to be conceivable at all. Furthermore, “real being” refers to anything that exists outside the mind with actual ontological status, whereas “logical being” refers to entities that exist only within the intellect as conceptual constructs. Real beings possess both actuality and potentiality, since anything that exists outside the mind has some act of being along with capacities that may or may not be fulfilled. Logical beings have neither actuality nor potentiality. The latter only exists as constructs of the intellect and therefore have no real powers, capacities, or intrinsic possibilities. In short, a logical being cannot “become” anything, because it has no ontological act in which potentiality could inhere.

⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), IX.1-3.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), I.3.1.

⁶ James 1:17.

⁷ Here, *attribute* means something like “a way of naming the simple divine essence” and this would be correct and standard in classical theism. However, at times in this paper I may use *attribute* to refer to creaturely qualities or accidents, and I want the reader to be aware of the risk of creating a subtle drift. To be clear, divine attributes are not accidents, while creaturely attributes *are* accidents. Thus, if the same word is sometimes used for both, I do not want the reader risk collapsing the distinction.

instead identical with His own *essence* and *existence*. Aquinas states that “in God, essence and existence are the same,”⁸ and therefore nothing can be added to Him as though He were some type of substratum awaiting further perfection. Augustine of Hippo anticipates this reasoning hundreds of years earlier when he writes that God “is what He has,” meaning that God’s attributes are not qualities distinct from His essence but they are identical with it.⁹ Therefore, the First Cause must be simple, for any composite requires a cause to unite its parts, and thus cannot be the ultimate explanation of being.¹⁰

The Third Principle: Non-Potentiality

The third principle follows from the first two in that accidents presuppose potentiality. By definition an accident is a perfection that a substance may or may not possess. In other words, it represents a capacity that can be actualized. For creatures, this is not at all problematic since they exist in a state of metaphysical incompleteness and are continually actualized by causes outside themselves. For example, a cup of coffee has the potential to be hot or cold because its temperature is an accidental feature that can change without altering the coffee’s underlying essence. God, on the other hand, is traditionally conceived as the One whose essence is identical with His act of existing (*ipsum esse subsistens*) and since He is Pure Act, He cannot possess unrealized capacities or receive new determinations. In short, to say that God “has” or “possesses” goodness, wisdom, or power as accidents would imply that He participates in these perfections as qualities distinct from Himself. However, classical theism insists that God does not *have* goodness because He *is* Goodness itself. In the same manner, He does not *have* wisdom simply because He *is* Wisdom itself. Dionysius the Areopagite expresses this insight by asserting that God is “beyond being” and therefore beyond the categorial structures that apply to creatures.¹¹ Aquinas also adopts this

⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.3.4.

⁹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), V.4.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), I.18. In classical theism, God is identical with His own essence and existence because His very “what-He-is” (essence) is the same as His “that-He-is” (existence). God does not *receive* existence, nor does He *have* existence as a property. He *is* existence itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). This is unlike every created being which has an essence that is really distinct from its act of existence. A human, an angel, or any creature can be fully defined in essence without thereby existing. Its essence is a capacity for existence and not existence itself. Therefore, creatures participate in being whereas God *is* Being. This is why God cannot not exist, while all other beings can fail to exist.

¹¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), I.1. Dionysius the Areopagite is important because he introduced the classic Christian form of apophatic (negative) theology insisting that God is so transcendent that no human concept or category can fully apply to Him. His writings shaped both Eastern and Western theology and thinkers like Aquinas drew heavily on his claim that God is “beyond being,” which became foundational for understanding divine simplicity and the unity of God’s attributes.

apophatic insight and argues that all divine attributes are identical with the divine essence. Therefore, their apparent multiplicity arises only from the limitations of the human intellect which must apprehend the simple divine reality through multiple conceptual lenses.¹²

Early Patristic Foundations for Divine Simplicity

Early patristic sources (as well as Anselm starting off the scholastic period) reinforce this metaphysical framework. In his defense of the Nicene doctrine, Athanasius insisted that God is not composed of parts and that the divine nature is utterly simple.¹³ In a similar way Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes that God's attributes are not distinct qualities but are different ways of describing the same simple divine essence.¹⁴ Leaning into Neo-Platonism in his autobiography *Confessions*, Augustine develops a strong account of divine simplicity in which God's being is identical with His attributes, His life, and His knowledge.¹⁵ These patristic insights from both East and West form the foundation upon which medieval/scholastic theologians (in particular Anselm and Aquinas) develop their more systematic accounts. Anselm's *Proslogion* asserts that God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," a formulation that implicitly requires divine simplicity, since any composite being would be metaphysically dependent on its parts.¹⁶

Summary

In summary, these three principles form a coherent metaphysical argument regarding the doctrine of divine simplicity. If God is immutable then it follows that He cannot undergo the

¹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.13.4. Aquinas is saying something very simple and very profound. In short, God is not made up of different "parts" like we are, so when we talk about God's wisdom, power, goodness, or love, we are not naming different pieces of God. We are naming the same reality from different angles because our minds can only understand Him in fragments. That is the heart of it. In other words, we experience God's attributes as many because our intellect is limited and must break things into concepts. But in God Himself, there is no division, no composition, no "parts" to distinguish. Everything in God is one simple, unified act of being.

¹³ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, in *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 2-3.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, trans. Stuart G. Hall (Leiden: Brill, 1994), II.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VII.10; Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V.

¹⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), II. Anselm's famous definition of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived" means that God must be the greatest possible kind of being as one who depends on nothing and cannot be improved. If God were made of parts, like a machine or a body, then those parts would be more basic than God Himself and something would have to put them together. A being assembled from components is always dependent, changeable, and capable of falling apart, which would make it less than the greatest conceivable being. For Anselm's argument to work, God must therefore be absolutely simple (i.e., not composed of pieces or properties) but identical with His own life, power, and existence. In sum, divine simplicity is not an added doctrine but the logical consequence of Anselm's definition.

changes implied by accidents. Likewise, if God is simple then it logically follows that He cannot be composed of substance and accidents. And, finally, if God is Pure Act, He cannot possess the potentiality presupposed by accidental perfections. Therefore, the doctrine of divine simplicity requires the exclusion of accidents from the divine nature as a logical consequence of the classical understanding of God as the uncaused, unchanging, and utterly simple source of all being.

3. Substance and Accident: Human vs. Divine

Created Substance vs. Divine Substance

A comparison between created substances and the divine substance reveals the profound and philosophical asymmetry that is at the heart of classical metaphysics. In creatures the difference between substance and accident is both real and unavoidable. This is because finite beings exist as compounds whose nature is either perfected, modified, or expressed through accidental properties. For example, human beings have a basic nature that makes us what we are, and then we have qualities (e.g., like being wise, strong, or tired) that can change without altering that underlying nature. These qualities are “add-ons” that come and go over the course of our lives. Thus, a person can gain strength, lose wisdom, or change personality traits, yet still remain fully human throughout. In classical metaphysics, this shows that our core essence is stable, while our qualities are flexible features that rest on top of it.¹⁷ To differentiate, the divine essence admits no such composition whatsoever. In God, existence is identical with essence and every attribute traditionally predicated of Him is identical with His very act of being. In other words, God does not have life, goodness, power, or wisdom the way creatures do for He is His life, His goodness, His power, and His wisdom in one single, undivided act. Creatures receive these qualities as additions that perfect an already-limited nature, although in God there is no underlying “core” waiting to be completed. His attributes are simply different ways our finite minds describe the one infinite reality of God’s simple, self-existent being.

¹⁷ Consider the foundational “principle of contingency/dependency”. Human qualities like wisdom or strength show that we are beings whose nature is not complete in itself but depends on added features that can grow, diminish, or disappear. This built-in changeability reveals that humans are contingent beings. We do not contain the full reason for our own existence or perfection within ourselves. Because our essence requires accidents to express itself and external causes to actualize its potentials, we are metaphysically dependent on something beyond ourselves. In classical theism, this contrast highlights why only God (whose essence needs no added features) is non-contingent and self-existent (e.g., the principle of existential necessity) while all creatures remain dependent and derivative.

It is this stark contrast that illuminates why created substances undergo change, receive existence from another,¹⁸ and possess qualities as accidental perfections, whereas God, as *ipsum esse subsistens*, is immutable, simple, and identical with the perfections creatures only participate in.¹⁹ The following comparative table highlights at-a-glance these fundamental differences and clarifies why the categories of substance and accident apply analogically rather than univocally when extended from creatures to the Creator.

Table 1. Comparing Substance and Accident

Feature	Created Substance (e.g., Human)	Divine Substance (God)
Composition	Substance + Accidents	Pure Essence (Simple)
Change	Can gain/lose accidents	Immutable
Existence	Receives existence from another	Is Existence itself (<i>Ipsum Esse Subsistens</i>)
Attributes	Possesses qualities (e.g., “is wise”)	Is the quality (e.g., “is Wisdom”)

At this stage, a question that may naturally arise is how can God who is immaterial be the cause for the material when whatever is in the effect must to some degree be in the cause? In classical philosophy, the challenge of an immaterial God causing a material world is addressed through the *Principle of Proportionate Causality*, which states that a cause must contain the reality of its effect in some manner (as a cause cannot give what it does not have). According to the Thomistic tradition, this containment occurs in three distinct modes: formally, virtually, or eminently. Material causes typically contain their effects formally (sharing the same nature, like fire causing heat). However, material and formal causes (while distinct) are nevertheless the two

¹⁸ A contingent being cannot explain the existence of another contingent being because both lack the power to exist through themselves. Each one depends on something outside itself to account for why it exists at all, so one dependent being can only pass the explanatory burden further back without resolving it. A whole chain of contingent beings still requires a cause that does not itself depend on anything else. Foundationalism therefore concludes that only a non-contingent, self-existent reality can serve as the ultimate ground for the existence of contingent creatures (See the principles of contingency/dependency; existential causality; and the positive principle of modality).

¹⁹ As *ipsum esse subsistens* (L. the very act of subsisting existence itself) God does not just or merely possess life, goodness, or power as qualities added to His nature. He is the living, the good, and the powerful in one simple, undivided reality. Creatures receive their perfections in limited, changeable ways, but God’s perfections are identical with His essence because His essence is nothing other than the pure act of existing. This is why classical theology insists that divine attributes differ only in our way of understanding, not in God’s own being.

internal “halves” of a physical object. More specifically, the material cause is the potentiality i.e., raw material, or “stuff” like marble), while the formal cause is the actuality (i.e., the organizing pattern, or blueprint) that makes it a specific thing (like a statue). In this relationship, matter provides the physical substrate, although it is the form that provides the identity and definition; together, they constitute a single, unified being through hylomorphism.

Different from this is a virtual cause which does not possess the physical nature of the effect (formally); however, it does possess the power or capacity to produce it. A classic example (as was referenced in the previous paragraph) is a sculptor and a statue. The sculptor is not made of marble or bronze (the formal nature of the effect), yet the “statue” exists in the sculptor's mind as an idea and in their hands as a power. Hence, the sculptor has the effect “virtually” because they possess the skill and intent necessary to bring that specific material form into existence.

Eminent causality describes a relationship where the cause contains the perfection of the effect not just in kind (formal), or power (virtual), but in a higher, more perfect mode that transcends the effect's limitations. So, while a virtual cause has the *power* to produce an effect (like a sculptor possessing the skill to make a statue), an eminent cause possesses the very *perfection* of that effect in a superior way. God is said to contain the material world eminently, that is possessing all the perfections and “being” of matter in a higher, non-material, and unified way that “takes the place” of the physical property without its inherent limitations. Furthermore, God is viewed as Pure Actuality, the most universal cause whose power is not restricted by matter; He causes the most common effect of all (which is existence itself) by actualizing the potential for material things to be, without Himself being composed of parts or potentiality.²⁰ In other words, if there is “being” (existence) in the world, it must be in God because a cause cannot give what He does not have. We can think of it like a fountain: the water in the basin (the world) can only be there if it first existed in the reservoir (God). Because God is the “Uncaused Cause,” He is the source of all reality for if He didn't possess “being” in the highest sense, He would not have any “existence” to hand out to rocks, trees, water, animals, or people.

Thus, to loop back to the question about how an immaterial God causes a material world: even though God does not have a physical body, He nevertheless possesses the “idea” and the

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. I.1.2. Specifically in the section discussing the perfection of God. He argues that since God is the first effective cause of all things, the perfections found in all material effects must “pre-exist” in Him in a more eminent way. He further clarifies that while God is absolutely immaterial, He alone possesses the power to produce matter from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) as He is the universal cause of all being.

“power” of matter. Using the Architect Analogy, an architect is not made of bricks and glass (immaterial cause), but the entire “being” of the skyscraper (material effect) exists in the architect’s mind first. The architect “has” the building’s reality (e.g., its shape, its strength, its existence, etc.) in a mental way that is actually *superior* to the physical bricks. Therefore, God does not need to be material to cause matter; He simply needs to possess the perfection of being that matter participates in.²¹ This helps to lead us to the reason as to why God is the exception when it comes to not possessing accidents.

Why God Is the “Exception”

Within the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, the apparent multiplicity of divine attributes such as mercy, justice, wisdom, or power does not indicate the presence of accidents in God. This actually reflects the limitations of the finite human intellect as it attempts to apprehend an infinite and utterly simple being. As we have noted, God’s existence is identical with essence, and essence is identical with every attribute traditionally predicated of Him, so that what we name as “mercy” or “justice” in God are not qualities added to a metaphysical core but are identical with the single act of subsisting existence itself (Aquinas refers to this as *ipsum esse subsistens* as we have also previously noted).²²

Classical theologians argue that the plurality of divine names arises not from any real or actual composition in God but from the diverse ways finite minds relate to the one simple divine reality. Augustine writes that God “is what He has,” meaning that divine attributes are not distinct perfections, they are identical with the divine essence. Therefore, they cannot be accidents in the Aristotelian sense because accidents presuppose potentiality and composition, both of which are excluded from the divine nature.²³ So, when we read Scripture which speaks of God as merciful, just, angry, or compassionate, the theological tradition maintains that these descriptions do not

²¹ Augustine. *The City of God*, XII.2, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003). It was Augustine who actually laid the groundwork for Aquinas by blending Platonic philosophy with Christian theology. Augustine argued that the “being” we see in the material world consists of finite, changing copies of the perfect, unchanging Divine Ideas held in God’s mind. For Augustine, God is the Supreme Being (*summe esse*). And because God is the source of all existence, anything that “is” must receive its being from Him. This ties into the question at hand because it frames God as the Architect of Reality: just as a house exists in the architect’s mind as a plan before it exists in bricks, the material world exists “immaterially” in God’s intellect as eternal patterns. Thus, the material effect (the world) is “in” the immaterial cause (God) as a rational blueprint. God does not need to be made of matter to create it; He simply “speaks” these eternal ideas into physical existence, giving them a lower, dependent form of being.

²² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.3.4; I.13.4.

²³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V.4.

signify actual changes in God but rather changes in the creature's participation in the unchanging divine goodness. In other words, as Gregory of Nyssa explains, terms such as "wrath" or "mercy" refer to the effects of God's single, immutable activity as experienced differently by creatures according to their moral and spiritual condition.²⁴ This relational interpretation is further emphasized by the broader patristic consensus that divine names are analogical and reflect the creature's mode of reception rather than God's internal state. Pseudo-Dionysius develops this insight by arguing that all divine names are accommodations to human understanding and that God transcends every category of creaturely predication, including the distinction between substance and accident.²⁵ Simply put, Dionysius is saying that every name we give to God is adapted to our limited way of thinking, not a literal description of what God is in Himself. We speak of God using creaturely concepts because that is all our minds can handle; however, God's reality surpasses every category we use, including the distinction between substance and accident. Our language points toward God, yet it never captures Him as He truly is. Aquinas later systematizes this train of thought by stating that divine attributes differ only in *ratione*, that is, in the conceptual order, while in reality they are identical with the divine essence, which is pure act without any admixture of potentiality.²⁶

Contemporary analytic theologians such as Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump continue to defend this classical position by emphasizing that divine simplicity is not a denial of the richness of God's life but rather a metaphysical claim that God's perfections are not ontologically separable components. They are the single, infinite act of being that grounds all creaturely existence.²⁷ Thus, God is the "exception" not because He violates the metaphysical principles that govern created substances but because He alone is non-contingent, non-composite, and self-existent, and therefore cannot possess accidents in any sense analogous to creatures. What appears to us as distinct attributes are simply the manifestations of the one simple divine reality as it is apprehended through the finite and fragmented lens of human cognition.

To summarize what has been presented in this chapter, we would say that God lacks accidents *because* He is Pure Act and the Eminent Cause of all being. For example, in

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II.

²⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, I.1.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.13.4.

²⁷ Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006); Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

material things, accidents like “wisdom” or “size” are added layers that modify a substance. However, in God there is no distinction between what He *is* and what He *has*. Because He contains the perfection of all effects in a superior and unified mode, it follows that His attributes (e.g., goodness, power, justice, love, etc.) are identical to His very Essence. Thus, for the sake of argument, if God did possess accidents, He would in turn be a composite of parts and therefore dependent on them. Therefore, to be the First Cause, He must be a single, necessary, and undivided “To Be” (*Actus Essendi*) that transcends the need for any external or secondary properties.

4. Transubstantiation: The Inverse Problem

The Eucharistic Miracle as the Mirror Image of Divine Simplicity

The Eucharistic transformation (e.g., in the Roman Catholic tradition) presents a metaphysical configuration that stands as the inverse of divine simplicity.²⁸ In God, classical theology affirms a substance without accidents because the divine essence is identical with existence and therefore cannot receive additional perfections. However, in the Eucharist the Church (Roman Catholic) teaches that the sensible accidents of bread and wine remain even though their substance has been wholly replaced by the Body and Blood of Christ. This inversion is a deliberate theological parallel that highlights the unique mode of divine action in the sacrament. Put in the following way, divine simplicity reveals a being whose perfections are identical with His essence while transubstantiation reveals a sacramental work in which God suspends the ordinary metaphysical dependence of accidents upon substance in order to communicate Christ's presence under the forms of bread and wine. Some of the patristic tradition seems to anticipate this structure in its view that sacramental change concerns the level of being rather than physical alteration. This can be seen in Cyril of Jerusalem's claim, writing in the fourth

²⁸ Classical theologians calling transubstantiation "the inverse of divine simplicity" means that the Eucharist displays the exact opposite metaphysical configuration found in God. In God, there is substance without accidents because His essence is identical with His existence and His attributes are identical with His essence. In the Eucharist, after consecration, there are accidents without substance because the sensible properties of bread and wine remain even though their underlying substance has been replaced by the Body and Blood of Christ. The two states mirror each other in reverse, revealing how divine causality can either exclude accidents entirely, as in God, or sustain them without a subject, as in the sacrament. We must keep in mind that the "inverse of divine simplicity" idea is debated, although mostly because the metaphysics behind it are contested and not because the phrase itself is controversial. It is mainly Thomists that generally like the comparison because it neatly contrasts God (who has no added features) with the Eucharist (which keeps the features of bread even after the bread is gone). However, many other theologians think the analogy is too clever and risks making the Eucharist sound like a metaphysical trick or implying a symmetry between God and the sacrament that is not really there. So, the disagreement is not about the wording itself, it is about whether the underlying framework, i.e., divine simplicity on one side and accidents-without-a-subject on the other, is actually coherent and/or necessary.

century, that the elements become Christ's Body and Blood through the efficacious word and the Spirit's operation while their outward appearance remains unchanged.^{29/30}

The Change of Substance and the Retention of Accidents

According to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the consecration effects a change in the deepest ontological layer of the Eucharistic elements. The *substance* of bread and wine ceases to exist and is replaced by the *substance* of Christ's Body and Blood, while at the same time the accidents or species remain perceptible to the human senses. However, this claim seems to challenge Aristotelian metaphysics which holds that accidents are ontologically *dependent on substance and cannot exist without it*. Aquinas seemed to recognize this and attempted to address this tension by arguing that the Eucharistic change is unique because it is effected by divine power, which alone can alter the fundamental act of being without altering the accidental properties that ordinarily flow from it (note that this paper will return to this issue and treat it more in depth).³¹ Augustine's sacramental theology provides an early conceptual foundation for this distinction by emphasizing that the sacrament communicates the reality of Christ under the form of bread and wine, indicating that the sensible properties serve as signs that veil the deeper ontological transformation.³²

Aquinas's Solution: Accidents Sustained Without a Subject

Aquinas works to resolve the apparent contradiction by asserting that in this singular sacramental context God directly sustains the accidents in existence without a created substance serving as their subject. This divine act does not imply that the accidents acquire an independent

²⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3, in *St. Cyril of Jerusalem: Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, trans. F. L. Cross (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986).

³⁰ In Eucharistic discussions, *appearance* can mean: the sensible accidents (color, taste, smell, texture), the phenomenological experience, or the empirical presentation. This paper uses it in the first sense, which is correct. But because *appearance* is a more casual term, it can drift toward the phenomenological sense if not anchored. Thus, whenever the reader sees the use of the word *appearance*, they should keep in mind to pair it with sensible accidents in order to keep the meaning fixed and within proper context.

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.1.

³² Augustine, *Sermon 272*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1993). It should be noted that Augustine did not teach transubstantiation in the later, technical Thomistic sense, although he clearly affirmed a real, sacramental change in the Eucharist. He lacked the Aristotelian categories of "substance" and "accidents," so he described the elements as visible signs that truly convey the invisible reality of Christ's Body and Blood. For Augustine, the bread and wine remain perceptible as symbols, yet they communicate the *res* (i.e., the actual Christ) through a mysterious transformation effected by Christ's word and the Spirit. His view is best described as sacramental realism expressed through symbolic language. It is not just a metaphor, nor is it later scholastic transubstantiation, it is a genuine change whose mode he leaves unexplained.

ontological status but rather that their dependence is transferred from a natural subject to the supernatural causality of God. For example, the color, taste, weight, and texture of bread continue to exist after consecration, but not because they inhere in any underlying “bread-substance.” Instead, they persist only because God actively holds them in being, much as a singer sustains a note that has no instrument beneath it. The accidents remain real, but their mode of existence is entirely exceptional which is grounded not in a creaturely subject but in God’s direct, sustaining power. Aquinas further argues that because God is the primary cause of all being, He can preserve accidents in existence even when the natural metaphysical conditions for their inherence are absent.³³ Other medieval theologians such as Hugh of St Victor and Paschasius Radbertus prepared the conceptual ground for this solution by distinguishing between the visible species and the invisible reality, thereby affirming the idea that sacramental presence does not require physical transformation.³⁴ Contemporary theologians, including Herbert McCabe and Eleonore Stump, seek to defend the coherence of this account by arguing that the dependence of accidents upon substance is itself a feature of the created order and therefore subject to divine suspension in a unique sacramental context.³⁵

Dimensive Quantity as the Accident “Placeholder”

Aquinas identifies “dimensive quantity” as the key to explaining how the Eucharistic appearances can stay in place even after the substance of bread is gone. In simple terms, he means

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.1.

³⁴ Hugh of Saint Victor, *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei*, ed. Rainer Berndt, Corpus Victorinum: Textus Historici 1 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2008); Paschasius Radbertus, *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini*, trans. John F. McCarthy (St. Louis: Orbis, 1969).

³⁵ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Continuum, 1987), 119-131; Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 401-412. However, McCabe and Stump’s defense has been challenged from several directions. Analytic philosophers like Norman Kretzmann and Peter van Inwagen question whether “accidents without a subject” is even a coherent metaphysical category, arguing that Aquinas’s solution strains the very logic of Aristotelian ontology. Non-Thomistic Catholic theologians, including Karl Rahner (considered one of the top theologians of the twentieth century) and Edward Schillebeeckx, dispute the framework itself. They claim that the Aristotelian substance (i.e., accident schema) is too rigid and that the Eucharistic change should be described in more personalist or relational terms. Protestant theologians likewise reject the account as metaphysically ad hoc, seeing the suspension of substance (i.e., accident dependence) as a special pleading that lacks biblical grounding. As a logical fallacy, this special pleading occurs when someone creates an *unjustified exception* to a rule or principle in order to protect a favored conclusion. Critics argue that Aquinas’s account risks this fallacy because it upholds the universal Aristotelian rule that accidents cannot exist without a substance, *except* in the Eucharist, where the rule is suspended. Thomists respond that this is not special pleading because the exception is grounded in divine causality, not in an ad hoc adjustment. But philosophers who reject the metaphysical framework or who think the exception lacks independent justification see the move as precisely the kind of rule-bending that defines special pleading. In short, while McCabe and Stump aim to preserve the internal coherence of the Thomistic model, critics across theological and philosophical traditions challenge both the mechanism and the metaphysical assumptions that underwrite it.

that the size, shape, weight, and spatial layout of the bread act like a framework that holds the other qualities together. So, the look, feel, and taste of bread remain because their underlying “dimensions” remain, i.e., dimensions that God miraculously keeps in existence even though the bread itself no longer does. In Aristotelian ontology, quantity is the first accident that flows from substance and provides the spatial extension upon which other accidents depend. Thus, Aquinas argues that God miraculously preserves the dimensive quantity of the bread and wine allowing it to function as an ontological locus or position for the remaining accidents such as taste, color, texture, and smell.³⁶ This preserved quantity does not become a new substance of its own; instead it functions as a kind of God-sustained framework that holds the remaining appearances together. In other words, the size, shape, and spatial structure of the bread do not turn into something else. They simply continue to exist because God keeps them in being allowing the other qualities (e.g., color, texture, taste) to stay unified even though the bread itself is no longer there. The result is that the Eucharistic species remain perceptible and coherent even though its underlying substance has been replaced by the substance of Body and Blood of Christ. In sum, this preservation ensures that Christ’s glorified body does not assume the physical characteristics of bread which in turn safeguards both the integrity of Christ’s humanity and the symbolic structure of the sacrament.

Why the Accidents Must Remain

It is argued that the persistence of the accidents is a theological necessity and not just a metaphysical curiosity. The sacrament must retain the appearance of food and drink in order to fulfill its *sacramental function* as nourishment and participation in Christ. Why? If the accidents were to disappear at the moment of consecration then the Eucharist would no longer be a sacrament in the proper sense because the visible sign would be lost.³⁷ In addition, if the accidents were replaced by the physical accidents of Christ’s glorified body, the communicant would encounter Christ in a mode inconsistent with the sacramental economy and potentially contrary to the reverence due to His glorified humanity. In other words, if the appearances of bread were replaced by the visible features of Christ’s glorified body, people would end up seeing and handling Christ directly in a way that does not fit how the sacrament is meant to work and could even come across

³⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.2.

³⁷ In Catholic teaching, a sacrament is a visible, tangible sign established by Christ that truly gives the grace it represents. It is not just a symbol or reminder but an action through which Christ Himself works, using ordinary material elements (like water, oil, bread, and wine) to communicate God’s life to the believer. See: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, §1131.

as disrespectful to His risen humanity.³⁸ The patristic tradition underscores this point by emphasizing that the sacrament communicates Christ under a veil as Augustine notes when he describes the Eucharistic species as signs that conceal the reality they convey.³⁹ Therefore, the miraculous persistence of the accidents seeks to preserve both the integrity of the sacrament and the mode of Christ's presence, ensuring that the faithful receive Christ truly yet sacramentally rather than physically.

Table 2. Comparing the Two States

Concept	Substance	Accidents
Normal Object	Present (e.g., Wood)	Present (e.g., Brown, Hard)
The Divine Nature	Pure Substance/Essence	None (God is Simple)
The Eucharist	Replaced (Body of Christ)	Persist (Taste, Smell, Shape)

Summary-Conclusion and a Logical Conundrum

This distinction is necessary because if the accidents themselves changed, that is, if the bread literally turned into a piece of heart muscle on the altar, then the Eucharist would cease to function as a sacrament. It would no longer be a sign pointing beyond itself and instead would be a physical mutation, collapsing the symbolic economy Christ instituted. Likewise, if the accidents were not miraculously sustained without their substance, the bread would stop appearing as bread the instant the substance changed, turning the “mystery of faith” into something verifiable by laboratory instruments rather than received through faith.

Nevertheless, this leads to a classic philosophical puzzle: if the Eucharist shows that accidents can exist without a substance, how can we ever be sure substances exist at all? Some later philosophers seized on this “Eucharistic loophole” to argue for Phenomenalism, the view that

³⁸ If the Eucharistic appearances were replaced by the visible, physical features of Christ's glorified body, people would end up touching, chewing, and swallowing what looks like Christ Himself. That kind of direct physical contact especially in the ordinary act of eating would not match the dignity of His risen humanity and would collapse the sacramental veil that protects the mystery. The sacrament is meant to give Christ truly but under humble signs. Exposing His glorified body to ordinary handling would cross a boundary the sacramental form is designed to preserve.

³⁹ Augustine, *Sermon 272*.

we only ever encounter appearances and can never prove the existence of the underlying “thing-in-itself.”⁴⁰ In sum, these tensions prepare the way for the deeper question that follows: how should we understand the Eucharistic change itself in light of these metaphysical and philosophical challenges?

⁴⁰ George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), §§1-33; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A249-A251.

5. The Mode of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist

The question of why Christ's physical substance in the Eucharist does not manifest its own accidents (despite the Aristotelian principle that every material substance possesses accidents) represents the final and most intricate dimension of Eucharistic metaphysics. For if Christ is truly and substantially present, and if we consider that His *humanity* includes determinate accidents (e.g., height, weight, spatial location) then it is natural to ask why these properties do not appear on the altar. The proposed solution lies in the particular mode of presence. This is a category that distinguishes the ordinary way bodies exist in space from the unique sacramental manner in which Christ exists under the species of bread and wine. Originally developed in the patristic period, this distinction was later refined by the medieval scholastics and in modern times is defended by some contemporary theologians with the goal of safeguarding both the realism of Christ's presence and the integrity of the sacramental sign.⁴¹

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 75, a. 1-7. Contemporary defenders of a distinct Eucharistic *modus praesentiae* include several Thomist-leaning philosophers such as Eleonore Stump, Brian Davies, Herbert McCabe, Reinhard Hütter, and Lawrence Feingold all of whom maintain that Christ is present "after the manner of substance" rather than by local spatial extension. Alongside them, more revisionist Catholic thinkers like Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx reinterpret the category in relational, symbolic-realist, or phenomenological terms while still affirming a non-physical mode of presence. These Catholic theologians still believe Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, but they do not explain it using the old Aristotelian categories of "substance" and "accidents." Instead, they describe the change in terms of relationships, meaning, and lived experience. In their view, the Eucharist becomes Christ's presence not by a hidden metaphysical mechanism but because its meaning, purpose, and the way God relates to us through it are transformed. They focus less on what the bread "is made of" and more on how God uses it, what it signifies, and how it draws us into communion with Christ. In the broader ecumenical field, theologians such as Robert Jenson, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Thomas F. Torrance also articulate real-presence models that rely on a unique, non-local mode of Christ's Eucharistic presence grounded in eschatology, pneumatology, or communicative action rather than Aristotelian metaphysics. In other words, these theologians believe Jesus is really present in the Eucharist, but they explain how He is present in a way that does not depend on medieval metaphysics. Instead of talking about "substance" and "accidents," they say Christ becomes present through God's future-shaping power (eschatology), through the work of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), or through Christ acting and speaking to His people in the meal (communicative action). Thus, they affirm a real presence, but they describe it as a unique, non-physical way of being present that fits within God's saving action rather than within Aristotle's categories. In short, these theologians move closer to Calvin's idea of a real, Spirit-mediated presence than to a physical or local presence, but each develops it in a distinct way. They all reject the idea that Christ's

Substantial Presence and the Rejection of Local Circumscription

Classical theology maintains that Christ is not present in the Eucharist by local circumscription, the mode by which ordinary bodies occupy space, but rather “after the manner of substance.” This distinction appears early on in Augustine’s reflections on the Eucharist where he writes that Christ’s glorified body remains in heaven while being sacramentally given on earth.⁴² Several hundred years later the medieval tradition formalizes this insight by arguing that local presence requires a body’s accidents to fill a determinate volume of space, whereas substantial presence does not. In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas basically states that a normal physical body is present in a place only when its physical features (e.g., size, shape, weight, etc.) actually take up space there. However, in the Eucharist, Christ is present in a different way. He is present *as a whole reality* (as “substance”) without His physical features occupying space. In other words, a body normally has to *fill space* to be present somewhere, yet Christ in the Eucharist is present without taking up room, because His presence there is not a physical but sacramental one.⁴³

Thus, local presence entails that a body’s accidents are spatially contained and interact with the surrounding environment. For example, a book resting on a table is present locally because its accidents occupy a specific region of space. Christ’s Eucharistic presence however is substantial, meaning that the whole substance of Christ is contained under the whole of the sacramental species and under each of its parts. This mode of presence does not require His natural accidents to be present, for they (His accidents) pertain to His glorified body in heaven and remain where that body is locally situated.⁴⁴

The patristic tradition already anticipated this distinction. Cyril of Jerusalem emphasizes that the Eucharist gives the body of Christ “in a manner known to God,” not by physical division or spatial displacement.⁴⁵ Aquinas later clarifies that Christ’s accidents do not become the accidents of the Sacramental Host because the sacramental presence does not entail the natural

body becomes locally present on the altar and instead describe His presence as real, non-physical, and made effective through God’s action or the Spirit, which is broadly similar to Calvin’s pneumatic model, even if their philosophical frameworks differ.

⁴² Augustine, *Sermon 272*.

⁴³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 76, a. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid., III, q. 76, a. 1.

⁴⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3-6.

mode of bodily existence.⁴⁶ Contemporary Thomists such as Herbert McCabe and Eleonore Stump defend this account by arguing that the sacramental mode of presence is *sui generis* and therefore cannot be evaluated by the criteria governing ordinary physical bodies.⁴⁷

Dimensive Quantity as the Mediating Accident “Placeholder”

In order to understand why Christ’s physical accidents are not perceptible in the Eucharist we must examine the role of dimensive quantity, the first accident that follows upon a material substance in Aristotelian metaphysics. Dimensive quantity is the Aristotelian accident that gives a material body its spatial extension (e.g., its size, shape, and the arrangement of its parts) and thus serves as the ontological foundation for all other sensible accidents. In Thomistic Eucharistic theology, this accident is of great importance. In line with this theological view, after consecration God preserves the dimensive quantity of bread (again, its size, shape) even though its substance no longer exists. By sustaining this single accident, God provides the spatial “scaffolding” that allows the *remaining appearances* (color, taste, texture, and weight) to continue coherently without a subject. Thus, dimensive quantity of size, shape and arrangement of parts, functions as the metaphysical anchor of the Eucharistic species, enabling the sensible properties of bread and wine to remain while their underlying substance has been wholly transformed. In sum, dimensive quantity provides the spatial framework within which all other accidents, such as color, texture, and weight, are instantiated.⁴⁸

In the Eucharist, the dimensive quantity of the bread remains after transubstantiation, even though the substance of bread ceases to exist. This remaining quantity (sustained directly by divine power) serves as the ontological “bridge” that supports the other accidents of bread.⁴⁹ Per Aquinas,

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 77, a. 1. Essentially, Aquinas means that Jesus’ physical traits such as His size, shape, and appearance do not get transferred to the consecrated Host, because His presence in the Eucharist is not the normal, physical way a body exists.

⁴⁷ Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Continuum, 2010), 89-95; Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 291-302. Both these authors basically argue that Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is a completely unique kind of presence, one that does not follow the normal rules for physical bodies and so one cannot judge it by ordinary physical standards. Thus, calling the sacramental presence *sui generis* means it is a category of its own; something God does that does not fit the rules of ordinary bodies. Therefore, it asks a person to trust that this unique kind of presence is real even though it cannot be analyzed the way we analyze physical objects. It is not a blind leap of faith per se, but it is a step beyond what reason alone can verify.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Categories*, 6; *Physics*, IV, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 75, a. 2. In sum, the idea that Aquinas is putting forth is that the “spatial framework” of the bread (i.e., its size, shape, and the way its parts occupy space) continues to exist by God’s direct sustaining power. This remaining quantity functions like an ontological bridge in that it provides the three-dimensional

it follows that because the perceptible qualities of the Host are grounded in the retained quantity of bread, Christ's own dimensive quantity does not replace or displace it. If Christ's natural quantity were present in the ordinary way, the Host would necessarily assume the dimensions of His glorified body. Aquinas argues that this would contradict the sacramental economy on the claim that the miracle concerns the change of substance alone, not the alteration of accidents.⁵⁰ In other words, if something like a small disk suddenly expanded into a full human form, the outcome would contradict the sacramental logic (which holds that only the substance changes while the accidents remain). Therefore, Christ is truly present, although not by His natural dimensive quantity. It is the retained quantity of bread that preserves the familiar appearance of the Host.

Early patristic sources implicitly support this logic. Let us consider Ambrose who, in *De Mysteriis*, insists that the Eucharistic change concerns the essence, not the outward form, which remains perceptible to the senses.⁵¹ Medieval theologians in the scholastic era, such as Bonaventure and Scotus, though differing from Aquinas on certain metaphysical details, likewise affirm that the accidents of bread remain precisely to preserve the sacramental sign.⁵² Contemporary philosophers, including Brian Davies and Reinhard Hütter, continue this line of thought in stating that the retention of dimensive quantity is essential for maintaining both the realism of Christ's presence and the intelligibility of the sacramental sign.⁵³

The Ontological Configuration of the Eucharistic Species

The resulting state of the Eucharistic elements can be described as a unique ontological configuration in which the substance of bread is absent, yet the accidents of bread remain, while the substance of Christ is present, yet the accidents of Christ are not locally manifested. Aquinas

structure in which all the familiar features of bread (its color, texture, taste, smell, and weight) can still appear and hang together in a coherent way. Without this dimensive quantity, the other accidents would have nowhere to 'be,' since qualities like color or texture cannot float freely without a spatial subject. By preserving the bread's dimensive quantity, God ensures that the appearances of bread remain stable and intelligible even though the underlying reality has been completely transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

⁵⁰ Ibid., III, q. 76, a. 4.

⁵¹ Ambrose, *De Mysteriis*, 9.50-52, in *St. Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works*, translated by Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

⁵² Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Sentences*, IV, dist. 11 in *Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum*. Vol. IV. In *Opera Omnia*, edited by the Quaracchi Fathers (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1889); John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, IV, dist. 11 in *Ordinatio*. Vol. IV. In *Opera Omnia*, edited by the Commissio Scotistica (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1950).

⁵³ Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 327-332; Reinhard Hütter, *Dust Bound for Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 214-223.

describes this idea as a “miraculous conjunction” in which the accidents of bread subsist without their natural subject and being upheld by divine power, while Christ’s substance is present without its natural accidents being locally applied.⁵⁴

Aquinas uses this configuration in order to explain why Christ does not “feel” the accidents of the bread. For example, the breaking of the Host does not constitute an injury to Christ because the accidents of bread do not inhere in His substance. In other words, He is present under them although not composed of them.⁵⁵ The earlier patristic tradition seems to affirm this distinction when it insists that Christ is not divided when the Host is divided since the sacramental presence is not subject to physical partition.⁵⁶

It cannot be ignored that the intellectual tension generated by this proposed configuration has long been recognized. It represents one of the most sophisticated applications of Aristotelian physics in the history of Christian thought by creating a deliberate separation between what a thing is and how it appears. Several hundred years after Aquinas, enlightenment age philosophers such as Berkeley and Kant exploited this separation to argue for forms of phenomenalism, claiming that the Eucharistic doctrine demonstrates the possibility of accidents existing without substances and therefore undermines the certainty of substance as a metaphysical category. In short, Berkeley and Kant use the Eucharistic doctrine to argue that if the Church can claim the appearances of bread remain even when the underlying reality has completely changed, then our senses cannot be trusted to reveal what things truly are. Berkeley takes this to mean that “substance” may be unnecessary altogether and perhaps only appearances exist. Kant goes further, treating the Eucharist as a vivid example of his distinction between things as they appear to us and things as they are in themselves. In both cases, the Thomistic separation between substance and accident becomes a philosophical springboard for saying that human beings never grasp reality directly but only its perceptual presentation.^{57/58}

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 77, a. 1-2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., III, q. 76, a. 3.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Sermon 234*. Augustine explains that when the Eucharistic bread is broken, only the sign is divided, not Christ Himself. The physical partition affects the appearance, while the reality signified (i.e., Christ’s whole presence) remains undivided because the sacrament communicates Him in a non-spatial, non-quantitative mode. Thus, Augustine affirms that Christ is given whole to each communicant since His sacramental presence is not governed by the physical properties of the bread through which it is signified.

⁵⁷ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, §§1-33; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A249-A251.

⁵⁸ Aquinas’s account of the Eucharist does not violate formal logic, yet it does require a radical suspension of both Aristotelian *and* modern metaphysical expectations. Within Aristotle’s framework, accidents are ontologically

Several respected Enlightenment-era thinkers (both Protestant and Catholic) challenged transubstantiation on philosophical grounds by arguing that the Thomistic model of “accidents without a subject” could not survive the emerging metaphysical and scientific standards of the period. Catholic reformers such as Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim questioned the continued use of Aristotelian categories in sacramental theology and urged a more “reasonable” symbolic interpretation of presence.⁵⁹ Protestant philosophers like John Locke and David Hume dismissed the doctrine as unintelligible within empiricist epistemology since a change of substance without any change in observable qualities contradicted their foundational principles of knowledge. Since empiricism treats “substance” as either an empty placeholder (Locke) or a fictitious construct without any corresponding impression (Hume), the claim that bread’s substance changes while every sensible feature remains identical amounts, for them, to asserting a distinction that makes no experiential difference and therefore no real difference at all.⁶⁰ Their critique is accurate *on their own terms*: if one accepts empiricism’s limits on what can count as a meaningful concept, transubstantiation cannot even be coherently formulated. However, this accuracy is conditional rather than universal because their argument presupposes the very epistemology that classical

dependent properties that cannot exist without a substance to inhere in, and substances cannot exist without accidents to actualize their presence in the world. The idea of transubstantiation explicitly overturns both principles. The sensible accidents of bread remain without a subject and Christ’s substance is present without its natural accidents being locally manifested. However, Aquinas does acknowledge this and reframes it as a supernatural exception (*praeter naturam*) in which God directly upholds the accidents of bread and simultaneously prevents Christ’s physical accidents from appearing. Yet when viewed through the lens of modern metaphysics and physics, the doctrine becomes even more incompatible with natural explanation since contemporary ontology rejects the substance-accident schema altogether. It understands properties such as color, taste, weight, and extension as physical features grounded in matter, fields, and interactions. Thus, the Thomistic configuration of “accidents without substance” and “substance without accidents” is not just improbable but completely unintelligible within a scientific framework. For this reason, Aquinas moves to position the idea of transubstantiation in the Eucharist within the classification of a miracle by describing it as a unique divine act that suspends the normal dependence relations of created being and therefore cannot be defended on empirical or philosophical grounds alone. The proposition that this is a miracle will be a point of discussion later in this paper.

⁵⁹ Johann Nikolaus von Hontheim, *Justinus Febronius de Statu Ecclesiae* (1763). Hontheim argued that the continued use of Aristotelian substance-accident categories in Eucharistic theology was philosophically untenable in the modern era and urged a more “reasonable” symbolic-realist interpretation of Christ’s presence. He maintained that the metaphysics of substantial change no longer carried explanatory force and that the Eucharistic elements should instead be understood as acquiring a new ecclesial meaning and relational function, not a new underlying substance. For Hontheim, Christ is genuinely present in the sacrament, although this presence is spiritual, relational, and liturgical, rather than physical or metaphysically “substantial.” His proposal sought to preserve the devotional significance of the Eucharist while freeing the doctrine from what he viewed as outdated and unintelligible scholastic categories.

⁶⁰ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.23; David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), X.

sacramental metaphysics rejects. It exposes the limits of empiricism more than it disproves the doctrine itself.

Immanuel Kant used the Eucharist as an example of how human beings can talk about things they can never actually know “as they are in themselves.” In simple terms, he was not saying the doctrine is false so much as he was saying it shows the limits of our minds. We only ever experience the world through appearances shaped by our senses and concepts, so when a doctrine claims something happening “behind” those appearances (like a change of substance with no change in what we can perceive) it highlights the gap between what we can know and what might exist beyond our cognitive reach. In other words, the Eucharist does not reveal the structure of reality. It reveals the structure and the boundaries of human understanding.⁶¹ Across confessional lines, Enlightenment thinkers increasingly regarded transubstantiation as a claim sustained by ecclesial authority rather than philosophical or empirical justification (e.g., to include a metaphysical explanation).⁶² However, this is not strictly an “appeal to authority” fallacy, rather it is a diagnosis of why the doctrine persists once the old metaphysical framework is rejected. From their perspective, if Aristotelian substance metaphysics is unintelligible and no empirical evidence can support a change of substance, then the only remaining ground for believing the doctrine is the Church’s authority. That is not a fallacy in their argument either, rather it is a claim about the source of justification. In other words, they were not saying that the Church appeals to authority and therefore the doctrine is false, but rather that without Aristotelian metaphysics, the doctrine has no rational support and survives only because the Church commands assent. In this case it is a critique of epistemic grounding, not a textbook logical fallacy.

Table 3. Summary Table: Elements Present and Absent in the Eucharist

Element	Status in the Eucharist
Substance of Bread	Gone (Ceases to exist)
Accidents of Bread	Remain (Supported by God's power)
Substance of Christ	Present (The “Whole Christ” is there)

⁶¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B306-309.

⁶² For a survey of Enlightenment critiques across confessional lines, see Ulrich L. Lehner, *The Catholic Enlightenment: The Forgotten History of a Global Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112-30.

Accidents of Christ	Hidden (They exist in Heaven, but not “locally” on the altar)
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Conclusion-Summary

In summary, Eucharist theology teaches that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, although not in a way that takes up space the way ordinary physical objects do. According to this view, God keeps the outward look, taste, and feel of bread and wine in place, and uses those remaining physical features as the “carrier” for Christ’s real presence. This framework yields a unique ontological configuration in which the accidents of bread and wine persist without their proper subject while Christ’s Body and Blood are present nonspatially and nonphysically under those appearances. However, as we have noted, this very configuration introduces significant philosophical challenges to include the notion of accidents existing without a substance which strains Aristotelian metaphysics, the rejection of local limitation raises questions about how a body can be present without spatial extension, and the appeal to dimensive quantity as a metaphysical “placeholder” is often viewed as an ad hoc solution rather than a natural inference from the broader system. These tensions reveal both the internal coherence of the scholastic model *on its own terms* and the considerable conceptual difficulties it faces *when examined from outside its metaphysical assumptions*.⁶³

⁶³ To be clear, a system can be perfectly consistent on the inside and still be wrong about the world. Internal coherence simply means the ideas fit together without contradiction *given the system’s own assumptions*. But truth requires more than that. It requires that the system actually corresponds to reality. One can build a flawless, airtight worldview on premises that are themselves false, outdated, or untestable. In that case, the system will “work” logically while still failing to describe how things really are. In other words, coherence shows that a set of ideas hangs together; it does not show that the ideas are *true*. For example, a beautifully constructed map can be internally perfect and still fail to match the terrain. For further study this raises the broader philosophical debate between coherentism and foundationalism and whether a belief system is justified simply because its parts fit together, or whether it must rest on basic truths that connect it to reality. This analysis proceeds from a broadly foundationalist epistemology, which the present writer regards as the most adequate framework for evaluating metaphysical claims, while also recognizing that other scholars may reasonably disagree.

6. Logical and Philosophical Tensions

The Law of Non-Contradiction and the Question of Coherence

A central philosophical challenge that may be levied against the doctrine of transubstantiation is whether it violates the classical Law (or Principle) of Non-Contradiction (herein after abbreviated to LNC). In its strict Aristotelian formulation, LNC states that the same thing cannot be both A and not-A at the same time and in the same respect.⁶⁴ The distinction between respects is essential since the scholastic tradition insists that the Eucharistic elements are not said to be both bread and not-bread in the same ontological category. Aquinas states that after consecration the *substance* of bread ceases to exist and is replaced by the substance of Christ's Body, while the accidents of bread remain.⁶⁵ Therefore, in respect to substance the host is not bread and in respect to accidents, it retains the sensory properties of bread. Since substance and accidents are treated as *distinct modes of being*, the doctrine does not establish contradictory attributes of the same subject in the same respect.

However, theologians maintain that transubstantiation is paradoxical rather than contradictory. To be clear, a paradox transcends ordinary experience without negating the principles of intelligibility, whereas a contradiction negates the very conditions of meaningful discourse. In other words, lay intuition may stumble over the idea of "accidents without a subject," although this difficulty does not amount to a logical impossibility. As Josef Pieper observes in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, the entire Thomistic tradition insists that mysteries of faith do not abolish reason but rather it exceeds its natural horizon. Pieper argues that a genuine theological mystery is not an irrational claim; it is a suprarational one. It is something that cannot be fully grasped by broad intellect, yet it does not mean that it violates the fundamental laws of thought. For Aquinas, Pieper notes, the human mind encounters truths that are "above reason" (*supra rationem*) yet never

⁶⁴ Aristotle. *Metaphysics*, IV.3, translated by W. D. Ross in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, vol. 2. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁶⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.2.

“against reason” (*contra rationem*). Thus, the Eucharistic doctrine of accidents sustained without a subject is not presented as a breach of LNC but as a case in which divine causality operates beyond the limits of creaturely metaphysics without overturning them. The paradox does not signal the incoherence of the sacrament itself, just the finitude of human conceptual categories.⁶⁶

Patristic sources, for example Cyril of Jerusalem, affirms that the elements become the Body and Blood of Christ while retaining their outward appearance, suggesting an early intuition of a transformation at the level of being rather than at the level of sensible qualities.⁶⁷ Augustine likewise emphasizes that divine action operates beyond what the senses can register, even though he never formulates a technical substance-accident distinction. In the *Confessions*, he repeatedly stresses that God works in the hidden depths of reality (*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*) in ways that elude sensory observation while remaining fully intelligible. For Augustine, the senses disclose appearances, yet it is God who effects real changes at a deeper, invisible level of being. This anticipates the later scholastic claim that divine operations may surpass creaturely modes of perception without contradicting reason.⁶⁸

Critics will further argue that the scholastic defense depends entirely on accepting Aristotelian categories that no longer carry explanatory force in contemporary metaphysics (as we have already noted).⁶⁹ Thus, if the distinction between substance and accidents is rejected, the doctrine appears to assert that the host is both bread and not-bread in the same respect, which would indeed violate LNC. Therefore, in order to maintain internal coherency of the doctrine and its theological claim, it must remain inseparable from the metaphysical framework in which it is articulated.

Divine Omnipotence and the Impossibility of Contradiction

At this stage the question naturally arises as to whether God could, in principle, override the laws of logic to bring about such a state of affairs. The short answer, according to classical theism, is the negative. This is not because God is limited, it is because the laws of logic are not external constraints that are somehow imposed upon Him. Simply put, God does not possess logic

⁶⁶ Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 43-45.

⁶⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.10.

⁶⁹ Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 312-315.

as a quality,⁷⁰ because God is the ground of logic, that is, His essence is identical with His intellect.⁷¹ Therefore, logic is not a rulebook outside God, nor a tool that He employs but the very structure of His own simple being. To ask whether God can suspend the laws of logic is to ask whether God can suspend Himself. And this is impossible since the laws of logic are not external rules imposed on God but reflections of God's own immutable nature. For example, LNC is not an arbitrary constraint, it is an expression of God's perfect actuality and simplicity. A contradiction is in fact a failure of intelligibility, and therefore a failure of being. Since God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, the very act of subsisting existence itself, He cannot "turn off" the principles that flow from His own essence. In sum, any attempt at suspending logic would mean suspending the very structure of divine being, which is metaphysically incoherent.

Aquinas seems to present this point with intense clarity. God is omnipotent because He can do all things that are possible, yet what implies a contradiction is not a "thing" at all.⁷² Aquinas's point is straightforward once stripped of technical vocabulary. When he says that God is omnipotent because He can do "all things that are possible," he means that divine power extends to every real possibility. But what implies a contradiction like a square circle or a thing that both exists and does not exist, is not a real possibility at all. It is not a "thing" waiting to be done but an empty string of words that cancels itself out. In other words, contradictions have no real being, no intelligibility, and no conceivable way of existing, so they cannot fall under the scope of divine action. Therefore, saying something to the effect of how God cannot make a contradiction true does not limit His power. What He does do is simply recognize that nonsense is not an object of power in the first place. In short, God's omnipotence reaches everything that can exist, yet contradictions are not candidates for existence. To extend this further, a contradiction is not a difficult task, it is a pseudo-task, a linguistic construction that fails to refer to any possible reality. Questions such as whether God can make a square circle, create a married bachelor, or bring into existence a truth that is false do not describe feats of omnipotence but combinations of words without coherent referents.⁷³

⁷⁰ In this paper I use *quality* as a sub-category of accident (which is correct in Aristotelian ontology). This should not be confused with its modern English meaning where *quality* can drift toward meaning "characteristic" or "trait," which is looser than the metaphysical sense.

⁷¹ Stump, *Aquinas*, 80-84.

⁷² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.25.3.

⁷³ Peter Geach, *Logic Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 78-82.

In short summary, this distinction reveals the classical difference between power and coherence. Divine omnipotence means that God can do all things that are possible, yet logical contradictions are not possible objects of power. For example, this is why classical theologians insist that God cannot lie, cannot cease to exist, cannot contradict Himself, and cannot make two plus two equal five.⁷⁴ These are clarifications of what omnipotence means and not limitations on divine power.⁷⁵

Miracles and the Suspension of Physical Laws

We have examined the laws of logic yet the distinction between logical and physical laws is also foundational for classical theology. Unlike the laws of logic, the laws of physics are contingent features of the created order, and they describe how this universe normally behaves and could have been otherwise.⁷⁶ Because these laws are contingent it means that God can suspend or override them at will. Many theologians would argue that this is precisely what a miracle is: a temporary suspension or bypassing of the normal physical order. Some more well known scriptural examples include the parting of the Red Sea, the virgin birth, and the resurrection.⁷⁷ These events represent exceptions to the normal causal order and not violations of logical necessity.

By contrast, however, the laws of logic are necessary and uncreated. They are not “laws” in the sense of imposed constraints, yet more specifically they are expressions of God’s own nature (as we have previously noted).⁷⁸ God cannot suspend the laws of logic because they are not contingent features of the universe but rather the conditions of intelligibility itself and, again, this distinction is crucial for evaluating the doctrinal idea of transubstantiation. If the doctrine actually requires a logical contradiction then divine omnipotence cannot rescue it and this seems to be precisely why Aquinas modified the definition of accident from “that which must exist in a subject” to “that which has a natural aptitude to exist in a subject.”⁷⁹ Hence, Aquinas knew he needed to avoid a logical contradiction since God cannot perform contradictions.

⁷⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.27.

⁷⁵ Saying that God cannot do the logically impossible is not restricting Him. It is simply recognizing that nonsense is not a real “thing” to be done. Omnipotence refers to the power to do anything that can possibly exist or make sense, not the power to make contradictions true.

⁷⁶ William Carroll, “Aquinas and Contemporary Science,” *The Thomist* 64 (2000): 21-45.

⁷⁷ John 2:1-11; Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 28:1-10.

⁷⁸ Stump, *Aquinas*, 82-83.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.1.

Modern Scientific Challenges: Atoms, Molecules, and Substance

In addition to the need of considering the laws or logic and physics, modern science introduces yet a different set of tensions. Contemporary physics defines objects by their measurable properties (e.g., atomic structure, molecular composition, mass, charge, etc.). In this framework, there is no hidden metaphysical core beneath the particles for if one changes the atoms then one changes the thing. Likewise, if the atoms remain the same then thing remains the same.⁸⁰

However, Aristotelian metaphysics treats atoms, molecules, and chemical bonds as accidents belonging to the categories of quantity and quality. In this view, substance is the underlying metaphysical identity or “what-ness” of the thing.⁸¹ For example, if a scientist were to analyze a consecrated host, the presence of carbohydrates, proteins, and gluten would not challenge the doctrine, because these belong to the order of accidents. The doctrine does not claim that the chemistry changes, it claims that the metaphysical belonging of those chemicals changes. The separation between metaphysical and scientific frameworks is a conceptual incommensurability and does not produce a direct contradiction. In other words, modern science does not affirm or deny substance, it simply does not employ the category. On the other hand, Aristotelian metaphysics treats substance as indispensable for explaining change and identity. Therefore, the tension arises not from empirical disconfirmation as it does from differing accounts of what counts as a fundamental explanation.⁸² This is not a contradiction as long as science and metaphysics stay in their own lanes. If a scientist tested a consecrated host, they would still find carbs, proteins, and gluten, which does not conflict with the doctrine, because those are the physical features of bread. The Church is not claiming the chemistry changes; it is claiming that what those chemicals belong to changes at a deeper, non-physical level. Science does not deal with that level at all. In other words, modern science does not affirm or deny “substance” because it does not use that category (it only measures what can be observed). Aristotelian metaphysics says

⁸⁰ Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper, 1958), 12-18.

⁸¹ Aristotle, *Categories*, 2a11-19. Aristotle basically taught that the tiny physical parts of something (e.g., its atoms, molecules, chemical bonds) are just the changeable features we can observe or measure. They are surface-level details but underneath all those shifting physical traits is the deeper identity of the thing, what it *really* is. He called that deeper identity the “substance,” the core “what-ness” that stays the same even when the physical features change. Modern science gives us far more detail about how matter is built, but it still treats those physical structures as the changeable aspects of a thing, not its deepest identity. So, while the scientific picture is more complex, the basic idea still fits: there is what a thing *is*, and there are the physical features that can change without turning it into something else.

⁸² Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 349-352.

you need the idea of substance to explain what a thing really is beneath its changing physical traits. So, the tension is not science disproving the doctrine, it is simply that the two systems explain reality in different ways and answer different kinds of questions. Although they cannot be fully reconciled, they do not directly contradict each other either. Science and Aristotelian metaphysics are simply talking about reality at two different levels. Science describes what you can measure: molecules, atoms, chemical reactions. Metaphysics describes what a thing is at the deepest level: its identity, its “belonging,” its mode of being. Because they answer different questions, they do not clash head-on, yet they also do not merge into one unified system. Science does not use the idea of “substance,” and metaphysics does not reduce things to chemistry. In essence, the two frameworks do not cancel each other out yet at the same time they also do not fit together into a single picture. Simply put, they run on parallel tracks.

Transubstantiation and the Biblical Pattern of Miracles

The Public and Sensory Character of Biblical Miracles

Throughout the biblical canon miracles are consistently portrayed as public, sensory, and empirically verifiable events. Instead of private mystical experiences they are concrete interventions in the created order that impress themselves upon the five senses of multiple observers. This pattern of divine miracles is evident across the Old and New Testaments where miracles are shown to function as displays of God’s divine power and also as epistemic signs intended to authenticate God’s messengers and confirm the truth of divine revelation (e.g., Moses, Elijah and Elisha, The Prophets, Jesus and the Apostles). As Gerhard von Rad notes, Israel’s faith is rooted in “mighty acts” that were “publicly witnessed and historically situated,” rather than in obscure, esoteric, secretive, or inward spiritual impressions.⁸³ In order to serve its revelatory purpose, the biblical narrative presupposes that a miracle must be accessible to the senses of those present, including skeptics, opponents, and the undecided.

The Old Testament provides numerous examples of this sensory dimension. For example, the parting of the Red Sea was a visible and audible event experienced by an entire nation. Likewise, the miracle of the manna in the wilderness was gathered (touched and seen), tasted, and consumed daily by thousands. Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal culminated in fire

⁸³ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 106-108.

descending from heaven in the presence of a gathered crowd. It is obvious that these events were neither subtle nor ambiguous, rather they were designed to be unmistakable manifestations of divine action. Augustine reflects on this biblical pattern when he notes that God's works in salvation history are "visible signs of invisible realities," intended to draw the human mind from sensory experience to spiritual truth.⁸⁴

The New Testament continues this same pattern where we see how the miracles performed by Jesus are consistently portrayed as public acts that engage the senses. For example, the blind receive sight in ways that onlookers can observe (see and hearing), and the raising of Lazarus is performed before a crowd (seeing and hearing), and the stench (smell) of death is explicitly mentioned to underscore the impossibility of any natural explanation. Even the resurrection appearances of Christ involve sight, hearing, and touch, culminating in Thomas's invitation to place his hand in the wounds of the risen Lord. As N. T. Wright argues, the New Testament writers insist on the "empirical, bodily, and publicly verifiable" nature of Jesus' resurrection precisely because it grounds Christian faith in historical reality rather than subjective experience.⁸⁵

In short sum, the biblically recorded miracles are characterized by their sensory immediacy, their public nature, and their resistance to naturalistic explanation. And, although they may be internal convictions, they are nevertheless external events that compel recognition, even among those predisposed to disbelief.⁸⁶

Verification and the Epistemic Function of Miracles

Biblical miracles serve a dual epistemic function: they authenticate the divine messenger and confirm the divine message.⁸⁷ Their credibility rests on their immediacy, completeness, and public accessibility. Healings in the New Testament are instantaneous rather than gradual. For

⁸⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), X.6.

⁸⁵ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 28-31.

⁸⁶ Thomistic philosopher Norman Geisler's account of biblical miracles reinforces this same pattern by insisting that a genuine miracle is an objective, sensory, and publicly observable intervention in the natural order, performed by God to authenticate a divine messenger or message. For Geisler, miracles are not inward impressions or private spiritual experiences but empirical events that "occur in the external world and are perceptible to the senses," thereby compelling recognition even among those predisposed to disbelief. This emphasis on public verifiability and resistance to naturalistic explanation complements the biblical pattern described above and further clarifies the contrast with the Eucharistic miracle as defined in Catholic theology. Whereas biblical miracles function as outward signs grounded in observable change, the Eucharistic change is defined precisely by the absence of sensory alteration, placing it in a distinct category of sacramental, rather than empirical, divine action. See: Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 15-18.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 15-18; 23-28.

example, a man lame from birth leaps and walks without rehabilitation and a woman suffering from hemorrhage is healed at the moment of contact. These are witnessed events as well as events that are scrutinized by religious authorities who often attempt to discredit the source of the power rather than deny the reality of the event itself.

The Gospels repeatedly emphasize that Jesus' miracles were performed in the presence of hostile observers. The Pharisees do not dispute that Jesus casts out demons, instead they attribute His power to Beelzebul. This narrative pattern underlines the biblical pattern that miracles are empirically undeniable even when their theological interpretation may be contested. As Craig Keener notes, the New Testament writers assume that "miracles were public events whose occurrence was not in dispute, only their meaning."⁸⁸

In addition to sensory verification of a genuine miracle, the verification of miracles also involves established communal procedures. We see this when Jesus heals the ten lepers and He instructs them to present themselves to the priests who serve as official examiners of ritual purity. The requirement of priestly examination in the healing of the ten lepers demonstrates that communal verification *presupposes* sensory validation. Under the Mosaic law, a priest could only declare a person clean by *visually* inspecting the skin and confirming the disappearance of lesions. Jesus' instruction to "show yourselves to the priests" therefore reinforces the biblical pattern that miracles are not authenticated by private intuition; they are authenticated by public, empirical, and authoritative examination. The communal process does not replace sensory evidence; it institutionalizes it, ensuring that miraculous events are evaluated through observable, verifiable change rather than subjective experience.⁸⁹

Sensory Epistemology and the Limits of Perception

Although biblical miracles are sensory events, the biblical authors also acknowledge that sensory perception *alone* does not guarantee spiritual understanding. For example, in the Gospels Jesus frequently laments that people have "eyes but do not see" and "ears but do not hear,"

⁸⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 115-118.

⁸⁹ The episode of the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19) is a perfect illustration of how public, authoritative verification depends on sensory evidence. When Jesus sends the healed men to the priests, He is not shifting the validation of the miracle into a private or mystical realm. He is doing the opposite: He is submitting the miracle to formal, communal, and sensory inspection. See also Leviticus 13-14 where the priestly role is empirical examiner, not mystical interpreter. Thus, the communal procedure assumes that something visible has changed, something publicly inspectable has occurred, and that the miracle leaves sensory evidence that can be evaluated.

indicating that recognition of divine action requires both sensory input and spiritual discernment.⁹⁰ Augustine deepens this biblical theme by distinguishing between two modes of perception: the external senses, which register the physical event, and the interior eye of the soul (*oculus interior*), which grasps its divine meaning. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine argues that miracles, teachings, and even Christ's visible actions are first encountered through ordinary sensory faculties, yet their true significance is discerned only when the mind is illuminated by God. The human eye can see the miracle, however, only the inner eye can perceive what the miracle reveals about the divine Word. Augustine uses this distinction to explain why many who witnessed Jesus' works failed to understand them. Their physical senses functioned correctly while their "inner sight" remained darkened. Thus, for Augustine, recognition of divine action requires both empirical perception and spiritual apprehension, a dual structure that mirrors Jesus' lament about those who "see" and yet do not truly see.⁹¹ Concisely stated, although the miracle itself is public and empirical, its interpretation nonetheless requires a rightly ordered heart.

Nevertheless, the biblical pattern remains clear: sensory perception is ordinarily necessary for recognizing that a miracle has indeed occurred. Spiritual discernment may deepen one's understanding of the event; however, it does not replace the empirical reality of the event itself. Without some sensory anchor, the biblical category of miracle collapses into subjective impression or wishful thinking. As John Chrysostom argues, God provides "visible proofs" so that faith may rest on "what is seen and known," not on private speculation.⁹²

Summary

Biblical miracles are consistently portrayed as public, sensory, and empirically verifiable acts of God. They engage sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. They are witnessed by crowds, scrutinized by authorities, and acknowledged even by opponents. Their purpose is to authenticate divine revelation through events that cannot be explained by natural causes. While spiritual discernment is necessary to grasp their full meaning, the events themselves are grounded in sensory

⁹⁰ Jesus cites this language explicitly in Matthew 13:13-15 where He applies Isaiah's prophecy to His own audience: "seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." Parallel formulations appear in Mark 8:18 ("Having eyes do you not see and having ears do you not hear?") and Luke 8:10, each reinforcing the theme that miracles and teachings are empirically available yet require spiritual receptivity to be rightly interpreted.

⁹¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), IX.3.

⁹² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. George Prevost (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), Homily 12.

experience.⁹³ This pattern forms the biblical baseline against which later theological claims, including the doctrine of the Real Presence, must be understood.

The Sacramental Mode of Presence: A Distinct Category of Divine Action

As we have previously stated (and offered here as a concise review for context), the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence asserts that Christ becomes truly, substantially present in the Eucharist through a unique sacramental mode of being. This mode is neither physical in the ordinary sense nor is it merely symbolic. Rather, it is a metaphysical transformation in which the substance of bread and wine is replaced by the substance of Christ's Body and Blood, while the sensible properties remain unchanged. Aquinas describes this as a "conversion of substance" (*conversio substantiae*) that differs from all natural transformations because it is effected directly by divine power rather than by natural causes.⁹⁴ The Catholic Church's teaching therefore situates the Eucharist within a *distinct category* of divine action and one that does not conform to the sensory pattern characteristic of biblical miracles.

This sacramental mode of presence is grounded in the broader theological conviction that God can operate at levels of reality inaccessible to the senses. One may argue that Augustine may have anticipated this distinct possibility when he writes that God's most profound works occur "in the hidden places of the soul" and are not always accompanied by visible signs.⁹⁵ Although

⁹³ In his survey of biblical supernaturalism, Thomistic philosopher and theologian Norman Geisler argues that Scripture records "about 250" miracles that meet the strict biblical criteria of *signs, wonders, or acts of power*. He emphasizes that this figure refers to discrete miracle *occurrences* (and not just mere references), and that many passages describe multiple miraculous acts within a single narrative unit. Geisler further insists that biblical miracles are always publicly observable, sensory-verifiable events, distinguishing them sharply from subjective religious experiences, internal impressions, or ambiguous natural anomalies. For Geisler, a genuine miracle must be an empirical disruption of the natural order, recognizable as such by witnesses, even if later interpreters dispute its theological meaning. See: Norman L. Geisler, *Miracles and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), esp. pp. 15-18. To be clear, Geisler's theological/biblical analysis is not new, nor is he alone. For example, Aquinas argues that a true miracle is a *visibilis effectus*, i.e., a visible, empirical event in the external world that exceeds the powers of created nature (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III.101). In the modern period, Karl Rahner (one of the top Catholic theologians of the twentieth century) likewise maintains that biblical miracles are "historical, publicly observable events" whose miraculous character lies in their objective occurrence rather than in subjective interpretation (*Foundations of Christian Faith*, 1978, pp. 116-118). Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI also stresses that the miracles of Jesus are "real events in history, perceptible to the senses," given precisely so that people could witness God's action (*Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 2007, pp. 242-244). Similarly, Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (a Dominican priest and one of the most prominent Thomist theologians of the twentieth century and widely regarded as the leading neo-scholastic interpreter of Aquinas before Vatican II) defines miracles as "facts perceptible to the senses" that surpass natural causes and are therefore empirically identifiable (*God: His Existence and His Nature*, 1934, pp. 501-503). In conjunction, these Catholic thinkers affirm that biblical miracles are not hidden or merely interior experiences; they are publicly observable divine acts, thus aligning closely with Geisler's criteria and the biblical record.

⁹⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

⁹⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.6.

Augustine does not articulate a formal substance-accident distinction, his insistence that divine action can be real without being sensibly perceptible provides an early conceptual foundation for the later scholastic articulation of sacramental presence. Yet at the same time we must be clear in the reference and context of Augustine. In *Confessions* X.6 Augustine is not discussing biblical miracles but rather the inner workings of God in the human soul, especially the dynamics of desire, memory, and spiritual illumination. So, when Augustine speaks of the “inner eye” or the “eye of the soul,” he is describing the capacity by which a person perceives God’s truth inwardly, i.e., an act of divine grace that enables repentance, regeneration, and spiritual understanding. This is part of Augustine’s broader anthropology in which the senses perceive external realities, yet the soul must be healed and illuminated to perceive God Himself. Thus, where Augustine elsewhere (e.g., *De Trinitate* IX-XI) distinguishes between external perception and spiritual perception in order to explain why some witnesses fail to grasp the meaning of Christ’s miracles, in *Confessions* X.6 he is concerned with the inward journey of the soul, not with the interpretation of public miraculous events.⁹⁶

The Persistence of Accidents and the Epistemic Challenge

The apex of the argument that we are approaching upon is the central epistemic difficulty posed by the doctrine of transubstantiation in that the sensible properties of bread and wine remain unchanged after consecration. According to classical Catholic teaching, if the consecrated host were subjected to empirical analysis, it would exhibit the chemical composition of bread and wine. Aquinas acknowledges this explicitly, noting that the accidents “remain with all their natural properties” and continue to function as the proper objects of the senses.⁹⁷ This simply means that the Eucharistic presence cannot be verified through sight, taste, touch, smell, or scientific investigation. The doctrine therefore requires an act of faith that transcends sensory evidence. However, although the Eucharistic presence cannot be verified through sight, taste, touch, smell, or scientific investigation, the Catholic tradition does not describe this as a “blind leap of faith” or as fideism. Church tradition understands the doctrine as a revealed truth that transcends sensory evidence without contradicting reason. Fideism (believing apart from or against rational inquiry) has been explicitly rejected by the Church, which insists that faith is supported by Scripture,

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.5.

philosophical reasoning, and ecclesial authority. Thus, Eucharistic belief requires faith (but not an irrational or anti-intellectual faith) and an assent to a supernatural reality that lies beyond empirical verification, not a denial of the value of reason itself.

The very fact that the Eucharist offers no rational or empirical evidence for the alleged change of substance inevitably places the doctrine in a more precarious epistemic position than sensory-verifiable miracles. Aquinas attempts to resolve this tension by arguing that faith “supplements the defect of the senses” (*defectum sensuum supplens*), not by negating sensory experience but instead by affirming a deeper metaphysical reality that the senses cannot access.⁹⁸ However, this does not eliminate the underlying problem: when no empirical indicators point *even indirectly* toward the claimed supernatural reality, the belief risks appearing to hover at the edge of the irrational. Josef Pieper’s distinction between what is “above reason” and what is “against reason” is meant to safeguard the doctrine from fideism (interpreting this as a paradigmatic example of Aquinas’s distinction between what is “above reason” and what is “against reason”).⁹⁹ Yet still, the absence of any evidential correlate means the Eucharist occupies a uniquely thin epistemic space in which the believer must affirm a metaphysical transformation that is not only unobservable, yet also systematically insulated from all possible verification. In this sense, the doctrine can seem to “skate on thin ice,” relying entirely on ecclesial authority rather than on the evidential structure that normally grounds belief in miracles.

The Absence of Sensory Verification and the Biblical Pattern

The absence of sensory verification in the Eucharist stands in marked contrast to the biblical pattern of miracles described in Section 1. Whereas biblical miracles are public, empirical, and immediately perceptible, the Eucharistic transformation seems to be the opposite: hidden, metaphysical, and perceptible only through faith. However, the Church does recognize and acknowledges this difference explicitly. The Catechism states that Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is “sacramental,” meaning that it is real although not subject to the ordinary conditions of physical presence.¹⁰⁰ Thus within this perspective framework, the sacramental mode of being is

⁹⁸ Aquinas, *Adoro Te Devote*, line 2, in *The Aquinas Prayer Book: The Prayers and Hymns of St. Thomas Aquinas*. Translated by Robert Anderson and Johann Moser (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2000).

⁹⁹ Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 43-45

¹⁰⁰ CCC, §1374.

not designed to function as a public sign in the same way that the miracles of Jesus or the apostles did.

Patristic writers appear to recognize this distinction at least to some extent. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem, in his *Mystagogical Catecheses*, emphasizes that the Eucharistic change is effected by the Holy Spirit and apprehended by faith rather than by the senses.¹⁰¹ In a similar way, Ambrose of Milan teaches that the words of Christ effect a real transformation, even though the outward appearance remains unchanged.¹⁰² It would seem that at the very least these two early witnesses demonstrate that the Church's understanding of the Eucharist has always involved a mode of divine action that does not conform to the sensory pattern of biblical miracles.¹⁰³ However, this insight was neither universal nor articulated with the metaphysical precision later found in Aquinas. Cyril of Jerusalem and Ambrose of Milan clearly teach that the consecrated elements undergo a real change that cannot be perceived by the senses and must be apprehended by faith. Cyril repeatedly tells the newly baptized not to "judge by taste" but to trust the words of Christ;¹⁰⁴ Ambrose insists that although the appearance remains bread and wine, the divine word effects a true transformation.¹⁰⁵ Yet this emphasis is not uniformly present across the Fathers. Many writers (e.g., Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr) stress the real presence, however, they do not explicitly frame it as a non-sensory miracle.¹⁰⁶ Others describe the Eucharist in strongly realist

¹⁰¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3.

¹⁰² Ambrose of Milan, *De Mysteriis*, 9.50.

¹⁰³ Because the Eucharist is the only miracle in Christian theology defined as *non-sensory* and *non-empirical* by its very nature, it inevitably appears more epistemically fragile than biblical miracles, which are public, observable, and empirically verifiable. Every other miracle in Scripture functions as a visible sign precisely because its supernatural character can be recognized through the senses. By contrast, the Eucharistic change is intentionally undetectable, producing no observable alteration in the accidents of bread and wine. This asymmetry can make the Eucharist seem "suspect" in the philosophical sense for it lacks the evidential structure that normally grounds belief in miracles and therefore depends entirely on ecclesial authority and doctrinal trust rather than empirical confirmation. The issue is not that the doctrine is irrational per se, but that it occupies a unique epistemic category and claim in which the supernatural effect is asserted without any sensory correlate. Ultimately, this makes it more vulnerable and open to charges of arbitrariness or special pleading.

¹⁰⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 4.1-4.

¹⁰⁵ Ambrose of Milan, *De Mysteriis*, 9.50-52.

¹⁰⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.18.5, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66, in *St. Justin Martyr: The First and Second Apologies*, trans. Leslie W. Barnard (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

terms without addressing the epistemic question at all.¹⁰⁷ No Father¹⁰⁸ articulates the later Thomistic notion of accidents remaining without a subject, and several Fathers (especially in the East) speak of the change in more mystical, participatory, or symbolic-realist categories rather than in metaphysical terms.¹⁰⁹ Thus, while there is a genuine patristic trajectory affirming that the Eucharistic change is not empirically verifiable, this was not a unanimous or systematically developed position, and the Fathers did not present it as a unique kind of miracle in the way medieval scholasticism later would.¹¹⁰

Eucharistic Miracles as Exceptional Signs

Even though the ordinary mode of Eucharistic presence is non-sensory, the Catholic tradition acknowledges the existence of extraordinary events in which the consecrated elements reportedly manifest physical properties of flesh and blood. These “Eucharistic miracles,” such as those associated with Lanciano or Buenos Aires, are presented as exceptional signs intended to strengthen faith rather than as normative expressions of the sacrament. Their rarity underscores the Church’s teaching that the ordinary Eucharistic presence is not subject to sensory verification. As Aquinas notes, God occasionally provides visible signs to confirm the truth of the sacrament, although these signs are not essential to the sacrament’s reality.¹¹¹

Contemporary theologians such as Lawrence Feingold argue that Eucharistic miracles function analogously to biblical miracles in that they provide empirical confirmation of divine action, however, they do so only in extraordinary circumstances and are not required for belief in the Real Presence.¹¹² The Catholic Church does not obligate the faithful to accept any particular

¹⁰⁷ For realist but non-epistemic treatments, see Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 7.1; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.2.2; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 41.

¹⁰⁸ Appeals to “what all the Fathers believed” often commit the fallacy of *consensus gentium*, the assumption that widespread or early agreement constitutes proof of doctrinal truth. Patristic testimony on the Eucharist is both diverse and context-bound, shaped by liturgical practice, anti-heretical argumentation, and non-Aristotelian metaphysical categories. The Fathers do not present a unified metaphysical account of Eucharistic change, nor do they articulate the later scholastic distinction between substance and accidents. To treat their varied statements as a single, unanimous doctrinal voice is to impose a synthetic uniformity that the historical record does not support.

¹⁰⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica* 37, in *Gregory of Nyssa: The Catechetical Oration*, trans. J. H. Srawley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). See also Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 4.2, which emphasizes mystical participation rather than metaphysical explanation.

¹¹⁰ For the absence of a Thomistic “accidents without a subject” framework in the Fathers, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 440-445; and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 166-175.

¹¹¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV.63.

¹¹² Lawrence Feingold, *The Eucharist: Mystery of Presence, Sacrifice, and Communion* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2018), 215-220. However, Feingold’s argument faces several philosophical and theological

Eucharistic miracle as dogma while the ordinary Eucharistic presence remains an object of faith grounded in Christ's words of institution and the Church's authoritative teaching.¹¹³

Summary

The Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence posits a sacramental mode of divine action that differs fundamentally from the sensory, public, and empirically verifiable miracles of Scripture. The Eucharistic transformation is metaphysical rather than physical, hidden rather than public, and apprehended by faith rather than by the senses. While extraordinary Eucharistic miracles occasionally provide sensory confirmation, they are not normative and do not alter the essential character of the sacrament. This distinction sets the stage for the deeper philosophical and epistemological questions addressed in the subsequent sections.

Table 4. Comparative Table: Biblical Miracles and the Eucharistic Presence

Category	Biblical Miracles	Eucharistic Presence (Catholic Theology)
Mode of Divine Action	Empirical interventions that alter physical reality in observable ways.	Sacramental transformation; the <i>substance</i> changes while physical properties (<i>accidents</i>) remain.
Role of the Five Senses	Engages all senses; designed to be directly perceived by witnesses.	Senses register only bread and wine; the change is inaccessible to sensory perception.
Public vs. Hidden Character	Performed openly; publicity is essential to their function as "signs."	Hidden and interior; not intended as a public empirical demonstration.
Verification and Scrutiny	Subject to public scrutiny, often by hostile observers who cannot deny the event.	Non-empirical; grounded in Christ's words and ecclesial authority rather than sight.
Immediate Physical Effects	Produce instantaneous, visible effects (e.g., healings, resurrections).	No observable change occurs; elements retain all natural physical properties.
Epistemic Function	Authenticates revelation through signs that compel recognition, even from skeptics.	Functions as a Sacrament of Faith; grounded in interior belief rather than demonstration.
Patristic Interpretation	Augustine and Chrysostom emphasize the sensory nature of biblical signs.	Cyril and Ambrose stress that the change is apprehended by faith, not by the senses.

challenges: it risks a category error by using sensory miracles to justify a non-sensory doctrine; it relies on special pleading by exempting the Eucharist from the evidential standards applied to biblical miracles; and it suffers from an evidential gap, since extraordinary Eucharistic phenomena do not logically demonstrate the metaphysical structure of transubstantiation. The rarity and contestability of such miracles further weaken their evidential force. As a result, Feingold's appeal to Eucharistic miracles provides, at best, indirect devotional support rather than a robust epistemic foundation for the doctrine.

¹¹³ See CCC, §67, and the Council of Trent, *Decree on the Eucharist*, sess. 13 (1551) in Council of Trent. *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. Translated by H. J. Schroeder, O.P. Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1978.

Relation to Natural Causes	Suspends or exceeds natural causes in empirically evident ways.	Operates at the level of substance; does not alter the natural laws of the elements.
Extraordinary Signs	Miracles are normative signs throughout salvation history.	“Eucharistic Miracles” (bleeding hosts, etc.) are rare exceptions, not the ordinary mode.
Overall Epistemic Pattern	Sensory perception is necessary to know a miracle occurred.	Sensory perception is insufficient; faith is the primary mode of apprehension.

The theological framework for this comparison relies heavily on the Aristotelian-Thomistic distinction between substance and accidents. In this context, we are reminded that substance is defined as what a thing *is* in its essence (in the Eucharist, this becomes the Body and Blood of Christ). Accidents are defined as the physical, measurable qualities (in the Eucharist, these remain bread and wine, e.g., taste, touch, chemical composition). While a Biblical miracle (like the turning of water into wine at Cana) changes both the *substance* and the *accidents*, the Eucharist is framed as being unique because the *accidents* remain unchanged to provide a sacramental sign that requires a leap of faith.

Summary: Transubstantiation and the Biblical Pattern of Miracles

It becomes obvious that a genuine tension emerges when the biblical standard for miracles is placed alongside the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Scripture consistently presents miracles as public, empirical, and sensory events, acts of God that alter the observable world in ways accessible to sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, and that can be scrutinized by crowds, skeptics, and authorities. If the Bible is divinely inspired, infallible, and inerrant, then this sensory, verifiable pattern is not incidental but rather it is normative for how God authenticates miraculous action. In contrast, the Eucharistic miracle (as defined by Catholic theology) does not follow this biblical paradigm. The substance changes while all sensory properties remain unchanged, leaving no empirical trace by which the event could be recognized or verified. The Church seeks to resolve this by classifying the Eucharist as a sacramental miracle rather than a biblical-style physical miracle. However, as has been noted, this move introduces a category of divine action that Scripture itself never describes or anticipates. The result is *not a formal contradiction but a clear epistemic tension* in that God (as revealed in the Bible) establishes a sensory model for recognizing miracles, while the Eucharist requires belief in a miracle that is, by definition, imperceptible to the senses and unverifiable by the biblical method.

Table 5. Comparative Table: Biblical Miracles and the Eucharistic Presence

Category	Biblical Miracles	Catholic Doctrine of the Real Presence
Nature of Event	Public, empirical, sensory-verifiable events witnessed by many, including skeptics.	Not empirically verifiable; appearances (accidents) of bread and wine remain unchanged.
Role of the Five Senses	Essential: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell confirm the event.	Ineffective: senses detect only bread and wine; no sensory change occurs.
Immediate Effects	Instantaneous, complete, visible results (lame walk, blind see, dead raised).	No observable physical effect; “substance” changes while “accidents” remain.
Public vs. Private	Public acts performed before crowds, including hostile observers.	Occurs within liturgy; no external sign accompanies the metaphysical change.
Purpose of Event	To authenticate God’s messenger and message; to demonstrate divine power.	To make Christ sacramentally present; not intended as public proof.
Natural Explanation	Events surpass natural causes (e.g., resurrection, nature miracles).	No natural change detectable; change is asserted by doctrine alone.
Epistemic Basis	Sensory evidence, eyewitness testimony, and public scrutiny.	Faith in Christ’s words and Church authority; no empirical confirmation.
Relation to Reason	Provides rational evidence for belief; functions as a sign.	“Above reason” yet not “against reason”; requires faith beyond the senses.
Extraordinary Confirmations	Built into salvation history (Exodus, Gospels, Acts).	Rare Eucharistic miracles may occur, however, are not required for belief.
Dogmatic Status	Foundational to Christian revelation and historical record.	Eucharistic miracles are private revelations; belief in them is optional.

The Problem of “Accidents Without a Subject”

The central philosophical difficulty in the doctrine of transubstantiation is not necessarily the change of substance itself, rather it is the claim that the sensible properties of bread and wine continue to exist *without any underlying subject*. Critics from the early modern period (most notably John Locke and David Hume) argued that the very concept of an “accident without a substance” is incoherent because by definition accidents are properties that must reside in a subject. Locke maintained that the idea of a property existing independently of a substance is unintelligible since the mind cannot conceive of qualities floating free from the thing that possesses them.¹¹⁴ Hume pushed the critique even further by arguing that we do not need to assume substances exist

¹¹⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.23.2-4. Locke argues that qualities such as color, shape, and motion cannot be conceived apart from a subject that bears them; the mind cannot form an idea of “whiteness,” “roundness,” or “motion” existing independently. For this reason, he concludes that we inevitably posit a substratum as the support of these qualities (Essay II.23.2-4). The reader should also keep in mind that the term “property” as used in this paper is interchangeable with “accidents” (see “Accidents” in Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms).

at all. For him, everything we experience is just a bundle of impressions (e.g., colors, sounds, textures, etc.) grouped together by the mind. If there are no underlying substances, then there is no room for talking about “accidents” or properties that depend on a deeper thing to hold them.¹¹⁵ Locke’s argument is both modest and sensible: he gives a psychologically realistic account of why we assume substances exist, even though he admits we never actually perceive them and can only posit a vague “something” that holds qualities together. Hume’s critique is far sharper being philosophically powerful and metaphysically corrosive because he argues that all we ever encounter are impressions like colors, tastes, smells, heat, or solidity, and that the mind simply bundles these together and calls the bundle a “thing.” Locke preserves the traditional substance-accident framework although he cannot really justify it. On the other hand, Hume dismantles that framework entirely, however, he offers nothing to replace it since his view depends on a strict empiricism that many find too narrow. In short, Locke is strong on how we think and weak on what ultimately exists. Hume is strong in critique and weak in reconstruction. Both arguments are influential, yet neither fully resolves the deeper metaphysical question. Together Locke’s modest defense of substances and Hume’s far more radical dismantling of them leave the classical substance-accident framework on uncertain footing. Locke cannot secure the metaphysical ground that accidents require, and Hume removes that ground altogether by reducing all qualities to bundles of impressions. When these critiques are placed alongside the traditional claim that accidents cannot exist without a subject, the tension becomes even sharper. Seen in this light, the Catholic claim appears to run directly against the principle of non-contradiction since it affirms the continued existence of properties that, by their very nature, cannot exist on their own.

However, the scholastic tradition did not define an accident as that which must exist in a subject but as that which has a natural aptitude to exist in a subject. Aquinas stated that what makes something an accident is not that it actually exists in a subject right now, but that it is the kind of thing that normally belongs in a subject. In other words, its very nature is to depend on something

¹¹⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.1.6. Hume illustrates this point with ordinary sensory examples such as colors, tastes, smells, sensations of heat or cold, and even the feeling of solidity, none of which appear to the mind as properties inhering in a deeper subject. We perceive only the impression of a particular shade, flavor, odor, or resistance, never a metaphysical “thing” that possesses these qualities. Because all perceptible features arrive as free-standing impressions rather than as accidents grounded in a substance, Hume concludes that the traditional notion of a bearer underlying its properties is a fiction of the imagination. By collapsing qualities into impressions and impressions into associative bundles, he effectively eliminates the conceptual space for accidents that depend on a subject, thereby dissolving the classical substance-accident framework altogether.

else, even if by a miracle it happens to exist without that support.¹¹⁶ In the Eucharist, God suspends the natural mode of existence of the accidents and sustains them directly. Aquinas compares this to the miraculous suspension of natural causal relations, such as when God preserves a body in existence without its usual material conditions.¹¹⁷ In *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.63, Aquinas argues that the accidents of bread and wine can continue to exist after consecration because God directly supplies the sustaining role ordinarily provided by the substance. He insists this is not a contradiction, since (in his view) the essence of an accident is not actual inherence. Instead, it is an orientation toward inherence, meaning that an accident can exist without a subject if God upholds it in an extraordinary way. How much of this is strictly justifiable and how much depends on Aquinas's own conceptual framework is a matter of debate. On one hand, his argument is internally coherent once one accepts his metaphysics of divine causality and his definition of accidents. On the other hand, critics note that the move works largely because Aquinas redefines "accident" so that inherence is no longer essential which allows him to preserve the doctrine by adjusting the terms. Therefore, while the argument may be philosophically elegant it also is heavily dependent on Aquinas's own metaphysical commitments rather than on independent logical necessity.¹¹⁸

This leads us to the deeper metaphysical issue concerning whether the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents is coherent in the first place. Patristic writers did not describe the doctrine in Aristotelian terms although several Fathers affirmed that the Eucharistic change is real yet not perceptible to the senses. Here we again reference Cyril of Jerusalem who instructed catechumens not to judge by taste or sight but rather to trust the words of Christ, suggesting an early recognition that the sensible properties remain unchanged.¹¹⁹ Ambrose of

¹¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 77, a. 1.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., q. 75, a. 5. Aquinas argues that God can sometimes hold things in existence directly, even when the normal physical conditions that sustain them are missing. He notes that just as God can miraculously preserve a human body without the material support it ordinarily requires, He can likewise preserve the appearances of bread and wine even after their substance is gone. Although Aquinas does not appeal to specific biblical miracles in this argument, he relies on the general principle that God can suspend natural causal relations whenever He chooses. The Eucharistic case, then, is simply another instance of God sustaining something in an extraordinary way maintaining the sensible qualities of bread and wine even when the underlying reality has been transformed. To be clear on the questions of whether we have any biblical or historical precedent for "accidents without a subject", the short answer is "no", at least not in the strict metaphysical sense Aquinas is addressing. There is no biblical miracle in which *properties* (color, taste, weight, texture, extension, etc.) exist without the underlying thing that normally carries them. Scripture records many miracles where natural causal relations are suspended, but never one where accidents exist without a substance.

¹¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV, ch. 63.

¹¹⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 4.1-4.

Milan taught that the divine word effects a transformation that is not accessible to empirical verification.¹²⁰ However, neither Cyril nor Ambrose articulated the later scholastic claim that the accidents remain without a subject. That development emerged only in the medieval period as theologians attempted to reconcile the patristic affirmation of a real change with Aristotelian metaphysics.

Contemporary Catholic theologians still defend the idea that accidents can exist without a subject by appealing to God's unlimited power and by stressing that metaphysical categories are not the same as physical ones. In their view, what seems impossible within the normal workings of nature is not necessarily impossible for God, and therefore the rules that govern physical objects do not automatically limit what can happen at the deeper, metaphysical level. For example, Lawrence Feingold argues that the accidents of bread and wine are preserved by God in a miraculous mode that does not violate logic since the distinction between substance and accidents is metaphysical rather than empirical.¹²¹ As we have noted, however, critics maintain that the scholastic solution relies on a metaphysical framework that is no longer widely accepted and that the notion of accidents existing without a subject remains conceptually strained even within that framework.

The notion of *accidents existing without a subject* stands in direct tension with several first principles of classical metaphysics (principles that Aristotle treats as foundational to the very possibility of knowledge). Because an accident is, by definition, a dependent mode of being that inheres in a substance, the idea that accidents could persist without a subject violates the principle that substance is the primary bearer of properties. As we have noted, "an accident is a real ontological addition to a substance," and therefore cannot possess its own act of existence. Detaching accidents from a subject also contradicts the Principle of Sufficient Reason (or PSR), since such accidents would lack any ontological ground for their being. It further strains LNC by positing entities that both *are* (they have being) and *are not* (they lack the substance that gives them being) in the same respect. Finally, it disrupts the potency-act structure of being, since accidents would possess actuality without the underlying potency that makes them possible. For these reasons, the classical tradition regards "accidents without a subject" as something more than unusual. It regards it as metaphysically incoherent apart from a miraculous suspension of the

¹²⁰ Ambrose of Milan, *De Mysteriorum* 9.50-52.

¹²¹ Feingold, *The Eucharist*, 215-220.

natural order.¹²² The following table outlines the metaphysical conflicts that arise if one posits the existence of “absolute accidents,” that is, accidents that exist without a supporting substance (as debated in various philosophical and theological critiques).

Table 6. First Principles Violated by the Concept of Accidents Without a Subject

First Principle Violated	Reason It Is Violated
Substance as Subject of Accidents	Accidents, by definition, exist <i>in</i> another; without a subject, they lose their ontological category.
Principle of Sufficient Reason	There is no “why” for the accident's presence if the ground of its existence (the substance) is absent.
Principle of Non-Contradiction	An accident would simultaneously be defined as “being-in-another” while actually being “being-in-itself.”
Potency-Act Principle	Accidents are “acts” of a substance; they cannot be “actualized” if there is no underlying “potency” to receive that act.
Analogy of Being	It collapses the hierarchy of being by treating a dependent mode of existence as an independent one.
Principle of Intelligibility	A “property” that belongs to nothing cannot be defined or understood, as its essence is linked to its subject.

Aristotelian and Modern Materialist Frameworks

Ultimately, it would seem that the plausibility of transubstantiation depends heavily on the metaphysical framework one adopts. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, the identity of a thing is determined by its substantial form rather than by its empirical properties. Substance is the underlying metaphysical reality that grounds the unity and intelligibility of a thing, while accidents

¹²² For Aristotle’s foundational account of substance and accident, see *Categories* 1-5 and *Metaphysics* VII-IX, where substance is treated as the primary mode of being and accidents as dependent properties that cannot exist apart from a subject. Aquinas develops this framework in *Summa Theologiae* I.3.1-8 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.52-55, arguing that accidents possess no act of existence apart from the substance in which they inhere. For a contemporary exposition of these first principles, see Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 63-92; and Norman Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 185-200, who emphasizes that accidents-without-a-subject violate the principles of substance ontology, the Principle of Sufficient Reason, and the act-potency structure of being.

are the perceptible features that manifest the substance.¹²³ From this perspective, it is possible for the substance of bread to be replaced by the substance of Christ's body while the accidents remain unchanged because the accidents do not constitute the identity of the thing. In short, the meaning of the Eucharistic elements resides in their substantial form, not in their empirical characteristics.

Modern materialist ontology, however, rejects this distinction. For the materialist,¹²⁴ the identity of an object is reducible to its physical structure, molecular composition, and observable properties.¹²⁵ In other words, there is no metaphysical substrate beneath the empirical data as the thing is nothing more than the arrangement of its parts. As a consequence, a change of substance without a change of accidents is impossible because the physical properties exhaust the identity of the object. If the bread looks, tastes, and chemically tests as bread, then it is bread. The materialist framework therefore renders transubstantiation both physically impossible and conceptually incoherent.

Although the difference between these frameworks is theoretical it also reflects broader historical developments. Early patristic writers operated with a realist sacramental ontology in which the Eucharist was understood as a participation in the divine life even though they did not try to articulate a metaphysical account of substance and accidents.¹²⁶ Because the early Church Fathers lacked access to Aristotle's full metaphysical system, they expressed the mystery of the Eucharist using the conceptual tools available to them (e.g., biblical imagery, liturgical language, and broadly Platonic or Stoic ideas about participation and transformation). Their focus was devotional and pastoral rather than technical, and they had no reason to articulate the Real Presence in terms of substance, accidents, or modes of inherence. It was only centuries later, once Aristotle's works were recovered and became central to medieval intellectual life, that theologians like Aquinas could give the doctrine a more precise metaphysical account. In this new context,

¹²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII.3.

¹²⁴ When we talk about "modern materialist ontology," we are not just talking about people who deny God or reject anything spiritual. The term refers to a specific philosophical position: the view that *everything that exists is ultimately physical*, and that all features of an object can be reduced to its physical structure, molecular makeup, and observable properties. In this framework, there is no real distinction between metaphysical categories (like substance and accident) and physical categories (like mass, shape, or chemical composition). Everything collapses into physics. So, the materialist is not simply someone who denies the supernatural. It is someone who denies that there are immaterial kinds of being or non-physical modes of existence at all. For them, the identity of a thing is nothing more than the arrangement of its matter and the properties that arrangement produces. That is why, from a materialist standpoint, the idea of "accidents without a subject" makes no sense. If properties are just physical features, then they cannot exist apart from the physical object that has them.

¹²⁵ J.J.C. Smart, *Philosophy and Scientific Realism* (London: Routledge, 1963), 34-45.

¹²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica*, 37.

Aristotelian categories offered a way to explain how the Eucharist could involve a real change of substance while the appearances of bread and wine remained. This allowed Aquinas to develop the sophisticated framework that would in turn shape Catholic theology for centuries.

Hence, medieval scholastics (drawing on Aristotle) developed a metaphysical system capable of explaining how the Eucharistic change could be real yet non-empirical. Early modern philosophers, influenced by the rise of mechanistic science, rejected substantial forms and replaced them with corpuscularian¹²⁷ or empiricist accounts of matter.¹²⁸ Contemporary analytic philosophers often adopt a physicalist ontology that leaves no room for metaphysical substances distinct from physical properties.¹²⁹

From the standpoint of contemporary philosophy and science, the coherence of transubstantiation depends on the metaphysical framework one adopts. Within an Aristotelian-Thomistic ontology where *substance* and *accidents* are real metaphysical categories, the doctrine is internally consistent. It posits a change at the level of substance while the accidents remain, and although this requires a unique act of divine causation, it does not violate the internal logic of that system. However, within a modern materialist or physicalist ontology identity is grounded in empirical properties and physical composition. Because this framework does not recognize a distinction between substance and accidents, a change of “what the thing is” without any change in observable properties appears incoherent. From this perspective, transubstantiation seems to conflict with contemporary understandings of identity, causation, and LNC.

Therefore, the apparent rationality or irrationality of the doctrine is not determined by theology alone but by the metaphysical assumptions one brings to the question. Each framework yields a different judgment about what counts as a coherent account of change and identity. Recognizing this allows both Catholic and non-Catholic readers to see why the debate persists for it is not only a disagreement about a miracle, it is also about the deeper structure of reality itself. At the same time, if one takes post-scholastic developments in metaphysics, physics, logic, and

¹²⁷ Corpuscularianism was an early modern view that explained all physical objects in terms of tiny, solid particles (“corpuscles”) whose size, shape, and motion produced every property we observe. Thinkers like Boyle and Locke used this model to replace older Aristotelian ideas of substance and accident with a more mechanical picture of the world. In this framework, qualities such as color, taste, or texture are nothing more than the effects of particle arrangements, which means they cannot exist independently of the matter that produces them. Corpuscularianism thus marks an important step toward modern materialism, where the identity of a thing is fully reducible to its physical structure and observable properties.

¹²⁸ Robert Boyle, *The Origins of Forms and Qualities*, in *The Works of Robert Boyle*, ed. Michael Hunter and Edward B. Davis (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999).

¹²⁹ Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

philosophy of language seriously, then modern materialist or physicalist ontology will appear more aligned with contemporary scientific and logical standards and less likely to conflict with prevailing accounts of identity and causation. This does not necessarily invalidate the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework; however, it does clarify why its plausibility is more evident to those who continue to affirm its underlying metaphysical commitments.

Table 7. Comparison of Competing Frameworks Aristotelian vs. Modern Materialist

Feature	Aristotelian/Thomistic	Modern Materialist
What makes bread “bread”?	The “Substantial Form”	The Molecular Structure
Can identity change without appearance?	Yes (Transubstantiation)	No (Identity = Appearance/Data)
Where does “meaning” reside?	In the Substance	In the arrangement of parts

7. Is Transubstantiation Logically or Empirically Defensible?

The Limits of Empirical Verification

From the standpoint of modern epistemology and the natural sciences, transubstantiation occupies a conceptual space that resists empirical judgement or resolution. As we have already discussed, the doctrine explicitly asserts that all empirically detectable properties of bread and wine remain unchanged after consecration, a claim already articulated in the thirteenth century by Aquinas, who argued that the “species” (accidents) persist while the “substance” is transformed by divine power.¹³⁰ And because the doctrine stipulates in advance that no sensory or instrumental observation could reveal the change, it is (by definition) insulated from empirical confirmation or falsification. For example, a chemical test or microscopic analysis that identifies the consecrated host as wheat starch does not necessarily challenge the doctrine itself, it simply confirms what the doctrine itself predicts.

This epistemic structure sharply contrasts with patristic Eucharistic realism, which tended to emphasize the mysterious transformation without the later scholastic precision regarding substance and accidents.¹³¹ Again referencing Cyril of Jerusalem, he exhorted catechumens to “judge not by taste” but to accept by faith that the bread becomes the body of Christ.¹³² Yet at the same time Cyril did not articulate a metaphysical mechanism; he simply affirmed a divine transformation. The scholastic attempt to provide a metaphysical explanation (rooted in Aristotelian categories) introduced a conceptual method that modern empirical science no longer

¹³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.2.

¹³¹ Patristic Eucharistic realism refers to the early Christian belief expressed from the second through the fifth centuries that the Eucharistic elements are not just (or only) symbolic representations but are, in a real and mysterious sense, the body and blood of Christ. This realism is liturgical, pastoral, and doxological rather than metaphysical. The Fathers affirmed the reality of Christ’s presence without offering a technical explanation of *how* the change occurs. Their emphasis fell on divine action, sacramental mystery, and the transformative power of the rite, not on ontological categories such as “substance” and “accidents,” which only emerged in the medieval scholastic period.

¹³² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.6.

recognizes as meaningful. Contemporary physics does not distinguish between “substance” and “accidents” as ontologically separable layers of reality; instead, it describes objects entirely in terms of measurable properties, structures, and causal relations.¹³³

As it has been previously pointed out, it was for this reason that philosophers from the Enlightenment period onward have regarded the doctrine as empirically vacant. Locke famously argued that a supposed change of “substance” without any alteration in observable qualities is indistinguishable from no change at all, rendering the claim unintelligible within empiricist epistemology.¹³⁴ More modern analytic philosophers, operating with identity criteria grounded in physical properties and causal continuity, continue to find no conceptual space for a transformation that leaves all empirical features intact.¹³⁵ Thus, from a post-scholastic scientific and philosophical standpoint, transubstantiation cannot be defended empirically because it deliberately excludes empirical access to the purported change.

The Role of Ecclesial Authority

At this point we are left with the doctrine’s epistemic grounding resting primarily on ecclesial authority (since neither empirical investigation nor modern metaphysical categories can establish the doctrine). To be clear, this is not at all a late development for we can see how it is embedded in the historical track of Eucharistic theology. The patristic writers appealed to Christ’s words, “This is my body,” as authoritative rather than as premises in a metaphysical argument. An example of this is found in Augustine who affirmed the real presence while at the same time acknowledging the symbolic and sacramental dimensions of the Eucharist. He further insisted that the sacrament must be interpreted within the rule of faith rather than through philosophical analysis. Augustine’s appeal to the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) signals his conviction that the Eucharist must be interpreted within the Church’s received doctrinal framework rather than through the immediacy of sensory perception or the autonomy of private judgment. For Augustine, the *regula fidei* is the authoritative, communal summary of Christian belief handed down through apostolic teaching, the baptismal creed, and the Church’s ongoing interpretive tradition. When he instructs his hearers not to “judge by what you see” but to “judge by the rule of faith,” he is directing them to understand the Eucharistic mystery through the lens of the Church’s shared

¹³³ Steven Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 23-45.

¹³⁴ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.23.

¹³⁵ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 112-15.

confession rather than through empirical analysis of the elements. This move reflects Augustine's broader sacramental theology in which the visible sign and the invisible reality are united within the ecclesial life of faith. Furthermore, the meaning of the sacrament is secured by the authoritative pattern of belief that governs Christian interpretation of Scripture and worship and not necessarily philosophical explanation.¹³⁶

Within the medieval period, the Church found itself confronted with eucharistic controversies such as those involving Berengar of Tours and thus increasingly formalized its teaching through conciliar authority.¹³⁷ The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) employed the term *transubstantiatio* to define the Church's position as a doctrinal determination grounded in ecclesial magisterium/Church authority and not as the conclusion of a philosophical demonstration.¹³⁸ Aquinas's metaphysical elaboration in the *Summa Theologiae* was intended to show that the doctrine was not internally contradictory within Aristotelian categories, yet he did not claim that reason could independently discover or prove the transformation. The starting point remained the words of institution and the Church's authoritative interpretation of them. In other words, the starting point remained the words of institution: "This is my body... this is my blood" and the Church's authoritative interpretation of those words, rather than any *independent* philosophical demonstration. The scholastic endeavor (including Aquinas's sophisticated use of Aristotelian categories) did not arise from speculative curiosity about the nature of substances but from the need to articulate coherently what the Church already confessed on the basis of Scripture *and liturgical tradition*. Therefore, the metaphysical explanation was secondary and derivative in that it served to defend the intelligibility of the Church's proclamation, not to generate it. This exemplifies a long-standing pattern in Christian theology (already seen in the patristic period) in

¹³⁶ Augustine, *Sermon 272*.

¹³⁷ Berengar of Tours (c. 999-1088) was the first major medieval theologian to challenge the emerging view that the Eucharistic elements undergo a literal ontological change. Rejecting the developing scholastic distinction between substance and accidents, he argued (drawing on Augustine) that the bread and wine remain what they are naturally, and that Christ is present sacramentally rather than through any material transformation. His position provoked strong opposition from figures such as Lanfranc of Bec, who appealed to ecclesial authority to defend a more robust realism. Although Berengar was compelled by several synods to affirm a formula endorsing substantial change, his assent was widely regarded as coerced. The controversy ultimately pushed the medieval Church to define its teaching more precisely, culminating in the Fourth Lateran Council's adoption of the term *transubstantiatio* in 1215.

¹³⁸ Fourth Lateran Council, *Constitutiones Concilii Quarti Lateranensis*, canon 1, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:230-31.

which doctrinal formulations emerge from the Church's effort to safeguard the apostolic faith against misunderstanding (and not from philosophical deduction).

The Reformation period further sharpened this dynamic when the Augustinian monk Martin Luther rejected transubstantiation. He did not do so because he denied the real presence, he did so because he rejected the Church's authority to impose a specific metaphysical explanation. Luther's Eucharistic theology preserves a robust doctrine of the real presence while rejecting the scholastic metaphysics that undergirded transubstantiation. For Luther, the certainty of Christ's presence rests entirely on the performative authority of Christ's words: "This is my body" rather than on any change in the underlying substance of the elements. He insists that Christ's body and blood are truly given "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, yet he refuses to explain this presence through Aristotelian categories, which he regarded as speculative intrusions into a divine mystery. Against the medieval view, he denies a change of substance; against the Reformed, he rejects a merely symbolic or spiritual presence. The Eucharist, for Luther, is a divine act grounded in promise rather than a metaphysical transformation. Christ is present because he wills to be present and has pledged himself to the sacrament, making the mode of that presence a matter of faith rather than philosophical explanation.¹³⁹ Operating within a different metaphysical and sacramental framework, John Calvin's Eucharistic theology affirms a real participation in Christ while rejecting both the scholastic account of transubstantiation and Luther's insistence on a corporeal presence "in, with, and under" the elements. For Calvin, the Eucharist is a true communion with the risen Christ, effected by the Holy Spirit, who lifts believers into fellowship with Christ's glorified body rather than bringing Christ's body down into the elements. The bread and wine remain what they are, yet through the Spirit they become instruments of a genuine, life-giving encounter with Christ. This "spiritual presence" is more than just symbol. It is a dynamic, sacramental participation grounded in Christ's promise and mediated by the Spirit's power. Thus, Calvin positions himself between medieval metaphysics and Zwinglian memorialism, preserving a robust realism while insisting that the mode of Christ's presence transcends physical location and cannot be explained through Aristotelian categories or Lutheran sacramental union.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz, trans. A. T. W. Steinhaeuser (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

¹⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.17.

Contemporary Catholic theology still officially teaches transubstantiation while many modern Catholic thinkers such as Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, have tried to explain the doctrine in ways that make sense within today's intellectual world. Instead of relying on the old medieval and Aristotelian categories of "substance" and "accidents" (which no longer fit easily with modern science or philosophy) they describe the Eucharistic change in more experiential or relational terms. Rahner emphasizes how Christ becomes present to the believer through the sacrament in a way that transforms the relationship between God and the worshipper. Schillebeeckx focuses on how the bread and wine become the real presence of Christ by functioning as effective signs within the life of the Church. Both theologians acknowledge that the medieval metaphysical framework is difficult to maintain in a post-Aristotelian age, therefore, they seek to preserve the core meaning of the doctrine (i.e., Christ truly present in the Eucharist) while expressing it in categories that resonate with contemporary understandings of reality, experience, and meaning.¹⁴¹

Why the Doctrine Is Ultimately a "Mystery of Faith"

When we consider the collapse of Aristotelian substance metaphysics as a widely accepted explanatory framework, the doctrine of transubstantiation now functions primarily as a theological mystery grounded in revelation and ecclesial authority rather than as a proposition demonstrable by logic or science. The Catholic Church itself acknowledges this status by classifying the Eucharist as a *mysterium fidei*, a term reaffirmed in the documents of Vatican II and subsequent magisterial teaching.¹⁴² Keep in mind that the designation does not imply irrationality, it simply indicates that the doctrine transcends the capacities of natural reason.

¹⁴¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 133-60; Karl Rahner, "The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966). Schillebeeckx argues that the bread and wine become Christ's body and blood because, after the consecration, they take on a new relational and sacramental identity within the Church. Their physical makeup does not change, however, their meaning and role do. They become the concrete way Christ gives himself to his people. Instead of relying on the old idea of a hidden "substance" beneath the appearances, Schillebeeckx says the elements are transformed because they now function as the real, effective signs of Christ's presence. He is not denying the real presence, he is explaining it in a way that fits a modern worldview in which the medieval notion of "substance" no longer resonates. Therefore, the change is sacramental and relational, not chemical or metaphysical. In short, he keeps the Catholic claim that Christ is truly present but expresses the "how" of that presence in terms of meaning, relationship, and experience rather than Aristotelian metaphysics.

¹⁴² Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), §47, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P., new rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

From a contemporary philosophical perspective, the doctrine represents a boundary case where classical logic attempted to explain a phenomenon that ultimately resists conceptual containment. The distinction between substance and accidents was originally intended to preserve logical coherence by ensuring that the doctrine did not entail a contradiction such as asserting that bread is simultaneously bread and not-bread in the same respect. However, once the metaphysical categories that made this distinction intelligible are no longer operative, the doctrine appears to modern thinkers as a conceptual artifact of a bygone ontology and thus ineffective. Secular philosophers like A. J. Ayer (and the whole movement called logical positivism) argued that statements are meaningful only if they can be tested, measured, or verified by the senses.¹⁴³ Because religious claims like transubstantiation cannot be observed or scientifically checked, they labeled them “non-cognitive,” meaning they do not express real facts; only feelings, attitudes, or symbolic language. Later philosophers working within a physicalist worldview go even further. Since modern science understands reality entirely in terms of physical properties, particles, and measurable processes, the idea of a “change of substance” that leaves all physical features untouched simply does not fit. From their perspective, the doctrine is not just unprovable, it does not even make sense within the framework they use to describe the world.¹⁴⁴

Nevertheless, within the Catholic tradition, the doctrine remains coherent insofar as it is anchored in a sacramental worldview that affirms divine causation beyond the order of nature. The Church does not claim that transubstantiation can be demonstrated by empirical or philosophical means. It asserts that the doctrine is known through revelation and safeguarded by ecclesial authority. In this sense, the doctrine’s defensibility is not empirical or logical in the modern sense but rather theological being accepted because the Church teaches it, and the Church teaches it because it believes Christ instituted it.¹⁴⁵

Conclusion

¹⁴³ A note about the claim that “statements are meaningful only if they can be tested, measured, or verified by the senses.” This statement collapses under its own weight because it fails to meet the very standard it sets. This rule is not itself something you can observe, measure, or verify through any empirical method. It is a philosophical assertion about meaning, not a scientific finding. Since the principle cannot be confirmed by the senses, it would (by its own criteria) have to be judged meaningless. In other words, if the verification principle is true, then it is meaningless, and if it is meaningless, then it is false. This self-referential failure is why most philosophers eventually abandoned logical positivism because its central test for meaningfulness cannot pass its own test.

¹⁴⁴ A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936), 115-18.

¹⁴⁵ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §47; CCC, §§1376, 1381; Council of Trent, Session XIII, Chapter 4 and Canon 1; Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* (1965), §§24-25.

From a strictly rationalist or empirical standpoint, the “ice” beneath transubstantiation is exceedingly thin, if not absent altogether. The doctrine cannot be demonstrated by empirical methods, nor can it be rendered fully coherent within post-scholastic metaphysical frameworks. Its intelligibility depends on accepting a sacramental ontology and the authority of the Church’s interpretive tradition. For this reason, the Catholic Church itself classifies the Eucharist as a “mystery of faith,” affirming that while the doctrine is not contrary to reason, it surpasses the explanatory capacities of reason alone.

8. John Chapter 6: Biblical Foundations for Eucharistic Doctrine

The Contextual Flow of John 6

The Gospel of John, and Chapter six in particular, unfolds as a carefully constructed narrative whose internal logic is consistently Christological rather than liturgical. Chapter six opens with the feeding of the five thousand, a miracle that functions as the narrative and theological foundation for the discourse that follows. John presents this sign as an act of compassion as well as a revelatory moment that discloses the identity of Jesus as the one who surpasses Moses and the manna of the wilderness. The crowd's response (which includes an attempt to make Jesus king by force) reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the sign's purpose for their desire for political liberation and material provision stands in tension with the Johannine emphasis on signs as pointers to deeper realities rather than ends in themselves.¹⁴⁶ This tension prepares the reader for the discourse that follows, in which Jesus interprets the miracle not as a prefiguration of a sacramental rite *but as a revelation of his identity* as the bread that comes down from heaven. Scholars have long noted that the sign-discourse structure is characteristic of the Fourth Gospel and that the feeding miracle serves as the interpretive key for the entire chapter.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, which present Jesus' miracles primarily as acts of compassion, demonstrations of divine authority, or inaugurations of the Kingdom of God, the Gospel of John structures its narrative around seven carefully selected signs (*sēmeia*) that function as revelatory disclosures of Jesus' messianic identity. John's terminology is deliberate: a *sign* is not simply a supernatural event; it is a symbolic action that unveils a deeper theological truth about the incarnate Word. Each sign is embedded within a larger interpretive discourse such as the Bread of Life discourse following the feeding of the five thousand or the "I am the Light of the World" declaration accompanying the healing of the man born blind so that the miracle becomes a visible enactment of Jesus' self-revelation. Moreover, the signs escalate in scope and significance, culminating in the raising of Lazarus, which prefigures Jesus' own resurrection and compels a climactic confession of faith. By selecting and arranging these events as messianic markers rooted in Israel's scriptural expectations, John transforms the miraculous into a theological grammar through which Jesus' identity as the Christ, the Son of God, is progressively unveiled, thereby fulfilling the evangelist's stated purpose that "these are written so that you may believe" (John 20:31).

¹⁴⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 233. Raymond Brown (1928-1998) was a highly respected Catholic biblical scholar known especially for his work on the Gospel of John and early Christology. A Sulpician priest and longtime professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he became one of the most influential figures in modern biblical studies. His major works such as *The Gospel*

The narrative progression from the miracle to the discourse is marked by a shift from physical bread to the theme of divine revelation. Jesus rebukes the crowd for seeking him because they ate their fill rather than because they perceived the sign's significance. This rebuke introduces the central Johannine theme that physical realities serve as symbols pointing to spiritual truths. John consistently employs this symbolic method throughout the Gospel as seen (for example) in the dialogues of Jesus with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the Jewish authorities. In each case, Jesus uses physical imagery to reveal spiritual realities and those He converses with misunderstand him by interpreting his words in a literal or material sense. To grasp this pattern is essential for interpreting the Bread of Life Discourse in chapter six for it demonstrates that the Gospel's symbolic language is not intended to establish ritual prescriptions, yet instead it is to reveal the identity and mission of Jesus. Raymond Brown observes that the misunderstanding motif is one of the most pervasive literary devices in the Gospel and that it consistently functions to elevate the reader from literal to spiritual understanding.¹⁴⁸

The structure of John 6 reinforces this interpretive framework that is found throughout the Gospel. The chapter divides naturally into three movements: the first is the feeding miracle, the second is dialogue concerning the meaning of the sign, and thirdly the response of the disciples. The middle section, which contains the Bread of Life Discourse, is framed by the crowd's misunderstanding and the disciples' difficulty in accepting Jesus' teaching. This framing device underscores the Christological focus of the discourse. Jesus repeatedly identifies himself as the bread of life and emphasizes that the true work of God is to believe in the one whom he has sent. John's Bread of Life Discourse employs several characteristic Jewish literary devices that shape its theological meaning. The misunderstanding motif, common in Jewish pedagogical dialogue, allows Jesus' audience to take his words in a literal or surface sense so that he can reveal a deeper,

According to John, The Birth of the Messiah, and The Death of the Messiah, remain standard academic references. Brown also served on the Pontifical Biblical Commission and was widely regarded for combining rigorous historical-critical scholarship with a balanced, ecumenical approach to Scripture. Because Brown is not a conservative Catholic theologian, his argument that John 6 does not function as a Eucharistic institution text carries even greater interpretive weight. His position cannot be dismissed as Protestant argument or as the product of an anti-sacramental bias, for Brown fully accepts Catholic Eucharistic doctrine while at the same time insisting that John 6 is not the exegetical foundation upon which that doctrine rests. This combination of ecclesial loyalty paired with rigorous historical-critical method gives his reading a distinctive credibility in ecumenical discussions, where confessional suspicion often clouds debates about sacramental interpretation. Brown's analysis demonstrates that one may affirm the Church's Eucharistic teaching while recognizing that the Fourth Gospel pursues a primarily Christological, rather than liturgical or institutional purpose in its presentation of the Bread of Life discourse.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 278.

spiritual meaning thus mirroring rabbinic patterns of question, confusion, and clarification. John also uses midrashic reinterpretation, recasting the manna tradition not as a past miracle, rather as a typological pointer to Jesus himself as the true, eschatological bread from heaven. Finally, Jesus' repeated "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι) declarations draw on Jewish theophanic language, signaling divine identity rather than just metaphor. These devices frame the crowd's misunderstanding and the disciples' struggle as narrative tools that highlight the discourse's central claim: the true work of God is to believe in the one he has sent, the living bread who gives eternal life. Thus, the discourse centers on the theme of faith rather than ritual participation. Rudolf Schnackenburg notes that the repeated emphasis on believing, coming to Jesus, and receiving eternal life through faith indicates that the primary concern of the passage is the revelation of Jesus as the source of life rather than the institution of a sacramental practice.¹⁴⁹

The absence of any explicit reference to the Last Supper or the words of institution further supports this interpretation. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, John does not include an institution narrative. For example, he places the foot washing at the center of the Last Supper account, and in doing so shifts the focus from sacramental institution to the revelation of Jesus' self-giving love. This narrative choice strongly suggests that John does not intend the Bread of Life Discourse to function as a Eucharistic institution text but as something else. Many scholars argue that John's theology of the Eucharist is actually expressed in chapters 13 through 17 (not in chapter 6) where themes of mutual indwelling,¹⁵⁰ divine love, and spiritual nourishment are developed without reference to ritual elements.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 47. Schnackenburg (1914-2002) was a German Catholic priest and biblical scholar who taught New Testament at the University of Würzburg. He was widely regarded as the "dean" of Catholic Johannine scholarship in the post-war period. His work is deeply historical-critical yet also theologically sensitive, which is why both Catholic and Protestant scholars cite him extensively. As one of the most influential Catholic New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, especially in Johannine studies, his three-volume *The Gospel According to St. John* is still considered one of the most rigorous and balanced treatments of the text.

¹⁵⁰ In reference to John's Gospel, when I use the term "mutual indwelling" I am referring to the distinctive Johannine conviction that God's life is shared, participated in, and reciprocally "abided in" by those in relationship with Him. John uses the language of "abiding" to describe the Father dwelling in the Son and the Son dwelling in the Father, a relational unity that expresses their shared life and purpose. That same pattern is then extended to believers, those who trust in Jesus "abide" in Him, and He "abides" in them, creating a participatory union in which divine life, revelation, and love are communicated and received. Therefore, mutual indwelling names the reciprocal, life-sharing communion that characterizes both the relationship between Father and Son and the relationship between Christ and His disciples. This is a relational ontology rather than a spatial one, grounded in shared life, revelation, and ongoing communion.

¹⁵¹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 412.

This paper has already emphasized that classical metaphysics distinguishes between substance and accident and that theological claims about divine simplicity or Eucharistic transformation must be understood within their own metaphysical frameworks. Likewise, we have noted that the Eucharistic miracle is often described as the inverse of divine simplicity, since it involves accidents without a subject rather than a substance without accidents. This metaphysical analysis highlights the complexity of applying Aristotelian categories to sacramental theology. However, the metaphysical framework employed in Eucharistic doctrine does not appear in the Johannine text itself. The Gospel's symbolic method operates independently of later metaphysical developments, and its use of bread imagery is rooted in the narrative and theological concerns of the evangelist rather than in Aristotelian categories. Our previous observation that sacramental change concerns the level of being rather than physical alteration underscores the distinction between metaphysical explanation and biblical exegesis. The Johannine text does not address metaphysical questions about substance and accident and therefore cannot be interpreted through the lens of later sacramental metaphysics without risking eisegesis.

The contextual flow of John 6 thus points toward a Christological rather than a sacramental interpretation. The narrative progression from the feeding miracle to the discourse, the symbolic method employed throughout the entire Gospel, the emphasis on faith as the means of receiving eternal life, and the absence of any explicit reference to the Eucharist all indicate that the primary purpose of the passage is to reveal the identity of Jesus as the bread of life. While later theological traditions have drawn upon this passage to support sacramental doctrines, the Johannine context suggests that the discourse is not intended as a liturgical instruction; it is meant as a revelation of the divine mission of Jesus. Therefore, the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is crucial. To read the Eucharist into the text is to impose a later theological framework onto a passage whose internal logic is consistently Christological.

In the Gospel of John, the author deliberately uses the Greek word *semeion* ("sign") instead of "miracle." These signs are not just displays of power; they are progressive revelations designed to lead the reader to the conclusion that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). The following table tracks how each sign builds upon the last to reveal Jesus' divine nature and authority.

Table 8. *The Seven Signs in the Gospel of John*

The Sign	Reference	Divine Revelation	Theological Significance
1. Turning Water into Wine	John 2:1-11	Lord of Creation	Replaces old ritual water with the “New Wine” of the Messianic age.
2. Healing the Official’s Son	John 4:46-54	Lord over Space	Proves His word has power over any distance; the Life-Giver.
3. Healing the Paralytic	John 5:1-15	Lord over Time	Asserts equality with the Father's work, even on the Sabbath.
4. Feeding the 5,000	John 6:1-14	The Bread of Life	The Sustainer who provides eternal life (i.e., God), fulfilling the Manna type.
5. Walking on Water	John 6:16-21	The “I AM”	Displays mastery over nature and uses the Divine Name (<i>ego eimi</i>).
6. Healing the Blind Man	John 9:1-12	The Light of the World	Restores spiritual vision while exposing the blindness of religion.
7. Raising Lazarus	John 11:1-44	Resurrection & Life	The ultimate sign demonstrating total authority over death itself.

In this table we can see the cumulative effect as John records how Jesus moves from the first sign to the seventh. In each case the “stakes” and the clarity of the revelation increase. Jesus moves from private to public with the first sign. This sign was only witnessed by a few (e.g., servants and disciples), while the final sign was a massive public event that triggered the plot to crucify him. The move from matter to life is seen where Jesus begins by manipulating inanimate matter (water), moves to restoring health (the son and the paralytic), then sustaining life (bread), and finally reversing death (Lazarus). We can also note the “I AM” connection as most of these signs are paired with a specific discourse or claim (e.g., the feeding of the 5,000 leads directly into the “I am the Bread of Life” sermon, cementing the link between the miracle and his identity).

The Words of Institution

The absence of the words of institution in the Fourth Gospel has long been recognized as one of the most significant literary and theological features of John’s passion narrative. In the

Synoptic Gospels we see the Last Supper presented as the moment in which Jesus identifies the bread as his body and the cup as his blood. However, John omits this material entirely and replaces it with the foot washing and this omission is not accidental.¹⁵² It reflects a deliberate theological and narrative strategy that shapes the way the Bread of Life Discourse in John 6 must be interpreted. The absence of the institution narrative in John 13 is therefore a crucial contextual piece of data for evaluating whether John 6 should be read sacramentally or Christologically. Scholars across confessional traditions have argued that John's silence on the institution words is itself a form of theological speech as it signals that John does not intend the discourse in chapter 6 to function as a Eucharistic institution text.¹⁵³

The accounts of the Last Supper that are found in the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus' words over the bread and the cup as the foundational moment for Christian sacramental practice. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus identifying the bread as his body and the cup as his blood, and Paul's account in First Corinthians confirms that this tradition was already established within the earliest Christian communities.¹⁵⁴ However, the absence of these words in John's Gospel is therefore all the more striking, especially given that John's narrative habits consistently show that he does not simply omit Synoptic material. He tends instead to recast it through a more explicitly theological lens. For example, the cleansing of the Temple cleansing is not dropped, instead it is dramatically relocated to the opening of Jesus' ministry and interpreted as a sign of His bodily resurrection, a layer of meaning absent from the Synoptics. The feeding of the five thousand (one of the few miracles shared by all four Gospels) is not just repeated for on the contrary it is expanded into the lengthy Bread of Life discourse. Here we see how John transforms a brief miracle story into a sustained meditation on heavenly nourishment, divine identity, and the

¹⁵² In the Catholic tradition, the washing of feet on Holy Thursday functions as a ritual dramatization rather than a sacrament. It embodies Christ's command of humble service in John 13, yet it lacks the essential features of sacramentality (e.g., no divine promise of grace, no covenantal institution, no apostolic mandate to repeat the act as a means of sanctification). However, in several Protestant traditions, especially Anabaptist and Holiness communities, the same passage becomes the basis for a third ordinance (or sacrament) *precisely because Jesus issues an explicit command and models a repeatable action*. This contrast exposes a deeper hermeneutical asymmetry. John 6 contains no institution narrative, yet it grounds the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, while John 13 contains a clear institution-like command, yet it does not ground a Catholic sacrament. The result is a striking inversion of expectations. Catholic sacramental theology privileges the Synoptic and Pauline institution accounts and reads John 6 as theological exposition. On the other hand, ordinance-based Protestantism privileges the explicit imperatives of Jesus and therefore elevates foot washing to sacramental status. The tension reveals not inconsistency so much as it does two fundamentally different logics of sacramentality. One is rooted in apostolic tradition and metaphysical grace (Catholic) while the other in literal obedience to the commands of Christ (Protestant).

¹⁵³ Brown, *John I-XII*, 275.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 276.

scandal of Jesus' flesh. In addition, there are episodes such as the walking on the water and the anointing at Bethany that are *retained* and *reshaped*. John removes Peter's role in the former and heightens Jesus' self-revelation ("I am"), while in the latter he identifies the woman as Mary of Bethany and explicitly links her act to Jesus' burial. The calling of the first disciples which is neatly compressed into a few verses in Mark now becomes in John a multi-scene theological drama involving *report* (testimony), *recognition*, *renaming*, and *redemptive-historical* (eschatological) promise. Across all of these examples, the pattern is unmistakable: John preserves the narrative "kernels" known from the Synoptics and then consistently *rearticulates* (deepens), *relocates*, or *reinterprets* them. This makes his omission of certain Eucharistic elements (especially the Words of Institution) renders the omission all the more noteworthy.

John's decision to exclude the institution narrative suggests that he is not attempting to reproduce or supplement the Synoptic tradition. Instead, he is presenting a distinct theological perspective on the meaning of Jesus' death and the nature of discipleship.¹⁵⁵ The replacement of the institution narrative with the foot washing in John 13 reinforces this interpretation in the following way: the foot washing functions as a symbolic act that reveals the meaning of Jesus' impending death as an act of self-giving love. The narrative emphasizes humility, service, and mutual indwelling rather than ritual participation. This thematic shift indicates that John's theological interest lies not in the establishment of sacramental forms but in the revelation of Jesus' identity and the transformation of the community through love.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, the symbolic action of washing the disciples' feet actually serves as the Johannine counterpart to the Synoptic institution narrative by revealing the meaning of Jesus' body and blood through enacted love (not through ritual elements). Furthermore, as we have noted, the absence of the institution narrative in John suggests that he is not concerned with metaphysical questions about the nature of sacramental change. He is concerned with the revelation of Jesus' identity and the formation of a community shaped by his love.

The theological implications of John's omission of the institution words are significant for interpreting John 6. If John had intended the Bread of Life Discourse to function as a Eucharistic institution text, then it would be very difficult to explain why he omitted the institution narrative at the Last Supper. Therefore, the absence of the words of institution in John 13 strongly suggests

¹⁵⁵ Schnackenburg, *John*, 51.

¹⁵⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 413.

that John does not view the discourse in chapter 6 as a sacramental instruction. He views it as a Christological revelation.¹⁵⁷ The discourse reveals Jesus as the bread of life, the one who gives life to the world, and the one who must be received through faith. The repeated emphasis on believing, coming to Jesus, and receiving eternal life through faith indicates that the primary concern of the passage is the revelation of Jesus' identity rather than the establishment of a ritual practice.

The noted contrast between the Synoptic institution narratives and the Johannine foot washing further supports this interpretation. The Synoptics present the Last Supper as the moment in which Jesus interprets his death through the material symbols of bread and wine. John presents the Last Supper as the moment in which Jesus interprets his death through the symbolic act of humble service. This difference reflects a broader theological difference between the Synoptic and Johannine writings. The Synoptics emphasize the sacrificial and covenantal dimensions of Jesus' death, while John emphasizes its revelatory and transformative dimensions.¹⁵⁸ Thus, the Bread of Life Discourse must be interpreted within the Johannine theological framework that has been handed down to us rather than through the lens of a later sacramental theology.

In summary, the absence of the words of institution in John serves as a hermeneutical boundary that prevents the Bread of Life Discourse from being read as a Eucharistic institution text. The discourse reveals the identity of Jesus as the bread of life and calls the reader to respond in faith. The Johannine emphasis on belief, revelation, and mutual indwelling suggests that the primary concern of the passage is the relationship between Jesus and the believer rather than the establishment of a sacramental rite. While later theological traditions have drawn upon John 6 to support Eucharistic doctrine, the Johannine context indicates that the discourse is not intended as a liturgical instruction yet rather as a Christological revelation. Therefore, the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is essential and paramount. In sum, to read the Eucharist into the text is to

¹⁵⁷ Brown, *John I-XII*, 278. Brown notes that the theological implications of John's omission of the institution words are far reaching for any interpretation of John 6. If John had intended the Bread of Life Discourse to function as a Eucharistic institution narrative, it becomes exceedingly difficult to account for the complete absence of the institution formula in the Last Supper scene of John 13. The Synoptic tradition had already stabilized the pattern of linking Jesus' interpretive words over the bread and cup to the Passover meal and John's deliberate decision to narrate the meal without those words cannot be dismissed as accidental or just stylistic. Rather, the omission appears to be a conscious theological choice that signals John's refusal to treat the discourse of chapter 6 as sacramental instruction. John relocates the theological center of the meal to the foot washing and the new commandment, thus shifting the interpretive focus from ritual institution to Christological revelation. Therefore, John 6 does not function as a liturgical mandate; it functions as a revelation of Jesus' identity as the life-giving Son, whose flesh and blood signify the totality of His incarnate mission rather than the mechanics of Eucharistic celebration. In sum, the absence of the institution words reinforces the conclusion that John's primary concern is Christological, not sacramental.

¹⁵⁸ Schnackenburg, *John*, 53.

impose a later theological framework onto a passage whose internal logic is consistently Christological.

The Language of Standard Jewish Metaphor

The imagery of eating flesh and drinking blood in John 6 belongs to a well-attested pattern of metaphorical expression within Jewish and wider ancient Mediterranean discourse. The language of John 6 comes across as vivid and shocking; however, it is not without precedent. Second Temple Jewish literature frequently employs corporeal imagery to describe relational, ethical, or intellectual appropriation rather than literal consumption. This linguistic and cultural background is essential for interpreting the Bread of Life Discourse for it situates Jesus' words within a recognizable semantic field rather than an unprecedented sacramental register. The metaphorical idioms of "eating," "drinking," and "devouring" were part of the cultural and literary repertoire of the period, and their use in John 6 aligns with this broader tradition.¹⁵⁹

The Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures provide several examples of metaphorical consumption that illuminate the Johannine language. In Psalm 27, David describes enemies who "eat up my flesh," a phrase that clearly denotes hostility rather than cannibalism.¹⁶⁰ The metaphor expresses violent opposition, not literal ingestion. Similarly, the wisdom tradition uses the imagery of eating and drinking to describe the internalization of instruction. Proverbs 9 portrays Wisdom as offering bread and wine to those who seek understanding, an image that expresses the reception of teaching rather than participation in a ritual meal.¹⁶¹ Sirach 24 further extends this metaphorical pattern by presenting Wisdom as nourishment for those who embrace her thereby reinforcing the association between eating and the reception of divine instruction.¹⁶² These examples demonstrate that the metaphorical use of eating and drinking to signify relational or intellectual appropriation was deeply embedded in Jewish thought.

Rabbinic literature (though later in its written form) preserves idioms that reflect earlier patterns of speech. The rabbis frequently describe the study of Torah as "eating" or "devouring" the words of Scripture, an image that conveys the internalization of divine teaching.¹⁶³ This

¹⁵⁹ Brown, *John I-XII*, 283.

¹⁶⁰ Psalm 27:2.

¹⁶¹ Proverbs 9:1-6.

¹⁶² Sirach 24:19-22.

¹⁶³ Jacob Neusner, *The Oral Torah* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 47. Neusner was one of the most influential and prolific Jewish scholars of the twentieth century, especially in the fields of Rabbinics, Second Temple

metaphorical usage aligns with the broader Jewish tradition and provides further evidence that corporeal imagery was commonly employed to express spiritual or intellectual realities. Therefore, John's use of eating and drinking language thus resonates with established Jewish idioms and would be out of place if attempting to introduce a novel sacramental vocabulary.

Meredith Warren's analysis strengthens this reading by situating John 6:51-58 within a broader Greco-Roman and Jewish symbolic world in which eating divine or sacred figures signifies receiving revelation rather than consuming literal flesh. In *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed*, Warren argues that ancient Mediterranean audiences would have recognized the idiom of "eating flesh" as a metaphor for ingesting divine wisdom or internalizing a revelatory message.¹⁶⁴ She demonstrates that similar imagery appears in mystery cults, philosophical traditions, and Jewish sapiential texts,¹⁶⁵ where "eating" functions as a metaphor for absorbing teaching or participating in divine knowledge.¹⁶⁶ Warren concludes that the Johannine imagery belongs to a symbolic register of epistemological ingestion, not a sacramental register of ritual consumption.¹⁶⁷ Her work provides a crucial comparative framework that reinforces the metaphorical interpretation of the discourse.

Emphasizing again that the metaphysical categories belong to a later philosophical framework that does not appear in the biblical text, this observation is relevant for interpreting the metaphorical language of John 6. It underscores the distinction between the symbolic idioms of Second Temple Judaism and the metaphysical explanations developed in medieval sacramental theology roughly one thousand years or so later. Sacramental change concerns the level of being rather than physical alteration, a point that highlights the difference between metaphysical analysis and the symbolic method employed in the John's Gospel. The metaphorical language of eating

Judaism, and early Judaism in relation to early Christianity. He authored or edited over 900 books, an output unmatched in modern religious studies.

¹⁶⁴ Meredith Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed: A Non-Sacramental Reading of John 6:51-58* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 18-22.

¹⁶⁵ From the Latin *sapiential*. A genre of literature centered on the pursuit of wisdom, ethical living, and the underlying order of the universe. Unlike historical or prophetic texts that focus on specific events or divine commands, sapiential works like Proverbs, Job, or Ecclesiastes use reflection and observation to explore universal human experiences (e.g., suffering, mortality, justice, etc.). In a philosophical context, these texts often personify Wisdom as a divine attribute or an "architectural" blueprint, illustrating how the immaterial Creator's intelligence is woven into the very structure of the material world.

¹⁶⁶ Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed*, 23-29.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-35.

and drinking in John 6 must therefore be interpreted within its own literary and cultural context rather than through the lens of later metaphysical categories.

The metaphorical background of eating and drinking in Jewish and Mediterranean literature also sheds light on the reaction of the crowd in John 6. Their difficulty in accepting Jesus' teaching does not necessarily indicate that they interpreted his words literally. Rather, their resistance may reflect the radical nature of Jesus' claim to be the source of divine life, a claim that challenges their understanding of God's provision and their relationship to the covenant. While the metaphorical language intensifies the theological claim, it does not require a literal interpretation. John's emphasis on believing, coming to Jesus, and receiving eternal life through faith suggests that the imagery functions to convey the necessity of a profound and transformative relationship with Jesus rather than participation in a ritual meal.¹⁶⁸

Thus, the metaphorical background of eating and drinking in Jewish and Mediterranean literature provides a coherent framework for interpreting the Bread of Life Discourse. The imagery aligns with established idioms that express relational, ethical, or intellectual appropriation rather than literal consumption. John's intended use of this language serves to reveal the identity of Jesus as the source of divine life and to call the reader to respond in faith. Once again, the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is therefore essential. To interpret the language of standard Jewish metaphor in John 6 as a literal reference to the Eucharist is to impose a later theological framework onto a passage whose internal logic is shaped by the symbolic idioms of Second Temple Judaism.

The "Eating" and "Believing"

The internal structure of the Bread of Life Discourse shows a deliberate parallelism between the verbs of eating and the verbs of believing. This parallelism is the primary literary mechanism through which John communicates the theological meaning of the discourse. The text repeatedly aligns the act of eating with the act of believing and the promises attached to each verb are identical. This structural correspondence then indicates that the discourse is concerned with the reception of Jesus through faith rather than participation in a ritual meal. The Johannine emphasis on belief as the means of receiving eternal life is consistent throughout the entire Gospel. The Bread of Life Discourse is not exception as it continues this pattern by employing the Jewish

¹⁶⁸ Schnackenburg, *John*, 55.

metaphor of eating to express the necessity of a profound and transformative relationship with Jesus.¹⁶⁹

The discourse begins with Jesus identifying himself as the bread of life and declaring that whoever comes to him shall not hunger and whoever believes in him shall never thirst.¹⁷⁰ The parallelism between coming and believing actually establishes the interpretive framework for the entire discourse. These two verbs function interchangeably, and the promises attached to them are identical and this equivalence continues throughout the chapter. Jesus states that everyone who believes has eternal life and he later declares that whoever eats the bread that he gives will live forever.¹⁷¹ The identical promises attached to believing and eating indicate that the two verbs describe the same theological reality. Thus, while the metaphor of eating intensifies the imagery, it does not introduce a new category of participation.

Further analysis reinforces this reading by demonstrating that the metaphorical equivalence between eating and believing goes beyond just being stylistic; it is foundational to the discourse's logic. Here we reference back to the scholarly work of Warren who demonstrates that John 6:51-58 employs a culturally recognizable idiom of ingesting divine wisdom, drawing on ancient Mediterranean associations between eating and internalizing teaching.¹⁷² She contends that the discourse's imagery belongs to a symbolic register in which "eating flesh" signifies receiving revelation rather than participating in a ritual meal. Warren further observes that the discourse's promises collapse if eating is interpreted literally since the life promised to those who eat is already granted to those who believe earlier in the chapter.¹⁷³ Therefore, her analysis supports the conclusion that the imagery of eating is a symbolic expression of believing rather than a reference to the Eucharist.

Noting again how a later philosophical framework does not appear in the biblical text, this observation is therefore relevant for interpreting the parallelism between eating and believing, for it underscores the distinction between the symbolic idioms of the Johannine text and the metaphysical explanations developed in medieval sacramental theology. The idea that the sacramental change concerns the level of being rather than physical alteration highlights the

¹⁶⁹ Brown, *John I-XII*, 284.

¹⁷⁰ John 6:35.

¹⁷¹ John 6:47, 51.

¹⁷² Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed*, 22-25.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 31-33.

difference between metaphysical analysis and the symbolic method employed in the Gospel. John's use of eating language must therefore be interpreted within its own literary and theological context rather than through the lens of later metaphysical categories.

The parallelism between eating and believing also reflects the broader Johannine emphasis on the necessity of faith for receiving eternal life. Throughout the Gospel of John belief is the decisive response to the revelation of Jesus. For example, the prologue declares that those who receive him and believe in his name are given the right to become children of God.¹⁷⁴ In addition, we see that in the dialogue with Nicodemus the emphasis is that whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, and the encounter with the Samaritan woman reveals that true worshipers must respond to the revelation of Jesus in spirit and truth.¹⁷⁵ The Bread of Life Discourse continues this pattern by presenting belief as the means of receiving the life that Jesus offers. The metaphor of eating functions to intensify the imagery of reception and dependence, it does not, however, alter the fundamental Johannine emphasis on faith.

The identical promises attached to believing and eating further support this interpretation. Jesus declares that everyone who believes has eternal life and he later states that whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life.¹⁷⁶ The present tense of the verb "has" in both statements indicates that the life in question is not only future, it is also an already present life for those who respond to Jesus in faith. Warren emphasizes that this grammatical feature is incompatible with a sacramental reading since the Eucharist had not yet been instituted and could not have been available to the discourse's original audience.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, the parallelism between the two statements strongly suggests that the metaphor of eating is a symbolic expression of the act of believing as opposed to a reference to a ritual practice.

As was revealed in the previous section (referencing the rabbinic scholarly work of Neusner), the metaphorical use of eating to express the act of believing also aligns with the broader Jewish tradition in which corporeal imagery is frequently employed to describe the internalization of divine instruction. The wisdom literature uses the imagery of eating and drinking to describe the reception of teaching, and rabbinic idioms describe the study of Torah as "devouring" the words

¹⁷⁴ John 1:12.

¹⁷⁵ John 3:16; John 4:23.

¹⁷⁶ John 6:47, 54.

¹⁷⁷ Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed*, 40-42.

of Scripture.¹⁷⁸ And, as was previously noted as well, John's use of eating language thus resonates with established Jewish idioms rather than introducing a new sacramental vocabulary. The metaphor functions to convey the necessity of a deep and transformative relationship with Jesus, one that involves the internalization of his teaching and the reception of the life that he offers.

In summary, the parallelism between eating and believing therefore provides a coherent framework for interpreting the Bread of Life Discourse. The imagery of eating functions as a metaphor for the act of believing and the identical promises attached to both verbs indicate that the discourse is concerned with the reception of Jesus through faith rather than participation in a ritual meal. John's emphasis on belief as the means of receiving eternal life, the symbolic method employed throughout the Gospel, the analysis of metaphorical realism, and the broader Jewish tradition of metaphorical consumption all support this interpretation. Here again, the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is essential and to interpret the metaphorical language of eating as a literal reference to the Eucharist is to impose a later theological framework onto a passage whose internal logic is shaped by the symbolic idioms of the Johannine tradition. Nevertheless, a more specific grammatical analysis will be undertaken in a subsequent section of this paper.

Before the Last Supper

The chronological setting of John 6 is one of the most decisive contextual factors for interpreting the Bread of Life Discourse. The events of the chapter occur roughly one year before the Last Supper, during the Passover season that precedes the final Passover of Jesus' ministry.¹⁷⁹ This temporal distance is not incidental as it shapes the expectations of the crowd, the meaning of Jesus' language, and the interpretive possibilities available to the original audience. The discourse that is at hand is not being addressed to disciples who are gathered in an upper room. It is being addressed to a mixed crowd of Galileans who have witnessed the feeding of the five thousand and who seek further signs.¹⁸⁰ Therefore, the absence of any Eucharistic context at this stage of Jesus' ministry is a critical exegetical piece of evidence that cannot be ignored.

The Johannine narrative in John 6 makes no reference to a ritual meal, sacramental elements, or covenantal language. In addition, the setting is public, not intimate and the audience is largely unbelieving, not covenantal. Finally, the discourse is framed by the crowd's demand for

¹⁷⁸ Neusner, *The Oral Torah*, 47.

¹⁷⁹ Brown, *John I-XII*, 233.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

signs rather than by Jesus' preparation for his death.¹⁸¹ These features in the narrative clearly distinguish the discourse from the Synoptic institution narratives, the latter of which occur in a private setting, are addressed to the disciples directly, and interpret Jesus' impending death through the symbols of bread and wine. The contrast between the two contexts highlights the distinct theological purposes of each of the respective passages.

As John 6 is interpreted within its chronological setting, we once again note the metaphysical categories that later theologians employed to explain the Eucharist presuppose a ritual context and a sacramental ontology that are absent from the discourse. Therefore, the chronological distance between John 6 and the Last Supper reinforces the need to interpret the discourse within its own narrative and theological context rather than through the lens of later sacramental metaphysics.

The crowd's response to Jesus' teaching sheds further interpretive light on the significance of the chronological setting. The crowd's difficulty in accepting Jesus' claims reflects their struggle to understand his identity rather than confusion about a ritual practice that had not yet been instituted.¹⁸² The words of Jesus does not challenge their understanding of some kind of sacramental rite or participation; it challenges their expectations about divine provision and messianic identity. The Johannine emphasis on belief as the decisive response to Jesus' revelation is consistent throughout the Gospel and the Bread of Life Discourse continues this pattern by presenting faith as the means of receiving the life that Jesus offers. And, while the metaphorical language of eating and drinking intensifies the imagery of reception and dependence, it does not introduce a ritual category that would have been unintelligible to the original audience.

The chronological setting also clarifies the relationship between John 6 and the Johannine account of the Last Supper. John's Gospel omits the words of institution and replaces them with the foot washing, a symbolic act that reveals the meaning of Jesus' death as an act of self-giving love.¹⁸³ This narrative choice strongly suggests that John does not intend the Bread of Life Discourse to function as a Eucharistic institution text. The discourse reveals the identity of Jesus as the bread of life and calls the reader to respond in faith while the foot washing reveals the

¹⁸¹ Schnackenburg, *John*, 49.

¹⁸² Brown, *John I-XII*, 285.

¹⁸³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 413.

meaning of Jesus' death and calls the disciples to embody his love. The two passages serve distinct theological purposes within the Gospel narrative.

In summary, the chronological distance between John 6 and the Last Supper also serves as a hermeneutical boundary that prevents the discourse from being read as a Eucharistic institution text. The narrative setting, the audience, the absence of ritual elements, and the broader Johannine emphasis on belief all indicate that the primary concern of the passage is the revelation of Jesus' identity rather than the establishment of a sacramental practice. Again, we stress the essential importance in the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis and therefore the risk of interpreting the metaphorical language of John 6 as a literal reference to the Eucharist (when the passage's internal logic is shaped by its chronological and narrative context).

The Reaction of the Crowd

The reaction of the crowd in John 6 is also a crucial interpretive element because it reveals how Jesus' original audience understood his language and what aspects of his teaching, they found objectionable. Their response is more than just a narrative detail; it is a hermeneutical indication that clarifies the nature of the discourse. The Johannine pattern of misunderstanding (which appears throughout the Gospel) provides the framework for interpreting the crowd's reaction. In each instance, Jesus uses symbolic or metaphorical language to reveal a spiritual truth, and his listeners respond with confusion or resistance because they interpret his words in a literal or material sense.¹⁸⁴ The Bread of Life Discourse continues this pattern, and the crowd's reaction must be understood within this broader narrative strategy.

The crowd's initial response *centers* on Jesus' claim to have come down from heaven. They object by stating that they know his parents and therefore cannot (or will not) accept his heavenly origin.¹⁸⁵ The crowd's difficulty concerns his identity and not the imagery of eating and drinking. This focus aligns with the broader Johannine emphasis on the revelation of Jesus as the decisive issue for belief. Thus, the crowd's resistance shows their inability to accept Jesus' claim to divine origin rather than confusion about a ritual practice that had not yet been instituted.

Therefore, when Jesus intensifies the imagery by speaking of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, the crowd declares that his teaching is hard and asks who can accept it.¹⁸⁶ Their objection

¹⁸⁴ Brown, *John I-XII*, 278.

¹⁸⁵ John 6:42.

¹⁸⁶ John 6:60.

does not necessarily indicate that they interpreted his words literally, as much as it is about their resistance and how it reflects the radical nature of Jesus' claim to be the exclusive source of divine life. And even though the metaphorical language heightens the theological claim, it does not require a literal interpretation. Craig S. Keener emphasizes that the crowd's reaction fits the Johannine pattern in which literal misunderstanding exposes spiritual blindness.¹⁸⁷ Keener argues that the discourse's escalating imagery functions rhetorically in order to sift genuine disciples from superficial followers and not to introduce a sacramental category.

Along with Keener, Meredith Warren's analysis further clarifies the crowd's reaction by situating the imagery within ancient Mediterranean symbolic conventions. As was previously pointed out, Warren argues that the idiom of "eating flesh" would have been recognizable as a metaphor for ingesting divine wisdom or internalizing revelation.¹⁸⁸ Thus the crowd's offense does not arise from cannibalistic overtones but rather from Jesus' claim to be the locus of divine revelation. Warren notes that the discourse's imagery belongs to a symbolic register of epistemological ingestion, and that the crowd's resistance reflects their rejection of Jesus' revelatory authority rather than confusion about ritual consumption.¹⁸⁹ Her scholarly analysis reinforces the exegetical conclusion that the crowd's reaction is theological, not sacramental.

Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) offers a complementary insight by emphasizing that the scandal of John 6 lies in Jesus' self-gift and not in Eucharistic ritual. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger argues that the crowd stumbles over Jesus' claim to be the bread of life because it demands a total reorientation of their understanding of God's provision.¹⁹⁰ He notes that the discourse confronts the crowd with the necessity of accepting Jesus as the definitive revelation of

¹⁸⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 686. Keener is one of the most widely respected New Testament scholars of the past generation, known especially for his mastery of first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman sources and for producing some of the most exhaustive commentaries in modern biblical scholarship. Holding a PhD from Duke University and serving as the F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, Keener has built his reputation on meticulous historical research and an unparalleled command of ancient literature. His two-volume *Gospel of John* commentary (often described as encyclopedic) draws on tens of thousands of primary source references and is considered one of the most comprehensive treatments of the Fourth Gospel ever produced. Likewise, his multi-volume commentary on Acts and his widely used *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* demonstrate his expertise in reconstructing the cultural, social, and rhetorical world of early Christianity. Because of this breadth and depth, Keener is regarded across denominational and academic lines as a leading authority on Johannine studies, New Testament history, and the lived realities of the first-century Mediterranean world.

¹⁸⁸ Warren, *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed*, 18-22.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 31-35.

¹⁹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 267-70.

God, a demand that provokes resistance long before any sacramental interpretation is possible. Ratzinger therefore situates the crowd's reaction within the broader Johannine theme of unbelief rather than within a Eucharistic framework. Thus, the crowd's reaction must be interpreted within the narrative and theological context of the Johannine text rather than through the lens of later metaphysical categories.

The reaction of the disciples provides further illumination regarding the nature of the discourse. They declare that Jesus' teaching is hard and many of them turn back and no longer follow him.¹⁹¹ Their departure reflects more about the cost of discipleship rather than confusion about sacramental participation. As it has been noted previously, the Johannine emphasis on belief as the decisive response to Jesus' revelation suggests that the disciples' difficulty lies in accepting his claim to be the exclusive source of divine life. Likewise, the metaphorical language of eating and drinking intensifies the imagery of dependence and reception; however (as we have beforehand noted), it does not introduce a ritual category that would have been unintelligible to the original audience.

The reaction of both the crowd and the disciples add to the coherent framework for interpreting the Bread of Life Discourse. The people's response and difficulty centers on Jesus' identity rather than on the imagery of eating and drinking. Per our preceding analysis, we once again emphasize the Johannine pattern of misunderstanding, and the broader Jewish and Mediterranean tradition of metaphorical consumption. Also, along with Warren's analysis of symbolic ingestion, Keener's emphasis on rhetorical intensification, and Ratzinger's focus on the scandal of Jesus' self-revelation all indicate that the discourse is concerned with the revelation of Jesus' identity rather than the establishment of a sacramental practice. The distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is therefore essential with regard to a passage whose internal logic is shaped by the symbolic expressions of the Johannine tradition.

The following two tables combined highlights the recurring theme of "divine misunderstanding" in John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks from a spiritual or heavenly perspective and His listeners respond with a literal or earthly perspective.

¹⁹¹ John 6:66.

Table 9. Divine Misunderstandings in the Gospel of John

Passage	Jesus' Statement (Symbolic/Spiritual)	Literal Misunderstanding	Who Misunderstands	Narrative Function / Theological Insight
John 2:19-21	"Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."	They think He means the physical Jerusalem temple.	Jewish leaders	Jesus speaks of His body; misunderstanding reveals the spiritual meaning of resurrection.
John 3:3-4	"You must be born again/from above."	Nicodemus thinks of re-entering the womb.	Nicodemus	Shows the need for spiritual rebirth; literalism blocks comprehension of divine life.
John 4:10-15	"Living water."	The Samaritan woman thinks of physical well water.	Samaritan woman	Misunderstanding opens space for Jesus to reveal the nature of eternal life.
John 4:31-34	"I have food to eat that you do not know about."	Disciples think someone brought Him lunch.	Disciples	Jesus clarifies that His "food" is doing the Father's will.
John 5:39-47	"You search the Scriptures... yet you refuse to come to me."	They think Scripture itself gives life.	Jewish leaders	Misunderstanding exposes their failure to see Christ as the fulfillment of Scripture.
John 6:32-35	"I am the bread of life."	They think of literal manna and physical bread.	The crowd	Sets up the deeper teaching on feeding on Christ for eternal life.
John 6:51-60	"My flesh is true food... my blood is true drink."	They interpret it as cannibalistic or absurdly literal.	The crowd & disciples	Their offense reveals the radical nature of the discourse; misunderstanding becomes a hermeneutical clue.
John 7:33-36	"Where I am going, you cannot come."	They think He plans to travel abroad.	Jewish leaders	Misunderstanding highlights their spiritual blindness to His return to the Father.

John 8:21-27	“You will die in your sins... where I am going, you cannot come.”	They think He is speaking of suicide.	Jewish leaders	Literalism prevents them from grasping His divine origin.
John 8:31-36	“The truth will set you free.”	They claim they have never been slaves.	Jewish leaders	Misunderstanding exposes their bondage to sin.
John 11:11-14	“Lazarus has fallen asleep.”	Disciples think He means natural sleep.	Disciples	Jesus clarifies Lazarus is dead; misunderstanding sets up the miracle.
John 11:23-27	“Your brother will rise again.”	Martha thinks only of the final resurrection.	Martha	Jesus reveals Himself as the Resurrection and the Life.
John 12:32-34	“When I am lifted up...”	They think “lifted up” contradicts their messianic expectations.	The crowd	Misunderstanding reveals their inability to accept a suffering Messiah.
John 13:6-12	Foot washing and cleansing	Peter thinks only of physical washing.	Peter	Jesus clarifies the symbolic meaning of cleansing and participation in Him.
John 14:4-7	“You know the way...”	Thomas says they don’t know where He is going.	Thomas	Misunderstanding leads to the revelation “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”
John 16:16-18	“A little while and you will not see me...”	Disciples are confused about His departure and return.	Disciples	Misunderstanding anticipates the passion, resurrection, and ascension.

Table 10. Classification of Johannine Misunderstandings

Category	Primary Theme	Core Misunderstanding	Key Examples
Identity & Origin	Who Jesus is and where He comes from.	The audience sees His human family/body; Jesus speaks of His divine sonship.	The Bread of Life (John 6); “Where I am going” (John 8); “Before Abraham was” (John 8).
Mission & Method	What Jesus came to do and how.	The audience expects a political/physical king; Jesus speaks of a suffering/spiritual servant.	Destroying the Temple (John 2); Being “Lifted Up” (John 12); Washing feet (John 13).
Nature of Life	How one receives eternal life.	The audience thinks of biological birth or physical sustenance; Jesus speaks of spiritual rebirth.	New Birth (John 3); Living Water (John 4); Flesh/Blood as food (John 6); Sleep/Death (John 11).

The merging of these two tables reveals a central literary and theological strategy in John’s Gospel known as the use of Johannine Irony. By pairing specific instances of misunderstanding with their broader thematic categories (e.g., identity, mission, and the nature of life) it becomes clear that the “signs” are more than just miracles to be seen; they are a specialized language to be decoded. The misunderstandings serve as a necessary narrative friction by exposing the radical “otherness” of the Messianic kingdom (e.g., where a physical temple is eclipsed by a resurrected body and biological birth is secondary to spiritual rebirth). Ultimately, these tables demonstrate that for John, faith is the process of moving from a “low Christology” (viewing Jesus through the lens of earthly needs and literal history) to a “high Christology” that recognizes Him as the divine Logos who provides eternal reality behind every physical symbol.

The Grammar

We have already begun to introduce the analysis of grammar in the previous section *The “Eating” and “Believing,”* whereas in this section, we will focus more exclusively on the topic. To begin with, it must be noted that the grammatical structure of the Bread of Life Discourse has often been treated as the decisive factor in determining whether John 6 should be interpreted sacramentally or metaphorically. Central to this debate is the shift from the more general verb for

eating (φαγεῖν) to the more vivid τρώγειν.¹⁹² Some interpreters have argued that this shift signals a transition from metaphor to literal consumption. However, the linguistic evidence, when examined within the broader Johannine style, the conventions of Koine Greek, and the literary patterns of the Gospel, does not support this conclusion. The shift intensifies the imagery although does not alter the semantic field established earlier in the discourse.¹⁹³

The discourse begins with φαγεῖν (*phageîn*), a verb whose semantic flexibility is well attested across Greek literature. In Homer, it denotes ordinary physical eating where heroes “eat bread” or “eat meat” in the context of hospitality and sacrifice. In Herodotus and Xenophon, it expands into metaphor describing armies that “eat up” a land’s resources or campaigns that “consume” provisions. The philosophical writers continue this range as seen in Plato’s use of φαγεῖν for simple meals within narrative settings, and Aristotle employs it figuratively to describe passions that “eat away” at the soul. Even the Septuagint mirrors this dual usage when it applies φαγεῖν both to Israel’s literal eating of manna and to prophetic images of nations “devouring” one another or judgment “eating” the land.¹⁹⁴ Thus, this broad literary pattern shows that φαγεῖν carries no inherent literalism. It is a standard Greek verb capable of bearing symbolic, moral, or spiritual

¹⁹² In John 6, the contrast between φαγεῖν (*phageîn*, “to eat”) and τρώγειν (*trōgeîn*, “to chew/gnaw”) becomes a decisive interpretive hinge. The ordinary verb φαγεῖν, rooted in the Indo-European field of general consumption, denotes the neutral act of eating without sensory vividness. But as the crowd resists Jesus’ teaching, John records a striking shift to τρώγειν, a verb whose etymology evokes the concrete, almost animalistic action of gnawing or crunching. This lexical escalation is not accidental. Rather than correcting the crowd’s literal misunderstanding, Jesus intensifies the physicality of His claim by moving from the general “eat” to the graphic “chew.” The shift exposes the Johannine misunderstanding in reverse where symbolic language is taken literally, Jesus responds not by spiritualizing but by doubling down on the embodied realism embedded in τρώγειν, forcing the audience to confront the visceral dimension of His words.

¹⁹³ Brown, *John I-XII*, 286. Brown’s analysis of John 6 ultimately resists the claim that the verb shift from φαγεῖν to τρώγειν marks a transition from metaphor to literal Eucharistic eating. He argues that the grammatical structure of the discourse cannot bear that interpretive weight. For Brown, the shift belongs to the evangelist’s rhetorical intensification, not to a change in semantic category. Within Johannine style, vivid or concrete vocabulary often heightens imagery without altering its figurative function, and Koine Greek itself regularly employs τρώγειν in non-sacramental, non-literal contexts. Thus, Brown maintains that the discourse’s meaning is actually established earlier where the focus is believing, coming, and receiving life from the Son and the later lexical escalation reinforces that theological theme rather than redirecting it toward ritual consumption. In short, the grammar sharpens the imagery but does not overturn the metaphorical framework already in place.

¹⁹⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), e.g., 1.469-474, where φαγεῖν is used for ordinary eating; Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 7.187, where armies “eat up” the land’s resources; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, trans. Carleton L. Brownson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 1.5.6, using φαγεῖν for consuming provisions; Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 372c, where φαγεῖν appears in a mundane meal context; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 1104b, employing φαγεῖν metaphorically for passions that “eat away” at the soul; Polybius, *Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 1.57.6, describing nations “devouring” territory; *Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs, rev. Robert Hanhart (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006), Ex. 16:15 (literal eating of manna) and Is. 1:7 (judgment “eating” the land).

meaning *depending on context* and is precisely the kind of polyvalence that frames its use at the opening of John 6.¹⁹⁵

In this discourse, Jesus declares that those who eat the bread he gives will live forever, a statement that parallels his earlier declaration that those who believe have eternal life.¹⁹⁶ The parallelism between eating and believing, established at the outset of the discourse, provides the interpretive framework for understanding the subsequent grammatical developments. The shift to *τρώγειν* does not disrupt this framework, while it does heighten the rhetorical force of the imagery.

Keener's analysis of the grammar is particularly important here. He notes that *τρώγειν*, though more graphic than *φαγεῖν*, is not restricted to literal chewing. It appears in Greek literature in both literal and metaphorical senses, including contexts that describe persistent or habitual engagement rather than physical mastication (as was noted previously).¹⁹⁷ Keener emphasizes that the verb's vividness does not require a literal interpretation, especially within a discourse that is already obviously framed by metaphorical language. He argues that the shift functions rhetorically in order to intensify the demand for radical commitment to Jesus rather than to introduce a sacramental category.¹⁹⁸ Again, this reading aligns with the broader Johannine pattern of using intensified imagery to convey spiritual truths and therefore, the grammatical intensification in John 6 must therefore be interpreted within the literary and theological context of the Johannine text rather than through the lens of later metaphysical categories.

The broader Johannine style further clarifies the function of the grammatical shift. The Gospel frequently employs vivid or hyperbolic language to convey spiritual truths. For example, Jesus speaks of living water, of being born from above, and of destroying the temple and raising it in three days.¹⁹⁹ In each case, the language is metaphorical, and the misunderstanding of the listeners serves to reveal the deeper meaning of Jesus' words. The shift to *τρώγειν* in John 6 fits

¹⁹⁵ In other words, a single word or image can carry multiple layers of meaning at the same time. Instead of having one fixed, narrow definition, a polyvalent term is flexible as it can function literally, metaphorically, symbolically, or theologically depending on the context. In biblical studies, calling a word "polyvalent" signals that its meaning is not locked into a single interpretive track but is capable of doing several things at once. This is exactly why *φαγεῖν* in John 6 cannot be forced into a strictly literal or sacramental reading. In Greek literature, the verb regularly operates with both literal and figurative senses, and John often uses everyday physical language to express spiritual realities. Polyvalence, then, names the linguistic openness that allows a term like *φαγεῖν* to participate in symbolic discourse without losing its ordinary sense.

¹⁹⁶ John 6:47, 51.

¹⁹⁷ Keener, *John*, 684.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 685.

¹⁹⁹ John 2:19; John 3:3; John 4:10.

this pattern of rhetorical intensification rather than signaling a departure from metaphorical discourse. Keener notes that John's use of vivid verbs often serves to sharpen the contrast between superficial and genuine discipleship which is a theme that dominates the latter portion of the discourse.²⁰⁰

The grammar of the discourse also aligns with the broader Jewish tradition of metaphorical consumption. The wisdom literature uses the imagery of eating and drinking to describe the reception of instruction, and rabbinic idioms describe the study of Torah as "devouring" the words of Scripture.²⁰¹ The Johannine use of vivid eating language thus resonates with established Jewish idioms rather than introducing a novel sacramental vocabulary. The grammatical intensification serves to underscore the necessity of a deep and transformative relationship with Jesus rather than to introduce a literal category of participation.

In summary, the grammatical structure of the Bread of Life Discourse supports a metaphorical interpretation of the imagery of eating and drinking. The shift from φαγεῖν to τρώγειν intensifies the imagery, yet as we observed just earlier in this section, does not alter the underlying semantic field established earlier in the discourse. The parallelism between eating and believing, the broader Johannine style, Keener's analysis of the rhetorical function of τρώγειν, and the Jewish tradition of metaphorical consumption all indicate that the grammar serves a symbolic rather than a literal purpose. Again, the underscores how essential the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is, and the caution against any kind of imposition of a later theological framework onto a passage whose internal logic is shaped by the symbolic idioms of the Johannine tradition.²⁰² The following table helps to summarize the converging lines of evidence that shape the grammatical

²⁰⁰ Keener, *John*, 686.

²⁰¹ Neusner, *The Oral Torah*, 47. See also: David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), pp. 175-179, where Stern interprets John 6 within Jewish exegetical patterns that understand "eating" as a metaphor for receiving, internalizing, and obeying Torah, rather than literal consumption. See also his discussion of "feeding on" God's wisdom and instruction as a well-established Jewish idiom.

²⁰² The lexical and methodological foundations for this reading are reinforced by both BDAG and Moisés Silva. BDAG's entries for φαγεῖν and τρώγειν demonstrate that each verb possesses a broad semantic range that includes literal and figurative uses, confirming that neither verb carries an inherent literalism capable of determining the meaning of the Bread of Life Discourse. Silva's analysis of lexical semantics further cautions against over-interpreting grammatical or lexical distinctions and insists that meaning must be determined by the discourse as a whole rather than by isolated word studies. These sources substantiate the argument that the shift from φαγεῖν to τρώγειν intensifies the imagery without altering the symbolic, belief-centered framework established earlier in the discourse. See: Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 92, 1051, and Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 27-29.

interpretation of John 6. The discourse's eating language cannot be evaluated on lexical grounds alone for its meaning emerges from the interplay between Greek semantic usage, Johannine literary patterns, and the broader Jewish idioms of metaphorical consumption. Therefore, the table presented here distills these three interpretive domains and clarifies how each contributes to a coherent, metaphorical reading of the Bread of Life Discourse.

Table 11. Factors Governing the Interpretation of Eating Language in John 6

Category	Evidence	Interpretive Implication
Lexical Semantics	Used literally and metaphorically across Greek literature; also used in both senses and not restricted to literal chewing.	The verb shift intensifies imagery yet does not change the semantic field or require literal consumption.
Johannine Literary Pattern	Parallelism between “eating” and “believing”; misunderstanding motif; use of vivid metaphors (living water, new birth, temple).	John regularly uses concrete language to express spiritual realities; vivid verbs heighten rhetorical force rather than introduce sacramental categories.
Jewish Metaphorical Idioms	Wisdom literature uses “eating/drinking” for receiving instruction; rabbinic idioms describe Torah study as “devouring” Scripture.	Johannine eating language resonates with established Jewish metaphorical usage rather than introducing a novel literal/sacramental meaning.
Grammatical Syntax	The use of the Aorist vs. Present tense; the articular participle “the one eating” (ὁ τρώγων).	Suggests a continuous, ongoing relationship of faith rather than a discrete, one-time ritual act.
Thematic Synthesis	The immediate clarification in John 6:63: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.”	Serves as a hermeneutical key, explicitly subordinating the physical metaphor to the spiritual reality it signifies.

As the table above illustrates, the lexical data, Johannine literary patterns, and Jewish metaphorical idioms all converge on the same interpretive conclusion (the semantic flexibility of φαγεῖν and τρώγειν). John's consistent use of vivid metaphor to express spiritual realities, and the well-established Jewish tradition of describing instruction as “eating” together show that the verb shift intensifies imagery without altering the symbolic framework set at the beginning of the

discourse. In sum, the grammar reinforces (rather than disrupts) the metaphorical parallel between eating and believing.

John 6 Promises Eternal Life to All Who “Eat,” but the Eucharist Is Not Universally Available

The theological logic of the John’s Gospel presents a consistent pattern in which eternal life is granted through belief in Jesus rather than through ritual participation. This pattern is evident throughout the Gospel and is reaffirmed repeatedly in the Bread of Life Discourse. Jesus declares that whoever believes has eternal life, a statement that appears in multiple contexts and forms the backbone of Johannine soteriology.²⁰³ As an example, John 5:24 presents one of the clearest expressions of realized eschatology in this Gospel and its force rests almost entirely on the Greek verbal system. Jesus declares that the one who hears His word and believes “has eternal life,” using the present active indicative ἔχει, which does not denote a future acquisition, but rather a present, ongoing possession. In other words, eternal life is not deferred until resurrection or judgment; it is already operative in the believer’s existence because it is bound to Christ’s own life. This present-tense assertion is immediately reinforced by the next clause, “does not come into judgment,” which also uses the present tense to describe a current state of exemption rather than a future hope. The final clause intensifies the point through the perfect tense μεταβέβηκεν (“has passed”), a form that signifies a completed past action whose effects endure into the present. The believer has already crossed from death into life, and that transition is irreversible. Therefore, the present tense of ἔχει and the perfect tense of μεταβέβηκεν articulate a soteriology in which eternal life is both inaugurated and possessed now, and not just something that is a future anticipation. John’s grammar is thus not incidental, it is theological. In short, belief initiates a definitive transfer of existential status, and the believer’s participation in divine life is a present reality grounded in a past, completed act that continues to define their identity. The universality of this promise stands in tension with interpretations that identify the “eating” of John 6 with Eucharistic participation, for the Eucharist is not universally accessible in the narrative context of the Gospel nor in the broader historical setting of Jesus’ ministry.

If the imagery of eating in John 6 were interpreted as a literal reference to the Eucharist, several theological difficulties would arise. First, no one prior to the Last Supper could have received eternal life, for the sacrament had not yet been instituted. This conclusion contradicts the

²⁰³ John 3:16; John 5:24; John 6:47.

Gospel's portrayal of Old Testament believers as recipients of divine life through faith and undermines the Johannine emphasis on the continuity of God's saving work. Raymond E. Brown further develops this argument by emphasizing that a literal Eucharistic reading of John 6 would create a theological rupture within the Gospel's own soteriology. If eternal life were tied to sacramental consumption, then no one prior to the institution of the Eucharist could have received the life that Jesus promises, a conclusion Brown regards as incompatible with the Fourth Gospel's portrayal of salvation as already available through faith.²⁰⁴ John repeatedly affirms that believers *now* possess eternal life (John 3:16; 3:36; 5:24; 6:47), and Brown insists that this present-tense soteriology cannot be subordinated to a ritual that did not yet exist in the narrative. Such a move would sever the continuity between God's saving work in Israel and the revelation of Jesus. In turn this would contradict the Gospel's insistence that the life offered in Christ is the fulfillment (not the replacement) of the life granted to earlier believers. For Brown, the discourse must therefore be intelligible within its historical setting. In other words, this means that its primary referent is the act of believing in Jesus rather than participation in a sacrament that had not yet been instituted. Eucharistic themes may be present at a secondary, theological level, nevertheless the literalist reading collapses the Gospel's own logic by making ritual participation the exclusive gateway to eternal life. This ultimately undermines the Johannine conviction that faith is the decisive and sufficient response to the Son's revelation.

Second, Rudolf Schnackenburg likewise argues that a literal Eucharistic interpretation of John 6 creates theological and pastoral contradictions that the Gospel itself does not support. He notes that if the discourse were teaching that eternal life is granted only through sacramental eating, then entire classes of people (e.g., infants, the severely disabled, the unbaptized, and all who lack access to the Eucharist) would be excluded from salvation, a conclusion fundamentally at odds with the Gospel's universal invitation to believe and receive life.²⁰⁵ Such an exclusion would

²⁰⁴ Brown, *John I-XII*, 287.

²⁰⁵ Schnackenburg, *John*, 59. Though Schnackenburg stresses a valid point, it should also be balanced with the understanding that Catholic theology does not teach that salvation depends on ritual participation apart from faith; rather, it insists that the sacraments are efficacious only when received in faith. The Church's sacramental theology holds that the rites operate *ex opere operato*, meaning that their grace derives from Christ's action, yet this grace is fruitful only *ex opere operantis*, that is, in proportion to the recipient's disposition of faith, repentance, and interior openness to God. Aquinas emphasizes that the sacraments "do not profit those who receive them without devotion," because the sacramental sign must be met with the interior act of believing for grace to take root. The Catechism likewise teaches that the sacraments presuppose and strengthen faith, not replace it, and that without personal assent the sacramental encounter remains unfruitful. Thus, even within Catholic theology, sacramental participation is never a mechanical or automatic means of salvation. It is always ordered toward and dependent upon the believer's act of

fracture the Johannine understanding in which Jesus is presented as the life-giver for the world and in which faith (not ritual capacity) is the decisive criterion for entering into that life. Schnackenburg stresses that John consistently portrays salvation as grounded in the revelatory encounter with Jesus and appropriated through belief, a pattern that cannot be subordinated to a sacramental act that presupposes cognitive, physical, and ecclesial conditions unavailable to many. To make ritual participation the necessary gateway to eternal life would, in his view, invert the Gospel's theological structure by replacing the primacy of faith with the mechanics of sacramental performance. For Schnackenburg, as for other major Johannine scholars, the Eucharistic resonance of John 6 is real although secondary; the primary meaning of the discourse remains the call to believe in the Son whom the Father has sent. Thus, and thirdly, salvation would depend on ritual participation rather than faith, a conclusion that stands in direct opposition to the Johannine insistence that belief is the decisive response to Jesus' revelation.

Keener emphasizes that the Johannine emphasis on belief as the means of receiving eternal life is consistent and pervasive. He notes that the Gospel repeatedly presents faith as the sole condition for salvation and that the imagery of eating in John 6 must be interpreted within this theological framework.²⁰⁶ The metaphorical language of eating intensifies the imagery of reception and dependence, although again, it does not introduce a new category of ritual participation. Therefore, Keener argues that the discourse functions to reveal the necessity of a profound and transformative relationship with Jesus rather than to establish a sacramental requirement for salvation.²⁰⁷ It therefore follows that the universality of the promise in John 6 must be interpreted within the theological framework of the Gospel rather than through the lens of a later sacramental metaphysics.

The promise of eternal life in John 6 is addressed to all who "eat," yet the imagery of eating functions metaphorically to describe the act of believing (as previously noted). The identical promises attached to believing and eating indicate that the discourse is concerned with the reception of Jesus through faith rather than participation in a ritual meal. The universality of the promise, the Johannine emphasis on belief, and the absence of any Eucharistic context all support

faith. This framework allows Catholicism to affirm the necessity of faith while also maintaining the sacramental economy, though it remains distinct from the Johannine emphasis in which belief itself is the decisive and sufficient response to Jesus' revelation. See: Council of Trent, *Decree on the Sacraments*, sess. 7 (1547); Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III.69.8; and CCC, §§1122-1131.

²⁰⁶ Keener, *John*, 689.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 690.

this interpretation. This once again shows why the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is vital.

The Early Church Fathers

The patristic interpretation of John 6 is more diverse than later theological traditions often acknowledge. Many early Christian writers prior to the fourth century interpreted the Bread of Life Discourse in spiritual, moral, or intellectual terms rather than as a direct reference to the Eucharist. To begin with, Origen played a decisive role in shaping the early Christian tendency to interpret John 6 in spiritual, intellectual, and allegorical terms rather than as a direct reference to the Eucharist. Convinced that Scripture was intentionally composed with multiple layers of meaning, he argued that many passages were written in ways that “resisted a purely literal reading” in order to draw the reader upward into contemplation of divine realities.²⁰⁸ His method treated the literal sense as a pedagogical starting point and insisted that the true nourishment of the soul came from assimilating Christ as *Logos*, the divine wisdom disclosed in Scripture. Therefore, when Origen interpreted the Bread of Life discourse, he framed “eating” and “drinking” as metaphors for interior participation in Christ through understanding, contemplation, and moral transformation.²⁰⁹ This hermeneutic created the conceptual space in which later Fathers (especially within the Alexandrian tradition) could read John 6 primarily as a discourse on spiritual illumination rather than sacramental realism.²¹⁰ As previously noted in this paper, patristic writers often approached divine realities through “the diverse ways finite minds relate to the one simple divine reality,”²¹¹ and Origen’s multilayered exegesis provided the intellectual framework for this approach. His influence ensured that, prior to the fourth century, many Christian interpreters felt no obligation to read John 6 eucharistically. Instead, they followed Origen in treating it as a text about the soul’s ascent to God through the reception of divine wisdom. This diversity reflects the fluidity of early

²⁰⁸ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), I.3.4.

²⁰⁹ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), Book 32.

²¹⁰ For the sake of clarity, The Alexandrian tradition refers to a distinctive early Christian theological and exegetical school centered in Alexandria, Egypt, which became one of the most influential intellectual centers of the ancient Church. It is not a formal institution so much as a *shared style* of reading Scripture and understanding doctrine that developed through figures like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Didymus the Blind, and later Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria. What unifies this tradition is its conviction that Scripture is a divinely crafted text whose deepest truths lie beneath the surface, accessible through spiritual, allegorical, and philosophical interpretation.

²¹¹ Refer back to the section of this paper, *Why God is the “Exception.”*

Christian exegesis and the absence of a uniform sacramental reading in the earliest centuries of the Church.

Clement of Alexandria interprets the discourse in terms of spiritual nourishment and the internalization of divine wisdom. He identifies the true food as the Logos and emphasizes the transformative power of knowledge rather than ritual participation.²¹² To again reference Origen, he interprets the imagery of eating and drinking as a metaphor for internalizing the Word of God. Origen argues that the true consumption of Christ occurs through contemplation and obedience rather than through physical eating.²¹³ Augustine, though writing later, famously declares, “Believe, and you have eaten,” a statement that encapsulates his interpretation of the discourse as a metaphor for faith which will be explored in more detail below.²¹⁴ Augustine affirms the Eucharist as a sacrament yet he does not identify the eating of John 6 with the sacramental act. Instead, he interprets the discourse as a call to believe in Christ and to receive him spiritually.

A more in depth look at Augustine’s interpretation of John 6 in *Tractate 26* provides substantial support for the claim that the discourse should not be read through the lens of later Eucharistic theology. He explicitly identifies the act of “eating” in John 6 with the act of believing, stating that “to believe in Him is to eat the living bread,” a formulation that decisively relocates the discourse from the realm of sacramental manducation²¹⁵ to the interior act of faith.²¹⁶ This reading jells with his broader hermeneutical principle in *De Doctrina Christiana*, where he argues that any biblical command that appears to enjoin morally troubling behavior (such as literal flesh-eating) must be understood figuratively, and he applies this rule directly to John 6 by insisting

²¹² Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 1.6.

²¹³ Origen, *Commentary on John*, 10.2.

²¹⁴ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26.1. in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), Tractate 26.

²¹⁵ Theological term referring to the act or mode of “eating” Christ in the Eucharist. The term became central in medieval and Reformation debates over how believers participate in Christ’s body and blood. The concept distinguishes between different kinds of “eating”: oral or corporeal manducation (physically chewing the consecrated elements), spiritual manducation (receiving Christ inwardly by faith), and sacramental manducation (receiving the sacrament according to its outward form). Early Christian writers (especially those influenced by the Alexandrian tradition) often emphasized spiritual or intellectual manducation, interpreting Jesus’ command to “eat” His flesh in John 6 as a metaphor for interior assimilation of divine wisdom rather than literal consumption. This diversity of interpretive modes helps explain why, as this paper notes, many patristic authors prior to the fourth century approached John 6 in “spiritual, moral, or intellectual terms rather than as a direct reference to the Eucharist.”

²¹⁶ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26. “For to believe in Him is to eat the living bread. He that believes eats; he is sated invisibly.”

that Christ's words signify participation in His passion rather than corporeal consumption.²¹⁷ Augustine's approach aligns closely with the lexical and literary data of the Fourth Gospel, in which the semantic flexibility of φαγεῖν and τρώγειν, the established Jewish idiom of "eating" instruction, and John's consistent use of vivid metaphor all converge to reinforce the symbolic parallel between eating and believing. Far from disrupting this metaphorical framework, Augustine's exegesis confirms it, demonstrating that the primary sense of John 6 concerns faith-union with Christ rather than Eucharistic ritual. Although Augustine maintains a robust sacramental theology elsewhere, his treatment of John 6 shows that he does not read later Eucharistic categories back into the Galilean discourse. In this Augustine supports the argument that the passage's original meaning is not a literal exposition of Eucharistic doctrine; it is a theological meditation on belief, participation, and abiding in Christ.

Craig Keener notes that the diversity of patristic interpretation reflects the broader exegetical tendencies of early Christianity, which often employed allegorical or spiritual readings of biblical texts.²¹⁸ He emphasizes that the sacramental reading of John 6 becomes dominant only in later centuries, particularly in the medieval/Latin West, where the development of sacramental theology and the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics shaped the interpretation of the discourse.²¹⁹ In contrast, the earlier patristic tradition reflects a more varied and often non-sacramental understanding of the imagery.

Once again, there is the distinction between metaphysical explanations of sacramental change and the symbolic idioms of the biblical text. This distinction is highly relevant for interpreting the patristic tradition for it underscores the difference between the metaphysical categories employed in later sacramental theology and the symbolic language of the early Fathers. The early patristic interpretations of John 6 must therefore be understood within their own historical and theological contexts rather than through the lens of later sacramental developments.

In sum, the diversity of patristic interpretation provides a valuable corrective to readings that assume a uniform sacramental understanding of John 6 in the early Church. The earliest

²¹⁷ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.16.24, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). Augustine writes that when a command appears to enjoin something morally shocking, "it is a figure, bidding us communicate in the sufferings of our Lord.

²¹⁸ Keener, *John*, 692.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 693.

interpreters did not uniformly see the discourse as Eucharistic. Instead, they employed a range of interpretive strategies that reflected their theological concerns and exegetical methods.

To clarify the conceptual distinctions developed in the preceding discussion, the following table provides a concise visual summary of the major categories at issue. Because the argument has unfolded across multiple metaphysical, exegetical, and theological layers, a structured comparison helps stabilize the reader's grasp of the key contrasts before moving into the concluding summary of *John Chapter 6: Biblical Foundations for Eucharistic Doctrine*. The table is not intended to introduce new claims. Its purpose is to distill the essential features already established in the analysis, allowing the reader to see at a glance how the various elements relate to one another and why they bear directly on the coherence of the doctrine under examination.

Table 12. Summary of the Eucharistic Reading: Exegetical vs. Eisegetical

Issue	Exegetical Reading (Contextual)	Eisegetical Reading (Doctrinal)
Context	Part of the Christological sign discourse following the feeding of the 5,000.	Viewed as a Eucharistic instruction or manual for the Mass.
Timing	Occurs well before the Last Supper in the Johannine timeline.	Treated as if it occurred after the Last Supper to provide a theological basis for the rite.
Language	Uses Jewish metaphor where “eating” represents internalizing or accepting wisdom/truth.	Interpreted as literal sacramental consumption of the physical body.
Grammar	Parallelism suggests eating equals believing (v. 35, 40, 47).	Focuses on ritual participation as the primary mode of “eating.”
Audience	Addressed to unbelieving crowds and skeptical Galileans.	Re-imagined as instruction for disciples at liturgy.
Johannine Theology	Emphasizes salvation by faith in the Sent One.	Emphasizes salvation via sacrament and the reception of Grace.
Literary Pattern	Follows the Johannine pattern of misunderstanding being corrected by spiritual explanation (v. 63).	Views the misunderstanding as an embrace of the “hard saying” as literal fact.

Early Interpretation	Often metaphorical or spiritual (e.g., Augustine), focusing on the Word.	Often reflects later medieval literalism read back into the Johannine text.
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Conclusion- John Chapter 6: Biblical Foundations for Eucharistic Doctrine

The cumulative evidence from the literary structure, historical setting, Jewish idioms, and theological emphases within the Gospel of John indicates that a strictly Eucharistic reading of John 6 (particularly one that identifies the discourse with the doctrine of Transubstantiation) risks becoming eisegetical rather than contextual. The sacramental interpretation imports later theological categories into a passage whose original context does not require them. Thus, the discourse belongs to the Johannine sign-revelation pattern, not to the liturgical or sacramental framework that developed in subsequent centuries.²²⁰

The central Johannine theme that eternal life is granted through belief appears repeatedly throughout the Gospel and is reaffirmed within the Bread of Life Discourse itself. Jesus declares that whoever believes has eternal life, a statement that forms the backbone of Johannine soteriology.²²¹ The metaphorical language of eating and drinking primarily functions to intensify the imagery of reception and dependence on Jesus and who he is and does not introduce a new category of ritual participation. In addition, the identical promises attached to believing and eating indicate that the discourse is concerned with the reception of Jesus through faith rather than participation in a sacramental meal.²²²

The Johannine emphasis on belief as the means of receiving eternal life is consistent and pervasive. For example, the imagery of eating in John 6 must be interpreted within this theological framework and that the shift to the more vivid verb τρώγειν serves to intensify the rhetorical force of the discourse rather than to introduce a literal category of consumption.²²³ The grammatical structure of the discourse, the broader Johannine style, and the Jewish tradition of metaphorical consumption all support this interpretation.

It has been shown that the distinction between metaphysical explanations of sacramental change and the symbolic idioms of the biblical text. is crucial for interpreting John 6, for it

²²⁰ Brown, *John I-XII*, 233.

²²¹ John 3:16; John 5:24; John 6:47.

²²² Schnackenburg, *John*, 59.

²²³ Keener, *John*, 689.

highlights the difference between the metaphysical categories employed in later sacramental theology and the symbolic language of the Johannine narrative. We have also previously noted that sacramental change concerns the level of being rather than physical alteration, a point that underscores the difference between metaphysical analysis and biblical exegesis. The Johannine text does not address metaphysical questions about substance and accident and therefore cannot and should not be interpreted through the lens of later sacramental metaphysics without risking eisegesis.

The historical setting of the discourse further supports a non-sacramental interpretation as seen in the events of John 6 occurring roughly one year before the Last Supper, and the discourse is addressed to a mixed crowd of Galileans who seek signs rather than to disciples gathered in an upper room.²²⁴ Therefore, the absence of any Eucharistic context at this stage of Jesus' ministry is a critical exegetical piece of data. Additionally, if the imagery of eating in John 6 were interpreted as a literal reference to the Eucharist, it would trigger several theological difficulties. For example, no one prior to the Last Supper could have received eternal life, infants and the disabled would be excluded, and salvation would depend on ritual participation rather than faith.²²⁵ These conclusions contradict the Johannine emphasis on the universality of the promise of eternal life for all who believe.

The patristic tradition further illustrates the diversity of early Christian interpretation. Before the fourth century, many early Christian writers interpreted the Bread of Life Discourse in spiritual, moral, or intellectual terms rather than as a direct reference to the Eucharist. Patristic Fathers from throughout the realm of Christendom such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine all interpret the imagery of eating and drinking as a metaphor for internalizing the Logos or believing in Christ.²²⁶ The sacramental reading becomes dominant only in later centuries, particularly in the medieval West, where the development of sacramental theology and the influence of Aristotelian metaphysics shaped the interpretation of the discourse.²²⁷ The earliest interpreters did not uniformly see the discourse as Eucharistic, and their diversity provides a

²²⁴ Brown, *John I-XII*, 234.

²²⁵ Ibid., 287.

²²⁶ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 26.1; Origen, *Commentary on John*, 10.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, 1.6.

²²⁷ Keener, *John*, 693.

valuable corrective to readings that assume a uniform sacramental understanding in the early Church.

Thus, the Eucharistic reading of John 6 is possible although not textually demanded. It arises primarily from later doctrinal commitments rather than from the natural flow of the text itself.²²⁸ The Johannine emphasis on belief, the metaphorical use of eating and drinking, the historical setting of the discourse, the grammatical structure of the text, and the diversity of early patristic interpretation all point toward a Christological and faith-centered reading. Hence, the distinction between exegesis and eisegesis is of great importance. Likewise, to interpret the metaphorical language of John 6 as a literal reference to the Eucharist is to impose a later theological framework onto a passage whose internal coherency and logic is shaped by the symbolic language and expressions of the Johannine tradition.²²⁹

²²⁸ In this context, “later doctrinal commitments” refers to the fact that the fully developed Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation did not arise directly from the natural, surface-level reading of John 6 but from centuries of theological reflection, metaphysical development, and ecclesial definition. This means that the Church’s eventual dogmatic conclusions (especially those articulated at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Trent (1551) established a binding interpretive framework that subsequent theologians then read back into Scripture. In other words, the doctrine was defined at the level of theology and ecclesial authority before it was systematically grounded in exegesis, so later interpreters sought biblical support for a doctrine already held to be true. This does not necessarily imply bad faith; it simply reflects how doctrinal development works in traditions that affirm magisterial authority. Once the Church declared the Eucharistic change to be a literal conversion of substance, theologians were obligated to interpret John 6 in a way consistent with that dogmatic commitment. Thus, “later doctrinal commitments” refers to dogmatic pronouncements considered infallible, which then shaped the hermeneutical lens through which Scripture was read. Therefore, by noting that the Eucharistic interpretation is “possible but not textually demanded,” means that it is a theologically motivated reading rather than one that arises inevitably from the grammar, context, or narrative flow of John 6 itself. Several major Catholic theologians have acknowledged that the Eucharistic reading of John 6 is not demanded by the text itself but emerges when the passage is read through the Church’s later doctrinal lens. Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Henri de Lubac, Raymond Brown, John Meier, and Karl Rahner all affirm the Real Presence while also noting that the metaphysical framework of transubstantiation and the sacramental interpretation of John 6 arise from the Church’s developing theological tradition rather than from the narrative and linguistic structure of the chapter alone. Their shared point is that dogmatic definition establishes the interpretive horizon within which John 6 is read sacramentally, meaning the doctrine guides the exegesis rather than the exegesis generating the doctrine (especially after Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the first council to officially use the term transubstantiation thus giving the doctrine its formal metaphysical shape, and the Council of Trent in 1551 (Session XIII) which reaffirmed and dogmatically defined transubstantiation in response to the Reformation, declaring the doctrine infallibly and binding it to Catholic interpretation of Scripture, including John 6).

²²⁹ Catholic biblical scholarship generally affirms a strong internal coherence across the Johannine writings. Authors such as Raymond E. Brown, Francis Moloney, Rudolf Schnackenburg, and John P. Meier argue that the Gospel of John and the three Johannine epistles share a common theological vocabulary, dualistic imagery, Christology, and community concerns. Brown’s *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* and his *Anchor Bible* commentaries emphasize that 1 John in particular mirrors the Gospel’s language, idioms, and symbolic contrasts so closely that it almost functions as a pastoral commentary on the Gospel. While 2 and 3 John differ in form because they are brief, conventional letters written by “the elder,” Catholic scholars still see them as products of the same Johannine school or community. Thus, the Catholic scholarly consensus is that the Johannine epistles and the Gospel arise from the same theological milieu, and therefore exhibit a recognizable consistency in style, themes, and worldview. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 18-

9. The Logical Defensibility of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Transubstantiation

The doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Transubstantiation occupy central positions within Christian theology, however, they each present markedly different logical profiles. Each doctrine is traditionally classified as a “mystery,” although the nature of the mystery differs substantially. Both the Trinity and the Incarnation pose questions of internal coherence, mainly how one being can be three persons, or how one person can possess two natures. Transubstantiation, by contrast, raises questions of metaphysical category structure, and in this case mainly the question of how a substance can be replaced while its accidents remain unchanged. The distinction between these types of logical difficulty is crucial for it reveals why the Trinity and the Incarnation have historically enjoyed broader theological and philosophical defensibility (and therefore almost universally accepted throughout all of Christendom) while Transubstantiation has required increasingly elaborate metaphysical framework to maintain coherence and rationality.

This section will examine these doctrines in turn, drawing upon patristic sources, medieval scholasticism, Reformation critiques, modern Catholic theology, contemporary Protestant thought, and secular analytic philosophy. The goal is not to necessarily to settle or somehow adjudicate theological truth, rather it is to assess the relative logical defensibility of each doctrine within the history of Christian thought and the broader philosophical tradition.

The Trinity: A Problem of Respects

Classical Formulation and Logical Structure

23, 25, 30-33; Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 67-74, 90-94; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 23-29, 35-38; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 12-15, 16-18; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 43-45, 47.

The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that God is one in substance and three in person. This formulation, articulated at the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), was defended by Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine. Athanasius insisted that the divine unity is preserved in the shared *ousia* of Father, Son, and Spirit, while the Cappadocians distinguished hypostasis from essence to avoid modalism or tritheism. In classical Christian theology, *ousia* denotes the one, undivided divine essence. The fundamental reality of God that is neither composite nor capable of receiving accidents, since, as was noted earlier in this paper, classical theism insists that God is not a substance in the same genus as creatures but is instead *actus purus* whose mode of being excludes the very conditions that make accidents possible. By contrast, *hypostasis* refers to an individuated subsistent reality, the concrete “who” that exists as a distinct mode of possessing the one divine essence. After the Cappadocian settlement, the Church articulated the formula μία οὐσία, τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις (“one essence, three hypostases”), meaning that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguished not by essence but by relations of origin. Thus, while *ousia* safeguards divine unity, *hypostasis* secures personal distinction without implying composition, change, or multiplicity in God. This is consistent with what we have also noted earlier in this paper that divine attributes differ only in our way of understanding, not in God’s own being. Augustine later developed a psychological analogy of memory, understanding, and will to illustrate how plurality can exist within unity without contradiction.²³⁰

The logical defensibility of the Trinity rests upon the classical distinction of respects. The doctrine does not claim that God is one person and three persons, nor that God is one substance and three substances. Rather, it distinguishes between what God is (one essence) and who God is (three persons). Because the predicates “one” and “three” apply in different respects, the doctrine does not violate the LNC.²³¹

Patristic and Medieval Development

Gregory of Nyssa argued that the divine persons are distinguished by their relations of origin, not by any division in the divine essence; in other words, what differentiates Father, Son, and Spirit is not *what* they are but rather *how* each uniquely subsists within the single, undivided divine life.²³² Augustine similarly maintained that the divine attributes are identical with the divine

²³⁰ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes*, trans. Robert W. Thomson, 2-3.

²³¹ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V.4.

²³² Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II.

essence, and that the persons are distinguished only by relational opposition. For example, the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds, so that their personal distinctions do not arise from differing qualities or parts in God but instead from the unique relational ways each subsists within the one simple divine being.²³³ Aquinas later systematized this relational ontology by arguing that the divine persons are subsistent relations within the simple divine essence. He described it as the unique case in which ‘relation itself subsists,’ meaning that paternity, filiation, and spiration are not accidental properties added to God; they are in fact the very manner in which the one divine essence exists in three distinct relational modes. In other words, the personal distinctions in God are nothing other than the eternal relations themselves (paternity, filiation, and spiration) each of which is a way the one simple divine essence subsists without introducing composition, parts, or accidental differentiations.²³⁴

This relational account preserves logical coherence by grounding plurality in relations rather than in parts or properties. Because relations do not introduce composition into the divine essence, the doctrine avoids the metaphysical difficulties associated with divine simplicity.

Contemporary Philosophical Defenses

Modern analytic philosophers and theologians such as Richard Swinburne, Brian Leftow, and William Lane Craig have developed models of the Trinity that maintain logical coherence while avoiding modalism and tritheism. Swinburne proposes a ‘social’ model in which the divine persons are distinct centers of consciousness united by perfect love and shared divine nature. For example, he imagines the Father, Son, and Spirit as three fully personal agents who know and love one another so completely, and cooperate so harmoniously, that together they constitute one perfectly unified God.²³⁵ Leftow defends a ‘Latin’ model in which the persons are modes of the one divine life. He argues that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not three separate centers of consciousness as they are three distinct ways the single, infinite divine reality exists and acts, much like one mind expressing itself through different relational stances without multiplying the underlying being.²³⁶ Craig and Moreland propose a ‘Trinity monotheism’ model that treats the divine persons as three distinct self-conscious subsistences within one soul. They picture the

²³³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V.

²³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.27-43.

²³⁵ Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 180-205.

²³⁶ Brian Leftow, *God and Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 345-380.

Father, Son, and Spirit as three fully aware personal agents who share a single divine mind and essence, much like three centers of thought and will existing within one infinite, unified spiritual being²³⁷

Contemporary Catholic theologians likewise defend the coherence of the classical doctrine by grounding Trinitarian distinctions in relational ontology rather than in any division of essence. For example, Karl Rahner emphasizes that the economic self-revelation of God in salvation history truly discloses the immanent Trinity, so that the Father, Son, and Spirit are the one God personally communicating Himself in three distinct relational modes of subsistence (as opposed to three independent centers of consciousness). In this view, the divine unity is not threatened by personal distinction because the relations themselves (i.e., begetting, being begotten, and proceeding) *are* the very way the one simple divine essence exists. Thus, Rahner maintains that Trinitarian faith does not multiply divine beings, it expresses rather the single mystery of God's self-communication in three irreducible yet inseparable relational expressions of the same infinite life.²³⁸

Although these models differ, they nevertheless share a common commitment to the distinction of respects. None requires the suspension of metaphysical laws or the redefinition of categories. As a result, the Trinity remains logically defensible even for many secular philosophers who reject its theological claims.²³⁹

The Incarnation: A Problem of Natures

Chalcedonian Definition and Logical Framework

The Council of Chalcedon in 451 issued its famous definition in which it affirmed Christ as *one person in two natures, divine and human, without confusion, change, division, or*

²³⁷ William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 575-600.

²³⁸ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

²³⁹ While each of these contemporary proposals attempts to articulate the mystery of the Trinity in philosophically accessible terms, they do not all stand in the same relation to classical orthodoxy. Leftow's "Latin" model remains firmly within the traditional Augustinian-Thomistic framework, preserving divine simplicity, a single divine mind, and relational distinctions grounded in modes of subsistence. However, Swinburne's "social" model and Craig and Moreland's "Trinity monotheism" both affirm traditional Nicene commitments (i.e., one divine nature and three divine persons) but they do so in ways that introduce multiple centers of consciousness, a move that many classical theologians regard as edging toward psychological tri-theism. Thus, while none of the three models explicitly contradicts the ecumenical creeds, only Leftow's account fully aligns with the metaphysical grammar of the classical tradition, whereas the other two remain orthodox in intention but revisionist in structure.

separation, as a direct response to several Christological distortions that had emerged in the preceding century. On one side stood Eutychianism/Monophysitism, associated with Eutyches, who taught that Christ's humanity was effectively swallowed up by His divinity, resulting in a single, fused nature after the Incarnation.²⁴⁰ This view threatened the reality of Christ's human experience and undermined salvation itself, since what is not assumed cannot be healed. On the other side stood Nestorianism, linked to Nestorius, who so sharply distinguished Christ's divinity and humanity that he effectively posited two subjects or persons acting in parallel. A divine persona and a human person, rather than a single, unified person of the Word. Chalcedon's formula was crafted as a precise middle path between these errors. It rejected the confusion and change implied by Eutyches' collapsing of the natures while at the same time the council rejected the division and separation implied by Nestorius' dual-person framework. By stressing that Christ exists as *one and the same Son*, fully God and fully man, united "unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably," the council sought to safeguard both the integrity of Christ's humanity and the unity of His person. In doing so, Chalcedon provided the classical Christological grammar that would from then on govern orthodox theology, therefore ensuring that the church could confess a Savior who is truly divine, truly human, and truly one.²⁴¹

This formulation preserves the unity of Christ's person while affirming the full integrity of both natures. The logical structure parallels that of the Trinity in that predicates apply in different respects. Christ is omnipotent in His divine nature and limited in His human nature and because these predicates apply to different natures, they do not violate LNC.

²⁴⁰ Although no major theologian formally labels Eutychianism as the "milkshake theory," many contemporary scholars, teachers, and pastors employ that metaphor informally to capture the essence of what Eutyches taught. The imagery arises naturally from Eutyches' own claim that Christ's humanity was absorbed into His divinity "like a drop of honey in the ocean," a vivid picture of one element being swallowed up by another. Modern analogies such as a milkshake in which ingredients blend into a single new substance, a smoothie where distinct components lose their identity, or a stew in which everything dissolves into one mixture help students visualize the problem. These comparisons highlight the core issue. In Eutychianism, Christ's humanity is not preserved as a distinct nature but is merged into the divine in such a way that a *third thing* emerges, neither fully human nor fully divine. Thus, while "milkshake Christology" is not a technical term, it functions as an effective pedagogical shorthand for explaining why the Church rejected Eutyches' view and why Chalcedon insisted that Christ's two natures remain unconfused and unchanged. Eutyches' absorption analogy "like a drop of honey in the ocean" "is preserved in the *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum* and in the standard English translation by Richard Price and Michael Gaddis. For historical and doctrinal analysis of Eutychianism and the Chalcedonian response, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451); R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Survey*; and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. For modern theological treatments that describe Eutychianism in terms of "blending," "fusion," or "mixture," see Oliver D. Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered*, and Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*

²⁴¹ Council of Chalcedon, *Definition of Faith* (451).

Patristic and Medieval Development

Athanasius argued that when the Word became flesh, He did so without ever stopping or diminishing what He eternally is as God.²⁴² In essence, Athanasius was stressing that the eternal Word must remain fully and unchangedly God in the Incarnation because anything less would violate the very nature of God. In this outline, God is understood as immutable (unable to change), simple (not composed of parts), and impassible (not subject to alteration or loss), all of which we have noted earlier in this paper. Thus, if the Word had “given up” or “set aside” any divine attribute in becoming human, He would have undergone a real change by moving from being fully God to being something less (which classical theism says is impossible for the One who is Pure Act and the fullness of being itself). This is why Athanasius insists that the Word takes on human nature without subtraction, diminishment, or transformation of His divinity. Put in simpler terms, God does not (nor cannot) stop being God in order to become human. He adds humanity without losing deity and this is why Athanasius repeatedly argues that the Incarnation is an act of divine condescension, not divine alteration. The Word assumes what He was not (a human nature) while remaining what He eternally is (fully divine). Only this preserves both the integrity of God’s nature and the saving logic of the Incarnation because a changing, diminished, or partially divine Christ could not redeem humanity. In short, theology proper requires Athanasius’s claim because a God who can lose or lessen His divinity is not God at all, and a Christ who is not fully God cannot save.

Cyril of Alexandria built on Athanasius’s insight by insisting that the Incarnation results in one unified person, not two parallel subjects (i.e., one divine and one human) acting side by side.²⁴³ For Cyril, everything Christ does has a single “I” behind it because the Word Himself is the acting subject of both the divine and human operations. In contrast, Leo the Great emphasized that within this one person the two natures remain genuinely distinct, each retaining what properly belongs to it.²⁴⁴ In other words, divinity does not turn into humanity, and humanity does not dissolve into divinity and instead each nature continues to function according to its own properties. Leo’s point is that Christ is not a mixture or blend, rather he is a single person who possesses two intact and unconfused natures. Several hundred years later Aquinas developed this into a more explicitly

²⁴² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), 54-60.

²⁴³ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995). Cyril’s treatise is the classic articulation of the unity of Christ’s person against Nestorian dual-subject Christology.

²⁴⁴ Leo the Great, *Tome to Flavian*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 12.

metaphysical account by stating that in the hypostatic union the divine person of the Word assumes a complete human nature, yet this assumption does not produce a third, hybrid nature or a composite person.²⁴⁵ In sum, the human nature is united to the divine person as its subject, meaning that the Word is the one who thinks with a human mind, wills with a human will, and suffers in a human body yet without ceasing to be fully divine.

In summary, the Chalcedonian framework avoids violating LNC by carefully distinguishing person from nature, just as Trinitarian theology distinguishes essence from person. LNC is only broken when the same thing is affirmed and denied in the same respect, and classical Christology is deliberately structured to prevent that collapse. Christ is not said to be “one nature and two natures,” nor “one person and two persons,” which would be contradictory. Instead, He is one person who possesses two distinct natures, each retaining its own properties. This means that predicates apply differently depending on the nature through which the one person acts. For example, He can hunger, suffer, and die according to His human nature, while He can forgive sins, uphold creation, and remain eternal according to His divine nature. These are not contradictions because they are not predicated of Christ in the same respect; they are the operations of one subject acting through two modes of being. In this way, the unity of Christ is grounded at the level of person, while the distinction of natures prevents any logical confusion or blending. The result is a coherent metaphysical structure in which the same “who” performs all actions, while the “what” through which He acts determines the kind of action performed.

Contemporary Philosophical Defenses

Modern philosophers such as Thomas V. Morris, Oliver Crisp, and Eleonore Stump have developed analytic models of the Incarnation that remain fully compatible with Chalcedon because each preserves the council’s two essential commitments (i.e., one person and two natures). Morris’s “two-minds” model maintains that Christ possesses both a divine consciousness and a human consciousness, however, these are not two *persons*. They are two cognitive ranges within the one divine person of the Word, thereby avoiding Nestorian dual-subject Christology.²⁴⁶ Crisp’s “divine preconscious” model also safeguards the unity of person by arguing that the divine mind can refrain from fully exercising certain capacities at the conscious level without surrendering or

²⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.1-6.

²⁴⁶ Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 102-130.

diminishing divinity. This in turn allows Christ to have a genuinely human experience while still being the one eternal Son.²⁴⁷ Stump (drawing on the teachings of Aquinas) grounds her account in a robust metaphysics of personhood in which the divine person assumes a complete human nature without forming a hybrid or blended nature.²⁴⁸ In all three models, the person remains one, the natures remain distinct, and the properties of each nature are preserved without confusion or change. And although these models differ in philosophical strategy, they all operate squarely within the Chalcedonian boundaries and uphold the traditional Christological grammar that predicates all actions of the one person acting through two natures.

In short, these contemporary models maintain logical coherence by distinguishing between natures and persons, and by avoiding any claim that Christ is both omnipotent and non-omnipotent in the same respect.

Transubstantiation: A Problem of Categories

Scholastic Formulation and Metaphysical Commitments

The doctrine of Transubstantiation as a recap. It was defined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and then reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in 1551, asserting dogmatically that the substance of bread and wine is replaced by the substance of Christ's body and blood, while the accidents of bread and wine remain. Aquinas argued that God miraculously sustains the accidents without a subject, a metaphysical exception that has no natural analogue.²⁴⁹

The doctrine requires a strict Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident, and it requires the suspension of the normal metaphysical dependence of accidents on substance. However, in Aristotelian ontology accidents exist only in a substance and cannot subsist independently²⁵⁰ and to make the claim that accidents can exist without a subject is to posit a unique metaphysical exception.

Reformation Critiques

Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli rejected Transubstantiation on both logical and biblical grounds, although each did so for different reasons. Martin Luther affirmed the real

²⁴⁷ Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 45-78.

²⁴⁸ Stump, *Aquinas*, 395-430.

²⁴⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75-77.

²⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX.1-3.

presence of Christ in the Supper although he rejected the Aristotelian metaphysics behind Transubstantiation by arguing that Scripture does not require such a complex philosophical framework to explain Christ's presence.²⁵¹ In Luther's view, the doctrine adds unnecessary layers of metaphysical machinery (e.g., substance, accidents, dimensive quantity, etc.) that go far beyond what the biblical text demands. John Calvin took a different route by insisting that Transubstantiation undermines the integrity of Christ's human nature.²⁵² Calvin's theological point was that if Christ's physical body is locally present on countless altars around the world then His human body must be ubiquitous and present everywhere at once which seems to strongly contradict the Chalcedonian affirmation that Christ's *humanity* remains finite and located. Ulrich Zwingli took the most radical position among the major Reformers by rejecting Transubstantiation not only on metaphysical grounds yet also as a fundamental category mistake in sacramental interpretation. From Zwingli's theological perspective, Christ's words "This is my body" function as covenantal, symbolic language rather than metaphysical description; therefore, to treat them as statements about substance and accidents is to misread both Scripture and the nature of signs. He argued that Christ's ascended human body is located at the right hand of the Father and therefore cannot be physically present on earth without collapsing the distinction between Christ's divine and human natures. In Zwingli's view, the Roman Catholic doctrine confuses sign and thing signified, turning a symbolic act of remembrance into an ontological transformation that Scripture neither teaches nor requires. His emphasis on the memorial and communal dimensions of the Supper was *not a denial of Christ's presence but a redefinition of its mode*. In other words, Zwingli maintained that Christ is truly present, however, he is present to faith, not present in the elements.²⁵³ In this theological framework, Zwingli sought to preserve both the integrity of Christ's humanity and the clarity of biblical language by positioning his view as the most logically straightforward alternative to the metaphysical complexities of Transubstantiation.

Despite their differences, all three Reformers agreed that Transubstantiation introduces conceptual problems that neither Scripture nor classical Christology requires and each sought to articulate a view of the Supper that preserved both biblical clarity and the integrity of Christ's humanity. These critiques highlight at the very least the logical difficulties inherent in the doctrine:

²⁵¹ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.

²⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.

²⁵³ Ulrich Zwingli, *On the Lord's Supper* (1526) in *Zwingli and Bullinger*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

the separation of substance and accidents, the suspension of metaphysical laws, and the introduction of ad hoc exceptions.

Modern Catholic Defenses and Revisions

Modern Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Joseph Ratzinger have attempted to reinterpret Transubstantiation in more personalist or relational terms, seeking to express the doctrine in categories that resonate with contemporary philosophical and theological concerns. Rahner emphasizes the symbolic, relational, and existential dimensions of the Eucharist, arguing that the sacrament communicates Christ's self-gift in a way that shapes the believer's entire mode of existence.²⁵⁴ For him, the heart of the Eucharist is not a metaphysical transformation that can be diagrammed as much as it is a personal encounter in which Christ becomes present as the ground of the believer's life. Schillebeeckx goes further by proposing the idea of "transignification," suggesting that what changes in the Eucharist is the *meaning* or *significance* of the bread and wine rather than their underlying metaphysical substance.²⁵⁵ In his view, the elements become the Body and Blood of Christ because they now function as the privileged signs through which Christ gives Himself to the Church. In contrast, Ratzinger affirms the traditional doctrine of Transubstantiation albeit he reframes it in sacramental rather than physicalist terms.²⁵⁶ He argues that the Eucharistic change is real and objective, yet it should not be imagined as a chemical or material alteration. He argues instead that it is a transformation at the level of being and relationship, in which the elements become the enduring form of Christ's self-presence to His people.

Although Rahner, Schillebeeckx, and Ratzinger move away from the older Aristotelian-Thomistic explanation of *how* the Eucharistic change occurs, they do not move all the way to Calvin's view of a purely pneumatic presence (although it may seem as such, or to a point). What they share with Calvin is an effort to avoid imagining Christ's presence in crude physical or spatial terms, and in that sense their language can sound more "spiritual" or relational. However, unlike Calvin, they all maintain that the elements themselves undergo a real, objective transformation, even if that transformation is described in symbolic, relational, or sacramental categories rather

²⁵⁴ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 287-311.

²⁵⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 133-150.

²⁵⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 85-102.

than in terms of substance and accidents. Therefore, their shift is best understood as a theological reframing, not a Reformed ontology. In other words, they intentionally distance themselves from medieval metaphysics while at the same time not abandoning the Catholic claim that the bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ.

Together, these thinkers represent different attempts to articulate the mystery of the Eucharist in ways that preserve the Catholic Church's teaching while making its meaning more intelligible to modern believers. In short, these reinterpretations attempt to preserve the doctrine while avoiding the metaphysical difficulties of the scholastic formulation. However, they often depart from the strict Aristotelian categories required by Trent.²⁵⁷

Secular Philosophical Assessment

Secular philosophers generally regard Transubstantiation as logically problematic because it appears to require the suspension of ordinary metaphysical rules and the reclassification of basic categories such as substance, property, and identity. From their perspective, the doctrine asks one to affirm that the bread and wine remain exactly the same in every observable respect while somehow becoming something entirely different at the level of being (a move that seems to violate the way contemporary metaphysics typically understands change). For example, Peter van Inwagen argues that the doctrine can be coherent only within a very specific and largely pre-modern metaphysical system that few philosophers today would endorse.²⁵⁸ In a similar way Alvin Plantinga acknowledges that miracles are certainly possible, yet he also notes that the metaphysical commitments required by Transubstantiation are unusually heavy. He points out that the doctrine does not simply claim that God performs an extraordinary act, yet more so that this act actually involves a kind of ontological transformation that modern philosophical categories struggle at best to accommodate.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ For these Catholic thinkers, it is not as a rejection of the Aristotelian-Thomistic framework but more as a way of expressing the same doctrinal truth in categories more accessible to contemporary thought. Their aim is not to discard Thomas's metaphysics but to shift the emphasis from how the change occurs at the level of substance and accidents to what the Eucharistic change means for the believer and the Church. In all three cases, the classical doctrine is preserved, but the explanatory framework is translated into a theological narrative in an attempt to better resonate with modern philosophical receptivity.

²⁵⁸ Peter van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," in *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 75-99.

²⁵⁹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 372-380.

In short, secular philosophers do not necessarily reject the possibility of divine action, they simply and rightly question whether the conceptual framework needed to make sense of Transubstantiation is one that is reasonably acceptable.

Comparative Analysis

Both the Trinity and the Incarnation rely on careful distinctions of *respect* that preserve logical coherence without requiring any suspension of metaphysical laws. In both doctrines, classical theology avoids contradiction by assigning different predicates to different categories. For example, in the Trinity, one essence and three persons; in the Incarnation, one person and two natures. Nothing is affirmed and denied in the same respect, so LNC remains intact. In direct contrast, Transubstantiation introduces a unique metaphysical exception in which the accidents of bread and wine (e.g., taste, appearance, texture) are said to remain without any underlying substance to support them. This is not simply a distinction of respects, it is a claim that accidents can exist without a subject, something that neither Aristotelian metaphysics nor any other area of Christian doctrine affirms. There is no parallel move in the Trinity or the Incarnation for those doctrines work within the normal boundaries of metaphysical reasoning, whereas Transubstantiation requires a special, one-off exception to how being ordinarily functions. For this reason, many philosophers and theologians judge the Trinity and the Incarnation to be more logically defensible than Transubstantiation, and not because they are simple. It is because they do not require the metaphysical suspension that Transubstantiation entails.

To clarify these differences more systematically, the following table compares the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Transubstantiation across key logical and metaphysical categories. The goal is not to reduce these mysteries to simple formulas, rather it is to highlight how each doctrine relates to classical metaphysical principles, how each handles distinctions of respect, and where each requires (or avoids) exceptional metaphysical claims. By placing them side by side, the contrasts become clearer in seeing how the Trinity and the Incarnation operate within the normal boundaries of classical metaphysics, while Transubstantiation introduces a unique set of commitments that stand apart from the patterns found elsewhere in Christian doctrine. The table below summarizes these contrasts in a concise, structured form.

Table 13. Comparative Logical and Metaphysical Analysis: Trinity, Incarnation, and Transubstantiation

Category	The Trinity	The Incarnation	Transubstantiation
Type of Mystery	A mystery of unity and plurality grounded in relational distinctions within one essence.	A mystery of personal unity and dual natures united without confusion or division.	A mystery of substantial replacement with accidental retention requiring metaphysical suspension.
Logical Structure	One essence and three persons, with predicates applied according to distinct respects.	One person and two natures, with predicates applied according to the nature in which they are predicated.	One set of accidents and a different underlying substance, with predicates applied contrary to empirical appearance.
Primary Metaphysical Commitment	Divine simplicity and relational subsistence within a single, undivided essence.	Hypostatic union in which two complete natures subsist in one person.	Aristotelian substance-accident ontology with the possibility of accidents existing without a subject.
Dependence on Category Distinctions	Depends on the distinction between essence and person, which is coherent within classical metaphysics.	Depends on the distinction between nature and person, which is coherent within classical metaphysics.	Depends on the distinction between substance and accidents and requires the inversion of their normal metaphysical relation.
Need for Metaphysical Exceptions	No metaphysical exceptions required; relational distinctions do not violate simplicity.	No metaphysical exceptions required; the union is personal rather than natural or essential.	Requires a unique exception in which accidents subsist without a substance and empirical properties remain unchanged despite substantial replacement.
Compatibility with Classical Metaphysics	Fully compatible with patristic and scholastic metaphysics, especially relational ontology.	Fully compatible with patristic and scholastic metaphysics, especially the distinction between person and nature.	Compatible only within a narrow Aristotelian-Thomistic framework and only with additional metaphysical scaffolding.
Compatibility with Modern Metaphysics	Broadly compatible with contemporary analytic models of personhood and relational identity.	Broadly compatible with contemporary analytic models of composite identity and dual-aspect ontology.	Generally incompatible with contemporary metaphysics of matter, ontology, and property-bearer relations.

Internal Coherence	High internal coherence when distinctions of respect are maintained.	High internal coherence when the person-nature distinction is preserved.	Moderate coherence within Thomistic metaphysics yet low coherence outside it due to the inversion of substance-accident relations.
External Explanatory Burden	Low; requires no suspension of natural or metaphysical laws.	Low; requires no suspension of natural or metaphysical laws.	High; requires the suspension of metaphysical dependence and the introduction of a unique divine intervention.
Empirical Interface	Not subject to empirical verification or contradiction because it concerns the divine essence.	Not subject to empirical verification or contradiction because it concerns the metaphysics of personhood.	Directly contradicts empirical appearance and requires the claim that sensory data do not correspond to underlying reality.
Overall Logical Defensibility	Strong; avoids contradiction through distinctions of respect and requires no metaphysical exceptions.	Strong; avoids contradiction through distinctions of nature and requires no metaphysical exceptions.	Weak to moderate; coherent only within a specific metaphysical system and requires exceptional metaphysical claims

In sum, the comparison table shows that the Trinity and the Incarnation maintain logical coherence by relying on stable distinctions (i.e., essence and person in the Trinity, person and nature in the Incarnation) that fit comfortably within classical metaphysics and require no suspension of natural or philosophical laws. Transubstantiation depends on a singular metaphysical move in which accidents are said to exist without a substance, a claim that has no analogue in other Christian doctrines and sits uneasily within both classical and modern metaphysical systems. As a result, while all three doctrines are mysteries, the Trinity and the Incarnation exhibit a higher degree of internal coherence and broader metaphysical compatibility, whereas Transubstantiation carries a heavier explanatory burden and relies on exceptional metaphysical assumptions.

Conclusion

The logical defensibility of Christian doctrines varies according to the kind of mystery each one presents. The Trinity and the Incarnation are mysteries of depth, that is, realities that exceed

human comprehension yet remain internally coherent because they operate within stable metaphysical distinctions. The Trinity distinguishes essence from person; the Incarnation distinguishes person from nature. These distinctions allow the doctrines to transcend human understanding without violating the LNC or requiring any suspension of how being ordinarily functions. In contrast, Transubstantiation is a mystery of substitution that hinges on a unique metaphysical exception in which accidents are said to exist without a subject. This move requires the redefinition or inversion of classical categories and introduces a level of metaphysical strain not found in other central Christian doctrines. For this reason, the Trinity and the Incarnation have historically enjoyed broader philosophical defensibility and have proven adaptable to both classical and contemporary metaphysical systems. However, Transubstantiation has required increasingly elaborate explanatory frameworks to maintain coherence, and its metaphysical commitments remain difficult to reconcile with both pre-modern and modern accounts of how substances and properties relate. While all three doctrines are mysteries, they are not mysteries of the same kind, and their differing logical structures account for their differing levels of philosophical resilience.

10. Alternative Explanations Without Aristotelian Categories

Personalist and Relational Models

The attempt to articulate a doctrine of Eucharistic change without recourse to Aristotelian categories emerged most explicitly in the twentieth century, particularly within the context of Catholic *ressourcement* and the broader personalist turn in European theology. The central intuition of these models is that the deepest reality of any created object is not its metaphysical substrate but rather its orientation, significance, and relational finality. For example, Edward Schillebeeckx argued that the meaning of a thing is not reducible to its material composition; it is constituted by its role within a network of interpersonal and ecclesial relations.²⁶⁰ In this framework, the Eucharistic elements undergo a transformation not by the replacement of an underlying substance yet by a reconstitution of their existential significance. In other words, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ because they are taken up into a new relational horizon established by Christ's institution and the Church's liturgical act. Their deepest reality is no longer defined by nutritive function; it is defined by sacramental intentionality.

This approach draws upon a broader philosophical movement that sought to overcome the static metaphysics of substance in favor of a dynamic ontology of meaning. Thinkers such as Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber emphasized that personal presence is not mediated through a metaphysical substrata rather it is mediated through relational availability and existential encounter.²⁶¹ Schillebeeckx and Schoonenberg take this and make effort to explain the Eucharist without using the old philosophical idea of "substance" and "accidents." Instead of saying the bread's inner essence changes, they argued that what really changes are the meaning and purpose

²⁶⁰ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 133-45. Schillebeeckx argues that sacramental reality is constituted by relational meaning rather than metaphysical substratum.

²⁶¹ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 112-18; Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 1958), 55-62.

of the bread and wine. In essence, when the priest consecrates the bread and wine, they take on a new role and a new meaning given by Christ. They now point to Christ, bring people into communion with Him, and function in the Church as His Body and Blood. The change is real; however, it is not a change in the physical or metaphysical makeup of the bread. It is a change in what the bread *means* and what it *does*. According to this proposal, the bread becomes Christ's Body not because its inner substance is replaced, it is because it now signifies Christ's presence and creates a real relationship between Christ and the believer. Therefore, the reality of the change is relational (about meaning, purpose, and relationship) rather than ontological (about the underlying being of the bread).²⁶²

The Catholic magisterium responded cautiously to these proposals. This can be seen in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* which affirmed that relational and symbolic dimensions are essential to sacramental realism yet the Pope still insisted that the Eucharistic change cannot be reduced to a shift in meaning or intentionality.²⁶³ The Church maintained that the transformation must be objective and intrinsic to the elements themselves and not just to the believer's perception or the community's interpretive horizon. Thus, the personalist models were judged insufficient because they risked collapsing the Eucharistic change into a subjective or intersubjective phenomenon rather than an ontological event grounded in divine causality. Nevertheless, these models remain significant because they highlight the existential and ecclesial dimensions of Eucharistic presence that classical metaphysics sometimes obscures.

*Early Patristic Accounts of Metousiosis*²⁶⁴

Long before the scholastic period's articulation of transubstantiation, the early Church Fathers affirmed a real change in the Eucharistic elements without employing Aristotelian

²⁶² Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ: A Study of the God-Man Relationship*, trans. David Smith (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 201-12.

²⁶³ Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* (1965), §§46-48.

²⁶⁴ Metousiosis is the Eastern Christian way of describing the real change that takes place in the Eucharist, and the term literally means a change of being. Unlike the Western doctrine of transubstantiation, which uses Aristotelian categories such as substance and accidents to explain how the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, metousiosis does not attempt to describe the mechanism of the change in philosophical detail. Instead, it simply affirms that through the action of the Holy Spirit in the liturgy, the elements truly become Christ's Body and Blood at the deepest level of their reality, even though their outward appearance remains the same. This concept developed primarily in the Eastern Church, drawing on the patristic emphasis on mystery, participation, and divine transformation rather than analytic metaphysics. While the West eventually formalized its explanation using scholastic categories, the East preferred to preserve the apophatic character of the sacrament, insisting that the Eucharistic change is real but ultimately beyond human comprehension.

categories. Their conceptual vocabulary was not shaped by substance and accident but by biblical typology, liturgical realism, and the metaphysics of participation (of which has been pointed out earlier in this paper). Ignatius of Antioch spoke of the Eucharist as the flesh of Christ in a manner that presupposed an ontological transformation rather than a merely symbolic representation.²⁶⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem described the consecrated elements as having undergone a change of being, using the term *metabole* to indicate a transformation effected by the Holy Spirit.²⁶⁶ The Fathers did not attempt to explain the mechanism of this change, however, they simply asserted that the bread becomes the Body of Christ through divine power.

The patristic metaphysics underlying these claims was shaped by the Neoplatonic doctrine of participation. According to this framework, material realities can be elevated or transformed by participation in higher forms of being.²⁶⁷ From this point of view, the Eucharistic elements become Christ's Body not by losing their physical properties, yet rather by being taken up into a new mode of existence through sacramental participation. This participatory ontology is evident in Gregory of Nyssa's analogy of iron placed in fire. The iron remains iron, yet it becomes fiery by participation in the fire's energy.²⁶⁸ Using this analogy, the Eucharistic elements remain perceptibly bread and wine, yet they become the Body and Blood of Christ by participation in the divine life.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition later developed this patristic intuition into the doctrine of *metousiosis*, a term that parallels, although does not replicate, the scholastic concept of transubstantiation.²⁶⁹ *Metousiosis* affirms a real change of being without specifying the metaphysical mechanism by which the change occurs. It reflects a more apophatic approach to sacramental ontology, emphasizing the mystery of divine action rather than the analytic precision

²⁶⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7.1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 188-89.

²⁶⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 4.3. *Metabole* is a Greek term meaning "change" or "transformation," and it became one of the earliest ways Eastern Christian writers described what happens to the bread and wine in the Eucharist. Rather than analyzing the change through philosophical categories, the Eastern Fathers simply affirmed that the Holy Spirit brings about a real transformation of the elements at the level of their deepest reality. Cyril of Jerusalem uses the word to express that the bread and wine do not remain ordinary food after the consecration but are altered by divine power into the Body and Blood of Christ. This language reflects the broader Eastern emphasis on mystery, participation, and divine action rather than on metaphysical explanation. In sum, *metabole* names the fact of the Eucharistic change without attempting to define its mechanism and it stands as a hallmark of the Eastern Church's more apophatic and liturgically grounded approach to sacramental theology.

²⁶⁷ Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), VI.4.3.

²⁶⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ*, in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises*, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1893), 519.

²⁶⁹ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 197-99.

of Aristotelian categories. Therefore, it is this approach that avoids the conceptual difficulties associated with accidents without subjects although at the cost of leaving the metaphysical structure of the change largely undefined.²⁷⁰

Modern Scientific and Quantum Analogies

In the modern period, some theologians and philosophers have attempted to reinterpret Eucharistic change using the conceptual resources of contemporary physics. We must note, however, that these proposals are speculative and lack magisterial endorsement. Nevertheless, they illustrate the ongoing effort to articulate sacramental realism in categories intelligible to a scientific age. Drawing upon the writings of Heisenberg, one line of thought draws upon the notion that physical objects are constituted by dynamic fields, information structures, or quantum states (and not by not necessarily by stable substances).²⁷¹ In other words, if matter is really made up of information rather than some hidden “substance,” then one could imagine the Eucharistic change as God rewriting the deepest “code” of the bread and wine. A helpful way to picture this is to think of a music file on a computer. The icon on the screen looks exactly the same before and after a person replaces the song inside it, and the file size might even stay the same. However, the moment someone opens it, it is discovered that the entire track has been changed. The outside looks identical, yet the inner content has been completely rewritten. In the same way, the bread and wine still look, taste, and feel like bread and wine because their outward structure stays intact. But at the deepest level of what they *are*, their “inner file” has been replaced. God has rewritten the underlying pattern, so their true identity is now the Body and Blood of Christ, even though the “icon” on the surface remains unchanged.

Yet this analogy is not without precedent in the history of philosophy. The seventeenth century German polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz argued that the true substances of the world are immaterial monads whose perceptible properties arise from their internal states.²⁷² Similarly,

²⁷⁰ Ignatius, Cyril, and Gregory are all Eastern Church Fathers, writing within the Greek-speaking theological world. Their Eucharistic language (realism, participation, transformation) reflects the Eastern metaphysical and liturgical tradition, not the later Western scholastic one.

²⁷¹ Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 70-78.

²⁷² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadology*, in *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), §§1-18. Leibniz gives us a picture of the world that stands in sharp contrast to the experience of “accidents without subjects.” For Leibniz, everything that exists is made of tiny, soul-like units called monads, and each monad changes only because of what is already inside it. Nothing from the outside pushes, bumps, or forces a monad to change. This idea, along with his belief that nothing happens without a reason (i.e., the Principle

contemporary physicists such as John Polkinghorne have suggested that what makes *you* “you” may not be the physical stuff of your body at all, but more so the pattern of information that your body carries. In other words, your identity might be less like a particular lump of matter and more like the *arrangement, organization, or story* that matter temporarily holds. The physical pieces can change (e.g., cells die, memories shift, atoms are replaced, etc.) whereas the underlying pattern stays stable enough for you to remain recognizably yourself. This way of thinking treats personal identity as something like a continually updated informational blueprint rather than a fixed physical substrate.²⁷³ Thus, if identity is informational, then the Eucharistic change could be understood as a divine reconstitution of the elements’ ontological identity while preserving their empirical appearance.

However, the difficulty with these aforementioned analogies is that they risk conflating theological ontology with scientific models that are themselves conditional or temporary and therefore subject to revision. In addition, the informational or quantum models still do not provide a clear account of how the elements actually become the Body of Christ rather than simply acquiring a new informational configuration. And, since the metaphysical leap from physical information to sacramental presence remains unexplained, then these models ultimately offer nothing more than suggestive metaphors rather than rigorous explanations.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Each Framework

Nevertheless, each of the three non-Aristotelian models offers genuine insights into the mystery of Eucharistic presence. The *personalist models* highlight the relational and ecclesial dimensions of sacramental realism, reminding us that the Eucharist is not an isolated metaphysical event; it is a communal encounter with Christ. The *patristic doctrine of metousiosis* preserves the apophatic character of divine action and avoids the conceptual difficulties associated with accidents without subjects. The *modern scientific analogies* provide imaginative ways of thinking about ontological transformation in a world where classical metaphysics is no longer taken for granted.

of Sufficient Reason, or PSR) means that events without a clear cause or subject simply cannot exist in his system. In other words, every change has a determinate ground, every occurrence a rational anchor.

²⁷³ John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 67-72.

Recognizing the limitations of these alternative models does not, by itself, establish the adequacy of the Aristotelian account. The failure of personalist, patristic, or scientific analogies to provide a coherent metaphysical explanation does not entail that the Thomistic substance-accident framework succeeds. It simply means that the alternatives surveyed so far are insufficient. The Aristotelian model still faces its own unresolved questions especially regarding the intelligibility of “substance” once abstracted from empirical properties, and the challenge of articulating how a non-empirical change can be both ontologically real and theologically meaningful. In other words, the shortcomings of other approaches do not automatically vindicate the Aristotelian one. They only highlight the ongoing need for a metaphysical account that is both conceptually rigorous and faithful to the Church’s claims about real presence.

For this reason, the Roman Catholic tradition has continued to affirm the Aristotelian explanation as the most coherent available. Transubstantiation provides a metaphysical structure that preserves both the objectivity of the change and the integrity of the sensible properties. It avoids the subjectivism of the personalist models, the indeterminacy of the patristic accounts, and the speculative character of the scientific analogies. Whether Aristotelian metaphysics is ultimately necessary for articulating Eucharistic realism remains a matter of debate, it nevertheless remains the most rigorous and coherent framework currently available despite any of its challenges or shortcomings.

Table 14. Comparative Table: Alternative Explanations Without Aristotelian Categories

Model	Core Intuition	How the Eucharistic Change Is Understood	Strengths	Limitations / Magisterial Concerns
Personalist / Relational	Reality is defined by meaning and relation rather than metaphysical substrate.	Transformation of meaning and relational significance within the Church's liturgical act.	Highlights ecclesial and existential dimensions; resonates with modern phenomenology.	Risks reducing change to subjectivity; judged insufficient in <i>Mysterium Fidei</i> .
Patristic / Participatory	Transformation occurs through participation in divine life rather	Elements are elevated into a new mode of existence through	Rooted in early biblical realism; avoids Aristotelian	Offers no explanatory mechanism; difficult to articulate analytically.

	than substrate change.	divine power; mechanism is apophatic.	categories and “accidents.”	
Scientific / Quantum	Physical reality consists of dynamic fields or information rather than stable substances.	A divine rewriting of the elements' deepest informational “code” while preserving appearance.	Provides a modern conceptual bridge; parallels informational identity theories.	Highly speculative; lacks theological grounding; risks collapsing metaphysics into metaphor.

11. Logical Fallacies In The Classical Argument For Transubstantiation

Introduction: Authority, Metaphysics, and the Limits of Demonstrability

As we have discussed in this paper, the doctrine of transubstantiation occupies a distinctive place in Christian intellectual history because it is simultaneously one of the most metaphysically ambitious and one of the least empirically verifiable claims ever advanced within the Christian tradition. The Roman Catholic Church maintains that the Eucharistic change occurs at a level of being that is not accessible to empirical investigation and that the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is intentionally hidden from all physical testing. As we have previously observed, this epistemic position moves the doctrine out of the realm of scientific demonstrability and into the realm of fideism. It asserts a change that cannot be detected by any sensory or scientific means and therefore must be accepted on the authority of the Church rather than on the basis of empirical evidence or philosophical demonstration.²⁷⁴

This epistemic structure is not incidental as it is built into the metaphysical architecture of the doctrine itself. The Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident (which undergirds the classical Catholic explanation) was never intended to describe a change that leaves all empirical properties intact while altering only an invisible metaphysical substratum. Aristotle explicitly denies the possibility of accidents existing without a subject and treats substance as the bearer of accidents rather than as an entity separable from them.²⁷⁵ The medieval scholastics (most particularly Aquinas) adapted Aristotelian categories to sacramental theology, yet in doing so they further introduced metaphysical inventions that Aristotle would not have recognized (e.g., such as the claim that God can sustain accidents without a subject through a special act of divine power).²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ See Section 7: *Is Transubstantiation Logically or Empirically Defensible?* Especially the subsection titled “The Limits of Empirical Verification.”

²⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IX.1-3.

²⁷⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.1.

Aquinas in turn acknowledges that this configuration is metaphysically unprecedented and that it requires a suspension of the ordinary dependence of accidents upon substance.²⁷⁷

Since the doctrine depends upon metaphysical categories that are not empirically verifiable and that require exceptions to the ordinary rules of ontology, the classical argument for transubstantiation is vulnerable to several logical fallacies or (at a minimum) significant logical vulnerabilities. However, we must also note that these fallacies do not necessarily disprove the doctrine since the Catholic Church does not claim that transubstantiation is demonstrable by natural reason. Instead, the Church notes that the philosophical arguments traditionally used to defend the doctrine cannot bear the weight placed upon them and that the doctrine ultimately rests on ecclesial authority rather than on logical necessity.

In the following sections this paper will examine five major fallacies that appear in the classical argument for transubstantiation: special pleading, category error and equivocation, circular reasoning, the metaphysical God of the gaps, and violation of the law of identity. Each fallacy will be analyzed in light of patristic sources, medieval scholasticism, Reformation critiques, and contemporary philosophical analysis. It must be understood that the goal is not to undermine the doctrine as an article of faith. The goal rather is to clarify the limits of its logical defensibility and to situate it within the broader history of Christian metaphysics.

Fallacy #1: Special Pleading

The first and most prominent logical vulnerability in the classical argument for transubstantiation is the fallacy of special pleading. In formal logic, special pleading occurs when a general rule is applied universally except in the one case where the rule would undermine the desired conclusion. The exception is not justified by neutral principles, whereas it is introduced solely to preserve the argument.

In Aristotelian metaphysics, the rule is clear. Accidents cannot exist without a substance in which they inhere. Color, taste, shape, quantity, and all other accidental properties require a subject that possesses them. Aristotle defines an accident as that which exists in another and cannot exist independently.²⁷⁸ Aquinas adopts this definition and affirms that accidents are real ontological additions to a substance, not free-floating entities.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ Ibid., III.77.1 ad 3.

²⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.30.

²⁷⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.3.6.

However, the classical Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation asserts that after consecration the accidents of bread and wine remain even though their substance has been wholly replaced by the Body and Blood of Christ. This requires the claim that accidents can exist without a subject, a claim that contradicts the very definition of accident used to construct the argument. The structure of the special pleading can be expressed in traditional textbook syllogistic form:

Major Premise: All accidents require a substance in which they inhere.

Minor Premise: The accidents of bread and wine remain after consecration.

Conclusion: Therefore, the substance of bread and wine remains.

This is the conclusion that Aristotelian logic would require, however, the Catholic doctrine rejects the conclusion and instead asserts an alternative conclusion: the accidents remain without a substance because God miraculously sustains them. This alternative conclusion is not derived from the premises but rather (as noted in this chapter's introduction) is introduced solely to preserve the dogma. In fact, Aquinas acknowledges that this configuration is metaphysically unprecedented and that it requires a special act of divine power.²⁸⁰

Looking back to the Patristic sources we do not provide support for this exception. While the early Fathers do speak of sacramental change, nevertheless they do not articulate a metaphysical structure in which accidents exist without a subject. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem affirms that the elements become the Body and Blood of Christ through the word and the Spirit, however, he does not claim that the sensible properties remain without a substance. His account is thus liturgical and theological rather than metaphysical.²⁸¹

Reformation theologians such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Martin Chemnitz criticized the Catholic position precisely on this point. Luther rejected transubstantiation because it violated the natural relation between substance and accident while Calvin argued that the doctrine introduced metaphysical novelties unknown to Scripture and the early Church. Chemnitz, in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, accused the Catholic position of inventing exceptions to Aristotelian logic solely to preserve a dogma that lacked biblical support.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Ibid., III.77.1.

²⁸¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, Catechesis 4.

²⁸² Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), II. Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586) is one of the most important second-generation Lutheran theologians, often called "the Second Martin" because of his decisive role in shaping post-Reformation Lutheran

Contemporary analytic philosophers also reject the idea that accidents or properties could exist on their own without a subject to sustain them. Peter van Inwagen argues that properties are inherently dependent features that cannot float free of the objects that instantiate them,²⁸³ and Kit Fine likewise maintains that the dependence of properties on substances is a built-in feature of metaphysical structure rather than an optional add-on.²⁸⁴ Their broader work on modality reinforces this point. Both philosophers challenge the common habit of treating “possible worlds” as if they were literal alternate universes in which properties might somehow exist independently. Van Inwagen insists that a possible world is simply a way of describing how things might have been, not a metaphysical realm where free-floating properties could subsist.²⁸⁵ Fine goes further, arguing that possible worlds cannot explain possibility at all, since the very notion of a “possible world” already presupposes an understanding of what is possible. For him, what can or cannot exist depends on the essence of things (i.e., their built-in natures) not on what happens in imagined scenarios. A triangle must have three sides because that is what a triangle is, and not because all possible worlds agree.²⁸⁶ Both van Inwagen and Fine shift the discussion of modality away from speculative metaphysics and toward a more grounded account in which both possibility and properties themselves are rooted in the natures of concrete substances rather than in abstract worlds or disembodied accidents.

The Catholic response is that divine omnipotence can suspend the ordinary dependence of accidents upon substance, however, this response still does not resolve the logical fallacy. It simply relocates the exception from the metaphysical to the theological domain. Thus, the exception still remains an exception, and it is introduced solely to preserve the doctrine.

Therefore, the fallacy of special pleading reveals that the classical argument for transubstantiation cannot be defended on purely philosophical grounds. It requires an appeal to divine intervention that suspends the ordinary rules of ontology. This does not invalidate the doctrine as an article of faith; however, it does undermine its claim to philosophical coherence.

Fallacy #2: Category Error and Equivocation

doctrine. His *Examination of the Council of Trent* (Latin: *Examen Concilii Tridentini*) is his major four-volume work responding to the Roman Catholic Council of Trent.

²⁸³ Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 55-60.

²⁸⁴ Kit Fine, *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 112-118.

²⁸⁵ van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 55-60.

²⁸⁶ Fine, *Modality and Tense*, 112-118.

A second major logical vulnerability in the classical argument for transubstantiation is the presence of category error and equivocation in the use of the term “substance.” A category error occurs when a concept belonging to one logical or ontological category is applied as if it belonged to another. Equivocation occurs when a single term is used in two or more different senses within the same argument, thereby creating the illusion of coherence while masking an underlying inconsistency. Both errors appear in the traditional Catholic defense of transubstantiation because the term “substance” is used in two incompatible ways. It is used first as an invisible metaphysical essence and second as a physical body.

In the scholastic account, “substance” is defined as the underlying metaphysical reality that persists through accidental change. Aristotle describes substance as that which exists in itself rather than in another.²⁸⁷ Aquinas adopts this definition and insists that substance is not a physical or empirical entity but rather the metaphysical core that grounds the identity of a thing.²⁸⁸ When the Catholic Church asserts that the substance of bread is replaced by the substance of Christ’s Body, it is this metaphysical sense of substance that is invoked. The change is said to occur at the level of being, not at the level of physical composition.²⁸⁹

However, when the doctrine is defended as a guarantee of the “Real Presence” of Christ’s Body in the Eucharist, the term “substance” is treated as if it referred to a physical body. The Council of Trent declares that Christ is “truly, really, and substantially present” in the Eucharist. This language has been consistently interpreted by Catholic theologians as affirming the presence of Christ’s physical Body, albeit in a non-spatial mode.²⁹⁰ Yet if “substance” is an invisible metaphysical category, then replacing the substance of bread with the substance of Christ’s Body should not entail the presence of a physical body. It would entail only the presence of a metaphysical essence. Thus, the argument shifts between two meanings of “substance.” On one

²⁸⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII.1. The old scholastic idea of “substance” does not really survive in modern philosophy or physics, at least not in the way Aristotle or the medievals meant it. They thought every object had a deep, hidden “something” that stayed the same even when its surface features changed. Most contemporary philosophers do not talk that way anymore. They usually explain objects in terms of their properties, structures, or the ways they are arranged, not in terms of an invisible core that holds everything together. And physics has moved even further away from the idea. It describes the world using fields, particles, and mathematical structures, not enduring “substances” underneath appearances. So, the basic intuition that things can change while still being the same thing still makes sense to people today, while the old metaphysical machinery used to explain that intuition is not part of how modern thinkers or scientists describe reality.

²⁸⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.3.5.

²⁸⁹ See Section 4: *Transubstantiation: The Inverse Problem*, especially the subsection titled “The Change of Substance and the Retention of Accidents.”

²⁹⁰ Council of Trent, Session XIII, Decree on the Eucharist, ch. 1.

hand it is metaphysical while on the other hand it is physical. This equivocation can be expressed in traditional logical form:

Major Premise: The substance of a thing is its invisible metaphysical essence.

Minor Premise: The substance of bread is replaced by the substance of Christ's Body.

Conclusion: Therefore, the invisible metaphysical essence of Christ's Body is present.

This conclusion follows from the premises. However, the Catholic doctrine asserts instead an alternative conclusion which is that the physical Body of Christ is present. This conclusion does not follow from the premises unless "substance" is redefined mid-argument to mean "physical body." Hence, the argument equivocates on the term "substance" by using it first in a metaphysical sense and then in a physical sense. The shift may be subtle, nonetheless, it is decisive because it allows the doctrine to claim both metaphysical invisibility and physical presence without acknowledging the inconsistency.

Patristic sources do not use the Aristotelian concept of substance in this way. For example, both Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus and Cyril of Jerusalem speak of the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ, however, they do so in sacramental, liturgical, or mystical terms rather than in metaphysical categories.²⁹¹ In other words, their language is realist, yet it is not grounded in a distinction between substance and accident. The metaphysical tools that later become central to the doctrine are absent from their writings.

Medieval scholasticism introduces the metaphysical distinction although even within the scholastic tradition there is debate about the meaning of "substance." Aquinas insists that substance is not a physical body (as was recently pointed out) but rather the metaphysical principle of being.²⁹² In contrast to Aquinas, Duns Scotus emphasizes the formal distinction within substances and argues that metaphysical categories cannot be directly equated with physical bodies.²⁹³ Thus, even in the scholastic tradition there contains internal tensions that complicates the Catholic claim that the substance of Christ's Body is present in the Eucharist.

In the sixteenth century, it was Reformation theologians that seized upon this ambiguity. Calvin argues that the Catholic doctrine equivocates on the term "body," treating it sometimes as

²⁹¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, Catechesis 4.

²⁹² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.2.

²⁹³ John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, IV.11.

a physical body and sometimes as a metaphysical essence.²⁹⁴ Chemnitz similarly accuses the Catholic position of shifting between incompatible definitions of substance in order to defend the doctrine.²⁹⁵ Although affirming the Real Presence, Luther rejects transubstantiation precisely because it relies on metaphysical distinctions that obscure rather than clarify the nature of Christ's presence.²⁹⁶

Contemporary analytic philosophers also reject the equivocation. Peter van Inwagen argues that metaphysical essences cannot be equated with physical bodies and that any argument that shifts between these categories commits a category error.²⁹⁷ Similarly, Kit Fine maintains that metaphysical structure cannot be reduced to physical composition and that any argument that conflates the two is logically incoherent.²⁹⁸ For example, both philosophers would say that you cannot explain what a thing *is* simply by listing what it is *made of*. A human person is not identical to the collection of cells that compose her body, just as the essence of a promise is not identical to the vibrations of air that carry the words. If someone tries to argue that a person “just is” their atoms, or that the meaning of a promise is nothing more than its physical expression, they have quietly switched from a metaphysical question to a physical one. That switch is the very equivocation van Inwagen and Fine warn against.

The Catholic response is that Christ's Body is present “substantially” although not physically, and that the term “body” is used analogically rather than univocally. However, this response actually introduces further equivocation, for it redefines “body” in a non-physical sense while retaining the language of physical presence. Thus, the argument oscillates back and forth between metaphysical and physical categories without acknowledging the shift.

The fallacy of category error and equivocation reveals that the classical argument for transubstantiation depends upon a shifting and inconsistent use of the term “substance.” As previously noted with the fallacy of special pleading, the fallacy of category error and equivocation does not necessarily invalidate the doctrine as an article of faith, although it does (again) undermine its claim to philosophical coherence.

Fallacy #3: Circular Reasoning (Petitio Principii)

²⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.

²⁹⁵ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, II.

²⁹⁶ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 28-36.

²⁹⁷ van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 45-52.

²⁹⁸ Fine, *Modality and Tense*, 98-104.

The Structure of the Classical Argument

The classical defense of transubstantiation also frequently relies upon a pattern of reasoning that (when examined with philosophical precision) shows a significant circularity albeit subtle. The argument begins by appealing to ecclesial authority and divine revelation as the basis for affirming that the substance of bread and wine is changed into the Body and Blood of Christ. This initial affirmation is not presented as a conclusion reached through metaphysical analysis. It is a statement of faith grounded in the Church's magisterial interpretation of Scripture and tradition. Aquinas acknowledges that the truth of the Eucharistic change is known primarily through revelation rather than philosophical demonstration since the senses perceive only the accidents of bread and wine while faith apprehends the underlying reality of Christ's presence.²⁹⁹ Thus, the metaphysical explanation enters *only after* the dogmatic claim has been established.

It is only that once the change of substance is accepted or affirmed on the grounds of divine revelation that the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident is introduced as the conceptual framework capable of explaining how such a change can occur without perceptible alteration. The scholastic tradition argues that the Eucharistic miracle is intelligible because substance and accident are metaphysically distinct, and so the substance may be replaced while the accidents remain. This explanatory move is presented as a rational defense of the dogma and a way of showing that the doctrine does not violate the principles of classical metaphysics. However, the justification for employing the substance-accident distinction in this context is not derived from independent philosophical necessity. Its justification is found in its perceived usefulness in safeguarding the Church's *prior* dogmatic and doctrinal commitment.

The final movement of the argument appeals to the Eucharistic change itself as evidence that the Aristotelian categories are sufficiently flexible to accommodate the change. The Eucharist is treated as the exemplary instance that confirms the applicability of the metaphysical distinction. Thus, the reasoning moves from dogma to metaphysics and then from metaphysics back to dogma, creating a loop in which the philosophical framework winds up being validated by the very doctrine it was constructed to defend. Therefore, the structure of the argument risks assuming what it seeks to prove since the metaphysical categories are justified by the Eucharistic miracle, and the Eucharistic miracle is rendered coherent by those same categories.

²⁹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.1.

Historical Background and the Development of the Loop

The circularity that is embedded in the classical defense becomes more apparent when viewed against the historical development of Eucharistic doctrine. In the patristic period, the Fathers employed a wide range of metaphors and conceptual models to describe Christ's presence in the Eucharist, yet they did not express a technical distinction between substance and accident. For example, Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of the elements becoming the Body and Blood of Christ through the efficacious word and the operation of the Spirit, yet he does not attempt to explain how the sensible properties remain unchanged.³⁰⁰ Augustine emphasizes the sacramental mode of presence and the transformative power of Christ's word, although he too does not employ Aristotelian categories to account for the phenomenon.³⁰¹ Thus, the early Fathers affirm a real change while at the same time they do not provide a metaphysical mechanism for it.

The introduction of Aristotelian metaphysics into Western theology during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries provided scholastic theologians with a conceptual vocabulary capable of articulating the Eucharistic change with greater precision. Here Aquinas chooses to adopt the substance-accident distinction as the most fitting framework for explaining how the substance of bread and wine can be replaced while their accidents remain.³⁰² However, at the same time Aquinas also acknowledges that the doctrine itself is known only through revelation and that the metaphysical explanation is constructed in service of the dogma rather than derived from independent philosophical inquiry. Therefore, the metaphysical categories end up functioning as an attempted rational defense of a revealed truth rather than as the foundation upon which the truth is established.

The Reformation further exposes the circularity of the classical argument. As has been previously noted, Protestant theologians such as Luther and Calvin criticize the scholastic use of Aristotelian categories as an unwarranted imposition upon the biblical text. Luther rejects the notion that accidents can exist without a subject, arguing that such a claim violates the basic principles of natural reason.³⁰³ Calvin contends that the scholastic explanation is a philosophical contrivance designed to support a doctrine that lacks scriptural warrant.³⁰⁴ These critiques point to

³⁰⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3.

³⁰¹ Augustine, *Sermon 272*.

³⁰² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

³⁰³ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 29-38.

³⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.

the extent to which the metaphysical framework is shaped by the dogmatic commitment it seeks to defend.

Modern Catholic theologians continue to affirm the doctrine of transubstantiation although many also openly acknowledge the limitations of the classical metaphysical explanation. Karl Rahner argues that the Aristotelian categories are historically conditioned and may not adequately express the mystery of Christ's presence in contemporary philosophical terms.³⁰⁵ Joseph Ratzinger also suggests that the scholastic explanation, while valid within its own conceptual framework, should not be treated as the only possible way of articulating the doctrine.³⁰⁶ These developments reveal that there is an ongoing tension between the dogmatic affirmation and the metaphysical categories the Church uses to explain it.

The Logical Problem: Philosophy Shaped by Dogma

The central difficulty lies in the fact that the metaphysical framework is adjusted specifically to accommodate the dogma, and the dogma is then used to validate the flexibility of the philosophy. The Aristotelian distinction between substance and accident is not adopted because it independently demands the possibility of accidents existing without a subject. Instead, we see that the distinction is modified to allow for this possibility precisely because the dogma/doctrine of transubstantiation requires it. Aquinas knew this and acknowledged that accidents cannot ordinarily exist without a subject, however, as a defense and justification he argues that God can sustain them miraculously in the Eucharist.³⁰⁷ Therefore, the philosophical principle is actually suspended in order to preserve the dogma, and then the suspension is justified by appealing to divine omnipotence.

When played out, this reasoning risks collapsing into *petitio principii*, since the metaphysical categories are invoked to defend the doctrine, and the doctrine is invoked to justify the modification of the categories. The argument assumes the truth of the doctrine in order to defend it, and the defense relies upon a philosophical framework that is itself shaped by the doctrine. The circularity demonstrates that the metaphysical explanation functions as a conceptual instrument constructed to preserve the doctrine and not as an independent rational foundation.

³⁰⁵ Rahner, "The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Investigations*, 287-300.

³⁰⁶ Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us*, 85-96.

³⁰⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.1.

Secular philosophers have long criticized this pattern of reasoning. In the eighteenth-century David Hume argued that appeals to miracles often rely upon circular reasoning. He points out that the alleged miracle is used to justify the suspension of natural laws and the suspension of natural laws is invoked to validate the miracle.³⁰⁸ Contemporary analytic philosophers such as J. L. Mackie similarly contend that theological explanations frequently presuppose the very principles they seek to establish.³⁰⁹ These critiques underline the broader philosophical concern that the classical defense of transubstantiation relies upon a metaphysical framework that is not independently justified yet rather it is instead tailored to fit the dogma.

Conclusion: The Persistence of the Circularity

The circularity that is embedded in the classical defense of transubstantiation does not necessarily invalidate the doctrine, yet it does show the limitations of the metaphysical explanation. The scholastic framework provides a coherent account of the Eucharistic change *only* if one already accepts the dogma and is willing to modify the metaphysical categories accordingly. Therefore, the explanation ends up functioning as a rational articulation of a revealed truth rather than as a philosophical demonstration of its possibility. The doctrine may indeed remain a “mystery of faith,” however, the attempt to render it metaphysically intelligible exposes the extent to which the philosophical framework is shaped by the dogmatic commitment it seeks to defend.

Fallacy #4: The Metaphysical “God of the Gaps” Fallacy

The Structure of the Metaphysical Gap

³⁰⁸ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 10.

³⁰⁹ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Contemporary analytic philosophers such as Mackie argue that many theological explanations quietly assume the very principles they are supposed to prove. Mackie notes that classical arguments for God often “rely on principles which themselves stand in need of support” (p. 38). His point is straightforward in that if an argument for God depends on a causal rule, a metaphysical axiom, or a principle of explanation that is not independently justified, then the argument becomes circular. In other words, Mackie is saying that some theological arguments work only if you already accept the worldview they are trying to establish. They start by assuming a rule like “everything must have a cause” or “the universe must have a designer,” and then use that rule to conclude that God exists. But if the rule itself is not proven (or if it is only plausible within a theistic framework) then the argument ends up presupposing what it claims to demonstrate. His critique is not that belief in God is irrational, but that certain philosophical defenses of that belief fail because they build their conclusion into their premises. His analysis is especially relevant to sacramental metaphysics, where the explanatory framework (e.g., substance, accident, divine causality) is often assumed rather than independently established.

When it comes to classical apologetics for transubstantiation, the concept of “substance” functions as the invisible explanatory layer that purportedly accounts for the Eucharistic change.³¹⁰ The accidents of bread and wine remain entirely unchanged, yet the underlying reality is said to be replaced by the Body and Blood of Christ. However, critics argue that this explanatory move resembles a metaphysical version of the “God of the gaps” fallacy, in which an unseen entity is invoked to fill an explanatory void that does not actually require such supplementation. In this case, the appeal to substance becomes a conceptual placeholder that masks the absence of empirical or philosophical evidence for a change that leaves no detectable trace. Hence, the scholastic tradition insists that substance is not an empirical entity and instead is a metaphysical principle that grounds the identity of a thing beneath its sensible properties. Aristotle describes substance as that which exists in itself and not in another, the bearer of accidents and the principle of unity within change.³¹¹ Yet in the Eucharistic context, substance is invoked precisely at the point where no observable change occurs, and its invocation serves to preserve a dogmatic and doctrinal claim rather than to illuminate a phenomenon or miraculous type event.

The critique intensifies even further when one considers the modern scientific understanding of matter. Contemporary physics and chemistry reveal that the accidents of bread (including its molecular and atomic structure) remain entirely unchanged before and after consecration. The chemical composition of the host, the arrangement of its starches and proteins, and the physical processes governing its decay all remain identical. Thus, from a scientific standpoint there is no measurable alteration in the object’s foundation. Therefore, the appeal to substance functions as an explanatory gap; in other words, a metaphysical insertion that accounts for a change that leaves no empirical footprint. Critics then argue that this essentially renders the concept of substance an empty term since it is invoked precisely where no evidence can be offered for its existence or transformation.³¹²

³¹⁰ Generally speaking, classical apologetics is a two step, rational approach to defending the Christian faith that begins with establishing the existence of God through natural theology (e.g., cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments) and then argues for the truth of Christianity by appealing to historical evidence, fulfilled prophecy, and the reliability of Scripture. It assumes that human reason, while limited, is capable of discerning metaphysical truths about God and the world, and that faith builds upon (rather than replaces) sound philosophical foundations.

³¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII.1.

³¹² The tension becomes acute when the doctrine of transubstantiation is set against the biblical pattern of miracles, which are uniformly public, sensory, and empirically verifiable. As this paper has previously pointed out in “*Modern Scientific Challenges: Atoms, Molecules, and Substance*” and “*The Limits of Empirical Verification*”, the Eucharistic change is defined precisely by the absence of any observable alteration, even at the molecular or atomic level. Because Scripture consistently presents miracles as events whose divine origin is authenticated through sensory

Patristic and Medieval Background

As we have previously noted, the patristic tradition does not employ the Aristotelian concept of substance in the technical sense later adopted by scholastic theologians. In the East, Cyril of Jerusalem affirms a real change in the Eucharist, however, he does not attempt to explain how the sensible properties remain unchanged,³¹³ while in the West, Augustine emphasizes the sacramental mode of presence and the transformative power of Christ's word, yet he does not articulate a metaphysical mechanism for the change.³¹⁴ Again, we see that the early Fathers affirm the reality of Christ's presence without appealing to an invisible substratum that undergoes alteration while all observable features remain constant.

Referencing again the medieval scholastics, and particularly Aquinas, they develop the concept of substance as the metaphysical foundation for explaining the Eucharistic change. Aquinas argues that the substance of bread is replaced by the substance of Christ's Body, while the accidents remain through divine power.³¹⁵ He acknowledges that accidents cannot ordinarily exist without a subject, yet he contends that God can sustain them miraculously. Therefore, we once again see that the metaphysical framework is adjusted to accommodate the doctrine, and the doctrine is used to justify the modification of the framework. This reciprocal reinforcement shows the extent to which the concept of substance functions as a theological or dogmatic necessity rather than as a philosophical conclusion.

Modern Catholic and Protestant Responses

Here we noted again how modern Catholic theologians recognize the difficulty of employing Aristotelian metaphysics in a scientific age. Karl Rahner argues that the scholastic

evidence, the Eucharist's non-sensory character introduces an epistemic discontinuity. It functions as a miracle that leaves no empirical footprint and therefore relies on metaphysical assertion rather than evidential manifestation. This contrast raises the question of whether transubstantiation constitutes a biblical-style miracle at all or represents a distinct category of sacramental action whose justification depends not on sensory confirmation but on ecclesial authority. The charge of a "God of the gaps" cannot be justly applied to biblical miracles because Scripture presents miracles not as explanations inserted where evidence is missing but as empirically disruptive events that *create* evidence through public, sensory manifestation. By contrast (again referring back in more detail to the section "*Modern Scientific Challenges: Atoms, Molecules, and Substance*" and "*The Limits of Empirical Verification*") transubstantiation invokes divine action precisely where no sensory or empirical change occurs, relying on a metaphysical mechanism (substantial change without accidental alteration) that is insulated from verification. Thus, while biblical miracles function as evidential signs, the Eucharistic miracle functions as a non-evidential assertion, making the "God of the gaps" critique applicable only to the latter and not to the biblical pattern of divine action.

³¹³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3.

³¹⁴ Augustine, *Sermon 272*.

³¹⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

categories are historically conditioned and may no longer adequately express the mystery of Christ's presence.³¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, suggests that the classical explanation (even if valid within its own conceptual framework) should not be treated as the only possible explanation of the doctrine.³¹⁷ These developments reveal an implicit acknowledgment that the concept of substance, as traditionally employed, may no longer function as a persuasive explanatory category.

Protestant theologians have long criticized the scholastic use of substance as a metaphysical gap filler. Magisterial Reformers such as Calvin argue that the doctrine relies upon a philosophical fiction that has no basis in Scripture or reason,³¹⁸ while Luther rejects the notion that accidents can exist without a subject, contending that such a claim violates the basic principles of natural reason.³¹⁹ These critiques further highlight the extent to which the concept of substance is invoked precisely where empirical evidence is lacking.

The Philosophical Problem

When considering the metaphysical "God of the Gaps" fallacy, the central philosophical difficulty lies in the fact that the concept of substance is invoked to explain a change that does not manifest in any observable way. David Hume argues that appeals to invisible entities to explain phenomena that show no empirical alteration constitute a form of explanatory emptiness.³²⁰ As has been previously noted, contemporary analytic philosophers such as J. L. Mackie similarly contend that theological explanations often rely upon concepts that lack empirical content and therefore fail to provide genuine explanatory power.³²¹ Thus, in the context of the Eucharistic the concept of substance functions as a metaphysical gap filler that preserves the doctrine while offering no independent evidence for its existence or transformation.

The result of this is a form of metaphysical "God of the gaps" type reasoning in which an invisible entity is invoked to account for a phenomenon that does not require such an explanation. The accidents remain entirely unchanged and the appeal to substance serves to preserve a doctrinal

³¹⁶ Rahner, "The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Investigations*, 287-294.

³¹⁷ Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us*, 34-41.

³¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.

³¹⁹ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW 36:32-36.

³²⁰ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 63-78.

³²¹ Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 1-15; 24-28.

claim rather than to illuminate a metaphysical reality. In the end, critics argue that this renders the concept of substance as basically an empty term since it is invoked precisely where no evidence can be offered for its existence or alteration.

Fallacy #5: The Violation of the Law of Identity

The Classical Formulation of the Problem

The Law of Identity states that *a thing is identical with itself* ($A = A$). Applied to the notion of being, the principle means that *whatever exists is what it is*, possessing a determinate act of existence that cannot be something other than itself at the same moment and in the same respect. For example, if we say, “this being is a human being,” the Law of Identity asserts that it *is* that being and not simultaneously a non-human being in the same respect. Its act of being (*esse*) is identical with itself and cannot be both “human” and “not-human” at once. In classical metaphysics, this is why a being cannot both possess and lack the same essential determination simultaneously: its act of being grounds its identity. Thus, *being=being* expresses the metaphysical stability presupposed by all predication that whatever has being must be identical with the being it has.³²²

This principle is foundational to classical logic and underlies all rational discourse. This becomes philosophically problematic in the case of transubstantiation because the doctrine asserts

³²² Norman L. Geisler, *The First Principles of Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1986), 17-22. Geisler (a Thomistic philosopher) argues that transubstantiation violates the very first principles that make metaphysics and knowledge possible. Because the Law of Identity requires that a being be identical with what it is in its act of existence, Geisler maintains that an object possessing all the accidents of bread must, in that same respect, be bread. To claim otherwise is to deny that being is what it is. Likewise, since accidents are epistemically and ontologically inseparable from the substances they manifest, the notion of accidents existing without a subject contradicts the Thomistic structure of being that Geisler defends. Thus, by appealing to a change in substance that produces no corresponding change in accidents, transubstantiation collapses into a violation of the principles of not only Identity, but also Non-Contradiction, and Causality that Geisler identifies as foundational to all coherent thought. Several major Catholic theologians including Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, Edward Schillebeeckx, Piet Schoonenberg, and Hans Küng, have acknowledged that the scholastic substance-accident framework is philosophically problematic, conceptually strained, or no longer adequate for expressing Eucharistic doctrine. While they affirm the dogma itself, their critiques align with Geisler’s argument that the classical explanation violates basic metaphysical principles such as identity, non-contradiction, and the inseparability of accidents from substance. To be clear, they are not abandoning Aquinas; they are translating rather than abolishing, re-expressing rather than rejecting, and updating conceptual language rather than denying the doctrine itself. Their aim is to preserve the dogma while shifting the explanatory focus from *how* the change occurs in terms of substance and accidents to *what* the Eucharistic transformation signifies for the believer and the Church (e.g., presence, encounter, and ecclesial communion). This is why Rahner speaks of transfinalization, Ratzinger of a relational ontology, and Schillebeeckx of transignification. Each seeks to maintain the truth of the doctrine while reframing its metaphysical expression in a way that resonates with modern thought.

that after consecration the being before us is not bread in substance, even though every accidental feature (e.g., taste, texture, appearance, chemical composition, molecular structure) remains identical to what bread is. In other words, the accidents continue to instantiate all the empirical markers by which we identify the being as bread, yet the Church claims that the underlying being is no longer bread at all. This creates a tension with the Law of Identity because the object appears to satisfy every criterion for “bread=bread” while being declared “bread≠bread” at the level of substance. As this paper has already explored earlier in “The Problem of Accidents Without a Subject” and “Is Transubstantiation Logically or Empirically Defensible?”, the doctrine requires a metaphysical distinction so sharp that it allows an object to be empirically identical to bread in every respect while being ontologically non-identical to bread in its being. In sum, this raises the question of whether such a claim stretches the Law of Identity beyond coherent application.

As has been already noted, the Church responds by distinguishing between essence and appearance. The host is said to be the Body of Christ in essence while remaining bread in appearance. This distinction relies upon the Aristotelian categories of substance and accident, in which the substance is the underlying reality and the accidents are the sensible properties. Therefore, the Church argues that the host is Christ in substance and bread in accident. This explanation preserves the doctrine while maintaining the Law of Identity *at the level of substance*.

The Counterargument from Logic

Critics argue that this defense violates the Law of Identity by severing the connection between properties and identity. If an object possesses all the properties of bread and none of the properties traditionally associated with the Body of Christ, then asserting that the object is the Body of Christ appears to contradict the principle that identity is grounded in the possession of essential properties. The claim that the host is Christ in substance while bread in appearance requires a redefinition of identity that disconnects it from observable properties. This move renders the concept of identity vacuous, since it allows any object to be identified as anything else regardless of its properties.³²³

Secular philosophers have also long criticized such moves as violations of logical coherence. Bertrand Russell argues that identity must be grounded in the possession of properties

³²³ Ibid.

and that any attempt to separate identity from properties results in conceptual incoherence.³²⁴ In addition, W. V. O. Quine contends that identity statements must be grounded in observable features and that any appeal to invisible essences undermine the logical structure of identity claims.³²⁵ In the Eucharistic context, the assertion that the host is Christ in substance yet bread in appearance appears to violate these principles.

Historical and Theological Context

Once again, the patristic tradition does not articulate the distinction between substance and accident in the technical sense later adopted by the scholastics. Here we reference again how Augustine emphasizes the sacramental mode of presence and the transformative power of Christ's word, although he does not claim that the host is Christ in substance while remaining bread in appearance.³²⁶ Likewise, Cyril of Jerusalem in the East affirms a real change, however, he also does not attempt to explain how the sensible properties remain unchanged.³²⁷ Because of this, the early Fathers do not confront the logical problem posed by the Law of Identity in the same way as later theologians and philosophers did. As we have observed, the medieval scholastics develop the distinction between substance and accident as a way of preserving the dogma/doctrine while trying to maintain logical coherence. As an example, this is seen when Aquinas argues that the substance of bread is replaced by the substance of Christ's Body, while the accidents remain through divine power.³²⁸ Aquinas contends that this does not violate the Law of Identity since identity is grounded in substance rather than in accidents. However, this move requires a redefinition of identity that disconnects it from observable properties and is exactly why and in what way critics argue that this renders the concept of identity void.

Conclusion: The Limits of Metaphysical Identity

The doctrine of transubstantiation challenges the classical understanding of identity by asserting that an object that possesses all the properties of bread is in fact the Body of Christ. The Church defends this claim by appealing to the distinction between substance and accident;

³²⁴ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), 18-22, 45-48.

³²⁵ W. V. O. Quine, "On What There Is," in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1-5; 65-79.

³²⁶ Augustine, *Sermon 272*.

³²⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3.

³²⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

however, both religious and secular critics argue that this move violates the Law of Identity by severing the connection between properties and identity. The result is a conceptual framework in which identity is grounded in an invisible essence that cannot be observed, measured, or detected. This in turn raises significant philosophical concerns about the coherence of the doctrine and the adequacy of the metaphysical categories that are used to defend it.

Summary of the Logical Tension

The Closed System of Eucharistic Metaphysics

The classical argument for transubstantiation operates within a conceptual framework that functions as a closed metaphysical system. Once the axioms of Aristotelian substance metaphysics and the ecclesial definitions of Eucharistic change are accepted, the internal logic of the doctrine proceeds with a high degree of coherence.³²⁹ The scholastic synthesis constructed by Thomas Aquinas is internally consistent because it is built upon a set of interlocking metaphysical commitments that mutually reinforce one another. Substance is defined as the underlying reality that persists beneath accidental change, accidents are defined as properties that can vary without altering the essence of a thing, and divine omnipotence is invoked to sustain accidents without a subject in the Eucharistic species. Within this system, the doctrine of transubstantiation follows as a rational articulation of a revealed truth rather than as a philosophical conclusion derived from independent inquiry.³³⁰

Hence, the difficulty arises when the axioms themselves are subjected to scrutiny from the standpoint of modern logic, empirical science, and contemporary metaphysics. Critics argue that

³²⁹ For the sake of clarity, a *closed metaphysical system* is one in which the fundamental explanatory categories (e.g., substance, accident, form, matter, causality, identity) are treated as fixed, exhaustive, and non-negotiable, such that all phenomena must be interpreted within that predetermined conceptual grid. Because the system is internally self-consistent, it can reinterpret any counter-evidence rather than revise its categories, making it resistant to empirical correction and conceptually insulated from alternative ontologies. In such a system, metaphysical explanations become circularly self-justifying: the framework determines what counts as evidence, and the evidence is then used to reinforce the framework. A closed metaphysical system is problematic because its very coherence becomes a barrier to truth-testing. When the fundamental categories of explanation (as we noted: substance, accident, form, matter, causality, identity, etc.) are treated as fixed and non-negotiable, the system gains the power to reinterpret any counter-evidence rather than revise its assumptions. This produces a form of conceptual circularity in which the framework determines what counts as evidence and the evidence is then used to reinforce the framework. Such a system becomes resistant to empirical correction, insulated from alternative ontologies, and incapable of acknowledging when its categories no longer map onto the phenomena they are meant to explain. Thus, closed metaphysical systems risk mistaking internal consistency for external truth, allowing doctrines to be preserved not because they are evidentially supported but because the system is structured to make their falsification impossible.

³³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.1.

the scholastic framework relies upon conceptual moves that would be considered fallacious by contemporary standards. The system may be internally coherent, yet it is only because it is insulated from external critique by the very definitions that constitute it. Therefore, the doctrine functions as a closed explanatory loop in which the metaphysical categories are shaped by the dogma and the dogma is defended by the metaphysical categories. And although this circularity does not necessarily undermine the doctrine as a matter of faith, it nevertheless does reveal the logical tensions that arise when the scholastic framework is evaluated according to modern philosophical criteria.

Special Pleading and the Suspension of Metaphysical Rules

One of the central criticisms leveled against the classical defense of transubstantiation is that it relies upon special pleading. In Aristotelian metaphysics, accidents cannot exist without a subject, since accidents are defined as properties that inhere in a substance. Aquinas acknowledges this principle yet nevertheless insists that God can miraculously sustain accidents without a subject in the Eucharist.³³¹ This move suspends the ordinary metaphysical rules in order to preserve the doctrine. The scholastic framework therefore applies the principles of substance metaphysics universally *except in the one case where the doctrine requires an exception*. Critics argue that this constitutes special pleading since the metaphysical rules are modified precisely at the point where they would otherwise undermine the doctrine.

The patristic tradition does not confront this problem directly since the early Fathers do not articulate the distinction between substance and accident in the technical sense later adopted by the scholastics. Cyril of Jerusalem affirms a real change in the Eucharist, however, as we have noted previously, he does not attempt to explain how the sensible properties remain unchanged.³³² Augustine emphasizes the sacramental mode of presence and the transformative power of Christ's word, yet he does not claim that accidents can exist without a subject.³³³ Thus, the problem of special pleading emerges only in the medieval period when the scholastic framework attempts to reconcile the doctrine with Aristotelian metaphysics.

As noted, even contemporary Catholic theologians recognize the difficulty of this move. Rahner argues that the scholastic categories are historically conditioned and may no longer

³³¹ Ibid., III.77.1.

³³² Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3.

³³³ Augustine, *Sermon* 272.

adequately express the mystery of Christ's presence,³³⁴ and Ratzinger similarly suggests that the classical explanation, while it may be valid within its own conceptual framework, should not be treated as the only possible articulation of the doctrine.³³⁵ Once again we note how these developments reveal (at the very least) an implicit acknowledgment that the scholastic framework relies upon conceptual exceptions that would be considered problematic by contemporary standards of philosophy and logic.

Unfalsifiability and the Limits of Verification

A second major criticism concerns the unfalsifiability of the doctrine. The accidents of bread and wine remain entirely unchanged before and after consecration, and no empirical test can detect any alteration in their chemical composition, molecular structure, or physical properties. Thus, the doctrine asserts a change that is (by definition) undetectable by any empirical means. Critics argue that this in turn renders the doctrine unfalsifiable since no conceivable test could ever prove it false. In contemporary logic and philosophy of science, unfalsifiability is often regarded as a weakness rather than a strength, since a claim that cannot be tested cannot be evaluated according to empirical or rational criteria.

Hume argues that appeals to miracles often rely upon unfalsifiable claims, since the alleged miracle is defined in such a way that no empirical evidence could ever contradict it.³³⁶ J. L. Mackie similarly contends that theological explanations frequently rely upon concepts that lack empirical content and therefore cannot be subjected to rational evaluation.³³⁷ In the context of the doctrine of the Eucharist, the doctrine asserts a change that leaves no empirical trace, and the appeal to substance functions as an invisible explanatory layer that cannot be observed, measured, or detected. Critics argue that this renders the doctrine unfalsifiable and therefore outside the scope of rational inquiry.³³⁸

³³⁴ Rahner, "The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Investigations*, 287-294.

³³⁵ Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us*, 34-41.

³³⁶ Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 114-131.

³³⁷ Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 1-15; 24-28.

³³⁸ In contrast to the unfalsifiable structure criticized by Hume and Mackie, biblical miracles are consistently presented as *public, sensory, and empirically verifiable events*. Whereas Hume argues that many miracle claims are defined in ways that no possible evidence could disconfirm (*Enquiry*, X.1), and Mackie contends that theological explanations often rely on concepts lacking empirical content (*The Miracle of Theism*, pp. 1-15, 24-28), the biblical narratives depict miracles as observable disruptions of the natural order. Water becomes wine, the blind see, the lame walk, and the dead rise in full view of crowds, opponents, and civil authorities. These events generate empirical data rather than evade it. Their evidential force lies precisely in their *public accessibility*. They can be witnessed, tested,

In summary, we have seen that Protestant theologians have also long criticized the scholastic framework on these grounds. Calvin argues that the doctrine relies upon a philosophical fiction that has no basis in Scripture or reason.³³⁹ Luther rejects the notion that accidents can exist without a subject, contending that such a claim violates the basic principles of natural reason and empirical observation.³⁴⁰ These critiques highlight the extent to which the doctrine is insulated from empirical verification.

Conclusion: The Tension Between Internal Coherence and External Critique

The doctrine of transubstantiation exhibits a high degree of internal coherence once the scholastic axioms are accepted. The metaphysical framework constructed by Aquinas is elegant, systematic, and logically consistent within its own conceptual boundaries. However, the axioms themselves are subject to significant criticism when evaluated according to modern philosophical standards. The reliance upon special pleading and unfalsifiability reveals the extent to which the scholastic framework functions as a closed system that preserves the doctrine by modifying the metaphysical rules at precisely the points where they would otherwise undermine it.

As has been previously stated, this tension does not necessarily invalidate the doctrine as a matter of faith, however, it does reveal the limits of the metaphysical explanation. Even though the scholastic framework provides a rational articulation of a revealed truth, it does not offer a philosophical demonstration that would satisfy contemporary standards of logical rigor or empirical verification. And thus, the doctrine remains a mystery of faith that rests heavily on ecclesial definition, Church authority, and revealed doctrine that in turn determines the axioms of the system. However, the attempts to render it metaphysically intelligible exposes the logical tensions that arise when the scholastic framework is evaluated according to modern criteria. In closing, the following two tables highlight the contrast between the *internal coherence* of the scholastic system and the *external critique* grounded in contemporary logic, metaphysics, and epistemology.

challenged, and even denied, but not rendered immune to observation. Thus, while the Eucharistic doctrine posits a change that leaves no empirical trace and therefore cannot be falsified, biblical miracles operate within an evidential framework where divine action is authenticated through sensory manifestation rather than metaphysical assertion.

³³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.

³⁴⁰ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW 36:32-36.

Table 15. *Classical Eucharistic Axioms vs. Modern Logical Standards*

Category	Classical Scholastic Framework	Modern Logical and Philosophical Standards
Source of Authority	Ecclesial definition and revealed doctrine determine the axioms of the system.	Empirical verification and rational analysis determine the validity of claims.
Metaphysical Structure	Substance and accident distinction is foundational and treated as universally applicable <i>except</i> in the Eucharist.	Identity is grounded in observable properties and empirical continuity rather than invisible essences.
Treatment of Exceptions	Divine omnipotence allows accidents to exist without a subject in <i>one unique</i> case.	Exceptions to metaphysical rules require independent justification rather than <i>appeal to authority</i> .
Epistemic Status	The change is affirmed by faith and protected from empirical evaluation.	Claims must be falsifiable or empirically testable to be considered meaningful.
Logical Coherence	Internally coherent once axioms are granted.	Externally incoherent due to special pleading and unfalsifiability.
Role of Philosophy	Philosophy serves theology by articulating revealed truths within a metaphysical system.	Philosophy evaluates claims independently of doctrinal commitments.

Table 16. *Logical Fallacies in the Classical Defense of Transubstantiation*

Fallacy	How It Appears in the Scholastic Defense	Why It Is Problematic by Modern Standards
Special Pleading	The universal rule that “accidents” (physical properties) require a “subject” (physical substance) is suspended only for the Eucharist. Divine power is invoked to justify this unique exception.	Logical rules must apply universally. Creating a single, ad-hoc exception to preserve a specific doctrine is seen as an illegitimate modification of first principles.
Category Error / Equivocation	“Substance” is treated as an ontological category distinct from matter yet is described using language belonging to	It conflates a metaphysical abstraction with a physical entity. Shifting between “substance” as a definition and

	physical objects (e.g., “becoming” or “replacing”).	“substance” as a thing-in-itself is a form of equivocation.
Circular Reasoning	The doctrine is true because the Church (or Scripture) is infallible; the Church’s infallibility is proven because it correctly teaches mysteries like transubstantiation.	It assumes the truth of the conclusion within the premises. The argument becomes a “closed circle” that offers no independent ground for acceptance.
Metaphysical “God of the Gaps”	Divine intervention is used to bridge the “gap” between what we observe (bread/wine) and what is claimed to exist (body/blood).	It relies on human ignorance or the lack of empirical detection to insert a supernatural cause. As understanding of physics grows, the “gaps” for such hidden changes shrink.
Violation of the Law of Identity	The “Body of Christ” is said to be identical to the “Host,” while simultaneously being identical to a body in heaven, violating the principle that in a single location a single substance cannot exist in multiple, mutually exclusive locations simultaneously while maintaining a single, unified physical identity.	A thing cannot be itself and something else (or in two different modes/places) without losing its identity. Modern logic views such “bilocation” of identity as a contradiction.
Unfalsifiability	The change of substance is defined as undetectable by any empirical means. No possible observation could ever count against the doctrine.	A claim that cannot be tested or proven false cannot be rationally evaluated. Such claims are treated as outside the domain of scientific inquiry.
Combined Effect	The doctrine is insulated from critique because metaphysical rules are adjusted to fit the dogma, which is then protected from empirical evaluation.	The system becomes closed. Internal coherence is maintained only by rejecting external standards of evidence and logical consistency.

12. Ecumenical Landscape and Logical Clarification of “Real Presence”

The doctrine of the Real Presence occupies a unique position within Christian theology because it stands at the intersection of metaphysics, ecclesiology, biblical interpretation, and sacramental ontology. Although the metaphysical tensions surrounding transubstantiation have been examined in earlier sections, the broader ecumenical landscape reveals that the question of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is not a narrow Roman Catholic concern, yet rather it is a near-universal Christian conviction. The overwhelming majority of Christians throughout history and across contemporary communions affirm some form of real presence, whether understood as substantial, sacramental, pneumatic, or mystical.³⁴¹ Therefore, this section serves as a bridge between the metaphysical analysis of divine simplicity and Eucharistic ontology and the logical evaluation of competing doctrinal claims that follows later in the paper. It situates the metaphysical debates within the wider Christian tradition and clarifies the conceptual ambiguities that often obscure ecumenical dialogue.

The Ecumenical Landscape of Eucharistic Doctrine

From the earliest patristic period, Christian writers spoke of the Eucharist in terms that presupposed a real participation in the body and blood of Christ. Ignatius of Antioch, writing at the beginning of the second century, described the Eucharist as “the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ,” a formulation that presupposes more than symbolic memorialism.³⁴² Justin Martyr affirmed that the consecrated elements are not received “as common bread and drink” but become the body and blood of Christ through the prayer of thanksgiving.³⁴³ In the fourth century, Cyril of Jerusalem instructed catechumens to “partake of the body and blood of Christ” under the forms of

³⁴¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 166-170.

³⁴² Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7.1.

³⁴³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66.

bread and wine, insisting that the elements are not to be judged by the senses, yet rather by faith in Christ's words.³⁴⁴ These early witnesses serve to help demonstrate that the intuition of real presence is not a medieval innovation but actually a foundational Christian conviction.

The medieval period systematized this intuition through Aristotelian metaphysics, culminating in the doctrine of transubstantiation articulated at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and refined by Thomas Aquinas.³⁴⁵ As the Reformation took hold, it did not abolish belief in real a presence although it did diversify its metaphysical interpretations. Luther rejected transubstantiation yet insisted on Christ's corporeal presence "in, with, and under" the elements, grounding his view in Christological rather than Aristotelian categories.³⁴⁶ Calvin affirmed a real, spiritual presence mediated by the Holy Spirit, arguing that believers are lifted by faith into communion with the ascended Christ.³⁴⁷ The Anglican tradition, which was uniquely shaped by both patristic retrieval and Reformation receptivity, maintained a real presence while refusing to define the mode of Christ's presence in metaphysical terms.³⁴⁸ Eastern Orthodoxy, drawing on the apophatic tradition of the Cappadocians and the liturgical theology of Chrysostom and Basil, affirms a real change effected by the Holy Spirit while declining to specify its metaphysical mechanism.³⁴⁹

When these traditions are considered together, a striking ecumenical fact emerges. The Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed traditions all officially affirm a doctrine of real presence in the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.³⁵⁰ These communions collectively represent more than seventy-five percent of the world's 2.4 billion Christians.³⁵¹ Therefore, the unavoidable conclusion is that most Christians belong to traditions that affirm some form of real presence in the Eucharist. The metaphysical diversity of these traditions does not negate the shared conviction that Christ is truly present in the sacrament. Rather,

³⁴⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 4.3.

³⁴⁵ Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 1 (1215).

³⁴⁶ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 32-38.

³⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.10.

³⁴⁸ The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1662), Article XXVIII.

³⁴⁹ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 196-205.

³⁵⁰ Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1:166-170.

³⁵¹ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 12-15.

it reveals that the central question is not so much as to whether Christ is present as it is of how that presence is to be understood.

A Logical Clarification of “Real Presence”

The ecumenical consensus on real presence is often obscured by conceptual ambiguity. The term “real” functions analogically across traditions and the failure to recognize this analogical usage frequently results in equivocation. For example, in Catholic theology, “real” refers to a *substantial* presence effected by the change of substance from bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.³⁵² In Lutheran theology, “real” refers to a *sacramental* union in which Christ’s body and blood are truly present with the elements.³⁵³ In Reformed theology, “real” refers to a *spiritual* presence (sometimes referred to as pneumatic presence) mediated by the Holy Spirit and received by faith.³⁵⁴ In Eastern Orthodoxy, “real” refers to a *mystical* presence effected by the epiclesis and grounded in the divine energies. In the Eastern tradition, saying that Christ is “really” present in the Eucharist means that His presence is genuine and transformative, although not in a physical or biological way. Instead, the Orthodox believe that during the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit is called down in a special prayer known as the epiclesis, and it is through this divine action that the bread and wine become a true encounter with Christ. This change is understood as a mystical work of God, rooted in what Orthodoxy calls the divine energies, which are God’s real and active presence in the world. The idea is that while God’s inner essence remains beyond human understanding, His energies are how He shares His life, grace, and power with creation. Thus, the Eucharist becomes a moment where believers genuinely meet Christ through God’s own activity, even though the exact manner of this presence cannot be fully explained or analyzed by human reason.³⁵⁵ Even though these definitions differ significantly, nevertheless each tradition insists that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist.

The failure to distinguish these analogical uses of “real” often leads to the fallacy of equivocation. Critics may argue that because Catholics define “real” as substantial presence, any other definition must be metaphorical or symbolic, while some Protestants may argue that because “real” can be understood spiritually, Catholic claims of substantial presence are unnecessary or

³⁵² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

³⁵³ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, 36-38.

³⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.10.

³⁵⁵ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 134-140.

incoherent. However, both positions rest on a failure to recognize that “real” is a term whose meaning is determined by the metaphysical framework in which it is being used. The analogical nature of theological language (having been affirmed by Augustine, Aquinas, and the entire scholastic tradition) requires that terms applied to divine realities be understood neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically.³⁵⁶

A second logical fallacy frequently encountered in Eucharistic debates is the false dilemma. This fallacy arises when the Eucharist is presented as either a literal, physical body or a mere symbol, with no middle ground. The history of Christian theology demonstrates that this dichotomy is false. For example, the Catholic tradition affirms that the Eucharist is both a sign and the reality it signifies, a *sacramentum et res*.³⁵⁷ The Lutheran tradition affirms that the elements remain bread and wine while also conveying Christ’s true body and blood.³⁵⁸ The Reformed tradition affirms that the Eucharist is both a memorial and a real participation in Christ through the Spirit.³⁵⁹ And, finally, the Eastern tradition affirms that the Eucharist is both an icon and a mystical participation in the divine life.³⁶⁰ The false dilemma arises only when the symbolic and the real are treated as mutually exclusive categories, a position that is rejected by every major Christian tradition except certain strands of Zwinglian memorialism.

The Demographic Argument for Real Presence

The ecumenical scope of belief in real presence can be expressed in a simple syllogism from what was expressed earlier.

Major Premise: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed traditions all officially affirm a doctrine of real presence.

Minor Premise: These traditions collectively represent more than seventy-five percent of the world’s Christians.

Conclusion: Most Christians belong to traditions that affirm some form of real presence.³⁶¹

³⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.13.5.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., III.60.1.

³⁵⁸ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, 36-38.

³⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.10.

³⁶⁰ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 134-140.

³⁶¹ Johnson and Zurlo, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 12-15.

This argument does not establish the truth of real presence; it simply demonstrates that the doctrine is not a marginal or sectarian belief. It is a central feature of Christian identity across time, geography, and theological tradition.

The significance of this demographic argument lies not in its appeal to authority, yet instead in its illumination of the historical continuity of Eucharistic belief itself. The doctrine of real presence is not a medieval addition as we have already noted. It is in fact a persistent feature of Christian worship and theology. Although the metaphysical explanations of this presence have varied, it is the conviction that Christ is truly present which has remained remarkably consistent and stable. This stability suggests that the doctrine is rooted not in philosophical speculation and instead in the lived experience of Christian worship and the interpretive tradition of the universal Christian Church.

Reconciling the Fallacies: Toward Conceptual Precision

The two fallacies identified earlier (i.e., the false dilemma and the equivocation on the term “real”) can be reconciled only by attending to the metaphysical frameworks that underlie each tradition’s Eucharistic theology. The false dilemma arises from the assumption that symbolic and real are mutually exclusive categories as we have pointed out. Yet the history of Christian sacramental theology demonstrates that symbol and reality are not opposites; they are interdependent modes of divine communication. Augustine’s definition of a sacrament as a “visible sign of an invisible grace” presupposes that the sign participates in the reality it signifies.³⁶² Aquinas also affirms that sacraments effect what they signify precisely because they are instruments of divine causality.³⁶³ Luther’s insistence that Christ’s body is present “in, with, and under” the elements reflects his conviction that the sacrament is both sign and reality, grounded in the *communicatio idiomatum* of Christ’s two natures.³⁶⁴ Calvin’s doctrine of spiritual presence maintains that the Eucharist is both memorial and participation, since the Spirit unites believers to the ascended Christ.³⁶⁵ Eastern Orthodox theology (shaped by the apophatic tradition) affirms that

³⁶² Augustine. *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, 26 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 3, edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).

³⁶³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.62.1.

³⁶⁴ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, 36-38.

³⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.10.

the Eucharist is both icon and reality, a visible manifestation of the divine energies.³⁶⁶ In each case the symbolic and the real are not mutually exclusive although they are mutually illuminating.

Therefore, the fallacy of equivocation is resolved by recognizing that the term “real” functions analogically across traditions. Catholic theology uses “real” to denote substantial presence, grounded in Aristotelian metaphysics. Lutheran theology uses “real” to denote sacramental union, grounded in Christological ontology. Reformed theology uses “real” to denote spiritual presence, grounded in pneumatological mediation. Eastern theology uses “real” to denote mystical presence, grounded in the distinction between essence and energies. We must understand that while these definitions may differ, nevertheless, *each affirms that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist*. As was noted previously, the analogical nature of theological language (affirmed by Aquinas and the broader scholastic tradition) requires that terms applied to divine realities be understood according to the metaphysical framework in which they are used.³⁶⁷

Apophatic Theology and the Limits of Conceptualization

The apophatic tradition offers a way of understanding the Eucharistic mystery that transcends the limitations of human language and conceptual categories. Rooted in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, apophatic theology emphasizes that God is beyond being and beyond all creaturely predicates.³⁶⁸ Likewise, Gregory of Nyssa insists that God’s essence is incomprehensible and that human language can only gesture toward the divine reality.³⁶⁹ Maximus the Confessor goes deeper by arguing that the divine energies are truly communicable while the divine essence remains inaccessible.³⁷⁰ All of this is to stress the point that the Eastern Orthodox Eucharistic theology, shaped by this apophatic framework, affirms that the change in the elements is real although ineffable. The epiclesis invokes the Holy Spirit to effect a transformation that cannot be captured by Aristotelian categories of substance and accident.³⁷¹ Thus, apophatic theology does not reject metaphysical explanation, rather it situates it within the broader recognition that divine mysteries exceed human comprehension.

³⁶⁶ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 196-205.

³⁶⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.13.5.

³⁶⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, I.1.

³⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II.

³⁷⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 5, translated by Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

³⁷¹ Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 134-140.

Therefore, the Eucharist, as participation in the divine life, cannot be reduced to a single metaphysical model. The Aristotelian framework of transubstantiation, the Christological framework of sacramental union, the pneumatological framework of spiritual presence, and the mystical framework of Eastern theology each illuminate *different aspects* of the mystery. And it is the apophatic tradition that reminds us that while these models are not exhaustive descriptions, they nonetheless become conceptual tools that point toward a reality that surpasses them.

This recognition does not in any way undermine the legitimacy of metaphysical inquiry. Rather, it provides a hermeneutical sphere within which metaphysical models can be evaluated. The apophatic tradition affirms that human concepts are necessary for theological reflection although they are still insufficient for capturing the fullness of divine reality.³⁷² The Eucharist, as the sacrament of divine presence, invites both metaphysical analysis and contemplative silence.

Toward a Metaphysically Coherent Ecumenical Framework

A metaphysically coherent ecumenical framework for understanding the Real Presence must be one that accounts for both the diversity of theological traditions and the unity of Christian conviction. This kind of framework begins by recognizing that the central claim shared by all major Christian communions is that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. The metaphysical diversity of this claim reflects the different theological emphases of each tradition rather than a fundamental disagreement about the reality of Christ's presence.

The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation emphasizes the ontological transformation of the elements, grounded in Aristotelian metaphysics and the principle that accidents can remain without their proper substance through divine power.³⁷³ The Lutheran doctrine of sacramental union emphasizes the Christological foundation of the sacrament, grounded in the *communicatio idiomatum* and the omnipresence of Christ's glorified body.³⁷⁴ The Reformed doctrine of spiritual presence emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in uniting believers to the ascended Christ, grounded in a pneumatological and eschatological framework,³⁷⁵ while the Anglican tradition affirms a real presence while refusing to define the mode of presence in metaphysical terms.³⁷⁶

³⁷² Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, I.1.

³⁷³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

³⁷⁴ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, 36-38.

³⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.10.

³⁷⁶ *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, XXVIII.

And, Eastern Orthodox theology emphasizes the mystical transformation effected by the Holy Spirit, grounded in the distinction between essence and energies and the apophatic tradition.³⁷⁷

These traditions differ in their metaphysical explanations, nevertheless, each affirms that the Eucharist is a real participation in Christ. Therefore, a metaphysically coherent ecumenical framework must recognize that the diversity of metaphysical models reflects the richness of the Christian tradition rather than a fragmentation of belief. The central claim of real presence is affirmed across traditions, even as its metaphysical articulation varies.

Conclusion

The doctrine of the Real Presence stands at the intersection of metaphysics, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology. The ecumenical landscape shows that the overwhelming majority of Christians affirm some form of real presence, whether understood as substantial, sacramental, spiritual, or mystical. The logical fallacies that often obscure this consensus can be resolved by attending to the metaphysical frameworks that underlie each tradition's Eucharistic theology. The apophatic tradition reminds us that the Eucharistic mystery transcends human conceptualization, even as metaphysical models illuminate different aspects of the reality. A metaphysically coherent ecumenical framework recognizes both the unity of Christian conviction and the diversity of theological expression. In sum, the Eucharist, as the sacrament of divine presence, invites both rigorous metaphysical inquiry and contemplative wonder.

³⁷⁷ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 196-205.

13. Which Eucharistic View Is Most Logically Sound?

When the question of “logical soundness” is not framed in terms of ecclesial authority or inherited metaphysical systems, yet framed in terms of internal coherence, avoidance of special pleading, and maximal harmoniousness with contemporary philosophical and scientific standards, the comparative landscape of Eucharistic doctrines looks decidedly different. As this paper notes, transubstantiation depends on a series of metaphysical exceptions such as accidents without a subject, substance without accidents, and a sacramental mode of presence that is “not empirically verifiable; appearances (accidents) of bread and wine remain unchanged”.³⁷⁸ In stark contrast to this, the Eucharistic theological view of memorialism does not require metaphysical inversions, no suspension of Aristotelian categories, and no appeal to a supernatural exception that leaves no sensory or empirical trace. Thus, when evaluated strictly on logical and philosophical grounds rather than theological authority, the result is that memorialism emerges as the most internally coherent model. Consubstantiation and pneumatic presence follows by occupying a middle space while transubstantiation represents the most metaphysically demanding and epistemically fragile option. As this paper has observed previously, “the doctrine cannot be demonstrated by empirical methods, nor can it be rendered fully coherent within post-scholastic metaphysical frameworks,”³⁷⁹ leaving it to function primarily as a *mysterium fidei* rather than a rationally demonstrable claim.

However, if one brackets for a moment questions of ecclesial authority and focuses instead on logical structure, conceptual workings, and metaphysical cost, a rough hierarchy emerges. At one end stands Zwinglian memorialism, which minimizes ontological claims and therefore minimizes logical liabilities. At the other end stands Roman Catholic transubstantiation, which does the opposite: it maximizes ontological claims and therefore maximizes metaphysical and

³⁷⁸ See Table 5. Comparative Summary: Biblical Miracles vs. Catholic Eucharistic Presence.

³⁷⁹ See “Conclusion” of “Is Transubstantiation Logically or Empirically Defensible?”

logical burden. Between these two poles lie the Lutheran and Reformed “real presence” models, both of which attempt to preserve a robust sacramental realism while at the same time avoiding what many critics regard as the most problematic features of the scholastic account.

To speak of “logical soundness” in this context is not to deny the role of mystery or to reduce sacramental theology to analytic metaphysics. To speak of “logical soundness” is to ask a more modest yet still important question: given the shared Christian commitments to the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation (as we have looked at previously), and as we even considering other important theological doctrines such as the resurrection, and the reliability of created order, which Eucharistic model introduces the fewest contradictions, the least ad hoc metaphysical machinery, and the smallest gap between what is affirmed doctrinally and what is observed phenomenologically? Within that constrained sense, memorialism emerges as the most logically economical, Lutheran and Reformed real presence views as moderate yet metaphysically costlier alternatives, and transubstantiation as the most metaphysically demanding and therefore the most vulnerable to external philosophical critique.

Memorialism As The Most Logically Economical Model

Historically, memorialism is associated above all with Huldrych Zwingli, whose early sixteenth century arguments against both Roman Catholic transubstantiation and Lutheran sacramental union framed the Supper primarily as an act of remembrance and covenantal proclamation rather than as a site of ontological transformation in the elements themselves.³⁸⁰ Zwingli’s exegesis of the words of institution (in particular “This is my body”) emphasizes the covenantal and metaphorical register of biblical language. Thus, Zwingli draws on analogies to other scriptural uses of “is” in symbolic or representative senses, such as “the rock was Christ” or “the seed is the word of God.”³⁸¹ In this reading, the bread and wine do not undergo any change in their underlying reality, they simply function as divinely appointed signs that direct faith to the once for all sacrifice of Christ.

From the standpoint of classical logic this is a remarkably conservative position. This position preserves the law of identity in its most straightforward form (i.e., bread remains bread, wine remains wine) and no appeal is made to a hidden “substance” that contradicts empirical

³⁸⁰ Zwingli, “On the Lord’s Supper,” in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 183-252.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 201-208.

appearance. In short, the metaphysical structure of the world is left intact. Thus, there is no need to theorize or suggest accidents without a subject, no need to invoke a special category of miraculous ontology in which the basic relation between appearance and reality is inverted, and there is no need to introduce a sacramental exception to the ordinary grammar of bodies and places. Within this sense, memorialism is logically “bulletproof” precisely because it refuses to load the Eucharistic elements with additional ontological commitments.

However, critics of memorialism have long argued that this logical framework comes at a theological cost. For example, patristic sources such as Ignatius of Antioch, who speaks of the Eucharist as “the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ,”³⁸² and Justin Martyr, who insists that the food “is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh,”³⁸³ are often cited as evidence that the early Church did not regard the Supper as just a mental recollection. Augustine’s language of *sacramentum* and *res*, sign and thing signified (which is more complex) speaks of a real participation in Christ’s body, even if mediated through a rich sacramental symbolism.³⁸⁴ Nevertheless, it must be noted that from a strictly logical perspective, memorialism has clear advantages. First of all, it aligns closely with empirical observation since nothing in the sensory or physical order appears to change at consecration. Second, it avoids the need to put forth a metaphysical “doubling” of reality in which what appears to be bread is in fact not bread at all. Third, it also avoids the charge of special pleading since it does not require a unique exception to the ordinary relation between substance and accidents. In contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, this kind of restraint is often praised as a virtue as it respects both the integrity of created order and the principle that theological claims should not multiply entities or mechanisms beyond necessity.³⁸⁵

³⁸² Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7.

³⁸³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 66.

³⁸⁴ Augustine, *Sermon* 272.

³⁸⁵ Swinburne, *The Christian God*, 190-200. Swinburne argues that the most rational theological hypotheses are those that satisfy the classical criterion of simplicity (an explicit appeal to Ockham’s Razor). For Swinburne, a theory is more probable *because* it is simpler, and a doctrine is more credible when it introduces no unnecessary entities, mechanisms, or exceptions. Applying this standard to sacramental theology yields a striking result. Memorialism, which posits no metaphysical inversions and requires no suspension of the ordinary relation between substance and accident, emerges as the most internally coherent account. Consubstantiation and pneumatic presence introduce additional explanatory layers but remain within the bounds of metaphysical intelligibility. Transubstantiation, by contrast, demands the greatest number of theoretical exceptions (e.g., accidents without a subject, substance without accidents, a miraculous mode of presence that leaves no empirical trace) and therefore stands as the most metaphysically expensive model. Under a Swinburnean analysis, the hierarchy of plausibility is reordered not by ecclesial authority but by the classical principle that the simplest adequate explanation is the most rational to affirm.

Nevertheless, while logic may be the principal strength of memorialism, its principal weakness is both hermeneutical and historical. Memorialism must explain why so much of the pre-Reformation tradition speaks of a real participation in Christ's body and blood, as well as why the language of "is" in the words of institution should be taken as purely symbolic when so many early and medieval theologians read it more strongly. Putting these aforementioned questions aside, once again if the question is framed narrowly in terms of logical coherence, memorialism still stands as the least metaphysically encumbered and therefore the most defensible model.

Consubstantiation And Pneumatic Presence As Moderate Real Presence Alternatives

If one wishes to retain a strong sense of "real presence" while avoiding the most controversial metaphysical claims of transubstantiation, the Lutheran and Reformed positions represent two related strategies although they too have distinction. Both of these views affirm that Christ is truly given to believers in the Supper while at the same time both resist the idea that the substance of bread and wine is somehow annihilated or replaced (and thus leaving accidents without a substance).

In the Lutheran tradition, the classic formula is that Christ's body and blood are present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine.³⁸⁶ Although Luther himself did not favor the term "consubstantiation" (apparently preferring instead to speak of a "sacramental union") later theological discussions have used the term to describe the view that the substance of Christ's body coexists with the substance of the bread rather than replacing it.³⁸⁷ Luther's own arguments against both Zwingli and the Roman doctrine are instructive. Against Zwingli, he insists on the literal force of "This is my body" and refuses to reduce the Supper to just a memorial. Against the scholastics, he rejects the Aristotelian operation of substance and accidents and *especially* the notion that accidents can exist without a subject calling such a claim an absurdity contrary to natural reason.³⁸⁸

The logical advantage of the Lutheran position (i.e., relative to transubstantiation) lies in its refusal to sever the link between accidents and substance. The bread remains bread in its own order, and Christ's body is truly present in a sacramental mode that does not require the annihilation of the created substance. The often cited analogy of iron in the fire, where the iron remains iron

³⁸⁶ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 467-477 (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII).

³⁸⁷ R.C. Sproul, "The Battle for the Table," *Ligonier Ministries* (November 1, 2006).

³⁸⁸ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 29-38.

and the fire remains fire while the two are united in a single glowing reality, illustrates this attempt to preserve both natural integrity and sacramental presence.³⁸⁹ In addition to this, LNC is respected by distinguishing between different respects or modes in that the same object can be called “bread” in its natural respect and “body of Christ” in its sacramental respect without asserting that it is and is not bread in the same way.

As with memorialism, this particular view also comes with a cost and in this case it is the doctrine of ubiquity. In order for Christ’s body to be present in, with, and under the elements at countless altars simultaneously, Lutheran Christology extends the *communicatio idiomatum* such that the human nature of Christ participates in the divine attribute of omnipresence.³⁹⁰ However, critics (especially from the Reformed side) have argued that this stretches the Chalcedonian definition by blurring the distinction between the natures and undermining the finitude of Christ’s glorified body.³⁹¹ Thus, from a logical standpoint the Lutheran view simply trades one metaphysical difficulty for another. And, yet, while it does avoid accidents without a subject, it goes on to introduce a robust doctrine of bodily ubiquity that many regard as equally problematic.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 36-38. Luther’s well-known analogy of iron placed in the fire serves as his clearest illustration of how Christ’s body and blood can be truly present in the Supper without requiring a change of substance. Just as iron heated in a furnace becomes permeated by fire (e.g., glowing, burning, radiating heat while remaining fully iron, etc.) so the consecrated bread becomes the bearer of Christ’s real presence without ceasing to be bread. The fire does not replace the iron, nor does the iron become fire. Instead, the two interpenetrate without confusion or conversion. For Luther, this image captures the heart of sacramental union. It is a real, substantial presence achieved not by metaphysical annihilation (as in transubstantiation) but by a divinely instituted conjunction in which Christ is “in, with, and under” the elements in a manner analogous to fire saturating iron.

³⁹⁰ *The Book of Concord*, 600-606 (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VIII). Here the Lutheran confessors articulate their mature Christology by insisting that the two natures of Christ are united in one person in such a way that the human nature truly shares in the majesty of the divine through the communication of attributes. This personal union grounds the Lutheran doctrine of the Real Presence: because the one person of Christ possesses divine omnipresence, His glorified body and blood can be truly present “in, with, and under” the consecrated bread and wine. These pages reject the Reformed restriction of Christ’s body to a single location as a failure to honor the personal union, and they reject transubstantiation as an unnecessary metaphysical reconstruction. Instead, they present a Christological rationale in which the sacramental presence flows directly from the unity of Christ’s person and the sharing of divine predicates by His human nature.

³⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.10-32. Calvin’s critique of Lutheran consubstantiation and the doctrine of ubiquity turns decisively on the Christological grammar of Chalcedon. In *Institutes* 4.17.16-19 he argues that the Lutheran claim that Christ’s glorified body is locally present “in, with, and under” the elements requires attributing omnipresence (a divine property) to Christ’s human nature. For Calvin, this violates Chalcedon’s insistence that the two natures unite “without confusion” and “without change,” since a body that is everywhere is no longer a true human body at all. The Lutheran appeal to ubiquity therefore collapses the distinction between the natures by smuggling divine attributes into the humanity, a move Calvin regards as a subtle form of Eutychianism in which the human nature is swallowed by the divine. Against this, Calvin maintains that Christ’s body remains locally in heaven and that believers truly partake of it through the Spirit, who unites them to Christ without requiring a local or corporeal presence in the elements.

The Reformed doctrine of pneumatic or spiritual real presence (associated primarily with the theologian John Calvin) represents a different strategy and approach to the Eucharist. Calvin insists that believers truly partake of Christ's body and blood in the Supper, however, he locates this participation not in a local presence of Christ's body in the elements, but rather in the work of the Holy Spirit who unites believers to the ascended Christ.³⁹² In accordance with a strict Chalcedonian and anti-ubiquitarian Christology, Christ's body remains in heaven at the right hand of the Father, while the Holy Spirit lifts the communicant into a real (although non local) communion with Christ. Therefore, the presence is both real and objective, however, its mediation is spiritual rather than by a change in the elements themselves.

From a logical analysis, this view has several advantages. First, it preserves the integrity of a human body as a finite, locatable entity and avoids the need to posit a ubiquitous corporeality. Second, it respects the ordinary language and understanding of space and place since Christ's body is not said to be locally present in multiple locations all at once. Third, it also avoids the metaphysical inversion of transubstantiation, since the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine even as they become instruments of a real spiritual communion. The "location problem" is solved although not by bringing Christ's body down from heaven and to the altar. It is solved by bringing the believer (through the Holy Spirit) into participation with the exalted Christ.³⁹³

And while it may have its logical advantages, nevertheless at the same time the Reformed view must explain how this spiritual presence is more than a subjective experience or a mere mental recollection. Reformed confessions such as the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession insist that believers truly receive the "proper and natural body and blood of Christ," though in a spiritual manner and by faith.³⁹⁴ Oliver Crisp points out that many modern Reformed thinkers want to affirm a real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper without adopting the metaphysical machinery of transubstantiation or the Lutheran claim that Christ's body is physically present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. To do this, contemporary analytic theologians have turned to broader philosophical discussions about how one thing can be genuinely present to another without occupying the same physical space. Instead of thinking in terms of location (e.g.,

³⁹² Ibid., 4.17.1-9.

³⁹³ Ibid., 4.17.31-32.

³⁹⁴ *The Belgic Confession*, art. 35, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 2, 1552-1566, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 427-434; *The Westminster Confession of Faith* 29, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 115-118.

Christ's body being "here" or "there") they use concepts like participation, union, or non-spatial dependence. These models suggest that believers truly share in Christ's life because they are joined to Him through the Holy Spirit, not because His physical body moves from heaven to the communion table. In other words, Christ is really present, however, His presence is understood in relational and spiritual terms rather than in terms of physical proximity or material change. This allows Reformed theologians to affirm a robust doctrine of real presence while staying faithful to their Christology and avoiding the metaphysical difficulties raised by both transubstantiation and Lutheran ubiquity.³⁹⁵

Therefore, in the continuum of logical cost both views of Lutheran and Reformed real presence occupy a middle position. They are more metaphysically ambitious than memorialism, since they affirm a real, objective presence of Christ in the Supper. However, they are less metaphysically demanding than transubstantiation as they do not require accidents without a subject or a radical reconfiguration of the relation between appearance and reality. Their liabilities lie primarily in the theological realm of Christology and pneumatology rather than in the ontology of the elements themselves.

Why Transubstantiation Is The Most Metaphysically Demanding Model

Roman Catholicism's doctrine of transubstantiation represents the most ontologically robust and metaphysically intricate account of the Eucharist. The doctrine was formally defined at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, the doctrine states that at the words of consecration the entire substance of the bread and wine is converted into the substance of the body and blood of Christ, while only the accidents, that is, the sensible properties, remain.³⁹⁶ This account presupposes an Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics in

³⁹⁵ Oliver D. Crisp, "Real Presence and the Reformed Tradition," in *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 145-170.

³⁹⁶ Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 230-231 (Lateran IV, canon 1); *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session XIII. Although the conceptual roots of transubstantiation stretch back into the patristic period, the doctrine did not receive a formal, authoritative definition until the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which first employed the term *transubstantiatio* to describe the conversion of the eucharistic elements. This conciliar statement established the doctrine as official Church teaching, but it was the Council of Trent (1551) that elevated transubstantiation to the status of an irreformable dogma, issuing detailed definitions and attaching anathemas to any contrary view. Trent's formulation declaring that the entire substance of bread and wine is converted into Christ's body and blood while only the accidents remain constitutes the moment at which the doctrine became fixed, unchangeable, and binding in the strict technical sense. Thus, while Lateran IV provided the first formal definition, it is Trent that rendered transubstantiation an infallible dogma of the Roman Catholic Church.

which substance and accidents are distinct ontological principles, and in which God, by miraculous power, can sustain accidents in existence without their proper subject.

Aquinas's treatment in the *Summa Theologiae* is definitive. He argues that in transubstantiation there is a unique kind of change in which one substance is converted into another without any underlying subject that persists through the change.³⁹⁷ The accidents of bread and wine remain, although they no longer inhere in any created substance. Instead, they are sustained directly by divine power. This is a deliberate exception to the ordinary metaphysical rule that accidents must inhere in a substance. Aquinas rightly acknowledges the uniqueness of this configuration and to justify it he makes the appeals to divine omnipotence.³⁹⁸ Thus, the standpoint of internal coherence the Thomistic account is carefully constructed. Noting for example, that within its own metaphysical framework the distinction between substance and accidents is clear, the nature of the change is precisely defined, and the appeal to divine power is consistent with broader commitments about God's ability to act in and upon creation. Classical Catholic theologians such as Cajetan and Suarez further refined these distinctions, and more contemporary Thomists continue to defend the intelligibility of the doctrine within a broadly Aristotelian ontology.³⁹⁹

As we have previously shown, the difficulty arises when this framework is evaluated against contemporary logical and empirical sensibilities. First, the notion of accidents without a subject appears to many philosophers as a violation of the very definition of an accident, which is ordinarily understood as a property that exists only in a subject. To say that color, taste, and extension exist without any underlying substance seems to invert the basic structure of predication and to require a *sui generis* category of "free floating" properties that are unlike any other entities in the created order.⁴⁰⁰ Second, the doctrine requires a radical disjunction between appearance and reality. What appears to every sense and every instrument as bread and wine is, in fact, not bread and wine at all. This raises questions about the reliability of sense experience and the extent to which theology may imagine hidden realities that systematically contradict empirical data.

³⁹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 75, a. 4-8.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., III, q. 77, a. 1-2.

³⁹⁹ Francisco Suarez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, disp. 50, in *Selections from the Metaphysical Disputations*, trans. John P. Doyle (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2014), 321-345.

⁴⁰⁰ Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 257-266.

We have noted already how contemporary Catholic theologians have been acutely aware of these tensions. For example, Karl Rahner argues that the Aristotelian categories used to articulate transubstantiation are historically conditioned and may no longer function as an adequate conceptual vehicle for expressing the mystery of Christ's presence.⁴⁰¹ Joseph Ratzinger suggests that while the dogmatic content of transubstantiation (namely the real and substantial presence of Christ, is non-negotiable) the scholastic explanatory model should not be treated as the only possible philosophical articulation.⁴⁰² Other Catholic thinkers, such as Edward Schillebeeckx, have proposed "transignification" or "transfinalization" models that shift the emphasis from a change in the underlying metaphysical substrate to a change in meaning, relation, or function, though these proposals have themselves been subject to magisterial critique.⁴⁰³

From the perspective of analytic philosophy, transubstantiation is often regarded as the most metaphysically expensive doctrine in the Eucharistic field. It requires a robust substance ontology, a special category of miraculous accidents without a subject, and a willingness to accept a deep and systematic divergence between empirical appearance and ontological reality. It also invites charges of fallacious arguing in the way of special pleading since the metaphysical exception it suggests appears to be tailored precisely to secure a prior dogmatic commitment rather than arising from independent philosophical considerations.

However, at the same time defenders of transubstantiation argue that Christian theology already affirms mysteries that strain ordinary categories, such as the Trinity and the incarnation,⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ Rahner, "The Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper," in *Theological Investigations*, 287-300.

⁴⁰² Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 304-309.

⁴⁰³ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 133-154. Catholic magisterial teaching has consistently rejected attempts to replace transubstantiation with "transignification" or "transfinalization," even when acknowledging that such models can illuminate the Eucharist's spiritual meaning. In *Mysterium Fidei* (1965), Paul VI directly critiques proposals that reinterpret the Eucharistic change as a shift in meaning, relational value, or communal function rather than a conversion of substance, insisting that "it is not permissible...to explain the Eucharist by saying that the substance of bread and wine remains, but that their significance is changed." The encyclical reaffirms the Council of Trent's dogmatic teaching that the bread and wine undergo a real, ontological transformation, *a conversion of substance*, and warns that any theory reducing Christ's presence to symbolic intentionality or ecclesial recognition undermines the objective, substantial mode of presence the Church professes. Later magisterial documents, including the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and John Paul II's *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, reiterate that while relational or symbolic dimensions are theologically fruitful, they cannot substitute for the metaphysical change affirmed by tradition. Thus, the magisterium's settled judgment is that transignification and transfinalization may serve as supplementary explanatory frameworks but are doctrinally unacceptable when proposed as alternatives to, or replacements for, transubstantiation.

⁴⁰⁴ However, both the Trinity and the Incarnation rely on careful distinctions of respect that preserve logical coherence without requiring any suspension of metaphysical laws. In both doctrines, classical theology avoids

and that the Eucharist, as the sacramental continuation of the incarnation, may reasonably be expected to involve metaphysical depth that exceeds ordinary comprehension.⁴⁰⁵ They also point to the long patristic and medieval tradition of strong real presence language and to the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic spirituality and ecclesiology, as reasons to accept a higher metaphysical cost in this domain.

Nevertheless, if the standard is strictly logical soundness understood as minimal internal contradiction, minimal special pleading, and maximal harmoniousness with empirical and metaphysical plausibility, then we must admit that transubstantiation occupies the most precarious position. Yes, it is internally coherent within its own system; however, that system itself is highly demanding and increasingly distant from the dominant metaphysical assumptions of contemporary philosophy and science.

Provisional Conclusion: Logic, Presence, And The Price Of Metaphysics

When the various Eucharistic models are ranked according their logical framework and metaphysical cost, we see how a pattern emerges. Memorialism is the most modest in its ontological claims and therefore the most secure in terms of logical coherence. Lutheran and Reformed real presence views represent serious attempts to preserve a robust sacramental realism while avoiding the most controversial features of the scholastic account, yet they do so at the price of complex Christological and pneumatological commitments. Finally, the transubstantiation model offers the most intense affirmation of Christ's substantial presence in the Eucharist, yet it does so by adopting a metaphysical framework that is both conceptually intricate and increasingly contested.

contradiction by assigning different predicates to different categories. For example, in the Trinity, one essence and three persons; in the Incarnation, one person and two natures. Nothing is affirmed and denied in the same respect, so LNC remains intact. In direct contrast, Transubstantiation introduces a unique metaphysical exception in which the accidents of bread and wine (e.g., taste, appearance, texture) are said to remain without any underlying substance to support them. This is not simply a distinction of respects but a claim that accidents can exist without a subject, something that neither Aristotelian metaphysics nor any other area of Christian doctrine affirms. There is no parallel move in the Trinity or the Incarnation for those doctrines work within the normal boundaries of metaphysical reasoning, whereas Transubstantiation requires a special, one-off exception to how being ordinarily functions. For this reason, many philosophers and theologians judge the Trinity and the Incarnation to be more logically defensible than Transubstantiation, not because they are simple, but because they do not require the metaphysical suspension that Transubstantiation entails. See "Comparative Analysis" in "The Logical Defensibility of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Transubstantiation."

⁴⁰⁵ Stump, *Aquinas*, 281-292.

However, the deeper theological question is whether logical economy should be decisive in matters of sacramental doctrine. For traditions that place strong weight on magisterial authority or on the general consensus of the Fathers,⁴⁰⁶ the metaphysical cost of transubstantiation may be judged acceptable or even necessary. For traditions or models that prioritize biblical exegesis and metaphysical prudence, memorialism or a spiritual real presence model may appear more responsible. In any case, a clear comparative analysis reveals that different Eucharistic doctrines do not just differ in piety or emphasis. They also differ in the price they ask us to pay in the currency of metaphysics and logic.

Summary: Why Memorialism Prevails on Pure Logic

When the Eucharistic debate is reframed not as a contest of ecclesial authority or sacramental piety and instead as a philosophical inquiry into logical economy, conceptual thriftiness, and metaphysical restraint, memorialism emerges as the model that most fully satisfies the classical canons of rational analysis. In the language of Ockham's Razor, the simplest explanation is to be preferred when competing accounts possess equal explanatory power. Memorialism requires no hidden ontological layers, no metaphysical inversions, and no appeal to a miraculous suspension of the ordinary relation between appearance and reality. Bread remains bread, wine remains wine, and the words of institution are interpreted within the broader biblical pattern of symbolic predication. Zwingli's insistence that Christ's command to "do this in remembrance of me" establishes a covenantal memorial rather than a metaphysical metamorphosis reflects this commitment to conceptual economy.⁴⁰⁷

On the other end of the continuum, transubstantiation requires a multilayered metaphysical architecture. It presupposes the existence of a nonempirical substrate called "substance," asserts that this substrate can be wholly replaced while all sensible properties remain unchanged, and

⁴⁰⁶ The early Church Fathers did not hold a unanimous or uniform view regarding the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. While many patristic writers employed strongly realist language, for example speaking of the bread and wine as Christ's body and blood, their explanations varied widely and lacked the metaphysical precision of later scholastic formulations. As this paper notes, "patristic writers... speak of the change in more mystical, participatory, or symbolic-realist categories rather than in metaphysical terms," and "no Father articulates the later Thomistic notion of accidents remaining without a subject." Instead of a single doctrinal consensus, the Fathers offered a spectrum of interpretations shaped by biblical typology, Platonic participation, liturgical practice, and pastoral concerns. While their shared conviction was that the Eucharist was not just bread and wine, they still did not agree on *how* Christ is present, nor did they articulate anything resembling the later doctrine of transubstantiation. In short, the patristic tradition reflects a broadly realist instinct without a unified metaphysical account.

⁴⁰⁷ Zwingli, "On the Lord's Supper," in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 201-208.

affirms that accidents can exist without a subject, a claim that contradicts the ordinary definition of an accident as a property that inheres in something else.⁴⁰⁸ And although the scholastic tradition defends this configuration with admirable rigor, it does so with the logical cost being undeniable. The doctrine requires a unique exception to the metaphysical grammar that governs every other created entity, and it does so precisely at the point where theological commitment is strongest. Critics from Luther to contemporary analytic philosophers have argued that this is a model based in part on the fallacy of special pleading since the metaphysical exception appears to be introduced solely to preserve a prior dogmatic conclusion.⁴⁰⁹

Thus, the paradox is stark for the very features that make memorialism logically sound are the same features that rendered it theologically suspect to the historic Church. Patristic writers such as Ignatius, Justin, and Irenaeus speak of the Eucharist with a realism that resists purely symbolic interpretation, and medieval theologians regarded the sacrament as the privileged site of Christ's substantial presence. To many in the tradition, a purely logical account seemed to drain the sacrament of its mystery, its power, and its participation in the incarnational economy. The Eucharist was more than simply a mental recollection; it was a transformative encounter with the risen Christ. Hence, the logical virtues of memorialism were perceived as theological vices, and the theological virtues of transubstantiation were purchased at a high metaphysical price.

As we can see, the conflict between memorialism and transubstantiation is more than just a disagreement about biblical exegesis or ecclesial authority. It is just as much a clash between two visions of how divine action relates to created order. Memorialism preserves the integrity of empirical reality and the stability of natural categories. Transubstantiation, on the other hand, prioritizes the sacramental economy and the Church's historic witness (even if it may be at the cost of metaphysical complexity). In turn, pneumatic presence attempts to mediate between these poles by relocating the miracle from the elements to the Holy Spirit, thereby preserving both realism and rationality. Calvin's insistence that believers are lifted by the Spirit into communion with the ascended Christ represents a sophisticated attempt to honor both the logic of embodiment and the logic of worship.⁴¹⁰

The Eastern Orthodox Reframing: Mystery as Method

⁴⁰⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 75, a. 4-8.

⁴⁰⁹ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 29-38.

⁴¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.17.1-32.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition approaches the Eucharistic question from an entirely different angle. Rather than deciding between competing metaphysical models, Orthodoxy reframes the entire discussion by relocating the Eucharist from the domain of analytic explanation to the domain of liturgical participation. In this sense, the Eucharist is not primarily a philosophical puzzle to be solved; it is a divine mystery to be entered. The Greek term *mysterion* captures this orientation as it signifies a reality whose depth exceeds conceptual containment.

Orthodox theologians have long regarded the Western distinction between substance and accidents as an unnecessary intrusion of human rationality into a domain where rational analysis is neither appropriate nor spiritually beneficial. The attempt to specify what changes in the Eucharist and how it changes is viewed as a symptom of the Western tendency to over define divine action. The Orthodox tradition prefers the term *metabole* (simply “change” or “transformation”) without specifying the metaphysical mechanics of that change.⁴¹¹ This is not a retreat into obscurantism, it is a principled refusal to reduce the sacrament to a set of conceptual categories that cannot possibly capture its eschatological depth. The Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 provides a particularly illuminating example. In response to Protestant critiques, the Synod adopted the term *metousiosis* (the Greek equivalent of transubstantiation), yet it did so with a crucial qualification. The term was affirmed as a confession of the fact of the change and not as an explanation of its mode. The Synod explicitly declared that the manner of the change is “altogether incomprehensible and impossible to understand except by God Himself.”⁴¹² This distinction between fact and mode is central to the Orthodox approach for the Church affirms the reality of Christ’s presence although it refuses to specify the metaphysical mechanism by which that presence is effected. This refusal is not just epistemic it is also liturgical. Thus, the Orthodox Divine Liturgy is understood as a single, unified act of worship in which heaven and earth are joined. The epiclesis (the invocation of the Holy Spirit) is emphasized as the moment in which the transformation is effected, yet the entire liturgy is regarded as a seamless participation in the Kingdom of God. The Eucharist is not a mechanical sequence of steps, rather it is a mystical ascent into divine life. In this context, the question of when the change occurs or how it occurs is regarded

⁴¹¹ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 194-198.

⁴¹² Synod of Jerusalem (1672), *The Confession of Dositheus*, in *Creeds and Confessions of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, ed. J. N. W. B. Robertson (London: SPCK, 1909), 125-132.

as a distraction from the deeper reality of the sacrament. The Eucharist is a foretaste of the eschaton, and as such it transcends the categories of fallen human logic.⁴¹³

Therefore, the Orthodox solution is not a metaphysical model; it is rather a methodological shift. Instead of attempting to resolve the logical tensions inherent in Western Eucharistic theories (whether Catholic or Protestant), Orthodoxy sidesteps the entire debate by insisting that the Eucharist belongs to a realm where logic is not the primary tool of understanding. The sacrament is a mystery, and therefore the proper response to mystery is not *analysis*, it is *adoration*. In the memorable phrasing of many Orthodox spiritual writers, the Eucharist is the Body of Christ, and the faithful are not invited to dissect the mystery as they are to receive it with reverence. The following tables summarize the logical and theological contrasts developed in this section.

Table 17. Comparison of Logical Defensibility

Model	Logical Hurdle	Rating	Why?
Memorialism	None	Highest	No “miracles” required; matches all physical data.
Pneumatic	Spiritual/Metaphysical	High	Respects the limits of physical bodies and matter.
Consubstantiation	Ubiquity (Multi-location)	Medium	Avoids the accident/substance divorce although it stretches the definition of “Body.”
Transubstantiation	Special Pleading / Contradiction	Lowest	Requires breaking the definitions of “Accident” and “Substance.”

Table 18. Comparison of Eucharistic Models

View	Logical Hurdle	Biblical Support	Theological Support	Patristic Support
Transubstantiation (Catholic)	Highest. Requires “accidents” to	Literalism. “This is my body” (Matt 26:26) and the Bread	Objective Change. Validity doesn't depend	High. Ignatius of Antioch and Justin

⁴¹³ Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. deCatanaro (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 112-121.

	exist without a substance.	of Life discourse (John 6:53-56).	on the priest's or recipient's faith.	Martyr describe it as literal flesh.
Consubstantiation (Lutheran)	Medium. Requires a body to be in many places at once (Ubiquity).	Literalism. Maintains the "is" yet refuses to say the bread "isn't" also there.	Union. Christ is "in, with, and under" the bread, like fire in heated iron.	Moderate. Some Fathers used metaphors of "union" rather than total replacement.
Pneumatic Presence (Reformed)	Low. Claims a "real" but spiritual encounter; respects physical limits.	Spiritual. "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing" (John 6:63).	Ascension. Christ's body stays in Heaven; the Spirit lifts the believer to feed on Him.	Moderate. St. Augustine is often cited for "sacramental" descriptions.
Memorialism (Baptist/Zwinglian)	Lowest. Zero conflict with physics; A=A.	Commemorative. "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).	Symbolic. The elements are "signs" that trigger faith, like a wedding ring.	Low. Rarely found in early writings, which assumed a form of "Real Presence."

14. The Limits of Logic in Sacramental Theology

As we have already noted, the question of whether the Eucharistic transformation can be rendered logically coherent has occupied theologians, philosophers, and critics from the patristic period to the present. The problem is more than metaphysical; it is also epistemological for it concerns the limits of human rationality when confronted with claims that purport to describe a supernatural intervention in the created order. The classical doctrine of transubstantiation (as defined at the Fourth Lateran Council and reaffirmed at Trent) presupposes a metaphysical framework in which substance and accident are distinct ontological principles. However, contemporary advances in science and philosophy have introduced conceptual pressures that challenge the intelligibility of this framework. The resulting tension has produced three broad strategies for resolving or reframing the problem, each corresponding to a different understanding of what counts as a “solution.” These strategies may be described as philosophical redefinition, scientific rejection, and theological appeal to supernatural exception. Each path reflects a distinct epistemic posture toward the relationship between logic, ontology, and revelation.

Philosophical Reconfiguration: Redefining Substance

The first strategy attempts to preserve the intelligibility of Eucharistic doctrine by redefining the meaning of “substance” in a way that is compatible with contemporary philosophical awareness. This approach is often associated with phenomenology, existential ontology, and certain strands of twentieth-century Catholic *ressourcement*,⁴¹⁴ so instead of treating

⁴¹⁴ Catholic *ressourcement* refers to the twentieth century movement within Catholic theology that sought renewal through a return to the foundational sources of the Christian tradition, especially Scripture, the Church Fathers, and early liturgical practice. Associated with figures such as Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Jean Daniélou, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the movement challenged the dominance of late-scholastic categories and encouraged a recovery of the symbolic, participatory, and relational dimensions of early Christian thought. In sacramental theology, this retrieval opened the way for modern reinterpretations of classical metaphysical terms, including “substance,” by situating them within a broader patristic and existential horizon. *Ressourcement* thus provided the conceptual space for twentieth century theologians to articulate Eucharistic presence in ways that remained faithful to tradition while engaging contemporary philosophical developments.

substance as a hidden metaphysical substrate underlying physical properties, these thinkers interpret substance as the deepest ontological meaning or identity of a thing. In this view, substance is not a microscopic entity; instead, it is the fundamental “what-it-is” that situates an object within a horizon of significance.

This reconfiguration has roots in the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Edmund Husserl, who argued that the essence of an object is disclosed through a core intuition and not through empirical analysis.⁴¹⁵ Martin Heidegger pushed this idea further by arguing that a thing is not defined just by the traits you can observe in front of you. Instead, what it truly is depends on how it fits into the larger world of meaning, relationships, and purposes in which we live.⁴¹⁶ Catholic theologians influenced by this tradition (e.g., Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx) applied these insights to sacramental theology. For example, Rahner argued that sacraments are “real symbols,” meaning that their efficacy lies in the existential encounter they mediate, and not in a metaphysical substrate.⁴¹⁷ Schillebeeckx proposed that the Eucharistic change concerns the “meaning-substance” of the bread and wine rather than their physical composition.⁴¹⁸ This approach is often illustrated by analogies drawn from social ontology. For example, a piece of paper can become a one-hundred-dollar bill without any molecular alteration because its identity is constituted by a network of social meanings rather than by its physical properties.⁴¹⁹ In this analogy, we see that the “substance” of the bill has changed even though its accidents remain the same. When applied to the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, this analogy suggests that the bread and wine acquire a new ontological identity through divine designation, even though their empirical properties remain unchanged.

The responsive critique argues that this redefinition departs from the metaphysical realism of the scholastic tradition and risks collapsing the Eucharistic change into a purely intentional or communal act.⁴²⁰ Defenders respond that the scholastic idea of substance was itself an attempt to articulate the ontological depth of created reality and that phenomenological reinterpretations

⁴¹⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 11-15.

⁴¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 67-71.

⁴¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 21-24.

⁴¹⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 76-82.

⁴¹⁹ John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 23-28.

⁴²⁰ Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 112-118.

preserve this depth while avoiding outdated physicalist assumptions.⁴²¹ The debate really comes down to whether “substance” is something that exists on its own, apart from how we think about it, or whether it is simply the deeper meaning a thing has because of the relationships and intentions that shape how we understand it.

Scientific Materialism and the Rejection of Metaphysical Depth

The second strategy resolves the logical tension by rejecting the metaphysical framework that makes the doctrine intelligible in the first place. From the standpoint of scientific materialism, the distinction between substance and accident has no empirical basis. In other words, modern physics reveals no ontological layer beneath the observable properties of matter. What scholastic metaphysics called “substance” is, in this view, a conceptual relic of pre-scientific ontology. This critique has been put forth by philosophers of science such as W. V. O. Quine, who argued that ontological commitments must be grounded in empirical theory rather than in metaphysical speculation.⁴²² In addition, contemporary physicalism maintains that all that exists is ultimately reducible to physical particles and fields.⁴²³ Under this theory, the Eucharistic host is composed of the same molecular structures before and after consecration, and there is no empirical evidence of a change in its underlying reality.⁴²⁴ From this perspective, transubstantiation is dismissed as a category mistake.⁴²⁵ The doctrine attempts to describe a change in a metaphysical substrate that does not exist and thus the problem is not that the doctrine is illogical, rather that it is meaningless within a scientific ontology.⁴²⁶ Therefore, the “solution” is to reject the metaphysical assumptions that generate the problem.

This position is not limited to secular critics. Many Protestant theologians influenced by Enlightenment rationalism, such as Huldrych Zwingli, argued that the Eucharistic presence should be understood symbolically rather than ontologically.⁴²⁷ Modern analytic philosophers sympathetic to Christianity often adopt a similar stance by contending that the metaphysical

⁴²¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 148-152.

⁴²² W. V. O. Quine, “On What There Is,” *Review of Metaphysics* 2 (1948): 21-38.

⁴²³ Jaegwon Kim, *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9-14.

⁴²⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 188-190.

⁴²⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 16-18.

⁴²⁶ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936), 41-45.

⁴²⁷ Zwingli, *On the Lord's Supper*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 183-187.

machinery of substance and accident is unnecessary for articulating a robust theology of the Lord's Supper.⁴²⁸

In sum, the obvious strength of this approach lies in its coherence with contemporary scientific understanding. However, its weakness is that it cannot accommodate the Catholic claim that the Eucharist involves a real, substantial presence of Christ. In the end it can only resolve the logical tension by abandoning the metaphysical commitments that make the doctrine possible.

The Theological Appeal to Supernatural Exception

The third strategy accepts the classical metaphysical framework and in doing so it argues that the Eucharistic transformation is a supernatural exception to the ordinary laws of nature. This approach is rooted in the Catholic tradition which holds that the Eucharist is a unique miracle in which God suspends the natural dependence of accidents on substance.⁴²⁹ Thus, the doctrine of transubstantiation is not so much an attempt to explain the Eucharistic change in natural terms as it is to articulate the metaphysical structure of a divine intervention.

Aquinas argued that God, as the Uncaused First Cause, can sustain accidents without a subject because He is the source of all being.⁴³⁰ Therefore, the Eucharistic miracle is possible precisely because it transcends natural logic.⁴³¹ The Council of Trent reaffirmed this position, declaring that the change of substance is effected by the words of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴³² Modern Catholic theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger have emphasized that the Eucharistic presence is not a physical presence, it is a sacramental mode of being that transcends empirical categories.⁴³³ Ratzinger further argued that the Eucharistic transformation is a "metaphysical miracle" that cannot be verified by scientific analysis and instead it is known through faith and ecclesial authority.⁴³⁴

This third approach resolves the logical tension by making an appeal to divine omnipotence in that if God created the laws of nature, He can suspend them.⁴³⁵ The problem is that this solution

⁴²⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 98-102.

⁴²⁹ Fourth Lateran Council, *Constitutiones*, ch. 1, 1:230-231.

⁴³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.77.1.

⁴³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV.63.

⁴³² Council of Trent, *Session XIII: Decree on the Eucharist*.

⁴³³ Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us*, 85-90.

⁴³⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 213-217.

⁴³⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, XXI.8. However, this is not only a question of the laws of nature as it is a question of logic, for it is the latter in which it is shown that transubstantiation violates (some of) the laws of logic (e.g., law of

cannot satisfy those who demand empirical verification or logical demonstration, and therefore ultimately it is an article of faith grounded in the authority of Christ's words and the teaching office/authority of the Church.⁴³⁶

Comparative Evaluation of the Three Strategies

These three strategies all reflect fundamentally different epistemic commitments. The philosophical approach seeks to preserve the doctrine by reinterpreting its metaphysical categories. The scientific approach resolves the tension by rejecting the categories altogether. The theological approach accepts the classical categories; however, it appeals to divine omnipotence to explain the suspension of natural laws.

And even though each strategy is internally coherent, they are nevertheless mutually incompatible. The philosophical approach depends on a phenomenological ontology that is rejected by scientific materialism. In turn, the scientific approach denies the metaphysical realism presupposed by both the philosophical and theological strategies. The theological approach affirms a supernatural intervention that is not only unintelligible within the scientific framework yet also unnecessary within the phenomenological one. The result is a conceptual crossroads at which one must choose between competing standards of rationality. The Eucharistic doctrine cannot be rendered simultaneously coherent within all three frameworks because each framework defines coherence differently.

Logic, Mystery, and the Epistemic Boundaries of Sacramental Claims

The limits of logic in sacramental theology arise not from a defect in logic, yet rather from the nature of the claims being made. The Eucharist is presented as a supernatural mystery that transcends the categories of natural reason. Classical theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas insisted that faith seeks understanding yet it does not demand comprehension.⁴³⁷ Modern

identity, LNC, PSR, etc.). In the classical view, if logic is identical with God's very nature rather than a tool He uses (which is affirmed by both Augustine and Aquinas), then God cannot suspend or violate the laws of logic, because doing so would mean contradicting His own being. Divine omnipotence does not include the power to undo God's essence, and a contradiction is not a "thing" that could be made real but a breakdown of meaning. So, on this account, God's inability to make contradictions true is not a limitation on His power but a reflection of the fact that His nature is the very ground of intelligibility itself.

⁴³⁶ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.36, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958).

⁴³⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.27. Augustine repeatedly affirms that faith seeks understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*) yet does not demand full comprehension of divine mysteries. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II.1.5, where Aquinas argues that faith involves assent to truths that exceed the grasp of natural reason.

theologians continue to affirm that the Eucharistic presence is a mystery that cannot be reduced to empirical or philosophical analysis.⁴³⁸

Thus, the question is not whether the doctrine can be made logically coherent in every framework. The question is whether it can be rendered intelligible within the framework of faith. For those who accept the authority of the Church and the possibility of supernatural intervention, the doctrine is coherent. For those who restrict truth to empirical verification or phenomenological meaning, it is not. In sum, the limits of logic in sacramental theology reflect the limits of human reason when confronted with claims that transcend the natural order. The Eucharist remains a point at which metaphysics, science, and theology intersect even if they do not necessarily converge. As we have seen throughout this paper, it is a doctrine that can be articulated, defended, and critiqued, although not resolved in a way that satisfies all epistemic standards simultaneously. The preceding analysis reveals three distinct strategies for addressing the logical tension inherent in Eucharistic metaphysics, and the following table presents these approaches side by side in order to clarify their underlying assumptions, strengths, and limitations.

Table 19. Comparative Analysis of the Three Major Strategies for Resolving the Logical Tension in Eucharistic Metaphysics

Criterion	The “Meaning” Makeover (Philosophical Reconfiguration)	The “Science Only” View (Scientific Materialism)	The “Divine Rule- Breaker” (Theological Supernatural Exception)
Core Claim	Substance is redefined as the purpose or identity that God gives to the bread.	The distinction between substance and accidents is rejected because it is not scientific.	God performs a unique miracle that stops the physical traits from needing a physical core.
Primary Framework (The Basic Approach)	It focuses on human experience and how we find meaning in the world.	It focuses on physicalism, chemistry, and what can be proven in a laboratory.	It focuses on classical theism and the idea that God has power over nature.

⁴³⁸ Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us*, 85-90. Ratzinger emphasizes that the Eucharistic presence is a sacramental mystery irreducible to empirical or philosophical categories. See also Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 243-247, where de Lubac stresses the irreducible mystery of Eucharistic ontology.

Understanding of Substance (The Inner Reality)	It is the deepest horizon of meaning that is revealed through our intentions.	It is a myth; there is no hidden core beneath the observable atoms and structures.	It is a real metaphysical principle that can only be changed by divine power.
Understanding of Accidents (The Outer Traits)	These are the physical ways that we perceive a specific identity or meaning.	These are the only real features of matter; nothing exists underneath them.	These are the physical traits like taste and smell, kept in place by God without a subject.
Mechanism of Change (How it Happens)	God changes the definition of the object from “bread for food” to “Christ for us.”	No change occurs at all; the host remains physically and chemically identical.	God swaps the substance of bread for the substance of Christ by a supernatural act.
Relation to Scholasticism (View on Tradition)	It reinterprets old Scholastic categories by giving them new, symbolic definitions.	It rejects traditional metaphysics as meaningless or unintelligible wordplay.	It retains traditional Thomistic logic and affirms the total power of God.
Epistemic Standard (The Quality Check)	Is the explanation logically consistent with how we experience meaning?	Can the claim be verified through empirical observation and science?	Is the claim consistent with revealed scripture and Church Authority?
Strengths	It explains the presence of Christ as a real presence without outdated metaphysics.	It is fully consistent with everything we know about modern physics.	It preserves the most traditional and literal form of the doctrine of faith.
Weaknesses	It risks making the Eucharist seem like it is only “in our heads” rather than real.	It cannot account for any sacred presence; it views the ritual as purely symbolic.	It is difficult to accept for those who require empirical or logical proof.
Representative Thinkers	Edmund Husserl, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx	W.V.O. Quine, A.J. Ayer, Richard Dawkins	Thomas Aquinas; Council of Trent; Pope Benedict XVI.
Final Verdict (The Bottom Line)	This is a re-interpretation that changes the dictionary to fit modern thought.	This is a rejection that throws out the entire	A confessional solution appealing to divine omnipotence and mystery.

		metaphysical framework.	
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15. An Epistemology of Eucharistic Doctrine: Authority, Tradition, and Mystery

The persistence of transubstantiation in Christian theology cannot be explained solely through metaphysics, logic, or empirical analysis. Thus, its enduring acceptance reflects a deeper epistemic structure in which ecclesial authority, inherited tradition, and the category of “mystery” function as primary sources of theological knowledge. For many Christians (and particularly within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy⁴³⁹) doctrinal truth is determined by first and foremost by the authoritative continuity of the Church’s teaching office (and not philosophical coherence or scientific compatibility). In this framework, the Eucharist is not first a metaphysical puzzle to be solved; it is first a *revealed reality* to be *received*. Thus, even when transubstantiation appears metaphysically strained, logically problematic, or scientifically incompatible, it remains compelling because its epistemic grounding lies in the trustworthiness of ecclesial tradition and the acceptance of sacramental mystery. This section goes on to examine how these epistemic commitments shape Eucharistic belief and why they continue to sustain doctrines that exceed, and sometimes contradict, the categories of classical metaphysics and modern science.

The Epistemic Problem of Eucharistic Doctrine

Although the persistence of Eucharistic doctrine in the Catholic tradition cannot be explained solely through metaphysical analysis, classical metaphysics still seeks to provide conceptual tools for articulating the distinction between substance and accident. However, these

⁴³⁹ To be clear, although the term “transubstantiation” is used here, Eastern Orthodoxy does not subscribe to the Thomistic doctrine of transubstantiation but instead affirms a real, mystical change traditionally described as *metousiosis*, a “change of being” that is confessed rather than analyzed. Unlike the Latin scholastic account, Orthodoxy refuses to frame the Eucharistic transformation in terms of substance and accidents or to explain how the change occurs. The Orthodox tradition emphasizes the mystery effected by the Holy Spirit in the epiclesis and maintains an apophatic stance: the bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood of Christ, yet the mode of this change transcends conceptual categories and is not subject to metaphysical definition.

categories alone do not account for why the doctrine of transubstantiation continues to command assent despite longstanding philosophical and scientific objections. The durability of the doctrine actual arises from the epistemic framework within which Catholic theology operates, and not so much not from the internal coherence of its metaphysical structure. As numerous theologians have observed, metaphysical models may illuminate doctrinal claims, however, they do not determine their acceptance.⁴⁴⁰

This shift from ontology to epistemology marks a significant development in contemporary sacramental theology in that instead of asking whether the metaphysical account of Eucharistic change is demonstrably coherent, the more fundamental question becomes, “what counts as knowledge in a tradition that regards divine revelation and ecclesial authority as normative sources of truth?”⁴⁴¹ In this context, the Eucharist is not primarily an object of philosophical or logical explanation for it is primarily a revealed mystery in which its intelligibility is mediated through the Church’s interpretive authority. Thus, the epistemic question concerns the grounds upon which believers assent to doctrines that exceed the limits of natural reason.⁴⁴²

It is therefore within this framework that the Eucharist functions as a classic case study in the limits of metaphysical explanation. The doctrine’s persistence is not a function of philosophical demonstrability, as it is the theological conviction that divine mysteries may be apprehended by faith even when they resist conceptual resolution. This epistemic position is deeply rooted in both patristic and medieval sources which consistently affirm that sacramental realities transcend the categories of creaturely understanding.⁴⁴³

Authority as an Epistemic Foundation

Catholic theology locates the epistemic ground of doctrinal certainty in the magisterium, whose authority is understood to derive from apostolic succession and the divine commission

⁴⁴⁰ Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 112-15.

⁴⁴¹ Stump, *Aquinas*, 255-60.

⁴⁴² Vatican I. *Dei Filius: Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* (Vatican City: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1870), chs. 3-4.

⁴⁴³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V.4; Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, II. However, this is not to say that the human mind is left in the dark or denied any real understanding of the sacrament. Christian thinkers have long drawn a careful distinction between *comprehending* a mystery and *apprehending* it. To comprehend something is to master it fully, to take it into our concepts in a way that leaves nothing unexplained. But to apprehend a mystery is different. It means we can genuinely grasp it, even if we cannot grasp it completely. In other words, we can know the truth of the Eucharist without claiming to know its inner mechanics. Our knowledge is real, but it is proportioned to our finite capacity, not to the infinite depth of the mystery itself.

entrusted to the Church.⁴⁴⁴ The magisterium functions as an institutional body and as the guarantor of doctrinal truth, providing the interpretive framework within which the faithful receive and understand the mysteries of faith. This epistemic model presupposes that the Church (as the custodian of revelation) possesses the authority to define doctrines that surpass the limits of natural reason.⁴⁴⁵

Apostolic succession plays a central role in this epistemic structure. For example, patristic writers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian argued that the continuity of episcopal teaching safeguarded the integrity of the apostolic deposit.⁴⁴⁶ This historical claim undergirds the Catholic conviction that doctrinal authority is grounded in the Church's divinely instituted interpretive office, thus, the Eucharistic doctrine is received because it is promulgated by the authoritative teaching body entrusted with preserving the apostolic faith (and not because its metaphysical articulation is self-evident).⁴⁴⁷

However, this epistemic model stands in marked contrast to Protestant approaches which typically locate doctrinal authority in Scripture rather than in ecclesial interpretation.⁴⁴⁸ For many Protestant theologians, the metaphysical difficulties associated with transubstantiation constitute evidence against its biblical warrant. Nevertheless, Catholic theology maintains that ecclesial authority can legitimately override metaphysical difficulty when the Church judges a doctrine to be part of the revealed deposit.⁴⁴⁹ Therefore, the epistemic difference is more than methodological, it is also structural in that Catholicism grounds doctrinal certainty in the magisterium, whereas Protestantism grounds it in the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁴ CCC, §§88-92.

⁴⁴⁵ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), §10.

⁴⁴⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.3; Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 21.

⁴⁴⁷ Council of Trent, Session XIII, ch. 4.

⁴⁴⁸ Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 145-52.

⁴⁴⁹ Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei*, §§15, 39, 47.

⁴⁵⁰ Protestant theology offers several rational and internally coherent interpretations of apostolic succession that differ sharply from the Catholic and Orthodox emphasis on tactile, sacramental lineage. For many traditions, apostolic succession is primarily a matter of *doctrinal continuity*, in which the Church succeeds the apostles by faithfully preserving their teaching as recorded in Scripture. Others emphasize *kerygmatic succession*, locating apostolicity in the ongoing proclamation of the apostolic gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions frame succession in terms of *spiritual empowerment*, arguing that the Holy Spirit, rather than institutional lineage, raises up ministers who continue the apostolic mission. Still others adopt a *communal* or *ecclesial* model, holding that the entire congregation (not a clerical elite) bears apostolic identity through its shared faith and practice. Anglican and some Wesleyan theologians articulate a *functional* model in which ministers succeed the apostles by continuing their pastoral and teaching roles without claiming ontological continuity. More

Tradition as a Source of Theological Knowledge

Tradition functions as a second epistemic pillar in Catholic sacramental theology. The continuity of liturgical practice, particularly the longstanding affirmation of Christ's real presence, provides a historical and communal context within which doctrinal claims are received and interpreted.⁴⁵¹ While the metaphysical explanation of Eucharistic change has varied across centuries, the core conviction of real presence has remained remarkably stable. This distinction between the *fact* of Christ's presence and the *mode* of that presence is crucial for understanding how tradition shapes doctrinal identity.⁴⁵²

The weight of historical consensus does not rest in unanimity of metaphysical explanation; it rests in the consistent liturgical and devotional affirmation of the Eucharist as the locus of Christ's real presence. For example, patristic writers such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom articulated this conviction in diverse conceptual frameworks, none of which however correspond precisely to the later scholastic doctrine of transubstantiation.⁴⁵³ The diversity of patristic metaphysics underscores that doctrinal stability does not require conceptual uniformity;

biblicist traditions advance a *canonical* model, identifying Scripture itself as the true successor to the apostles. Finally, narrative-historical approaches understand apostolicity as participation in the apostolic story and mission rather than inheritance of apostolic authority. Across these diverse models, Protestants reject the notion of a transmissible apostolic office while affirming multiple legitimate forms of continuity with the apostolic era. Continuities that are grounded in teaching, proclamation, Spirit-empowerment, communal identity, ministerial function, canonical authority, or narrative participation. Thus, the doctrine and idea of apostolic succession is not an easily open-and-shut case, for even within Christian history the concept has never enjoyed a single, uncontested meaning. The range of interpretations demonstrates that apostolic continuity can be understood in multiple rational and theologically defensible ways, each grounded in a different account of where authority properly resides in the life of the Church. This diversity does not just reflect denominational disagreement but reveals the deeper epistemic question that underlies all appeals to apostolicity i.e., by what criteria does the Church determine continuity with the apostolic age, and who possesses the authority to define that continuity? Once this question is foregrounded, it becomes clear that debates about succession are ultimately debates about knowledge, authority, and the means by which the Christian community identifies the authentic transmission of the apostolic faith. In this light, the contested nature of apostolic succession becomes an ideal point of departure for the broader conclusion which is that debates about apostolic succession ultimately reveal a deeper and more fundamental issue: Christian traditions differ not simply because they hold different historical claims, but because they operate within different epistemic frameworks for determining what counts as authoritative knowledge in the first place. Apostolic succession becomes a diagnostic lens through which the underlying structures of Christian reasoning come into view. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant models diverge because they privilege different sources of certainty. In other words, these differences are not simply disagreements about ecclesial history but about the very *criteria* by which continuity, legitimacy, and doctrinal identity are recognized and maintained.

⁴⁵¹ Josef Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (New York: Benziger, 1951), 33-40.

⁴⁵² Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1:153-60.

⁴⁵³ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 4.3; Ambrose, *De Mysterioris*, 9.50; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 82.

rather, it reflects the Church's capacity to preserve the substance of faith while allowing for development in its articulation.⁴⁵⁴

Thus, tradition functions as a stabilizing force in doctrinal identity by helping to shape the boundaries of what believers consider "non-negotiable" and providing a historical horizon within which doctrinal claims are evaluated.⁴⁵⁵ In the case of the Eucharist, tradition affirms the reality of Christ's presence while permitting a range of metaphysical interpretations. Therefore, the Catholic commitment to transubstantiation reflects both the authority of the magisterium as well as the formative power of tradition in shaping the epistemic expectations of the faithful.⁴⁵⁶

Mystery as a Theological Category

At this juncture we want to ensure that we explore the distinguishing of mystery from contradiction. Classical Christian theology has long insisted that "mystery" does not signify contradiction. What it does signify is the presence of truths whose full intelligibility exceeds the limits of human finite cognition. Augustine famously described divine realities as "light so bright that it blinds" (as opposed to darkness that obscures), a metaphor that captures the patristic conviction that mystery is not irrational but supra-rational.⁴⁵⁷ This distinction is crucial for Eucharistic theology where the Church has historically claimed that the transformation of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is a mystery of faith rather than a metaphysical absurdity. We have already noted earlier in this paper that classical metaphysics treats accidents as dependent on substance and that the Eucharistic miracle "suspends the ordinary metaphysical dependence of accidents upon substance."⁴⁵⁸ The Church presents this suspension not as a contradiction, rather instead as a divine act that transcends the explanatory reach of Aristotelian categories.

A contradiction arises when a proposition affirms and denies the same predicate of the same subject in the same respect.⁴⁵⁹ A mystery, by contrast, arises when a proposition affirms something

⁴⁵⁴ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, 1845), 35-40.

⁴⁵⁵ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 21-28.

⁴⁵⁶ CCC §§1374-1381.

⁴⁵⁷ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.27.

⁴⁵⁸ See section 4. *Transubstantiation: The Inverse Problem* and *The Eucharistic Miracle as the Mirror Image of Divine Simplicity*.

⁴⁵⁹ Nevertheless, there is the argument that the doctrine of transubstantiation violates several first principles, including LNC. See Table 6. First Principles Violated by the Concept of Accidents Without a Subject.

whose mode of possibility is not fully comprehensible. The Church's claim that Christ is substantially present under the species of bread and wine is not framed as the assertion that bread both is and is not bread in the same respect. Rather that what appears as bread is no longer bread in its underlying reality. Aquinas repeatedly insists that transubstantiation is not a violation of LNC, but a miracle in which God effects a change at the level of substance while preserving the accidents through divine power.⁴⁶⁰

Although classical theology distinguishes mystery from contradiction, critics have long argued that the category of mystery can be deployed as a rhetorical shield to protect doctrines from legitimate conceptual scrutiny and this concern is not new. Peter Abelard warned in the twelfth century that appeals to mystery can mask incoherence rather than illuminate profundity.⁴⁶¹ Modern analytic philosophers such as J. L. Mackie and Graham Oppy have also argued that the invocation of mystery often functions as a permission to avoid the hard work of metaphysical clarification. Mackie contends that theologians frequently invoke mystery at precisely the point where a doctrine becomes conceptually unstable, treating it as a protective barrier rather than confronting its internal tensions. In *The Miracle of Theism*, he notes that mystery is regularly used to “insulate” religious claims from rational assessment and to “block further inquiry” when contradictions threaten to surface (pp. 25-28). Oppy develops a similar critique in *Arguing About Gods*, where he argues that the appeal to mystery is frequently a “conversation-stopper” that halts analysis without resolving the underlying conceptual problems (pp. 52-55). For both philosophers mystery becomes epistemically suspect when it does not function as an acknowledgment of cognitive limitation but rather as a strategy for avoiding the metaphysical clarification that rigorous argument demands.⁴⁶² And, so within Eucharistic theology the charge is that transubstantiation relies on the language of mystery precisely at the point where Aristotelian categories break down, especially regarding the possibility of “accidents without a subject,” a problem we have previously identified as a “logical

⁴⁶⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III.75.4.

⁴⁶¹ Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Abelard sought to expose apparent contradictions in patristic authorities and argued that the theologian's task is to reconcile these tensions through disciplined reasoning rather than by retreating into pious assertions that something is simply mysterious. For Abelard, mystery becomes problematic when it functions as a rhetorical refuge that masks incoherence instead of illuminating a truth that genuinely exceeds human comprehension. Thus, his critique presses the Church to distinguish between authentic divine mystery and what he regarded as intellectual evasion, urging that appeals to mystery come only after rigorous conceptual clarification rather than in place of it.

⁴⁶² Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Graham Oppy, *Arguing About Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

conundrum.”⁴⁶³ The tension is heightened by the fact that the Church simultaneously affirms the intelligibility of doctrine and the limits of human reason. For example, Vatican I declared that mysteries are not contrary to reason, they are above it. However, critics will point out that the line between “above reason” and “against reason” is not always clearly maintained.⁴⁶⁴ This in turn poses the risk is that mystery becomes a conceptual refuge rather than a theological insight.

Despite these philosophical tensions the category of mystery possesses profound psychological and devotional meaning. Human beings tend to be drawn to ritual actions that mediate transcendence and the Eucharist functions as a point of sacred encounter precisely because it is framed as a mystery. William James observed that religious experience often involves a sense of “more” that cannot be reduced to rational categories and sacramental theology capitalizes on this phenomenological structure.⁴⁶⁵ In other words, sacramental theology intentionally builds upon this phenomenological structure by presenting the Eucharist as a site where the divine becomes tangibly accessible through ritual form. The mysterious character of the sacrament does not just conceal metaphysical complexity; it actively shapes the believer’s perception of divine presence and in doing so it invites an encounter that is affective, embodied, and experientially saturated in ways that purely intellectual accounts cannot replicate. In short, the Eucharist’s mysterious character invites reverence, awe, and a sense of divine nearness that purely symbolic interpretations may struggle to evoke.

Patristic writers such as Cyril of Jerusalem emphasized the transformative power of sacramental mystery and urged catechumens to trust the Church’s teaching even when sensory experience suggested otherwise.⁴⁶⁶ The devotional tradition that followed (from medieval mystics to contemporary Catholic spirituality) has consistently treated the Eucharist as a site where divine mystery becomes tangible. Thus, it is this devotional power that helps to explain the persistence of transubstantiation even among believers who cannot articulate its metaphysical underpinnings.

Mystery also functions as an epistemic permission structure that authorizes belief in the absence of full comprehension. In other words, it signals that the believer is not required to resolve every metaphysical difficulty before assenting to doctrinal claims. This structure is evident in this

⁴⁶³ See section 4. *Transubstantiation: The Inverse Problem and Summary-Conclusion and a Logical Conundrum*.

⁴⁶⁴ First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, ch. 4.

⁴⁶⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902).

⁴⁶⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, IV.

paper's previous observation that the Eucharistic miracle "stands as the inverse of divine simplicity," a configuration that deliberately exceeds the explanatory reach of classical metaphysics.⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, the appeal to mystery works to legitimize the acceptance of doctrines that would otherwise appear conceptually strained. Philosophers of religion such as Alvin Plantinga have argued that belief in divine mysteries can be rationally warranted even in the absence of evidential demonstration, provided that such belief arises within a properly functioning cognitive environment shaped by a religious tradition. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga maintains that Christian belief can possess full rational warrant when it is formed by cognitive faculties operating as they were designed to operate within the context of the Holy Spirit's internal instigation and the communal practices of the Church.⁴⁶⁸ On this account, the acceptance of mysteries such as the Trinity or the Eucharistic presence does not depend on metaphysical proofs. Instead, the acceptance depends on the proper functioning of the believer's noetic/intellectual structure within the life of faith. Thus, mystery is not a retreat from rationality, yet instead it becomes a mode of warranted belief grounded in the interplay between divine action, tradition-shaped cognition, and the epistemic practices of the Christian community. From this perspective, mystery does not seek to conceal conceptual gaps; instead, it seeks to provide a framework within which faith can operate without collapsing into irrationality.

Why Millions Still Affirm Transubstantiation

Here we will begin with the epistemic priority of authority over reason. For many Catholics, the acceptance of transubstantiation is not grounded in metaphysical argumentation but ultimately in the epistemic authority of the Church. The Magisterium's teaching is treated as a reliable guide to divine truth and the believer's assent is shaped by trust in ecclesial authority rather than independent philosophical analysis. This epistemic posture is consistent with the Church's self-understanding as the custodian of apostolic teaching (as previously discussed). The Catechism explicitly states that the doctrine of transubstantiation is to be "firmly believed" because it is taught by the Church.⁴⁶⁹ Sociological studies of religious belief consistently show that authority structures

⁴⁶⁷ See section 4. *Transubstantiation: The Inverse Problem* and *The Eucharistic Miracle as the Mirror Image of Divine Simplicity*.

⁴⁶⁸ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 153-158.

⁴⁶⁹ The Catechism teaches that dogmas are received on the basis of divine authority rather than sensory or rational verification (CCC 88-92, 1381, CCC, §1376.), and the Council of Trent defines transubstantiation as a matter of faith to be "openly and plainly confessed" (Session XIII, ch. 4). Vatican I affirms that revealed doctrines may

play a decisive role in shaping doctrinal acceptance. For example, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge put forth the idea that religious communities function as “organizations of supernatural compensators” in which authoritative institutions provide the interpretive frameworks that believers rely upon to make sense of doctrinal claims (pp. 25-30).⁴⁷⁰ The authors emphasize that individuals rarely adopt or retain complex theological doctrines through independent reasoning alone; rather, they internalize them through participation in a community whose authority they trust. In this view we can see how ecclesial authority both transmits doctrine and actively shapes the cognitive environment in which doctrinal assent becomes both plausible and compelling. Thus, the persistence of transubstantiation reflects the broader dynamics of religious epistemology, where trust in tradition often outweighs metaphysical plausibility.

With regard to the devotional and liturgical embeddedness of the doctrine, it is more than just a doctrinal proposition. In the Catholic Mass, it is an enacted liturgical reality where the ritual repetition of the Eucharistic celebration embeds the doctrine in the believer’s devotional life. Anthropologists such as Victor Turner have shown that ritual provides a powerful framework for understanding why doctrines like transubstantiation endure within communities of practice. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner notes that ritual actions generate “*communitas*,” a heightened sense of unity and shared meaning that arises when participants enter a liminal space where ordinary categories are suspended (pp. 94-97).⁴⁷¹ Within such liminal environments, symbolic actions acquire

“surpass the limits of natural reason” and are assented to because of the Church’s divine commission as guardian and interpreter of revelation (*Dei Filius*, chs. 3-4). Vatican II reiterates that the Magisterium alone authentically interprets the deposit of faith (*Dei Verbum* §10). Paul VI’s *Mysterium Fidei* further identifies the Eucharist as the “mystery of faith par excellence,” whose mode of presence “cannot be explained by the senses nor by natural reason” (§§15, 39, 47). Thus, the doctrine’s persistence reflects the Catholic epistemic framework in which ecclesial authority and sacramental tradition provide the warrant for affirming mysteries that exceed metaphysical analysis.

⁴⁷⁰ Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

⁴⁷¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969). Turner uses the term “liminal” to describe the transitional phase within ritual in which participants are symbolically removed from ordinary social structures and placed into an in-between state where normal categories, hierarchies, and expectations are suspended. In this threshold space, individuals experience a loosening of conventional boundaries and an intensified openness to symbolic meaning. Liminality therefore heightens the affective and cognitive power of ritual actions, making participants more receptive to experiences of transcendence. Applied to the Eucharist, the liturgical setting creates precisely this kind of liminal environment, one in which the doctrine of real presence becomes experientially plausible because the worshiper is drawn into a space where ordinary metaphysical expectations are bracketed and sacred mystery is foregrounded. His account of liminality also illuminates the experiential intensity of Pentecostal and charismatic worship. These traditions regularly create ritual settings in which participants are symbolically lifted out of ordinary social expectations through extended singing, embodied movement, glossolalia, and spontaneous prayer. The resulting atmosphere functions as a liminal space in Turner’s sense, a threshold in which normal hierarchies loosen, and worshipers experience heightened emotional openness and communal solidarity. In such contexts, reports of divine immediacy, healing, or empowerment mirror Turner’s description of *communitas* as the affective bond generated in

intensified emotional and cognitive force, shaping how participants perceive reality. Applied to the Eucharist, Turner's analysis suggests that the ritual structure of the Mass creates a social and psychological context in which the doctrine of real presence becomes experientially plausible. The sacrament's mysterious framing does more than accompany the ritual it actively deepens its transformative power by drawing participants into a shared experience of transcendence. Therefore, the doctrine's persistence becomes inseparable from its liturgical embodiment.

The role of catechesis and ecclesial identity also plays a crucial role in shaping the believer's understanding of the Eucharist. Even from early childhood Catholics are taught that the Eucharist is the real Body and Blood of Christ, in which this teaching becomes a core component of ecclesial identity. Sociological research indicates that beliefs tied closely to a group's identity are especially difficult to change because they function as markers of belonging and not just ideas to be evaluated. Christian Smith shows that in religious communities, doctrines often operate as social boundaries that signal who is "inside" and who is "outside," which means that questioning them can feel like threatening one's place in the group itself.⁴⁷² When a belief becomes woven into the shared story, practices, and emotional life of a community, people tend to hold onto it even when they cannot fully explain it or when alternative views seem intellectually plausible. In this sense, the durability of doctrines such as the real presence is not simply a matter of theological argument as much as it is of the powerful social forces that shape identity, loyalty, and communal cohesion.⁴⁷³ Thus, the Eucharist serves as a boundary marker that distinguishes Catholic identity from Protestant alternatives, reinforcing the doctrine's durability.

The existential appeal of a tangible, sacramental Christ, which is associated with the doctrine of transubstantiation, offers believers a tangible encounter with Christ that purely symbolic interpretations may have trouble replicating. The desire for sacramental immediacy has deep roots in Christian spirituality. For example, Ignatius of Antioch emphasized the Eucharist as

the transition between ordinary and sacred time. The same dynamics that render the Eucharistic liturgy experientially plausible also operate in Pentecostal and charismatic worship, where the ritual environment primes participants for encounters with the divine (see p.p. 94-97).

⁴⁷² Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 89-94.

⁴⁷³ For a fuller discussion of how doctrines function as social boundary markers that regulate belonging and identity within religious communities and why questioning them can feel like a threat to one's place in the group see Kenneth J. Howell, *Confessional Rigidity in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism: A Theological-Psychological Analysis of Extremes, Trauma, and Spiritual Maturity*. Zenodo, February 4, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18476418>, Introduction, especially the sections drawing on Mary Douglas and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.

“the medicine of immortality,” with later medieval mystics describing the sacrament as a direct participation in Christ’s life.⁴⁷⁴ Therefore, it is this existential appeal of a Christ who is physically present in the sacrament continues to draw believers toward transubstantiation.

In sum, what is the difference between metaphysical plausibility and ecclesial trust? Ultimately, this persistence of transubstantiation reflects the fact that ecclesial trust often outweighs metaphysical plausibility. In other words, believers may acknowledge the conceptual difficulties associated with the doctrine (e.g., including the problem of accidents without a subject) yet still affirm it because it is integral to their religious identity and devotional life. In sum, the doctrine is “ultimately a mystery of faith,” a formulation that captures the primacy of trust over metaphysical coherence.⁴⁷⁵

Epistemic Divergence: Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Zwinglian Models

Here we will consider how each tradition justifies its Eucharistic claims. First, Catholic theology grounds its Eucharistic doctrine in the authority of the Magisterium and the metaphysical framework of transubstantiation. Orthodox theology affirms the real presence while at the same time resisting metaphysical precision, preferring the language of mystery and transformation (*metousiosis*) without Aristotelian categories.⁴⁷⁶ Lutheran theology affirms the real presence through sacramental union, rejecting transubstantiation while insisting that Christ’s body and blood are truly present “in, with, and under” the elements.⁴⁷⁷ Reformed theology affirms a real spiritual presence mediated by the Holy Spirit, while Zwinglian theology interprets the Eucharist as a memorial that signifies yet does not convey Christ’s presence.⁴⁷⁸

Thus, most Christian traditions do not treat metaphysical coherence as the primary criterion for Eucharistic doctrine. The Orthodox appeal to mystery, the Lutheran appeal to sacramental union, and the Reformed appeal to covenantal symbolism all prioritize theological, liturgical, and biblical considerations over metaphysical precision. Even Catholic theology, despite its

⁴⁷⁴ Ignatius of Antioch. *Letter to the Ephesians* in *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 20.

⁴⁷⁵ See section 11. *Logical Fallacies In The Classical Argument For Transubstantiation and Conclusion: The Tension Between Internal Coherence and External Critique*.

⁴⁷⁶ Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 201-205.

⁴⁷⁷ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, LW 37: 169-172.

⁴⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.10-12; Zwingli, *On the Lord’s Supper*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, 183-216.

metaphysical commitments, ultimately grounds the doctrine in ecclesial authority rather than philosophical demonstration.

Table 20. Comparative Epistemic Commitments of Major Eucharistic Traditions

Tradition	Central Epistemic Ground	Mode of Presence	Attitude Toward Metaphysics
Catholic	Magisterial authority	Substantial presence	High metaphysical precision
Orthodox	Liturgical and mystical tradition	Real presence (undefined mode)	Metaphysical reticence
Anglican ⁴⁷⁹	Scriptural authority, reason, and tradition (The Three-Legged Stool)	Real Spiritual Presence; varies from corporeal to receptionist ⁴⁸⁰	Intentional Ambiguity; avoids “how” (mysterious)
Lutheran	Scriptural promise	Sacramental union	Moderate metaphysical articulation
Reformed	Biblical exegesis and covenant theology	Spiritual presence	Minimal metaphysical claims
Zwinglian	Rational coherence and biblical memorialism	Symbolic presence	Non-metaphysical

⁴⁷⁹ Anglican theology approaches the Eucharist through what is often called the “three-legged stool” of Scripture, reason, and tradition. This means Anglicans look first to the Bible, but they also give weight to the wisdom of the early Church and to careful theological reflection. Because of this balanced method, Anglican views of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist range widely. Some Anglicans hold a view close to the Catholic understanding, while others see the presence as spiritual rather than physical, and still others adopt a more symbolic or “receptionist” approach in which Christ is present to the believer rather than in the elements themselves. What unites these positions is a deliberate refusal to define *how* Christ is present. Anglican theology tends to preserve a sense of mystery, affirming real presence while avoiding metaphysical explanations that go beyond Scripture. I have chosen to include Anglicanism in the table because it represents a major Christian tradition with a distinctive epistemic posture toward the Eucharist. Unlike the other models, Anglicanism does not anchor its Eucharistic doctrine in a single metaphysical framework. Instead, it grounds belief in a combination of Scripture, historical continuity, and reasoned reflection, which produces a spectrum of acceptable interpretations. This intentional ambiguity is itself an epistemic stance. Anglicans affirm real presence but decline to specify the mechanism. Including Anglicanism in the table highlights a unique approach to doctrinal justification of one that values theological breadth, liturgical continuity, and conceptual modesty over metaphysical precision.

⁴⁸⁰ With the receptionist view, the presence is tied to the act of receiving, not to the bread and wine themselves. In other words, the elements do not change in their being; instead, Christ is spiritually present to the believer at the moment of faithful reception. Put simply, Christ is present to the communicant, not in the elements, the bread and wine remain bread and wine, and the believer receives Christ spiritually because of faith and the Holy Spirit’s action. This view emerged strongly in parts of the Anglican tradition (especially in the 16th-17th centuries) as a middle way between Catholic transubstantiation and Zwinglian memorialism.

Conclusion: The Limits of Reason and the Logic of Trust

In conclusion, we consider why Eucharistic doctrine ultimately rests on epistemic posture. The diversity of Eucharistic doctrines across Christian traditions reveals that the decisive factor is not metaphysical argumentation as it is an epistemic position. Whether one affirms transubstantiation, sacramental union, spiritual presence, or memorialism depends largely on one's stance toward ecclesial authority, scriptural interpretation, and the role of mystery in theology. In either case, there resides an unavoidable tension between faith, authority, and rational inquiry. It has already been pointed out that transubstantiation is the most metaphysically demanding model and that its coherence depends on accepting divine omnipotence and ecclesial authority as epistemic anchors, and this creates an unavoidable tension between faith and reason. In sum, rational inquiry presses for conceptual clarity, while faith accepts doctrinal claims that exceed the limits of metaphysical explanation.

As the preceding analysis has shown, the various metaphysical models of Eucharistic presence (whether Aristotelian, Reformed, Lutheran, Orthodox, or symbolic) ultimately reach a point where logical demonstration gives way to the deeper question of why believers assent at all. The internal coherence of each framework matters, however, none of them secures conviction solely through metaphysical argumentation. What actually emerges is a pattern in which doctrinal commitment is shaped less by philosophical proof and more by the authority structures, communal practices, and interpretive traditions that form the believer's imagination and religious faith. This observation prepares the way for the central proposition that follows: that the logic of trust, rather than the logic of metaphysics, ultimately governs the believer's assent.

16. Doctrinal Precision or Personal Trust

The question of whether God honors the faith of believers regardless of their Eucharistic tradition touches the pastoral center of the entire debate. Therefore, this is not so much a metaphysical issue as it is a profoundly spiritual one, for it concerns the nature of faith itself. Both theologically and biblically the answer depends on whether faith is understood primarily as doctrinal precision or as personal trust.⁴⁸¹ Christian history reveals that both emphases have shaped the Church's understanding of sacramental participation, and the tension between them continues to animate contemporary discussions. Jaroslav Pelikan's opening chapter in *The Christian Tradition* provides the classic articulation of the distinction between the faith that is believed (*fides quae*) and the faith by which one believes (*fides qua*). Pelikan argues that Christian history has always been shaped by the interplay between doctrinal content and personal trust, and that this tension is constitutive of the Church's development.⁴⁸²

The Biblical Priority of Intent

The biblical witness consistently affirms that God evaluates the heart rather than the technical accuracy of one's conceptual formulations. The Lord's declaration to Samuel that God

⁴⁸¹ Although the contrast between doctrinal precision and personal trust can be overstated, it is not a strict false dichotomy so long as it is understood as a heuristic rather than an absolute division. Christian theology has always held together the *fides quae creditur* (the faith that is believed) and the *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which one believes), and the history of doctrine shows that neither dimension can be reduced to the other. Yet different periods and traditions have emphasized one aspect more strongly than the other, producing distinct approaches to sacramental participation. Patristic writers such as Augustine and Cyril of Jerusalem stressed the necessity of right belief while simultaneously grounding the efficacy of the sacraments in God's gracious action toward the trusting believer. Medieval scholasticism developed increasingly precise metaphysical accounts of the Eucharist, whereas the Reformers often redirected attention toward the believer's relational trust in Christ and the Spirit's work. Contemporary theology continues to navigate this tension, recognizing that faith involves both cognitive assent and personal reliance, and that the Church's sacramental life has always been shaped by the interplay between these two modes of believing. In sum, the distinction is not a false dichotomy. It is a conceptual tool that illuminates the diverse ways Christians have understood what it means for God to honor the faith of those who come to the table.

⁴⁸² Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, "The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition" (100-600), 1:1-5.

looks not at outward appearance but at the heart has long served as a foundational principle for Christian moral and sacramental theology. 1 Samuel 16:7 has long been interpreted as establishing a theological principle that God evaluates the inward disposition rather than external markers of correctness. Patristic and medieval commentators consistently read the verse as teaching that intention and the orientation of the heart carry greater weight before God than visible performance or intellectual precision.⁴⁸³ The New Testament reinforces this by teaching that salvation is grounded in grace received through faith rather than in intellectual mastery of doctrinal detail. Ephesians 2:8-9 has been central to Christian teaching on the nature of salvation, emphasizing that grace is received through faith and not through human achievement or intellectual mastery. Patristic, medieval, and Reformation commentators consistently interpret the passage as grounding salvation in God's initiative rather than in the believer's doctrinal precision, thereby underscoring that trust in God's gracious action both precedes and exceeds the believer's conceptual understanding.⁴⁸⁴ Early Christian writers such as Augustine likewise emphasized that the efficacy of the sacraments is rooted in God's action and the believer's disposition rather than in metaphysical comprehension.⁴⁸⁵

Within this framework, Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me" has been interpreted across traditions as a call to obedient participation rather than a demand for metaphysical explanation.⁴⁸⁶ In its biblical sense, the act of remembrance signifies covenantal fidelity and relational trust rather than mere cognitive recall. Nothing in the Lukan narrative suggests a change in the bread's ontological structure; instead, Jesus frames the action within Israel's established pattern of ritual remembrance, where symbolic acts re-present God's saving work without altering the physical elements themselves. As was noted previously in this paper, biblical miracles are public, sensory, and empirically verifiable events, whereas the Eucharistic change in later doctrine is defined as non-sensory and non-empirical by its very nature. In short, this contrast underscores that Luke's account is liturgical and narrative, not metaphysical and that the verse establishes the practice, not the ontology. Later doctrinal developments, especially those

⁴⁸³ See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.36; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 12, a. 1, where both affirm that the moral and spiritual value of an act is determined chiefly by its interior intention.

⁴⁸⁴ See Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 83-85; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 113, a. 4; Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 127-130, where each affirms that salvation is grounded in divine grace received through faith, not in human works or intellectual merit.

⁴⁸⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.36.

⁴⁸⁶ Luke 22:19.

employing Aristotelian categories, do not arise from the text itself but instead from theological reflection seeking to articulate how Christ is present in the rite. Thus, Luke 22:19 functions as the foundation of Eucharistic practice while remaining silent on the metaphysical mechanisms later traditions debate.

Therefore, the primary honor rendered to God in the Eucharist is the believer's faithful participation expressed in love and gratitude, even when the mechanics of Christ's presence remain a mystery. Contemporary theologians across denominational lines have frequently noted that Scripture nowhere requires a specific theory of Eucharistic change as a condition for divine acceptance.⁴⁸⁷

Differing Denominational Standards

Even though Scripture emphasizes intent, Christian traditions have nevertheless developed distinct doctrinal expectations regarding Eucharistic participation. Many Protestant communities adopt an inclusivist posture holding that a person's sincere faith in Christ is sufficient for participation and that the precise mechanics of the sacrament are secondary. This view is rooted in the Reformation conviction that faith unites the believer to Christ apart from metaphysical speculation.⁴⁸⁸ Methodist and Presbyterian theologians argue that God honors the believer's trust even when their understanding of the sacrament is incomplete. Reformed theology (particularly in the Calvinist tradition) maintains that God honors faith by granting genuine spiritual nourishment through the Holy Spirit to those who approach the table with sincerity. Calvin insisted that the Spirit lifts believers to partake of Christ in heaven, a view that places the emphasis on the believer's disposition and the Spirit's agency rather than on metaphysical precision.⁴⁸⁹ This "covenantal" approach does two things: it affirms real presence and grounds its efficacy in the believer's union with Christ.

⁴⁸⁷ Gordon T. Smith, *A Holy Meal: The Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 23-27. Across Christian traditions, Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me" has been interpreted primarily as a call to obedient participation (a ritual reenactment that shapes communal identity) rather than a demand for metaphysical explanation.

⁴⁸⁸ Luther does not represent the minimal-metaphysics wing of this tradition. While he rejected transubstantiation's Aristotelian framework, he fiercely insisted on the real, objective presence of Christ "in, with, and under" the elements and refused to reduce the Supper to a symbolic or purely memorial act. The inclusivist, low-metaphysical posture is more characteristic of the Reformed, evangelical, and free-church streams than of classical Lutheranism. Luther shares the Reformation's emphasis on faith, yet unlike later Protestants, he does not subordinate sacramental ontology to it. Instead, he grounds the believer's participation in Christ's promise, not in the believer's sincerity.

⁴⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.17.10-12.

However, Catholic and Orthodox theology maintain that the fullness of sacramental grace is tied to the objective reality of the Eucharist as instituted by Christ. While both traditions affirm God's mercy toward all, they hold that the sacrament's ontological character is not dependent on individual belief and instead on the Church's faithful preservation of Christ's words.⁴⁹⁰ Patristic writers such as Ignatius of Antioch and Cyril of Jerusalem insisted that the Eucharist is what Christ declares it to be, and contemporary Catholic and Orthodox theologians continue to emphasize the Church's responsibility to safeguard this mystery.⁴⁹¹

The Principle of Scruples

The Apostle Paul's discussion in Romans 14 provides a biblical template for navigating differences of conscience within the Christian community. Paul tells the Church that God honors both the one who eats and the one who abstains, provided each acts with the intention of pleasing the Lord. Romans 14:6 stands at the heart of Paul's pastoral strategy for managing differences of conscience within the early Christian community. In a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile believers, disputes over food, purity, and sacred days were cultural as well as theological. Paul refuses to resolve these disagreements by imposing uniformity; instead, he reframes the issue around intentionality. His repeated use of the phrase εἰς κύριον ("unto the Lord") suggests that the moral value of both eating and abstaining lies not in the act itself but in the telic orientation of the believer. Whether one participates or refrains, the decisive criterion is that the action is performed *for the Lord* and accompanied by thanksgiving. This grammatical and cultural framing yields a theological principle that resonates far beyond the immediate dispute: God honors divergent practices when they arise from sincere devotion and a clear conscience. Paul's argument does not elevate one position over the other. Instead, he insists that both are acceptable when directed toward Christ. Therefore, Romans 14:6 provides a biblical template for navigating non-essential

⁴⁹⁰ CCC §§1373-1381 present the Catholic Church's most concentrated statement on Christ's Eucharistic presence. The Catechism affirms that Christ is present to the Church in many ways, although "most especially in the Eucharistic species" (§1373), establishing a hierarchy of presence. It then defines this presence as "true, real, and substantial" (§1374), meaning that the whole Christ is present not symbolically but by a unique sacramental mode. The Catechism grounds this presence in Christ's own words and the power of the Holy Spirit (§1375) and reaffirms Trent's teaching that the Eucharistic change is transubstantiation (i.e., the conversion of the entire substance of bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood while the accidents remain (§1376). Because Christ is wholly present under each species and in every part of each species (§1377), the Eucharist is rightly adored (§1378). The section concludes with Aquinas's confession that the senses do not perceive this change and that faith rests solely on Christ's word (§1381), encapsulating the Catholic claim that the Eucharistic presence is non-sensory, non-empirical, and grounded in divine promise rather than perceptible evidence.

⁴⁹¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 7; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 4.

differences within the Church. It prioritizes intention over mechanism, conscience over uniformity, and charity over correctness, offering a model of principled inclusivity that has shaped Christian approaches to contested practices including (by analogy) later debates about sacramental participation and the role of faith in ritual obedience.

Early Christian interpreters such as John Chrysostom read Romans 14 as teaching that God evaluates the sincerity of the heart rather than the precision of one's reasoning in matters not essential to salvation. Chrysostom emphasizes that Paul's repeated phrase εἰς κύριον ("unto the Lord") signals that the decisive criterion is the believer's intention, not the external act itself.⁴⁹² This raises the natural question of which Christian traditions actually classify the Eucharist as *essential* to salvation. In historic sacramental theology, the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox churches treat the Eucharist as normatively necessary for the life of salvation because it is the ordinary means of union with Christ. By contrast, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and evangelical traditions affirm the importance of the Lord's Supper although they do not consider it a requirement for salvation, grounding salvation instead in faith alone and viewing the sacrament as strengthening grace rather than conferring it indispensably.

Modern ethicists and biblical scholars frequently appeal to this principle presented by Paul when addressing disputes over sacramental theology, noting that Paul's pastoral concern centers on the believer's intention and charity rather than on uniformity of understanding. In his commentary on Romans 14:1-12, James D.G. Dunn emphasizes that Paul's concern is not adjudicating which group ("the weak" or "the strong") has the correct theological reasoning. Rather the concern is over cultivating a community in which differing convictions can coexist under the lordship of Christ. Dunn notes that Paul reframes the dispute by shifting attention from the *content* of the practice (eating or abstaining) to the *intention* behind it. For Dunn, the repeated phrase εἰς κύριον ("unto the Lord") signals that the decisive issue is the believer's orientation toward Christ. What matters is that each practice is undertaken with thanksgiving and fidelity of conscience. Dunn also stresses the cultural complexity of the Roman house churches: Jewish dietary scruples, Gentile indifference to such concerns, and the social dynamics of shared meals in a mixed community. Paul's pastoral genius, in Dunn's reading, lies in refusing to collapse these differences into a single normative pattern. Instead, Paul insists that God "accepts" both groups

⁴⁹² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 514-516.

because both act out of sincere devotion. Therefore, Dunn reads Romans 14:6 as a charter text for Christian pluralism in non-essential matters and as a passage in which Paul protects the integrity of conscience while preserving the unity of the community under Christ's lordship.⁴⁹³

When applied to the Eucharistic debate, the principle of scruples suggests that God honors the faith of those who approach the table with reverence, whether they interpret the sacrament as a miraculous transformation, a spiritual communion, or a solemn memorial. The diversity of Christian practice does not negate the sincerity of devotion, and the work of the Holy Spirit is not confined or restricted to a single metaphysical model.

Conclusion: Faith and the Logic of Trust

From a spiritual and pastoral standpoint, many theologians conclude that God is more concerned with the faith of the communicant than with the philosophical system they employ to describe the sacrament. A Catholic kneeling before what they believe to be the transubstantiated Body of Christ, a Baptist receiving the elements in solemn remembrance, and an Orthodox believer standing in awe before the mystery of *metousiosis* are all directing their faith toward the same Christ. And although their conceptual frameworks may differ, their devotion is unified in its object. Reformed theology in particular emphasizes that the Spirit meets believers according to the measure of their faith which suggests that divine grace accommodates itself to the believer's sincere intention.⁴⁹⁴ With this being said, the Eucharistic debate ultimately returns to the question of trust: whether God honors the heart that seeks Him even when the mind cannot fully articulate the metaphysical depths of the mystery. The following table summarizes how major traditions answer this question, highlighting where they converge on God's honoring of sincere faith and where they differ in their doctrinal expectations for receiving the Eucharist.

⁴⁹³ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 796-802.

⁴⁹⁴ Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 221-224.

Table 21. How Christian Traditions Understand God's Honor of Sincere Eucharistic Faith

Feature	Tradition	Does God Honor the Faith Regardless of View?	How Participation Is Understood
Paul's Teaching (Romans 14:6)	Early Church / Biblical Foundation	Yes	God honors intention: both eating and abstaining are accepted when done "unto the Lord."
Mainline Protestant	Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical	Yes	Faith in Christ is primary; Eucharistic mechanics are secondary.
Reformed / Calvinist	Reformed / Calvinist	Yes (with nuance)	The Spirit nourishes sincere believers spiritually even without metaphysical clarity.
Roman Catholic	Roman Catholic	Partially	God honors faith, while full sacramental grace is tied to the Eucharist's objective reality.
Eastern Orthodox	Eastern Orthodox	Partially	God is merciful; however, participation assumes acceptance of the Eucharist as mystery and reality.
Memorialist	Zwinglian / Low-Church Protestant	Yes	The act is obedience and remembrance; God honors the heart, not metaphysics.
Sacramental / Liturgical	High-Church Anglican / Orthodox-leaning	Yes (within bounds)	Faith is honored, although participation assumes reverence for the sacrament's sacred character.

17. Conclusion

The long history of Eucharistic reflection reveals that Christian attempts to articulate and fully explain the presence of Christ at the communion table inevitably press against the limits of metaphysical language, conceptual precision, and the capacities of human reason. From the earliest centuries of Church history theologians recognized that the Eucharist stands at the intersection of divine mystery and human understanding. Patristic writers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Augustine (to name just a few) approached the sacrament with a posture that combined *realism* with *restraint*. They did so by affirming a genuine participation in Christ while acknowledging that the mode of this participation exceeded the categories available to them. As we observed earlier in this paper, their reflections established a path in which the Eucharist was treated not as a problem to be solved but as a mystery to be received. Medieval scholasticism (and most particularly in the work of Thomas Aquinas) sought to clarify this mystery through the conceptual framework and language of Aristotelian metaphysics with an intent of producing the doctrine of transubstantiation as a way of safeguarding the Church's confession of Christ's real presence. Still, even Aquinas insisted that the senses fail and only faith clings to Christ's word, and thus a recognition that the metaphysical account is a tool of explanation rather than an exhaustive description of divine action.

The Reformation challenged the Western consensus not because the Reformers denied Christ's presence, rather because they differed on how to best preserve the integrity of the biblical witness, the nature of faith, and the relationship between sign and reality. Luther defended a strong sacramental realism grounded in Christ's promise, while Calvin stressed a pneumatic presence mediated by the Holy Spirit, and Zwingli emphasized memorial participation as an act of obedient and covenantal remembrance. These diverse models reflect deeper theological commitments concerning the nature of faith, the role of the Church, and the epistemic status of metaphysical claims. Modern Catholic theology continues to affirm transubstantiation while increasingly

acknowledging the analogical and apophatic limits of metaphysical language. Contemporary Protestant theology often emphasizes the formative, communal, and covenantal dimensions of the meal rather than its ontological mechanics. And secular philosophers and scientists, from David Hume to contemporary materialists, have challenged the coherence of Eucharistic claims by appealing to empirical constraints, although such critiques often presuppose a metaphysical framework that the doctrine itself does not inhabit.

Across these traditions, a consistent biblical thread emerges. Scripture repeatedly prioritizes the intention of the heart over the precision of conceptual explanation. Paul's teaching in Romans 14, reinforced by the broader canonical witness, suggests that God honors the sincere devotion of those who act "unto the Lord," even when their reasoning differs. Early interpreters such as John Chrysostom understood this principle as a safeguard for Christian unity, insisting that God evaluates the sincerity of the believer rather than the correctness of their metaphysical account. This pastoral insight does not eliminate doctrinal differences, nor does it flatten the real theological stakes involved in Eucharistic claims. Instead, it reframes the debate by reminding the Church that the Eucharist is fundamentally an encounter with the living Christ, not a test of philosophical ingenuity.

The collective weight of historical, theological, and philosophical reflection suggests that no single metaphysical model can fully capture the mystery of Christ's presence. Each tradition offers a partial insight shaped by its own conceptual resources and theological priorities. For example, transubstantiation provides a metaphysical grammar or sentence structure for affirming *substantial* presence, the Reformed tradition highlights the Holy *Spirit's* mediating role, the Lutheran view provides a *sacramental* framework, memorialist *symbolic* accounts emphasize obedience and remembrance, and Orthodox theology preserves the apophatic *self-effacement* that refuses to reduce *mystery* to *mechanism*. What unites these diverse approaches is the agreed upon conviction that the Eucharist is a gift of grace in which Christ meets His people. The Church's task (i.e., universal Church, not denomination) is not to eliminate conceptual diversity and instead is to ensure that such diversity remains ordered toward a three-fold goal of the worship of Christ, the unity of Christ (His body, the Church), and the formation of a people into the image of Christ (whose lives bear witness to the reality the sacrament proclaims).

In the end, the Eucharist exposes the limits of human reason and invites the Church into a positional relationship of trust. And although theologians may continue to refine metaphysical

accounts, and philosophers may continue to probe their coherence, the heart of the sacrament remains the same: Christ gives Himself to His people and they receive Him in faith. Whether one kneels before what is confessed as a miracle, stands in awe before a sacred mystery, or participates in remembrance of a saving act, the orientation is toward the same Christ. Thus, when understood in this way, the Eucharist moves from a site of doctrinal divergence and becomes a place where the Church learns again that faith seeks understanding, that mystery exceeds explanation, and that God honors those who come to Him with sincere hearts.

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

Accident

A nonessential property that can change without altering a thing's underlying nature. *"In formal logic, an accident is a property that can change, be lost, or be added without changing the essential nature of the thing."*

See also: Substance; Dimensive Quantity; Accidents Without a Subject.

Accidents Without a Subject

A Thomistic claim that in the Eucharist the accidents of bread and wine remain even though their substance no longer exists. *"Aquinas works to resolve the apparent contradiction by asserting that...God directly sustains the accidents in existence without a created substance serving as their subject."*

See also: Transubstantiation; Dimensive Quantity.

Actus Purus (Pure Act)

A classical description of God as fully actualized being with no unrealized potential. *"God...is instead actus purus...whose mode of being excludes the very conditions that make accidents possible."*

See also: Divine Simplicity; Immutability.

Analogy of Being (Analogia Entis)

The principle that language about God is analogical rather than univocal or equivocal. *"Divine names are analogical and reflect the creature's mode of reception rather than God's internal state."*

See also: Apophatic Theology; Divine Simplicity.

Apophatic Theology

A theological method emphasizing God's transcendence and the inadequacy of human concepts. *"Dionysius...arguing that God is 'beyond being' and therefore beyond the categorial structures that apply to creatures."*

See also: Analogy of Being; Divine Simplicity.

Composite Being

A being composed of parts, properties, or principles and therefore dependent on a cause to unite them. *“Any composite requires a cause to unite its parts and thus cannot be the ultimate explanation of being.”*

See also: Non-Composition; Divine Simplicity.

Contingency Principle

The metaphysical principle that contingent beings require an external cause for their existence.

“A contingent being cannot explain the existence of another contingent being because both lack the power to exist through themselves.”

See also: Ipsum Esse Subsistens; Pure Act.

Created Substance

A finite being whose essence is distinct from its act of existence and whose nature is expressed through accidents. *“Finite beings exist as compounds whose nature is either perfected, modified, or expressed through accidental properties.”*

See also: Substance; Accident.

Dimensive Quantity

The spatial extension of a body that serves as the structural basis for other accidents. *“Aquinas identifies ‘dimensive quantity’ as the key...providing the spatial ‘scaffolding’ that allows the remaining appearances to continue coherently without a subject.”*

See also: Accidents Without a Subject; Transubstantiation.

Divine Simplicity

The doctrine that God is not composed of parts or properties and that His essence is identical with His existence. *“God’s attributes are not qualities distinct from His essence but are identical with it.”*

See also: Immutability; Non-Composition.

Divine Substance

God’s unique, non-composite mode of being, identical with existence itself. *“God is not a substance in the same genus as creatures but is instead actus purus...whose mode of being*

excludes the very conditions that make accidents possible.”

See also: Created Substance; Divine Simplicity.

Immutability

The classical claim that God cannot undergo change because change implies potentiality.

“Because God is absolutely perfect, He cannot undergo any change whatsoever.”

See also: Pure Act; Non-Potentiality.

Ipsum Esse Subsistens

A Thomistic term meaning “the very act of subsisting existence itself.” *“He is existence itself (ipsum esse subsistens).”*

See also: Divine Simplicity; Pure Act.

Logical Being

A conceptual entity existing only in the intellect, possessing neither actuality nor potentiality.

“Logical beings have neither actuality nor potentiality...a logical being cannot ‘become’ anything.”

See also: Real Being; Potentiality.

Metaphysical Accident

A perfection or property that inheres in a substance although it does not constitute its essence.

“An accident is a real ontological addition to a substance (not just some kind of modification).”

See also: Substance; Dimensive Quantity.

Non-Composition

The principle that God is not composed of parts or properties. *“If God possessed accidents, then...He would cease to be absolutely simple.”*

See also: Divine Simplicity; Immutability.

Non-Potentiality

The doctrine that God has no unrealized capacities because He is Pure Act. *“Since He is Pure Act, He cannot possess unrealized capacities or receive new determinations.”*

See also: Immutability; Pure Act.

Potentiality

The capacity for change or further actualization, present in creatures yet absent in God. *“To acquire or to lose an accident is to undergo a transition...which presupposes potentiality.”*

See also: Pure Act; Accident.

Real Being

A being that exists outside the mind and possesses both actuality and potentiality. *“Real beings possess both actuality and potentiality, since anything that exists outside the mind has some act of being.”*

See also: Logical Being; Substance.

Substance

The underlying essence or “whatness” of a thing, distinct from its accidents. *“A substance that possesses accidents is composite...a unity constituted by a metaphysical core together with various accidental properties.”*

See also: Accident; Substantial Change.

Substantial Change

A transformation in which one substance ceases to exist, and another comes into being. *“The substance of bread and wine ceases to exist and is replaced by the substance of Christ’s Body and Blood.”*

See also: Transubstantiation; Substance.

Transubstantiation

The Eucharistic doctrine that the substance of bread and wine is wholly replaced by Christ’s Body and Blood while the accidents remain. *“The sensible accidents of bread and wine remain even though their substance has been wholly replaced by the Body and Blood of Christ.”*

See also: Accidents Without a Subject; Dimensive Quantity.

Unity of Divine Attributes

The classical claim that God’s attributes are identical with His essence and differ only in human conceptualization. *“God ‘is what He has,’ meaning that divine attributes are not distinct perfections but rather are identical with the divine essence.”*

See also: Divine Simplicity; Analogy of Being.

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About the Author

Kenneth J. Howell, Th.D., is an independent researcher whose work integrates theology, philosophy, ethics, and related disciplines to illuminate the deeper forces shaping religious identity, doctrinal development, and inter-tradition conflict. His research doctorate in theology and ethics examined the interrelation of theological reasoning, metaphysical frameworks, moral analysis, and historical method, culminating in his dissertation *Reality, Rationalism, and Reason*, a systematic study of Jesus the Christ through the lenses of classical theism, philosophical anthropology, and doctrinal interpretation. His scholarship consistently seeks to clarify how metaphysical assumptions shape theological claims and how those claims, in turn, influence the lived experience of faith communities. In this current study, Howell extends his longstanding interest in the intersection of metaphysics and theology by examining the logical and conceptual architecture underlying the doctrine of transubstantiation. Drawing on classical metaphysics, patristic and scholastic sources, analytic philosophy, and contemporary scientific critique, he analyzes the claim that the Eucharist presents “accidents without a subject” and evaluates its coherence within both historical and modern frameworks. His work aims not only to map the internal logic of the doctrine but also to situate it within the broader ecumenical landscape, offering readers a rigorous, interdisciplinary account of how metaphysical commitments shape Eucharistic theology and its reception across Christian traditions. His research has been published in numerous curated scholarly communities, both nationally and internationally, across theology, biblical studies, ethics, religious studies, and analytical psychology.