

COVENANT MEMORIAL

A Fresh Perspective on Real Presence

Essay No 2

Memorial, Presence, and Covenant: A Biblical and Patristic Theology of the Eucharist

Abstract

This essay argues that the Christian Eucharist is best understood as a **covenantal memorial** (*zikkārôn / anamnesis*) that makes present the once-for-all saving act of Christ without repeating or re-performing it. Drawing upon the Passover theology of Exodus 12, the Hebrew conception of memorial as divine action, and early patristic Eucharistic language, the study contends that Real Presence is neither metaphysical abstraction nor symbolic reduction, but **relational, participatory, and covenantally enacted**. This framework aligns closely with early Christian theology and avoids later distortions that separate presence from memorial or sacrifice from covenant.

1. Memorial in the Hebrew Bible: More Than Human Memory

In the Hebrew Scriptures, memorial (זִכְרוֹן / *zikkārôn*) denotes not subjective recall but **ritualised remembrance that elicits divine action**. When God “remembers,” covenantal commitments are enacted in the present (Gen 9:16; Exod 2:24).

The Passover account in 12:13–14 establishes the controlling pattern:

“When I see the blood, I will pass over you... This day shall be for you a memorial.”

The blood does not inform God nor persuade him emotionally; it functions as a **covenantal sign**. God’s seeing triggers his saving action. The memorial feast does not reenact deliverance but **places each generation within its continuing efficacy**.

Crucially, this saving event:

- precedes the giving of the Law,
- is grounded entirely in divine promise,
- demands loyalty and trust rather than legal obedience.

The structure is grace-first, obedience-following—a point foundational to later Eucharistic theology.

2. Memorial as Participation Rather Than Repetition

The annual Passover feast functions simultaneously as:

- **remembrance of what God did,**
- **participation in what God continues to give,** and
- **communal incorporation into covenant identity.**

This logic explains how Israel can say, liturgically, “*we were brought out of Egypt*” without historical confusion. The event is once-for-all; the participation is ongoing.

Thus, memorial in Scripture is:

- effective without being repetitive,
- real without being metaphysically speculative,
- communal rather than merely individual.

This provides the grammatical framework for understanding the Eucharist.

3. The Eucharist Instituted as Memorial

Jesus institutes the Eucharist explicitly within a Passover setting, commanding:

“Do this in remembrance (*anamnesis*) of me.”

Within a Jewish context, *anamnesis* naturally evokes *zikkārôn*. It signals not mental recall but **liturgical actualisation**. Jesus does not command the repetition of sacrifice; he commands the **perpetual memorialisation of a redemptive event yet to be completed**.

What is new is not memorial logic, but **the identity of the event** being memorialised: the self-giving of Christ as the climactic covenantal act.

Thus:

- the Cross is once-for-all,
- the Eucharist is ongoing participation,
- presence is covenantal, not mechanical.

4. Real Presence as Covenantal Presence

Within this framework, Real Presence is not the localisation of Christ’s body as an object, but **his faithful presence as covenant Lord**.

The bread and wine function as:

- visible words of divine promise,
- appointed signs God has bound himself to honour,
- sacramental means through which believers “feed on Christ by faith.”

As in Exodus 12:

- the worshipper sees and receives the sign in faith,
- God sees the sign and acts according to his promise.

Presence, therefore, is **relational and promissory**, not metaphysically self-justifying.

5. Alignment with Early Patristic Theology

What is striking is how closely this memorial-participatory account aligns with early Christian teaching—long before medieval sacramental metaphysics.

5.1

In *First Apology* 66, Justin writes:

“We do not receive these as common bread and common drink; but... the food which has been eucharisted by the word of prayer from him... is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.”

Justin insists on Real Presence, but he explains it through **prayer, thanksgiving, and transformation of use**, not substance analysis. The emphasis is covenantal and doxological.

5.2

Irenaeus explicitly frames the Eucharist within covenant renewal:

“The bread, receiving the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly.”
(*Against Heresies* IV.18.5)

For Irenaeus, the Eucharist is an act of covenant renewal because, through the Church’s invocation of covenant promise, God faithfully joins earthly signs to heavenly realities, re-integrating the worshipping community into Christ’s reconciling work without repeating the sacrifice or explaining the mystery in speculative terms¹.

¹ **Irenaeus: Eucharist, Covenant Renewal, and Participatory Reality**

Irenaeus of Lyons explicitly frames the Eucharist within the horizon of **covenant renewal and divine action**, rather than metaphysical transformation. In *Against Heresies* IV.18.5, he writes: “The bread, receiving the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly.”

Several points are decisive.

First, Irenaeus locates Eucharistic change not in the **material substrate** of the bread, but in its **relation to God’s action**. The decisive moment is the *invocation of God* (*epiklēsis*), not an alteration of substance described in philosophical terms. What changes is not *what the bread is made of*, but *how it now exists within God’s covenant economy*.

Second, Irenaeus’s language of “two realities” (*duae res*) is intentionally non-speculative. He does not speak of two substances, nor of illusion versus reality, but of a **joined participation of the earthly and the heavenly**. The bread remains bread, yet it is taken up into a higher register of meaning and function because God has acted upon it by promise.

Third, the realism of presence is grounded entirely in **divine faithfulness**, not in sacramental mechanics. The bread becomes Eucharist—literally “thanksgiving”—because God responds to the Church’s invocation. Presence is therefore **covenantal**, not automatic: God gives what He has promised to give when his people act in obedient remembrance.

Finally, Irenaeus’s Eucharistic theology is inseparable from his doctrine of **recapitulation**. Just as Christ unites heaven and earth in his incarnate life, so the Eucharist participates in that same unifying movement. The sacrament does not localise Christ, nor repeat his sacrifice, but **draws the Church into living communion with the risen Lord**.

In this way, Irenaeus provides one of the clearest patristic witnesses to a Eucharistic theology in which:

- memorial and presence are not opposed,
- participation does not imply repetition,
- and realism does not require metaphysical explanation.

5.3

Cyril emphasises participation rather than explanation:

“Under the form of bread, you receive the Body of Christ; under the form of wine, the Blood of Christ... so that you may become of one body and blood with him.”
(*Mystagogical Catecheses* 4)

Presence here is **unitive and participatory**, not mechanistic.

5.4

Augustine famously resists crude realism:

“Believe, and you have eaten.”
(*Sermon* 272)

Yet he does not deny Real Presence; he interprets it within **faith, sign, and participation**:

“If you receive worthily, you are what you have received.”

This fits precisely with a memorial theology that is effective but covenantal.

6. Memorial, Sacrifice, and the Cross

The Fathers consistently hold together:

- the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ,
- the Eucharist as sacrificial memorial,
- participation without repetition.

The Eucharist **shows forth** the Lord’s death (1 Cor 11:26); it does not re-enact it. Sacrifice is present as **representation and thanksgiving**, not limited to penal categories.

This explains why patristic Eucharistic theology sits uneasily with some reductionist forms of Penal Substitutionary Atonement: the Fathers’ focus on the language of covenant, victory, participation, and healing.

7. Conclusion

When properly framed within biblical memorial theology, the Eucharist emerges as:

- a covenantal memorial,
- a real participation in Christ,
- a means of grace grounded in divine promise.

This theology:

- honouring the once-for-all nature of the Cross,
- affirming Real Presence without metaphysical coercion,

Presence is real because **God acts covenantally through invocation and promise**, not because the Church has mastered the mechanics of divine action.

- stands squarely within early patristic teaching,
- remains intelligible within Jewish sacramental logic—even where Jewish theology ultimately demurs.

This is not a novel or compromise position. It is, quite simply, **the deep sacramental grammar of Scripture and the early Church rediscovered.**

Select References

- Justin Martyr, *First Apology*
- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*
- Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*
- Augustine, *Sermons*
- Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*
- Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*
- Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History*

Covenant Memorial

A Fresh Perspective on Real Presence

Copyright © 2026 Colin Dye

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise — without prior written permission of the author, except for:

- (1) brief quotations in reviews, and
- (2) reproduction for personal use, private study, or non-commercial academic research, provided the work is not altered and proper attribution is given.

Permission is required for commercial use, republication, translation, distribution in course packs, or posting on other websites.

Scripture Translation

Unless otherwise indicated Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®)*.

Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Occasional emphasis has been added for clarity.