Excerpts from:

*The Real Presence: What Is It?*

by

J. C. Ryle

(1816-1900)
There is a word in the text that heads this page which demands the attention of all Christians in this day. That word is “presence.” There is a religious subject bound up with that word, on which it is most important to have clear, distinct, and scriptural views. That subject is the “presence of God,” and specially the “presence of our Lord Jesus Christ” with Christian people. What is that presence? Where is that presence? What is the nature of that presence? To these questions I propose to supply answers.

I. The first subject we have to consider is the general doctrine of God’s presence in the world; his omnipotence.

The teaching of the Bible on this point is clear, plain, and unmistakable. God is everywhere. There is no place in heaven or earth where He is not. There is no place in air or land or sea, no place above ground or under ground, no place in town or country, no place in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, where God is not always present. Enter into your closet and lock the door: God is there. Climb to the top of the highest mountain, where not even an insect moves God is there. Sail to the most remote island in the Pacific Ocean, where the foot of man never trod God is there. He is always near us,—seeing, hearing, observing, knowing every action, and deed, and word, and whisper, and look, and thought, and motive, and secret of every one of us, and everywhere.

Such language as this confounds and overwhelms us. The doctrine before us is one which we cannot fully understand. Precisely so. But it does not follow that the doctrine is not true, because we cannot understand it. It is the weakness of our poor intellects. However hard to understand this doctrine may be, it is one which is most useful and wholesome for our souls. To keep continually in mind that God is always present with us, to live always as in God’s sight, to act and speak and think as under His eye,—all this is eminently calculated to have a good effect upon our souls. Wide, and deep, and searching, and piercing is the influence of that one thought, “Thou God sees me.”

(a) The thought of God’s presence is a loud call to humility. Man does not always see us, but the Lord is always looking at us, morning, noon, and night. Who has not need to say, “God be merciful to me a sinner?”

(b) The thought of God’s presence is a crushing proof of our need of Jesus Christ. What hope of salvation could we have if there was not a Mediator between God and man? Before the eye of an ever-present God, our best righteousness is filthy rags, and our best doings are full of imperfection. Where should we be if there was not a fountain open for all sin, even the blood of Christ? Without Christ, the prospect of death, judgment, and eternity would drive us to despair.

(c) The thought of God’s presence teaches the folly of hypocrisy in religion. What can be more silly and childish than to wear a mere cloak of Christianity while we inwardly cleave to sin, when God is ever looking at us and sees us through and through? It is easy to deceive ministers and fellow-Christians, because they often see us only upon
Sundays. But God sees us morning, noon, and night, and cannot be deceived. Oh, whatever we are in religion, let us be real and true!

(d) The thought of God’s presence is a check and curb on the inclination to sin. The recollection that there is One always near us and observing us, who will one day have a reckoning with all mankind, may well keep us back from evil. Happy are those sons and daughters who, when they leave the family home, and launch forth into the world, carry with them the abiding remembrance of God’s eye. “My father and mother do not see me, but God does.”

(e) The thought of God’s presence is a spur to the pursuit of true holiness. The highest standard of sanctification is to “walk with God” as Enoch did, and to “walk before God” as Abraham did. Where is the man who would not strive to live so as to please God, if he realized that God was always standing at his right hand? To get away from God is the secret aim of the sinner; to get nearer to God is the longing desire of the saint.

(f) The thought of God’s presence is a comfort in time of public trouble. When war and famine and pestilence break in upon a land, when the nations are rent and torn by inward divisions, and all order seems in peril, it is cheering to reflect that God sees and knows and is close at hand,—that the King of kings is near and not asleep.

(g) The thought of God’s presence is a strong consolation in private trial. We may be driven from home and native land, and placed at the other side of the world; we may be bereaved of wife and children and friends, and left alone in our family, like the last tree in a forest: but we can never go to any place where God is not, and under no circumstances can we be left entirely alone.

Such thoughts as these are useful and profitable for us all. That man must be in a poor state of soul who does not feel them to be so. Let it be a settled principle in our religion never to forget that in every condition and place we are under the eye of God. It need not frighten us if we are true believers. The sins of all believers are cast behind God’s back, and even the all-seeing God sees no spot in them. It ought to cheer us, if our Christianity is genuine and sincere. We can then appeal to God with confidence, like David, and say, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way ever-lasting” (Psalm cxxxix. 23, 24). Great is the mystery of God’s presence everywhere; but the true man of God can look at it without fear.

II. The second thing which I propose to consider is the real spiritual presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In considering this branch of our subject we must carefully remember that we are speaking of One who is God and man in one Person. We are speaking of One who in infinite love to our souls, took man’s nature, and was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, dead, and buried, to be a sacrifice for sins, and yet never ceased for a
moment to be very God. The peculiar “presence” of this blessed Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, with His Church, is the point which I want to unfold in this part of my paper. I want to show that He is really and truly present with His believing people, spiritually or after the manner of a spirit, and that His presence is one of the grand privileges of a true Christian. What then is the real spiritual “presence” of Christ, and wherein does it consist? Let us see.

(a) There is a real spiritual presence of Christ with that Church which is His mystical body, the blessed company of all faithful people. This is the meaning of that parting saying of our Lord to His Apostles, “I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. xxviii. 20). To the visible Church of Christ that saying did not strictly belong. Rent by divisions, defiled by heresies, disgraced by superstitions and corruptions, the visible Church has often given mournful proof that Christ does not always dwell in it. It is the Holy Catholic Church, composed of God’s elect, the Church of which every member is truly sanctified, the Church of believing and penitent men and women; this is the Church to which alone, strictly speaking, the promise belongs. This is the Church in which there is always a real spiritual “presence” of Christ.

There is not a visible Church on earth, however ancient and well ordered, which is secure against falling away. Scripture and history alike testify that, like the Jewish Church, it may become corrupt, and depart from the faith, and departing from the faith, may die. And why is this? Simply because Christ has never promised to any visible Church that He will be with it always, even unto the end of the world. The word that He inspired St. Paul to write to the Roman Church is the same word that He sends to every visible Church throughout the world, whether Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational: “Be not high-minded, but fear . . . continue in His (God’s) goodness, otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.” (Rom 11:21-22)

On the other hand, the perpetual presence of Christ with that Holy Catholic Church, which is His body, is the great secret of its continuance and security. It lives on, and cannot die, because Jesus Christ is in the midst of it. It is a ship tossed with storm and tempest; but it cannot sink, because Christ is on board. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, robbed, beaten, beheaded, or burned; but His true Church is never extinguished. It lives on through fire and water. When crushed in one land, it springs up in another. And what is the reason of all this? It is the perpetual “presence” of Jesus Christ.

(b) There is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ in the heart of every true believer. This is what St. Paul meant when he speaks of “Christ dwelling in the heart by faith” (Ephes. iii. 17). This is what our Lord meant when He says of the man that loves Him and keeps His Word, “We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him “(John xiv. 23). In every believer, whether high or low, or rich or poor, or young or old, or feeble or strong, the Lord Jesus dwells, and keeps up His work of grace by the power of the Holy Ghost. As He dwells in the whole Church, which is His body,—keeping, guarding, preserving,
and sanctifying it,—so does He continually dwell in every member of that body,—in the least as well as in the greatest.

This “presence” is the secret of all that peace, and hope, and joy, and comfort, which believers feel. All spring from their having a Divine tenant within their hearts. This “presence” is the secret of their continuance in the faith, and perseverance unto the end. In them-selves they are weak and unstable as water. But they have within them One who is “able to save to the uttermost,” and will not allow His work to be overthrown. Not one bone of Christ’s mystical body shall ever be broken. Not one Lamb of Christ’s flock shall ever be plucked out of His hand. The house in which Christ is pleased to dwell, though it be but a cottage, is one which the devil shall never break into and make his own.

(c) There is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ wherever His believing people meet together in His name. This is the plain meaning of that famous saying, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. xviii. 20). The smallest gathering of true Christians for the purposes of prayer or praise, or holy conference, or reading God’s Word, is sanctified by the best of company. The great or rich or noble may not be there, but the King of kings Himself is present, and angels look on with reverence. The grandest buildings that men have reared for religious uses are often no better than whitened sepulchers, destitute of any holy influence, because given up to superstitious ceremonies, and filled to no purpose with crowds of formal worshippers, who come unfeeling, and go unfeeling away. No worship is of any use to souls at which Christ is not present. Incense, banners, pictures, flowers, crucifixes, and long processions of richly dressed ecclesiastics are a poor substitute for the great High Priest Himself.

The meanest room where a few penitent believers assemble in the name of Jesus is a consecrated and most holy place in the sight of God. They that worship God in spirit and truth never draw near to Him in vain. Often they go home from such meetings warmed, cheered, stablished, strengthened, comforted, and refreshed. And what is the secret of their feelings? They have had with them the great Master of assemblies, even Christ Himself.

(d) There is a real spiritual “presence” of Christ with the hearts of all true-hearted communicants in the Lord’s Supper. Rejecting as I do, with all my heart, the baseless notion of any bodily presence of Christ on the Lord’s table, I can never doubt that the great ordinance appointed by Christ has a special and peculiar blessing attached to it. That blessing, I believe, consists in a special and peculiar presence of Christ, vouchsafed to the heart of every believing communicant. That truth appears to me to lie under those wonderful words of institution, “Take, eat: this is My body.”

“Drink ye all of this: this is My blood.” Those words were never meant to teach that the bread in the Lord’s Supper was literally Christ’s body, or the wine literally Christ’s blood. But our Lord did mean to teach that every right-hearted believer, who ate that bread and
drank that wine in remembrance of Christ, would in so doing find a special presence of Christ in his heart, and a special revelation of Christ’s sacrifice of His own body and blood to his soul. In a word, there is a special spiritual “presence” of Christ in the Lord’s supper, which they only know who are faithful communicants, and which they who are not communicants miss altogether.

After all, the experience of all the best servants of Christ is the best proof that there is a special blessing attached to the Lord’s Supper. You will rarely find a true believer who will not say that he reckons this ordinance one of his greatest helps and highest privileges. He will tell you that if he was deprived of it, he would find the loss of it a great drawback to his soul. He will tell you that in eating that bread, and drinking that cup, he realizes something of Christ dwelling in him; and finds his repentance deepened, his faith increased, his knowledge enlarged, his graces strengthened.

Eating the bread with faith, he feels closer communion with the body of Christ. Drinking the wine with faith, he feels closer communion with the blood of Christ. He sees more clearly what Christ is to him, and what he is to Christ. He understands more thoroughly what it is to be one with Christ and Christ in him. He feels the roots of his spiritual life insensibly watered, and the work of grace within him insensibly built up and carried forward. He cannot explain or define it. It is a matter of experience, which no one knows but he who feels it. And the true explanation of the whole matter is this,—there is a special and spiritual “presence” of Christ in the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus meets those who draw near to His table with a true heart, in a special and peculiar way.

Let us now go a step further. There is a real bodily presence of Jesus Christ in heaven at the right hand of God. This is a deep and mysterious subject, beyond question. What God the Father is, and where He dwells, what the nature of His dwelling-place who is a Spirit,—these are high things which we have no minds to take in. But where the Bible speaks plainly it is our duty and our wisdom to believe. When our Lord rose again from the dead, He rose with a real human body,—a body which could not be in two places at once,—a body of which the angels said, “He is not here, but is risen” (Luke xxiv. 6). In that body, having finished His redeeming work on earth, He ascended visibly into heaven. He took His body with Him, and did not leave it behind. And thus, to come round to the point with which we started, there is in heaven a real bodily presence of Jesus Christ.

Let us now go a step further. There is no real bodily presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, or in the consecrated elements of bread and wine.

This is a point which it is peculiarly painful to discuss, because it has long divided Christians into two parties, and defiled a very solemn subject with sharp controversy. Nevertheless, it is one which cannot possibly be avoided in handling the question we are considering. Moreover, it is a point of vast importance, and demands very plain speaking. Those amiable and well-meaning persons who imagine that it signifies little what opinion people hold about Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper,—that it is a
matter of indifference, and that it all comes to the same thing at last, are totally and entirely mistaken. They have yet to learn that an unscriptural view of the subject may land them at length in a very dangerous heresy. Let us search and see.

My reason for saying that there is no bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper or in the consecrated bread and wine, is simply this: there is no such presence taught anywhere in Holy Scripture. It is a presence that can never be honestly and fairly got out of the Bible.

Let the three accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper, in the Gospels of St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, and the one given by St. Paul to the Corinthians, be weighed and examined impartially, and I have no doubt as to the result. They teach that the Lord Jesus, in the same night that He was betrayed, took bread, and gave it to His disciples, saying, "Take, eat: this is My body; "and also took the cup of wine, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink ye all of this: this is My blood." But there is nothing in the simple narrative, or in the verses which follow it, which shows that the disciples thought their Master's body and blood were really present in the bread and wine which they received. There is not a word in the epistles to show that after our Lord's ascension into heaven the Christians believed that His body and blood were present in an ordinance celebrated on earth, or that the bread in the Lord's Supper, after consecration, was not truly and literally bread, and the wine truly and literally wine.

Some persons, I am aware, suppose that such texts as "This is My body," and "This is My blood," are proofs that Christ's body and blood, in some mysterious manner, are locally present in the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, after their consecration. But a man must be easily satisfied if such texts content him. The quotation of a single isolated phrase is a mode of arguing which would establish Arianism. The context of these famous expressions shows clearly that those who heard the words used, and were accustomed to our Lord's mode of speaking, understood them to mean "This represents My body," and "This represents my blood."

The comparison of other places proves that there is nothing unfair in this interpretation. It is certain that the words "is" and "are" frequently mean represent in Scripture. The disciples, no doubt, remembered their Master saying such things as "The field is the world the good seed are the children of the kingdom "(Matt. xiii. 38). St. Paul, in writing on the Sacrament, confirms this interpretation by expressly calling the consecrated bread, "bread," and not the body of Christ, no less than three times (1 Cor. xi. 26-28).

Some persons, again, regard the sixth chapter of St. John, where our Lord speaks of "eating His flesh and drinking His blood," as a proof that there is a literal bodily presence of Christ in the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper. But there is an utter absence of conclusive proof that this chapter refers to the Lord's Supper at all! The Lord's Supper had not been instituted, and did not exist, till at least a year after these words were spoken. Enough to say that the great majority of Protestant commentators altogether deny that the chapter refers to the Lord’s Supper, and that even some Romish
commentators on this point agree with them. The eating and drinking here spoken of are the eating and drinking of faith, and not a bodily action.

Some people fancy that St. Paul's words to the Corinthians, “The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? “(1 Cor. x. 16), are enough to prove a bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. But unfortunately for their argument, St. Paul does not say, “The bread is the body,” but the “communion of the body.” And the obvious sense of the words is this: “The bread that a worthy communicant eats in the Lord’s Supper is a means whereby his soul holds communion with the body of Christ.” Nor do I believe that more than this can be got out of the words.

Above all, there remains the unanswerable argument that if our Lord was actually holding His own body in His hands, when He said of the bread, “This is My body,” His body must have been a different body to that of ordinary men. Of course if His body was not a body like ours, His real and proper “humanity” is at an end. At this rate the blessed and comfortable doctrine of Christ’s entire sympathy with His people, arising from the fact that He is really and truly man, would be completely overthrown and fall to the ground.

Finally, if the body with which our blessed Lord ascended up into heaven can be in heaven, and on earth, and on ten thousand communion-tables at one and the same time, it cannot be a real human body at all. Yet that He did ascend with a real human body, although a glorified body, is one of the prime articles of the Christian faith, and one that we ought never to let go!

Once admit that a body can be present in two places at once, and you cannot prove that it is a body at all. Once admit that Christ’s body can be present at God’s right hand and on the communion table at the same moment, and it cannot be the body which was born of the Virgin Mary and crucified upon the cross. From such a conclusion we may well draw back with horror and dismay. Well says the Prayer Book: “The sacramental bread and wine remain still in their very natural substances, and therefore may not be adored (for that were idolatry, to be abhorred of all faithful Christians); and the natural body and blood of our Savior Christ are in heaven, and not here; it being against the truth of Christ’s natural body to be at one time in more places than one.” This is sound speech that cannot be condemned. Well would it be for the Anglicans if all Churchmen would read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest what the Prayer Book teaches about Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper.

If we love our souls and desire their prosperity, let us be very jealous over our doctrine about the Lord’s Supper. Let us stand fast on the simple teaching of Scripture, and let no one drive us from it under the pretense of increased reverence for the ordinance of Christ. Let us take heed, lest under confused and mystical notions of some inexplicable presence of Christ’s body and blood under the form of bread and wine, we find ourselves unawares heretics about Christ’s human nature. Next to the doctrine that Christ is not God, but only man, there is nothing more dangerous than the doctrine that
Christ is not man, but only God. If we would not fall into that pit, we must hold firmly that there can be no literal presence of Christ’s body in the Lord’s Supper; because His body is in heaven, and not on earth, though as God He is everywhere.

Let us now go one step further, and bring our whole subject to a conclusion. There will be a real bodily presence of Christ when He comes again the second time to judge the world. This is a point about which the Bible speaks so plainly that there is no room left for dispute or doubt.

The world has not yet done with Christ. Myriads talk and think of Him as of One who did His work in the world and passed on to His own place, like some statesman or philosopher, leaving nothing but His memory behind Him. The world will be fearfully undeceived one day. That same Jesus who came before in lowliness and poverty, to be despised and crucified, shall come again one day in power and glory, to raise the dead and change the living, and to reward every man according to his works.

The wicked shall see that Savior whom they despised, but too late, and shall call on the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of the Lamb. The godly shall see the Savior whom they have read of, heard of, and believed, and find, like the Queen of Sheba, that the half of His goodness had not been known. They shall find that sight is far better than faith, and that in Christ’s actual presence is fulness of joy.

This is the real bodily presence of Christ, for which every true-hearted Christian ought daily to long and pray. Happy are those who make it an article of their faith, and live in the constant expectation of a second personal advent of Christ. Then, and then only, will the devil be bound, the curse be taken off the earth, the world be restored to its original purity, sickness and death be taken away, tears be wiped from all eyes, and the redemption of the saint, in body as well as soul, be completed.

I have now unfolded, as far as I can in a short paper, the truth about the presence of God and His Christ. I have shown (1) the general doctrine of God’s presence everywhere; (2) the Scriptural doctrine of Christ’s real, spiritual presence; (3) the Scriptural doctrine of Christ’s real, bodily presence. I now leave the whole subject with a parting word of application, and commend it to serious attention. In an age of hurry and bustle about secular things, in an age of wretched strife and controversy about religion, I entreat men not to neglect the great truths which these pages contain.

(1) What do we know of Christ ourselves? We have heard of Him thousands of times. We call ourselves Christians. But what do we know of Christ experimentally, as our own personal Saviour, our own Priest, our own Friend, the Healer of our conscience, the comfort of our heart, the Pardoner of our sins, the Foundation of our hope, the confidence of our souls? How is it?

(2) Let us not rest till we feel Christ “present” in our own hearts, and know what it is to be one with Christ and Christ in us. This is real religion. To live in the habit of looking
backward to Christ on the cross, upward to Christ at God’s right hand, and forward to Christ coming again,—this is the only Christianity which gives comfort in life and good hope in death. Let us remember this.

(3) Let us beware of holding erroneous views about the Lord’s Supper, and especially about the real nature of Christ’s “presence” in it. Let us not so mistake that blessed ordinance, which was meant to be our soul’s meat, as to turn it into our soul’s poison. There is no sacrifice in the Lord’s Supper, no sacrificing priest, no altar, no bodily “presence” of Christ in the bread and wine. These things are not in the Bible, and are dangerous inventions of man, leading on to superstition. Let us take care.

(4) Let us keep continually before our minds the second advent of Christ, and that real “presence” which is yet to come. Let our loins be girded, and our lamps burning, and ourselves like men daily waiting for their Master’s return. Then, and then only, shall we have all the desires of our souls satisfied. Till then the less we expect from this world the better. Let our daily cry be, “Come, Lord Jesus.”