

“Transubstantiation: Theology, History, and Christian Unity”

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Report prepared by Sean Pierce
And Jonathan J. Armstrong

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Transcript:

[1] Jonathan Armstrong: Today it is our huge honor to be speaking with Dr. Brett Salkeld arch diocesan theologian for the Archdiocese of Regina, Saskatchewan, and also the book editor of the journal *pro ecclesia*, and author of the text that we'll be discussing today *Transubstantiation: theology, history and Christian unity*. Dr. Salkeld, thank you so much for being with us today.

[2] Brett Salkeld: Thanks for having me.

[3] Jonathan Armstrong: To begin with this text. *transubstantiation* is not the only book that you've dedicated to an important point of ecumenical theology. I like to refer back to briefly to your book in 2011, which you released titled "Can Catholics and Evangelicals Agree about Purgatory and the Last Judgement?" available from Paulist Press. What was your journey, if I may ask, to writing this book on transubstantiation?

[4] Brett Salkeld: So, I, I was always interested in Catholic-Evangelical questions from my own personal background and family and, and experiences in my undergrad. I went to grad school in theology, I wanted to pursue like the hot questions, right that when, when a Catholic meets a Baptist, and the Baptist says, like, tell me about, you know, papal infallibility or Marian dogma or purgatory. I wanted to-I wanted to really dig into those questions, because they just come up all the time, and I wasn't satisfied with how equipped people were to have those conversations, I think we were largely equipped to try to defeat each other with proof texts, which generally just reinforces the idea that the other person is being stubborn.

[5] And so, I wrote on purgatory for my master's thesis, actually, and managed to get that turned into a little book. And then I was looking for something similar, but maybe a little meatier for my doctoral dissertation, and I was taking a course on ecumenical dialogue, and I had to do the class presentation on the Eucharist. And in my discussion with my professor, and in the course description, and then the paper I wrote for that class, I realized that I had some misconceptions, and I was misrepresenting the Catholic position. And if I was getting that wrong, and I was arguing with Protestants who, who thought the same thing I did, they just thought it was wrong. But, but we, we were both mistaken about what the Catholic Church actually taught. I thought, well, here is something to work on. So, and at the same time, my professor who was going to be my dissertation director, we already knew we plan to work together. She came to me at the end of the semester, and said, I think we found your dissertation topic, and I said, I think so too. So that's, that's where it came from.

[6] Jonathan Armstrong: One of the-one of the themes of our dialogues, here in this interview program is at the point of ecumenical dialogue, and I'm fascinated to hear that you took a graduate class on the subject, may I just ask what kind of books you read for that class?

[7] Brett Salkeld: there was a lot of reading, so we read a lot of agreed statements. So-so throughout the, you know, the last 50 years or so different Christian bodies have released all kinds of common statements. So, the most, you know, famous one is the Joint Declaration on Justification, signed by the Lutherans and Catholics, most Lutheran and-and the Roman Catholic Church. But-but many others, so that was a big part of the reading. And then we would read particular texts on different issues. My professor was particularly interested in the question of authority in the church teaching authority. So, we read a lot about early, early development of structures of authority, like bishops, and like, where does the papacy come in and all those kinds of things. So, some historical texts on those. It was it was largely like those kinds of primary text rather than say, a textbook that walks you through maybe if there was such a book that might be good for an undergrad class, but at the graduate level, we were really digging into the primary sources.

[8] Jonathan Armstrong: Amazing. Thank you very much, Dr. Salkeld in the preface to your book, transubstantiation, you write this, there may be no other issue about which Catholics and Protestants have been so assured that they must disagree, but about which the vast majority of the ostensible disputants know so little. This is the great conundrum of transubstantiation in ecumenical dialogue, we are quite certain we disagree about a word that almost no one, Catholic or Protestant, actually understands. This is an astonishing way to open your book and an astonishing insight. Would you be willing to begin us with a definition How do you define transubstantiation?

[9] Brett Salkeld: Yes, okay. I'll give you the technical definition and then I'll break it down. On a little because this is, you'll see immediately where the problem comes in. Right. So, transubstantiation technically means that at the consecration of the Eucharist, the substance of the bread becomes the substance of Christ body, and the substance of the wine becomes the substance of Christ's blood. Now, the problem immediately arises, we don't know what "substance" is. It gets used in a lot of different ways. in contemporary English, we use it often to mean a kind of physical reality, right? If there was a, there was a powdery white substance at the crime scene. And so, substance in order to understand your transubstantiation, you need to know that for Thomas Aquinas, and-and those, you know, around that time, substance is a category that helps us say, what is the deepest reality of a thing.

[10] And technically, it is what is present to the intellect, not what is present to the senses. And so, you and I can sense it, let's say we see something that's kind of granular, and white and small. And it might be salt, and it might be sugar, we don't know. And so we, you know, lick our finger and take a little taste of it. And then we see if it's sweet or

salty, and through all of that physical apprehension, then our mind says, this is salt or this is sugar, but we can, we can't directly encounter those things. And-and the way we know that is because things can change, you can get a haircut, you can grow or shrink, you can get an arm amputated. And I can still recognize my intellect can still recognize Jonathan, even when the physical is changing.

[11] So, our intellect recognizes some deeper reality that is expressed with the physical but not identifiable with the physical. Medieval theologians found that category really useful because they wanted to say that this is really, really, really real. They wanted to uphold the tradition of the church, that God is the actor, and this is not just us doing something in our own minds. But they also needed to avoid things that look like cannibalism or, or that made it look like God was kind of deceiving us in the sacrament because there was there was a physical change, but we couldn't see it or perceive it somehow. And substance allowed them to do that work.

[12] Jonathan Armstrong: When Thomas Aquinas uses the language of substance in his understanding-his theology of transubstantiation, is he using a one-to-one correspondence way, the Aristotelian category of substance that Aristotle lays out in his famous 10 categories?

[13] Brett Salkeld: it's very close-as a category. It's very close to what Aristotle uses, but there's an important difference, which is, the framework with within which the category is used is different because Thomas believes in creation. And if you believe in creation, then then substance which for-for Aristotle, is that which sort of stands independently-independently subsisting thing for Thomas, there's actually no such thing besides God as-as an independently subsisting thing.

[14] So, substance for Thomas depends on God's creating something to be the kind of thing that it is. So even though it functions in its relation to other acts to other things like accidents, the way it does for Aristotle, there's actually a pretty significant shift that that that is important for sacramental theology. That comes from Thomas's doctrine of creation, it actually gets fairly complex. But I do walk through that in some detail in the book to show how Thomas transforms Aristotle, because one of the critiques of Thomas is that he lets Aristotle's categories control his sacramental theology. And in my argument is that he actually recasts those categories within a Christian and biblical worldview that believes in in creation, and that allows him to use them well in a sacramental theology.

[15] Jonathan Armstrong: Dr. Salkeld, thank you very much for that reflection. One of the most important ecumenical documents of the last several decades was produced in 1982. You're well aware of it was the faith and order commission of the World Council of Churches, which convened at Lima in 1982. And they produce this document called baptism, Eucharist and ministry. Many people look back to this document BEM as one of

the last major milestones that we have in achieving real ecumenical process. How is it that this document BEM informed your own analysis of transubstantiation?

[16] Brett Salkeld: So, it was a super important document. It avoids the term transubstantiation, which was kind of the way you did things at the time. The idea was transubstantiation was too controversial. And so-so there's two things that were really important about that work for my book. The first is that it was remarkable how many different Christian denominations were willing to sign up for something like real presence, something says God is the real actor. There's genuine change in the Eucharist, when it's consecrated by, you know, an ordained minister like this, this is real. This isn't just, you know, community meaning making in our own minds.

[17] It's remarkable how much agreement could be had on that. But on the other hand, the avoidance of the term transubstantiation led in the responses to an interesting pattern. So, there's actually six volumes of collected responses to BEM that you can find at your theological library. And when-when you go looking on this question on transubstantiation many Protestant groups say, this looks pretty good. But we're not sure that it has explicitly rejected transubstantiation. So, if it means transubstantiation, we're not on board. But if it doesn't, this looks really great. And then a couple groups, say, this, this looks like transubstantiation, which would be good for us, but we would really appreciate it if it would just say so.

[18] And so, my conclusion was, the Christian people, if they want to be able to trust that the ecumenical agreements are legit, and take their own concerns into account, they need to see transubstantiation dealt with head on, because it operates in our minds as a kind of identity marker that needs to be either appropriately rejected or appropriately accepted. And I also show I think, in those responses, that the people who are saying they want to see it or don't want to see it don't always understand, in fact, most of the time don't understand what it is.

[19] So, they-they reject something that they don't understand. So, I said, Okay, then we need to tackle this head on and get really clear on what it is because I think transubstantiation actually does a lot of the work that Protestants want to do. And I try to show that in the book. And we'll get to that maybe in a couple of the later questions. And so far, the response I've heard from Protestants who've read the book has been very positive. They're like, Yeah, actually, it's not what I thought it was. And it's not so far from what I believe in it does do some of the work that that Protestant would want done in the realm of sacramental theology.

[20] Jonathan Armstrong: We really appreciate the work that you have done in this. Dr. Salkeld in your book transubstantiation. You provide a thoroughgoing historical analysis of three of the major Christian theologians to tackle this issue, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and John Calvin. And for those of an evangelical ilk, the first question that we may ask is, wait a minute, this word transubstantiation is not a biblical word. And so

how do you make sense of the-the question or the-the concern that is really the transubstantiation arises from the medieval context, these medieval school men making use of Aristotelian philosophical categories, but not really approaching it from a biblical mindset? What's your view?

[21] Brett Salkeld: So, I mean, it's certainly the case that it emerges relatively late in the tradition, and it emerges in response to a particular problem. So, the church wants to affirm something like real presence. Basically, from the beginning. This is a very ancient doctrine, and it seems relatively unproblematic for the church fathers. But as the metaphysical worldview shifts in Western Europe, questions start to rise first in the ninth century, but then, especially in the 11th century, that looked like modern questions, which is basically, this can't be real, because real means physical, and it's obviously not physical. So, it must just be a symbol. And of course, it is a symbol a sacrament is a symbol, but the problem is, it must be only a symbol, right?

[22] And so then, some people respond to that with quite physical categories. They make the same mistake as the other people, they just choose the other option, right? It's either that only a symbol or it's a kind of clandestine physical transformation, and neither of those actually work with-with the biblical witness or the or the patristic tradition. So, transubstantiation emerges in a new philosophical context, to try to say what the fathers were saying, which is something like there is an earthly element to that, then signifies and leads to the heavenly element. And that is, and that element is not just something we're doing in our own minds, but it's actually an action of God. And so, the, the accidents of bread and wine are effectively the sign and the substance of body and blood are effectively the-the signified. And that's-that's an Augustinian distinction, right sign and signified is an ancient distinction in sacramental theology, but it was being recast in a new context to be able to try to say what the fathers had always been saying, when their language no longer sufficed, because the philosophical context had shifted into this sort of false dichotomy between an overly physical sometimes even almost cannibalistic, understanding, and sort of mere symbolism.

[23] Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you very much, Dr. Salkeld. You, you review carefully Luther's view of the real presence of Christ, which is usually called consubstantiation Of course, you know, very well consubstantiation comes from or includes the Latin prefix con meaning with, and Luther often explained his view of transubstantiation or consubstantiation being that Christ was present in, with, an under the bread in the wine. Could you help us out here? What are the substantive differences between this view of consubstantiation and transubstantiation?

[24] Brett Salkeld: Right, yeah, and this is a super important question, and I'm gonna say at the front end, this takes a lot of work in the book. So, if you're really interested, this this, this gets fairly complex. I'll try to, you know, a rough fly over here. The first thing first thing to mention is that Luther never uses the word consubstantiation and at least some Lutherans find it offensive to have their doctrine called consubstantiation they'll

say it's a parody or even a calumny of Orthodox Lutheran belief, but in, with, an under his Lutheran language, for sure Luther uses that, and he does follow the late medieval nominalist who prefer consubstantiation over transubstantiation.

[25] It's important to recognize, first off Luther's intention in preferring this articulation. He's trying to say something that Thomas says 300 years earlier, which is that the-the accidents of bread and wine, the physical perceivable sensible realities are not a deception. So, Thomas makes it very clear that these are the sign. But between Thomas and the reformation, most nominalist theologians start to talk about the bread and wine as if they're a disguise, rather than as if they are assigned. And that's rejected at the Reformation. And Thomas Aquinas would have said like three cheers like, yeah, that's wrong. So, the Anglican 39 articles say that transubstantiation overthrow with the nature of the sacrament. And the concern there is precisely that if it's if bread and wine are not a sign, then it's not a sacrament, because sacraments are based on sign, and sacraments can't be a disguise.

[26] And so when-when Luther says the bread and wine are really there, he wants to affirm something that Thomas is also affirming. But so, so I think the basic intention is, is there that Thomas reject- considers consubstantiation and rejects it, and he rejects it because for him, it's not it's not sacramental enough, because it puts the body and blood and the bread and wine at the same metaphysical level, they both exist substantially, which means that the-the patristic distinction between sign and signified gets kind of collapsed. And so, for Thomas, he wants the accidents to function as the sign and the substance to be the signified.

[27] When you get to Luther and they exist at the same metaphysical level, you start to see ramifications for Luther and his debate with the with the Swiss under Zwingli where he ends up denying that the bread and wine are signs at all, because the Zwinglians say, well, they're only signs. And then Luther says, Well, no, they're not signs. It's really Jesus and it gets a little awkward and even most Lutherans think that Luther didn't completely succeed here. He-he was striving for something that I think most of us Catholics, Lutheran otherwise could agree with, but his own system. Once he was in that polemic context with the Victorians had him saying things that were a little bit awkward. And so, as a Catholic who thinks transubstantiation works, I sort of commend it to Protestants as doing better on this count than then is generally thought, you know, Protestants are worried that transubstantiation ignores the sign value.

[28] And Catholics can sometimes say, well, it's not a symbol. What Catholics should say is it's not only a symbol when Catholics say it's not a symbol that we kind of misrepresent something, and we-we leave ourselves open to a critique that Protestants can rightly make, but it's a sacrament, of course, it's a symbol like, have you read your Augustine, you know? So yeah, I think it's one of the key distinctions is it scrambles the sign signified relationship. And, and metaphysically, it's awkward to have those two things existing in the same way at the same time, it just, it doesn't seem to account for

the sort of metaphysical texture that the Father is or Thomas Aquinas we're trying to get at.

[29] Jonathan Armstrong: That is helpful, Dr. Salkeld and suddenly, I'm thinking, Oh, I wish I could take back some things that I've said in my church history lectures over the years. I do appreciate the-the depth and care in your analysis here to begin to sort those things out.

[30] Brett Salkeld: Okay. Well, I hope the book is helpful to anyone doing this kind of work. Yeah.

[31] Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you. In your question, in your view, Dr. Salkeld, what are the actual questions for future research concerning the nature of the Eucharist?

[32] Brett Salkeld: No, that's, that's really good. I mean, so one of the worries that Protestants have about Catholics is the Catholics say, you know, for ecumenical dialogue to work, you just have to sign up for Catholic theology, whole hog, right. So, like, Protestants have to accept transubstantiation. Now, you can notice that Catholics aren't really that concerned that if some Eastern Orthodox groups don't have a history of transubstantiation, some of them have taken it on, it's helpful, but others, you know, think it's, it's a, it's a kind of Western imposition. We're not too worried about it, we're happy with-with the eastern articulations of real presence, whether they use transubstantiation or not.

[33] So, Protestants can be a little offended, like, how come the Eastern Orthodox get a pass on that, you know? And I think part of the answer is that the Eastern Orthodox don't have a have a rejection of transubstantiation written into their DNA. Whereas at the beginning of the reformation, you know, Protestants do. So, I think what's really open is, can we find a way to acknowledge the intention of our partners, and I think what my book tries to show that Calvin and Luther and Thomas, are pretty darn close in intention, they want real presence, but they got to deal with a whole host of metaphysical and theological questions. And I think, you know, Thomas, does a really commendable job that would be even helpful to Luther and Calvin, but I think Catholics need to know that Luther and Calvin were trying to do basically the same work.

[34] And then the question that remains open is, if we don't have to denounce one another's position, right, if Protestants don't have to say transubstantiation is a heresy that Catholics need to reject. But instead, they can say transubstantiation is a pretty good articulation of the mystery. We might prefer some other articulation. The question is, how much can different articulations coexist? And I think they can coexist to a large degree, if we're not concomitantly condemning the-the others position, right. So, I think a Protestant can say, I don't need to use transubstantiation, but I think it's a legit move, to try to capture the mystery of the Eucharist.

[35] And I'm going to try this other articulation that maybe balances it or says something else that is also true, and valuable, without denying what transubstantiation says, so, to me, it's a question of a kind of legitimate pluralism, not that we can stand in contradiction with one another. But can we say things with different emphases in different language within our different traditions, while acknowledging the same basic intention? And-and I would, I would put that forward as the work that we need. If you know George Hunsinger's work, the Eucharist and Ecumenism, he does something like this, that's been pretty well received. And he pitches something called trans-elementation, which has an Eastern kind of pedigree but was taken up by some of the reformers, notably, Peter Vermigli, who was quite trusted by Calvin actually on this question. So, I think that and-and, and Hunsinger or himself seems quite open to transubstantiation. He acknowledges its basic intention and doesn't think Catholics need to bail on it. So, I think I would, I would hold him up as an example and commend other people to that kind of work. And I would hope that my book helps people to do that kind of work.

[36] **Jonathan Armstrong:** I'm very grateful for your book. And I think you've articulated there so beautifully, exactly. The remaining problem and ecumenical dialogue. It's not just that we're talking about specific disagreements in our language, it's that we're talking about different modes of thought. And-and these whole conceptual frame of references which you tease out with your philosophical analysis really well. But unless you do that hard work of getting down to the philosophical, metaphysical differences between these modes of thought, it's really hard to broker any real understanding or agreement.

[37] **Brett Salkeld:** I, what you just said is gold, like you have understood my book really well, if you can say that like that, that I think that's exactly right. It's easy to do sort of surface analyses and think that there's a basic contradiction that's irreconcilable. If you do the deep work, you might still find some disagreement, but when that disagreement is in the context of a broader understanding of it, I think a lot of times you see that, that that disagreement falls within a legitimate pluralism in the church,

[38] **Jonathan Armstrong:** one of my favorite theologians to try to make sense of that, when we're just handing cards back and forth to each other's.

[39] **Brett Salkeld:** Yeah.

[40] **Jonathan Armstrong:** Ernst Käsemann whom I've not really read deeply, but his idea about the-the differences in the Apostolic voices, and that the Canon representing a range of legitimate Christian modes of thinking, that's been very helpful to me, as I've tried to, you know, figure out, like, as an evangelical, leading with a Bible first mentality, how do I understand a plu- legitimate plurality and theological views? Well, even the- the apostles show somewhat differences in Matthew's theology, or James, etc.

[41] Brett Salkeld: Right.

[42] Jonathan Armstrong: For me personally has been helpful.

[43] Brett Salkeld: Yeah, I, I think that early churches rejection of the Diatessaron, right, the idea that you could just make one, gospel and harmonize everything, I think their rejection of that idea is really helpful for us, because it says there can be a legitimate pluralism, there might be things that on the surface look contradictory that we might want to iron out or whitewash. But actually, if you dig deeper, those surface contradictions can lead you deeper into the Christian mystery. Now, I don't want to say there's no one's ever said anything wrong. I think there are legitimate mistakes. But I don't think you find those legitimate state mistakes without doing this real hard work first, and, and, and reading things in the best possible light and acknowledging the intention of the author,

[44] Jonathan Armstrong: the gospel itself as quad reformed, I need to keep chewing on what you've given me there. Dr. Salkeld. That's excellent. Dr. Salkeld if I can conclude this interview with a question that we've been asking all of our guests on this program, and that is this. What would it mean today for the church to be united? How would we even recognize that unity? And what is it that we can do as Christians to pursue the Unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17?

[45] Brett Salkeld: I mean, this is a huge question. This would be another, you know, whole book. So, I'll just take a couple angles on it, right? I mean, I think the most obvious thing for what would it mean for the church to be united is that its witness in the world would be amplified immensely. I mean, if we preach a gospel of reconciliation between humans and-and humans and God, and we are not reconciled with one another, does it there's a grave wound in our capacity to witness to the truth of the gospel. And so, Jesus's reconciling mission seems to me to need to take sort of priority in our relationships with one another, that that's part of what we are a model of, or even if you use Catholic words, that were a sacrament of that unity for the world, you know, a sign of it and-and its real presence at the same time, right? So that would be that would be one angle.

[46] But then to go to the second part of your question, or maybe it was the third part. As a theologian, I would-I would highlight something in particular, right, of course, I would say, we should be praying together we should be serving together. spending this time with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is the bane of all caricatures. And-and you know, you meet you meet people who you've heard about, and this happens with Catholics and evangelicals all the time, that evangelicals hear things about Catholics, and then when they meet Catholics, they're like, Oh, well, that's-that's not quite what I heard growing up, and vice versa. It may be a little symmetrical, but I think, you know, because Catholics don't know as much about evangelicals or, or talk about

them as much but so spending time and particularly in Christian pursuits like prayer and service, but then from a theological angle.

[47] I think the the-the work of coming to really understand what the other people value and are trying to say in their articulations. So, my mentor Margaret O'Gara, who the who the book is dedicated to, and who passed away sort of halfway through its writing. She used this metaphor of learning to speak another language. So, if I can, if in my chapter on Luther, I can articulate Luther's position so that a Lutheran reads it and says, Yeah, they got me right, then I can offer a critique, then I can say, and I'm not sure Luther's articulation here achieves quite what he wants to achieve. And I might suggest to you that, you know, Thomas gets this part better than Luther. But I can only do that if the Lutheran trusts that I've actually understood Luther in the first place.

[48] So as theologians, I think, learning to speak the language of our dialogue partners, so that they recognize themselves in our descriptions, is-is-is a massive first step. And then then the critique, which you know, a lot of people want-want to do the critique first. And the critique is valuable, we do need to subject one another to critique, because there are things that need refining, or that maybe even are blatantly mistaken. But you-you can't do that work, as long as you haven't understood the intention, the context, and as long as the other group doesn't feel heard. Any critique you offer is just going to entrenched division, right? And so, you know, particularly for theologians, I say, do that work of learning to speak the language of the other?

[49] **Jonathan Armstrong:** It's been a huge delight today to be speaking with Dr. Brett Salkeld arch diocesan theologian for the Archdiocese of Regina, Saskatchewan, and also the book editor of *pro ecclesia*, the theological journal and also author of the texts that we've been discussing today. *Transubstantiation: Theology, History and Christian unity* available from Baker academic 2019. Dr. Salkeld, thank you so much for being with us today.

[50] **Brett Salkeld:** Thanks for having me. It was a lot of fun.