

The Eucharist: Remember the Christ!

"When the hour had come, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, 'Take this and share it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes.' And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.'" [Luke 22: 14-20, see also Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25]

With these words and actions, Jesus instituted one of the great celebrations of the church, which the early church referred to as the **Eucharistia**, Greek for "thanksgiving." Like [baptism](#), it was intended to serve as a bond between individual believers and Christ Jesus and hence a source of unity within the church. It is therefore tragically ironic that it has become yet another source of divisions.

It is clear that people of good faith can reach different conclusions about the mysteries involved in the Eucharist (the term I personally prefer to "The Lord's Supper" because of its ancient roots and its appropriate literal meaning). In this issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, we'll take a look at the beliefs and practices of the early church surrounding the Eucharist.

Then

The leaders of the early (pre-Nicene) church were primarily concerned with three issues: the nature of the bread and wine, who could partake, and who could preside. An honest reading of their writings offers a variety of opinions. As always, it is important to note that these are not authoritative documents, nor is their relative proximity to the events in itself persuasive. The Gnostic movement was contemporaneous with many of these writings, and they got many things wrong. Nevertheless, the force of many of the arguments should be taken seriously.

The nature of the bread and wine

Some writings seem to firmly support the contention that the eucharistic bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ.

"They (certain heretics) abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again." (Ignatius, Letter to the Smyrneans, Ch. 7, ca 105 AD)

"For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Saviour, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh

by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh." (Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 66, ca 160 AD)

"He declared plainly enough what He meant by the bread, when He called the bread His own body. He likewise, when mentioning the cup and making the new testament to be sealed "in His blood," affirms the reality of His body. For no blood can belong to a body which is not a body of flesh." (Tertullian, Anti-Marcion, Ch. 40, ca. 207 AD)

"But we give thanks to the Creator of all, and, along with thanksgiving and prayer for the blessings we have received, we also eat the bread presented to us; and this bread becomes by prayer a sacred body, which sanctifies those who sincerely partake of it." (Origen, Against Celsus, Ch 13.33, ca. 248 AD)

On the other hand, there are indications that the early church understood the bread and wine to be the figurative body and blood of Christ.

The first is a notable omission. The Didache is one of the earliest non-canonical Christian documents. Also called The Teaching of the Twelve and dating to the late first or early second century, it is a very early liturgical manual for the church. Its author is unknown, which probably kept it from being included in the canon, but it was highly valued by the early church. Chapter 9 provides instructions for the Eucharist:

Now concerning the Thanksgiving (Eucharist), thus give thanks.

First, concerning the cup: We thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine of David Thy servant, which Thou madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever.

And concerning the broken bread. We thank Thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which Thou madest known to us through Jesus Thy Servant; to Thee be the glory for ever.

Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever.

If the early church universally understood the eucharistic bread and wine transformed into the body and blood of Christ, it seems odd that The Didache makes no such comment and treats the emblems as ordinary bread and wine.

Some writings are even more direct about the figurative nature of the Eucharist.

"For when the Greeks, having arrested the slaves of Christian catechumens, then used force against them, in order to learn from them some secret thing [practised] among Christians, these slaves, having nothing to say that would meet the wishes of their tormentors, except that they had heard from their masters that the divine communion was the body and blood of Christ, and imagining that it was actually flesh and blood, gave their inquisitors answer to that effect." (Irenaeus, fragment from an unknown work, ca. 180 AD)

Admittedly, this is a somewhat enigmatic passage, but Irenaeus (bishop of Lyons) certainly seems to be saying that the slaves being interrogated had heard their masters refer to the body and blood of Christ and misunderstood.

"Elsewhere the Lord, in the Gospel according to John, brought this out by symbols, when He said: 'Eat ye my flesh, and drink my blood;' describing distinctly by

metaphor the drinkable properties of faith and the promise, by means of which the Church, like a human being consisting of many members, is refreshed and grows, is welded together and compacted of both,—of faith, which is the body, and of hope, which is the soul; as also the Lord of flesh and blood. For in reality the blood of faith is hope, in which faith is held as by a vital principle." (Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, Book I, Chapter 6)

Unlike many issues, when it comes to the Eucharist, the writings of the early church fathers offer no concrete answer to the nature of the bread and wine, so the solution lies in *Sola Scriptura*. There were big problems in [Corinth](#) over the Eucharist, and Paul addressed a number of issues. At the end of that discussion, he says that the observance of the Eucharist was revealed to him by God and gives a simple review:

"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way He took the cup also after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." (1 Corinthians 11:23-27)

As in [The Didache](#), it is noteworthy that Paul does not unequivocally state that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood, so the solution to the questions comes down to the definition of "is." When Jesus says, "*This is My body*," does He mean this literally or figuratively? It certainly seems likely that the Disciples understood a figurative meaning at the time. First of all, they could see Jesus' body reclining at the table with them. It had not been broken. Furthermore, at least one of them certainly would have had serious reservations about apparent cannibalism. And being Jews, they would certainly have had a problem with drinking human blood.

Jesus frequently used figurative language in referring to Himself. John recorded many of these: Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (6:35, 48), "the light of the world" (8:12, 9:5), "the door of the sheep" (10:7), "the good shepherd" (10:11,14), and "the true vine" (15:1,5), even though he was not literally any of these things.

There is symbolism surrounding food and drink throughout the Gospels. Given the centrality of food and drink to human life, that's hardly surprising. In answering Satan's challenge to change stones into bread, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 ("*He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord*").

Later, when His disciples were apparently concerned that He wasn't eating enough, Jesus told them, "*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work*" (John 4:34). And after his discourse about eating His flesh and drinking His blood in John 6—one that naturally created quite a stir—Jesus helped the disciples understand: "*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life*" (John 6:53). This is the spirit in which Jesus referred to Himself as "living bread."

In the tabernacle, just before the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, was the Holy Place. The only food kept perpetually in the Holy Place was the

shewbread (Leviticus 24:5-9), 12 cakes made from fine flour representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Only Aaron and his sons (the priests) could eat this consecrated bread.

Jesus also used the cup symbolically—in Matthew 20:22, Mark 10:38, John 18:11, and most significantly, in Matthew 26:39: "*And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.'*" The cup is Jesus' passion, crucifixion, and death, the pre-ordained method of sacrificing for the sins of humanity.

Water baptism is a substitutionary and symbolic initiation rite into the Christian life. To become united with Christ, we "die," we are "buried," and we rise again. But we do not really die, are not really buried, and therefore do not really rise again from the dead. Baptism is a symbolic act, albeit one with profound significance and importance.

The Eucharist is equally profound and important. In the bread, we consume His words that bring life. The eucharistic bread is the new shewbread, now offered to the new priesthood (all believers). In the wine, we drink the cup of His blood sacrifice, regularly cleansing us of the sentence of death our sin deserves. As Jesus Himself said, His words are more important than His literal flesh and His sacrifice more important than His literal blood because it is His words and His sacrifice we should be remembering, and in remembering be motivated to respond: "*everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock*" (Matthew 7:24). Without action, the remembrance is meaningless. Just as the American slogans, "Remember the Alamo!" and "Remember the Maine!" were intended not as memorials, but as calls to action, so too is "*Do this in remembrance of Me.*"

Who could partake?

The Eucharist is a remembrance of the continual impact of Jesus on humanity, and for individuals that impact must have a starting point. Forgiveness through Jesus' sacrifice is available to all, but it must be acknowledged by associating oneself with Him. For the early church, the starting point was always baptism—there was simply no such thing as an unbaptized believer. The phrase is an oxymoron. Thus, Justin Martyr could emphatically proclaim:

"And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined" (Dialogue with Trypho, Chap. 66, ca. 160 AD).

This restriction reflects Jesus' words in Mark 16:16, "*He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved,*" as well as those in Matthew 7:24-27 (he who acts on His words). But Justin's words ("no one is allowed") also suggest that some in the church may have begun to judge whether another is "worthy." Justin lived at a time when Gnosticism, with its grotesque corruptions of the Gospel, was a serious challenge to true faith, so perhaps the church can be forgiven for its apparent legalism.

If we go to the Scriptures, it should be clear that no one has the right to deny another the Eucharist based on a judgment of His faith, baptism, or actions. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*a man must **examine himself**, and in so doing he is to eat of*

*the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if **he does not judge** the body rightly" (1 Corinthians 11:28-29, emphases mine). Clearly, the decision to partake of the Eucharist is a matter of individual conscience.*

Who could preside?

The New Testament texts about the Eucharist give us no direct guidance on this issue, and that serves as guidance. If it were important that only an ordained church leader could preside over the Eucharist, surely God would have inspired someone to say so. There is not even a hint of any restriction. The implication then is that any believer can preside.

Very early in the history of the early church, however; this was not the case. No later than within a few years after the end of the apostolic age (about 100 AD), the administration of the Eucharist became the province of the bishopric. I discussed the unscriptural distinction between elder/presbyter and overseer/bishop in an [earlier issue](#) of *ET&N*, so I won't go into depth here, but the principle early proponent of the distinction was Ignatius of Antioch. Relative to the Eucharist, he wrote:

"Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it." (Letter to the Smyrneans, Chap. 8, ca. 105 AD)

Similarly, late in the second century, Tertullian wrote much the same thing in his Apologetic:

"We take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike." (IV.3, ca. 198 AD)

I can't find any original Greek (or Latin) text for Tertullian's Apologetics, so I'm not sure about the word translated "president." It could be as simple as someone who presides, which would leave the question of restrictions unanswered, or it could be a synonym for overseer/bishop. I suspect the latter.

Again, in defense of these early writers, there was a considerable threat to Christianity from Gnosticism in the second and early third centuries. Safeguarding the Eucharist from the gnostic misinterpretations and applications was certainly justified. Unfortunately, however, the restrictions far outlasted the threat in the hierarchical churches.

And again, the silence of Paul in his letter to Corinth is instructive. The Corinthians Eucharist (breaking of bread, agape meal) was disgraceful. One simple solution Paul could have put forth was to be sure a trustworthy leader presided over it, but he didn't. He was unconcerned with the issue of leadership in the Eucharist. He was concerned with the individual attitudes the members of the congregation brought to the event.

Now

What's really important about the ceremony?

It has at least five different names: Eucharist, Communion, The Lord's Supper, Agape Meal, and Passover.

Some advocate that it be celebrated as part of a full meal and call the simple bread and wine a "snack."

Some take the bread and wine annually, some quarterly, some monthly, some weekly. Some see the need to share them every time they gather.

There is debate over the bread and wine itself. Must the bread be unleavened? Must participants break off pieces from a single loaf? Is grape juice (fruit of the vine) sufficient or must it be fermented? If it's wine, must it be mixed with water? And should everyone drink from one cup? There are even a few who use water.

Most see the sequence as bread followed by wine, but the ancient document called [The Didache](#) says wine followed by bread (chapter 9).

Who can oversee the ceremony—ordained priests, elders and deacons, or any believer?

Some insist that some amount of fasting must precede taking communion; some even practice foot-washing afterwards.

Are only members of a particular Church allowed to take the bread and wine or can any baptized believer? Or even anyone based on their own conscience? Or just 144,000 in an "anointed class"?

And regarding conscience, some suggest that one can only take the bread and wine when his or her conscience is clear or has made a full confession of sins.

And finally, what is the nature of the bread and wine? Do they actually become the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation)? Or are His body and blood present in the bread and wine (consubstantiation)? Are they only symbolic, or does the Holy Spirit impart nurturance in the bread and wine?

Incidentally, I had thought that every group claiming Christ observed *some* form of the Eucharist, but I was wrong. In Shelly Steig's [Finding the Right Church: A Guide to Denomination Beliefs](#), I discovered several that don't. The Bible Holiness Church, for example, "does not take communion, since Paul said the ordinances were 'nailed to the tree,'" one of the more curious uses of Scripture I've run into!

Every one of these different names, practices, and beliefs has some basis in Scripture or in the early interpretation of Scripture.

There are over 1,000,000 permutations of these names, practices and beliefs. Which is right? If you've got one wrong, does it invalidate the rite? Are you no longer worshipping God in spirit and in truth? Some would answer "Yes," each of these things matter, and the arguments have led to major church splits. Luther (transubstantiation) and Zwingli (symbolic) failed to unify the Reformation primarily over this single disagreement.

So what **is** important? I'd like to suggest that there is only one thing. Jesus Himself said it: "*Do this in remembrance of Me.*" In so doing, we celebrate the *past* sacrifice of Jesus, His *present* communion with us through the Spirit, and his *future* return and the feast that will follow.

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are two ceremonies that Jesus clearly intended as unifying events for Christians—[water baptism](#) at the beginning of one's Christian walk in order to be publicly unified with His death, burial, and resurrection; and the Eucharist in order to maintain that association, be spiritually fed, and to routinely "*proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*" [1 Corinthians 11:26].

In his instructions to the church in Corinth, Paul adds, "*whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord*" [1 Corinthians 11:27]. The specific context of his warning involved the selfish and ostentatious show the wealthier members of the congregation put on during the ceremony, but the lesson can be generalized to any unworthiness. Certainly, the arrogant belief that "only we have it right" would qualify.

For what it's worth (probably not much), my personal take on these things is that:

1. I prefer the term, "Eucharist" (despite the association of that term with the Roman church)
2. The Eucharist should be celebrated as part of a larger meal.
3. The Eucharist should be celebrated weekly, on the first day (Sunday).
4. The bread should be a single, unleavened loaf and the fruit of the vine actual wine in a single cup, and they should be in that order.
5. The Eucharist can be lead by any believer.
6. No one should be prevented from participating; it is a matter of conscience.
7. While preparatory fasting is not essential, self-examination (honesty about sin) is.
8. The bread and wine are symbols.

If I insisted on sharing communion only with those who held precisely my views, I'd probably have to do it alone most of the time. Instead, each week I participate in the celebration at my local congregation where we usually refer to it as the Lord's Supper, it's not part of a larger meal, it's done every Sunday, the bread is several wafers from which we break pieces, the fruit of the vine is grape juice in traditional communion cups, any baptized man in the congregation can lead, anyone can participate, no particular preparation is proscribed, and the bread and juice are viewed as symbols as far as I know. Does that make me a hypocrite?

Not long ago, my wife and I joined a Catholic friend at a service and participated in a celebration that was called the Eucharist, was not part of a larger meal, was conducted on a Sunday morning, involved individual wafers dipped in wine, was lead by an ordained priest, was apparently open to anyone since they didn't stop me, had no preparatory expectation, and the bread and wine were considered by most to be the actual body and blood of Christ. I found it a little strange but no less meaningful. Does that make me a hypocrite?

To argue endlessly about these things (or countless other doctrinal issues) is to promote disunity and therefore damage the mission of the church. The last part of Jesus' great prayer at the end of His ministry reveals what was most important to Him as He faced the crucifixion. Can you identify the correct text?

"The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in [(a) sound doctrine, (b) love, (c) wisdom, (d) love, (e) unity], so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."

The correct text is (e) unity... "*perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me*" (emphasis mine). What does the world conclude from our petty, and even our important, arguments? All too often, it concludes that God did not send Jesus and no glory is given to His followers. So I suggest that we celebrate the fact that so many remember Jesus with bread and wine/fruit of the vine with a common ceremony, regardless of the differences.

Remember the Christ! And in remembering, strive to be like Him.

Discussion

One subscriber wrote to ask what I thought about the Catholic Church's stance on denying communion to politicians who advocate so-called abortion rights and gay marriage. While I appreciate the Catholic Church taking a strong position, I think they're applying the wrong remedy. Taking communion is a matter of personal conscience and no one has the right to deny this to another person. On the other hand, if a member's public statements on issues of morality are in direct contradiction to biblical teaching, the church has every right, even the responsibility to expel such a cancer from its midst when attempts to teach and correct the member have failed. Personally, I find John Kerry's comments that he does not allow his personal faith to affect his public decision-making to be reprehensible for one who claims to be Christian. His personal faith should influence **everything** about his life, including public policy-making. To proudly do otherwise is pure hypocrisy.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: God Moves in a Mysterious Way

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