

EUCHARIST



One of the central elements in early Christian worship was a special meal of thanksgiving and sharing. In a letter by a non-Christian in 112 A.D., Pliny, the Roman Governor of Bithynia, described an early Christian worship service as closing with a "custom...to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind." Christians know this meal as a reenactment of the Last Supper which Jesus held with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. Why do Christians eat bread and drink wine as an act of worship? The answer to this question has its roots both in the Old Testament as well as in the life and ministry of Jesus.

In the first place, the eating of a sacred meal was an ancient way of sealing a covenant—a way of confirming that a solemn promise would be honored and kept (Ge. 26:28-31; 31:51-54; Dt. 27:1-8; 2 Sa. 3:17-21). Just as important is the fact that the central redemptive event of the Old Testament, the Passover, was both sealed and annually celebrated by a sacred meal (Ex. 12). Even the term "the Lord's Table," so familiar to Christians from the writings of Paul, has its first mention in the Old Testament in the context of sacrificial worship (Mal. 1:7). Finally, the prophets envisioned a great banquet at the end of the world which would celebrate God's redemptive work (Is. 25:6-8).

These Old Testament ideas converge in the Last Supper which Jesus held with his disciples. The supper was held on the night of the Passover celebration, and it was at this supper that Christ confirmed with his disciples a new covenant, a covenant which offered forgiveness based on his sacrificial death (Mk. 14:12-15, 22-25; Heb. 8:6-8, 10-12). The Messiah had come! The salvation of God had come! The new covenant had been confirmed! The Last Supper heralded all these things.

In addition to the background of the Old Testament for the Last Supper, there are several important factors in the life of Jesus which give special meaning to the meal. One of these is the fact that Jesus offered table fellowship to all kinds of people as a symbol of God's invitation for salvation. Sinners, prostitutes, revenue officers—all those who were despised—were freely invited to eat with Jesus (Mt. 9:10-13; Lk. 15:1-2; 7:33-34; Mt. 21:31-32). In his feeding miracles (Mk. 6:30-44; 8:1-10) and in his parables (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Lk. 14:15-24), Jesus openly invited all who would come to participate in the great messianic banquet. The future joy and fellowship of all God's people in the end of the age was to be celebrated by table fellowship in the present (Mk. 2:18-19).

At the Last Supper, the words and actions of Jesus took on a heightened meaning for the disciples—a meaning which collected all the strands of significance from Jesus' gracious table fellowship. His gestures and words were so striking that they would continue to be repeated in Christian celebrations from then until now.

Here are his actions (1 Co. 11:23-26; Mt. 26:26-29). He took bread, he gave thanks, and he broke and distributed the bread so that the disciples might share it with him. He took the cup, he gave thanks, and he gave it to the disciples, who received it and drank from it with him.

Here are his words. "This bread is my body which is given for you," he said (Lk. 22:19). "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," he said (Lk. 22:20). "I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new in the kingdom of God," he said (Mk. 14:25). And finally, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Co. 11:24b).

In repeating these actions and words, Christians reenact and reaffirm the covenant ritual of the Last Supper. They celebrate the salvation of God which was made possible through the death of Jesus. Furthermore, they anticipate the coming of Jesus who promised to eat and drink with them in the Father's kingdom (Mt. 26:29; 1 Co. 11:26). This is why the meal is called Eucharist, since the Greek verb *eucharisteo* (to give thanks) is used in all the biblical accounts to describe the gestures and words of Jesus. It is indeed a ritual of thanksgiving to God for the one who gave his own life for the life of the world (Jn. 6:51). Because one eats at the invitation of the Lord himself, it is truly "the Lord's table" (1 Co. 10:21).

Yet even all this does not exhaust the meaning of the Christian sacred meal. The elements of the meal also point toward the unity of the church in Jesus Christ. The sharing of the single loaf represents a *koinonia* (fellowship), that is, a participation in the body of Christ which collectively consists of his redeemed people. The sharing of the cup represents a *koinonia* in the redemptive power of Christ's shed blood (1 Co. 10:16-17). It is from this New Testament word *koinonia* that we derive the English term "communion". In fact, it is because the Lord's Table represents Christian unity in the redemptive death of Jesus that Paul reprimands the insensitivity and callous behavior of the Corinthians who were not observing the meal in love toward each other (1 Co. 11:17-22, 33-34).

When Christians celebrate the Lord's Table, they spiritually encounter the invisible Christ. Just as at pagan celebrations the worshipers encountered demons in their rituals, so also Christians encounter the risen Christ in Eucharist, since it is truly his table (1 Co. 10:18-21).

So then, reverence for Christ and love for each other are the central attitudes which the worshiper ought to exhibit at communion. To fail to do so, in the words of Paul, is to fail to "discern the Lord's body," and in fact, is to "sin against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Co. 11:27-29).

Christians have various differences in their understanding of both the inner meaning as well as the outer procedures for celebrating Eucharist. Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Jesus, and they treat the meal as a sacrifice. Protestants consider the Roman Catholic teaching as verging on the magical and as foreign to the thought of the New Testament. Lutherans believe that Christ is bodily present in the bread and wine in a mysterious way, though they reject the idea that the bread and wine are transformed. Those from some traditions deny that Christ is present at the meal in any unique sense at all, while others hold that he is truly there, though in a spiritual way. This latter view, that Christ is truly present in a spiritual way, probably fits best with the biblical evidence.

In Christian practice, there is also diversity. Some use bread with yeast, others without yeast. Some use wine, others grape juice. Some use a common cup, others individual cups. Some use bread already divided, others have a ritual breaking of the bread. Some only allow local or denominational church members to participate, others allow any believer in Christ of whatever background to participate. These various differences ought not to divide the universal church. Surely the reality toward which the supper points is the sacrificial work of Christ accomplished once and for all at Calvary (He. 9:26a-28)! And that truth is shared by all who have come to faith in him.



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