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# Funeral or Festival?

by Rob McRay

## Memorial and Thanksgiving in the Lord's Supper

I recently attended a Roman Catholic funeral mass for the mother of a member of our church. I had never attended one before, but in some ways it reminded me of the communion service reenacted many times in the Churches of Christ of my youth. In the weekly memorial service for Christ, the sanctuary was filled with the sad, almost mournful strains of "Night with Ebon Pinion" or "'Tis Midnight and on Olive's Brow." The slow rhythm of the pallbearers' feet reminded me of the men who marched silently down the aisle during the final verse of the song and stood at the table in front. The room was quiet and solemn as those gathered reflected upon the tragic death of the one in whose honor the memorial service was held. A familiar liturgy was recited as the congregation had heard it recited often before:

In like manner, Heavenly Father, we give thanks unto Thee for this cup, the fruit of the vine, which so vividly represents to us the blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ which was shed for us on the cruel cross of Calvary. May all who partake of this cup do so in a manner which is well-pleasing in Thy sight. In the name of Your Son and our Savior. Amen.

One by one those gathered received the communion, believing that it was critically important that this rite be precisely observed in the correct and traditional way. The atmosphere was intended to re-

semble a funeral; after all, this was called a "memorial service." As a fourth grader at one of our elementary schools, and in many Sunday School classes, and in countless comments at the communion, I was taught that during the supper I should bow my head and close my eyes and picture Jesus on the cross. I should think about his pain and agony. I should remember that it was my fault that he suffered and died. I should examine myself and repent of my sins that I might take the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner, for if I failed to partake worthily, then I would surely be lost.

Over the years I have certainly attended many churches which did not observe the communion in this way, but this view of the supper is still widespread. However, I believe it fails to capture the intended meaning of this great Christian observance. Chiefly, it fails to reflect the intended nature of the remembering and thanksgiving that was part of the Lord's Supper in the early church. The Lord's Supper was intended to remember Jesus, not in a "memorial service," but in a commemorative festival. The atmosphere was not one of grim mourning, but of joyful thanksgiving.

### Passover and the Last Supper

To fully grasp the meaning of the Lord's Supper to the earliest Christians, we must consider its beginning as part of Jesus' last Passover with his disciples.<sup>1</sup> The Synoptic Gospels present the Last



Supper as part of the Passover meal. The bread and cup which Jesus passed to his disciples were already laden with meaning in the context of the Passover celebration. Understanding the Passover, then, is critical to understanding the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, understanding the Passover is important to understanding the entire event of the death and resurrection of Christ. According to the Gospel of John, the Passover festival was the appointed occasion for his passion (cf. John 12:20-33; 13:1). The meaning and character of the Passover celebration should provide the framework for interpreting the meaning and character of the supper.

The first Passover was a night of deliverance. The meal that night was eaten hastily in an atmosphere of anticipation and fear and hope. The angel of death was coming; freedom was imminent. Subsequent generations celebrated the festival remembering that Israel had been saved from the death plague on Egypt and that God had led them out of slavery with a mighty hand (Exod 12:17,26-27, 41-42; 13:3, 8-10). The Passover was a kind of "Thanksgiving Dinner." Though Jesus was clearly troubled the night of the Last Supper, the festival he chose for its setting was a joyful feast remembering the mighty saving acts of God in the past and anticipating divine deliverance in the present and future. Part of the celebration was the reciting of the **Hallel**, i.e., Psalms 113-118. The hymn which Jesus and the disciples sang before they left the upper room (Matt 26:30) was the last portion of these psalms, beginning with either Psalm 114 or 115. This was a festival of praise and thanksgiving.

The unleavened bread which Jesus broke was called the bread of affliction (Deut 16:3), a reminder of the suffering and oppression of Egypt. However, the memories of affliction were surely overshadowed by the deliverance represented in the absence of leaven (Exod 13:33-34, 39). The cup of wine for which Jesus gave thanks, the third in a series of three or four cups in the meal, was called the "cup of blessing" (cf. 1 Cor 10:16), that is, a cup for which thanks is given. Wine was considered a gift of God and associated with gladness (Ps 104:14-15) and the joyful harvest festival (Deut 14:26). In the hymn which Jesus and the disciples recited at the close of the meal were the following words:

I will lift up the cup of salvation and call  
on the name of the LORD, . . .  
I will pay my vows to the LORD in the  
presence of all his people. . . .  
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice  
and call on the name of the LORD, . . .  
I will pay my vows to the LORD in the

presence of all his people.  
(Psalm 116:13-18)

It is highly significant that Jesus' sacrifice of himself was during the Passover festival, and likewise significant that he chose symbols of deliverance and rejoicing and thanksgiving to represent the body and blood he offered.

Perhaps the best expression of the meaning of the Passover in Jesus' day was given by Rabban Gamaliel, the grandson of Paul's teacher. The Mishnah records that he said of the Passover:

Therefore are we bound to give thanks, to praise, to glorify, to honour, to exalt, to extol, and to bless him who wrought all these wonders for our fathers and for us. He brought us from mourning to a Festival-day, and from darkness to great light, and from servitude to redemption; so let us say before him the *Hallelujah*.<sup>2</sup>

### **"Do this in remembrance of me"**

According to Luke and Paul, Jesus directed his disciples to "do this" (i.e., give thanks, break and eat the bread, and drink the cup) in remembrance of him. To "remember" in the Old Testament often meant more than a simple mental recollection of something. The idea of remembering the past was often attached to some action or response in the present. Thus in Psalm 78:1-8, Israel must tell and retell God's glorious deeds to each generation. Should the people forget God's great acts, they will fail to put their hope in God, fail to keep his commandments, and fail to remain steadfast and faithful. Remembering the past is tied to faith and obedience in the present.

To "remember" can also mean to "proclaim." In Psalm 71:15-17, the Psalmist comes proclaiming God's mighty deeds and praising him for them. "I will proclaim your righteousness" (71:16b; NIV) and "I will praise your righteousness" (NRSV) is more literally, "I will cause your righteousness to be remembered" (cf. Isa 12:4). To cause God's works to be remembered is to praise him publicly.

The Passover was the premier occasion for recounting the mighty saving acts of God. According to Exodus, the central purpose of the festival of Unleavened Bread was to serve as a reminder to Israel of their deliverance from slavery. "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance . . . for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt . . ." (Exod 12:14-17; cf. 13:3-10; Deut 16:3). According to the Mishnah,



a central feature of the Passover celebration was the reciting of Deuteronomy 26:5-10. The son would ask

*The remembered events of the past have consequences for those who remember them and the remembering evokes a response.*

the father why this night was different from others, and the father would retell the story: "He begins with the disgrace and ends with the glory; and he expounds from 'a wandering Aramean was my father . . . ' until he finishes the whole section" (*Pesahim* 10:4).

A number of interpreters have argued that when Israel remembered God's deeds through cultic rituals, the past was actualized in the present and the worshipers participated in their redemptive history. Some have suggested that the rituals, like ancient pagan cultic rites, reenacted mythical or historical dramas, renewing the content of the myth and allowing the participants to "experience its elemental power."<sup>3</sup> Others have argued that, for Israel, the actualization occurs through a recital of historical acts which are non-repeatable. Rather than the past being actualized in the present, the participants are transported back to the past event and participate in the original history. Childs presents a middle position arguing that it is not the historical events themselves which are made real in the present. Rather, the redemptive quality of those events continues to be experienced when "later Israel responded to the continuing imperative of her tradition through her memory" (85). Colin Brown, however, suggests that Childs has taken the concept of actualization beyond what the evidence warrants. It is not the past event, he says, that is "somehow made present. Rather it is the living God, Yahweh, who is ever present."<sup>4</sup> Marcus Barth also rejects "the idea that by remembrance, God's basic action is repeated, put into effect, validated, actualized, or applied—as if God's action were in need of, and in some sense dependent on, a religious ceremony."<sup>5</sup> Barth prefers to render the word "remembrance" as "celebration," a public and festival expression of joy and gratitude for God's completed act and for its implications for

the present and future. "God's perfect act is recited and confessed in the Passover rather than reenacted or made valid and real only in the cultic ceremony."

To whatever degree the past is or is not actualized in the Passover, the Mishnah does teach that all Israelites in every generation should participate in the festival as though they themselves were delivered from Egypt, because it is written, "You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt'" (Exod 13:8). All Israelites are free from the captivity of Egypt because of God's saving act in history. The remembered events of the past have consequences for those who remember them and the remembering evokes a response. The Passover celebration provided a structure for that remembrance and the response.

Similarly, the Lord's Supper provides a structure for remembering God's saving act in Christ and for the response of his people. When Christians "do this in remembrance of" Jesus, they publicly proclaim God's mighty deeds through recounting the story of the death and resurrection and through the act of participating in the festival itself. As Barth rightly contends, the clearest biblical statement interpreting the meaning of the Supper is Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians 11:26 that "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (44). The Supper is not a "memorial service" for one who has died, but a "commemorative celebration" of God's mighty deliverance. In the Lord's Supper, as in the Passover, God's people publicly recall his saving work in an act of corporate praise, declaring the sacrificial death and victorious life of Jesus Christ.

Also as in the Passover, recalling the deliverance of Jesus Christ leads to a response in the present. We claim our freedom from captivity by virtue of his completed act; we set our hope in him; and we renew our faithfulness and obedience to our Lord. And, especially, we give thanks.

### **The Eucharist as a Thanksgiving Dinner**

The New Testament provides no indication of an official or universal title for the bread and cup which the Lord instituted. The meals which Christians shared together are referred to in Acts as "breaking bread" (though some see this as a reference to the Supper, rather than to the larger church meal), and Jude calls them "love feasts" (*agapais*). The church meal continued to be known as the "love feast" in the early church. Paul calls the bread and cup a "participation" or "communion" or "fellowship" (*koinonia*) and the "Lord's supper," but these are



more descriptions than titles. However, the early Christian documents which followed the New Testament are virtually unanimous in calling the bread and cup “the Thanksgiving” (*eucharistia*, from which we get the term “Eucharist”). This indicates something of the character of the Supper in the early decades of its observance.

This designation derives from the thanks which Jesus gave before the bread and before the cup, and which continued as part of the church’s observance of the meal. The church gave thanks before each because Jesus had done so. Jesus did so because that was part of the Passover liturgy and was a Jewish custom at other meals. The common Jewish prayer for the bread may go back to the time of Jesus, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth”; likewise, the prayer for the cup, “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.” Something similar to this was likely a part of Jesus’ thanksgiving.

The earliest recorded prayers at the eucharist are those in the **Didache** (probably early second century, but perhaps earlier). The prayer for the cup is first, “We give thanks to you, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your Servant, which you made known to us through Jesus your Servant. To you be the glory forever.” The prayer for the bread follows,

We give thanks to you, our Father, for the life and knowledge which you made known to us through Jesus your Servant. To you be the glory forever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together became one loaf, so may your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. Because the glory and the power are yours through Jesus Christ forever.<sup>6</sup>

Another longer thanksgiving follows which includes thanks for God’s holy name, for knowledge and faith and immortality, for food and drink, and because he is mighty. Ferguson suggests that the prayers may be adapted from Jewish table prayers (100). Noticeably absent is any focus on the suffering and death of Christ. The broken bread is identified with the church (as in 1 Cor 10: 16-17), not with the physical body of Jesus.

Even when we remember the death of Christ

in the Lord’s Supper, this does not require an emphasis on contemplating Jesus’ agony on the cross, nor does it demand an atmosphere of a “memorial service.” In the New Testament, references to Jesus’ death focus on what the death accomplished for those who believe in him. Christians are not admonished to meditate upon his agony, but to consider what his death means for their lives and faith. Thus the author of Hebrews says that we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus (10:19). John praises Jesus because he “freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1:4-6) and the heavenly chorus worships him because he has ransomed saints for God by his blood (Rev 5:9). Paul thanks God that we have redemption through the blood of Christ (Eph 1:3-8). He reminds the Gentiles that they were brought near by his blood (Eph 2:11-13) and declares that we have been reconciled through his body and blood (Col 1:20-22). While there is certainly a place for considering the suffering of Christ, the emphasis in the New Testament is on remembering and proclaiming his death as a saving act of grace.

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Furthermore, this side of the preaching of the gospel, we cannot see the cross without looking back through the empty tomb. The body of Christ does not belong on a crucifix. The Crucified Lamb is the Risen Lord. We take the “Lord’s

Supper” on the “Lord’s Day,” made so by virtue of his resurrection. The sacrificial death of Christ redeems, cleanses, justifies and gives life—and for this we rejoice and give thanks. The one who offered himself that we might receive these blessings conquered death and intercedes for us with the Father—and for this we praise him. “We have abundant reason to rejoice in Christ’s death and to praise the slaughtered yet living Lamb” (Barth, 46). The eucharist is not a funeral wake. It is a thanksgiving dinner.

### **The Lord’s Supper as Church Festival**

The Passover was not an individual ritual, but a celebration shared in community. Like the Passover, the Lord’s Supper is a community event. The Church breaks bread together and shares the



one loaf as members of one body (1 Cor 10:16-17). When the supper is observed as a "memorial service," the emphasis is typically on each individual quietly remembering Christ's suffering and reflecting on his or her own sin. When the supper is observed as a commemoration of God's saving acts, the emphasis is on the community remembering and proclaiming and giving thanks together (cf. Barth, 14-15, 48).

As a weekly fellowship meal, the place of children around the table needs to be reconsidered. Israelite children grew up participating in the Passover and learning of God's mighty acts as part of the family and community celebrating the festival. The sacramental theology which has dominated Christian thinking about the Supper has discouraged the participation of children in something they can not fully understand (as if most adults fully understand sacramental theology!). But the children's lack of understanding was precisely why they had a place in the Passover liturgy. Their questions as to why certain things are done in the festival prompted the retelling of God's deliverance and the meaning of the Passover meal. Our silent meditation provides no place for even the whispered questions of children. Perhaps children should have a place at the Lord's Supper just as they share in the family celebrations at Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter. When we teach them to sing "Jesus loves me, he who died

heaven's gates to open wide," perhaps we are already teaching them what it means to participate in the eucharist.

As a thanksgiving dinner, the sometimes awkward place of the offering is made more natural. The familiar phrase, "And now separate and apart from the Lord's Supper, we have this opportunity to give back to God a portion . . .," is unnecessary and unfortunate. Rather, the congregation's giving may appropriately be seen as a thank offering to God in response to his wondrous works.

As a church festival, the relationship between the eucharist and worship is made more vivid. The church celebrates this feast during its worship each week because it remembers and proclaims the work of Christ each Lord's day. And the church worships during the meal, because it cannot remember without giving thanks and praise to God.<sup>7</sup> As we gather around the table, we are bound to give thanks, to praise, to glorify and to bless him who brought us from mourning to a Festival-day, and from the power of darkness to the kingdom of his Son, and from slavery in sin to redemption in Christ; so let us say before him the Hallelujah!

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