

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: The Lord's Supper
Number: 4
Text: Matthew 26:17-30
Date: October 19 2008 (a.m.)

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UNDERSTANDING THE LORD'S SUPPER (Part IV)

This is my body" – This phrase, spoken by Jesus in the upper room, took place at the Passover meal and served as part of the institution known as the Lord's Supper. It also is one of the most debated statements in Scripture. The controversy has, oddly enough, centered around the little verb "is"-I say oddly because as R.T. France points out, "Since it is generally agreed that in Aramaic this statement of Jesus would not have had an expressed verb."¹ In Aramaic there would be no copula-it is implied-and as such any doctrine built upon the little word 'is' is built upon a very shaky foundation! Much of the disputation at the time of the Protestant Reformation centered around the Lord's Supper. The Reformers, as we have previously noted, united in their opposition to the Roman Catholic dogma of the Mass. They were not, however, able to come to complete agreement among themselves on the issue. As a result, Protestants today hold to three positions on (or variations of) the meaning of Jesus' words. We briefly look at these as we examined the question, "What is the *fundamental* significance of the Lord's Supper?" Sometimes, or so it seems, we become so familiar with certain portions of the Bible that they tend to lose their impact. The Upper Room discourse (the institution of the Lord's Supper) is one of those portions of Scripture that frequently falls in this category. It is a pity too, because the deeds and words of our Lord on this occasion are tremendously significant. Jesus had gathered with His disciples on this, the last night before His crucifixion. It was the first day of the Jewish Feast of Unleavened bread. Arrangements had been made to celebrate the Passover in the Upper Room of a friend's house (Mark 14:12-16). No servant was present to assume the custom of washing the feet of guests (and none of the apostles would stoop to such a menial task). So Jesus laid aside His own garments, put on a slave's attire, and proceeded to wash the disciples' feet, illustrating in a vivid way how authentic love expresses itself in humble service. He stunned His disciples by telling them that one of them would betray Him. He also spoke of the Holy Spirit, the other Comforter (John 14:5-26). At some point during the meal, Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-19; I Corinthians 11:23-25). Notice how central in all of this is Jesus' own view of His death. In particular, note what our Lord did with the elements, what He said about them, and his own explanation as to their meaning and purpose.

I. THE OCCASION OF THE INSTITUTION

The Gospel narratives inform us that this took place in the midst of the Passover Meal. This was not merely a coincidence. The care which Jesus took with

respect to the Passover indicated thoughtful deliberation (cf. Matthew 26:2; Mark 14:13ff.; Luke 22, esp. v. 15, where Jesus earnestly desired to eat with His disciples before He suffered). “Nothing,” writes Warfield, “can be more certain than that he deliberately chose the Passover Meal for the institution of the sacrament of his body and blood.”²

A. The Similarities Between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper.

Both are religious feasts. The central feature is the Paschal lamb – the typical character of which is a constant refrain in the New Testament (cf. John 1:19,20,36; I Corinthians 5:7; I Peter 1:19; Revelations 5:6,12, 7:14, 12:11, 13:8). In both, the *lamb* is slain and partaken of by the worshippers. This close similarity is not accidental, and we may say that the Lord Jesus *intended* the Lord’s Supper to be the Christian Passover Meal.³

B. Substitute or Continuance?

It is inadequate to say the Lord’s Supper is a *substitute* for and entirely *different* from the Passover – something put in its place and celebrated *instead of*. Rather it is only a NEW FORM given for the continuance of the Passover’s essential substance.

C. The Symbols Changed.

The Paschal lamb had been the *symbol* of sacrifice. Jesus now in the upper room *identifies* Himself with the lamb. That which the lamb symbolized has come – and the *bread* and *wine* now symbolize Him the way the lamb did. Why this change? Why not go on with the Passover meal and its symbols within a Christian context?

II. THE REASON FOR THE INSTITUTION

He to whom all the sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament pointed was about to be offered up. This would entail the *cessation* of the ritual law, and with it, the sacrifices the law prescribed (Hebrews 9 and 10). The Temple is no longer the focal point of worship. The day has come when neither in Jerusalem nor in any other special place should people worship God, but everywhere in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24).

A. New Symbols, Not New Symbolism.

The great change means (and must mean) new symbols that picture the fulfillment, the passing away of the type in the antitype. The symbols are changed. The substance, however, remains the same.

B. The Significance of the Passover Meal.

1. It has an historical importance, celebrated in remembrance of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.
2. It has redemptive significance. It combines the two ideas of expiation and communion. The Passover falls into the class of PEACE-OFFERINGS, but since there can be no peace-offering without an atonement, which is

effected by the sprinkling of the blood, the Passover presupposes an act of expiation effected by the application of the blood of the paschal lamb.⁴ The victim offered was the material of the meal, and the idea of expiation was therefore fundamental to it. “It was,” notes Warfield, “a feast of death. But, on the other hand, just because it was a festive meal, it...also celebrated rather the effects than the fact of this death – it was a feast of life.”⁵

C. The Significance of the Lord’s Supper.

The Lamb of God,⁶ the true Passover, established a new feast, capable of celebration and observation by all. The new symbols of bread and wine speak of His body and blood.

1. THE BREAD – speaks of our Lord’s *vicarious suffering* (Luke 22:19).
2. THE WINE – The cup that Jesus took was the third cup in the Jewish Passover, the cup of redemption (Luke 22:20).

NOTE: Whenever the Lord’s Supper is spread before us, we are invited to take our place at the *sacrificial feast*. The substance of which is the flesh and blood of the victim, which has been sacrificed once and for all at Calvary; and as we eat these in their symbols, we are certainly not repeating his sacrifice (nor prolonging it), but *we are* continuing that solemn festival upon it, instituted by Christ, by which we testify our “participation in the altar” (Hebrews 13:10) and claim our part in the benefits of Christ. The sacrificial feast is not the sacrifice, in the sense of the act of offering: it is, however, the sacrifice in the sense of the thing offered, that is, eaten in it; and therefore it is presuppositive of the sacrifice in the sense of the act of offering and implies that this offering has already been performed. “The Lord’s Supper,” declares Warfield, “as a sacrificial feast is accordingly not the sacrifice, that is, the act of offering up Christ’s body and blood: it is, however, the sacrifice, that is the body and blood of Christ that were offered, which is eaten in it: and therefore it is presuppositive of the sacrifice as an act of offering and implies that this act has already been performed once for all.”⁷

CONCLUSION: By examining the relationship between the Passover Meal and the Lord’s Supper, we are able to understand some of the problems that have surrounded this sacrament. We can see how corruptions crept into the concept and practice of the Lord’s Supper in the course of Christian history. How so? By and by, the significance of a sacrificial feast (as understood in the Old Testament sacrificial system) faded and attempts were made to find meaning, some other meaning, for the language of Jesus, and this led to error. A right conception of the Lord’s Supper must begin with the Passover Meal and Jesus’ interpretation of it in the upper room.

ENDNOTES

¹ R. T. France, The Gospel of Mark: The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2002) p. 569.

² B.B. Warfield, Selected Shorter Writings (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), vol. I, p. 332.

³ There are also differences. Passover was a family affair; the Lord’s Supper belongs to the Church. Passover, strictly speaking, was not a sacrament; the Lord’s Supper is. The Paschal lamb was not for atonement of sins; it was a communal offering whose meat could be consumed by the people. The Lord’s Supper is a sign and seal of the great work of atonement presented to the Father by Christ once and for all. cf. W. VanGemeren, “Passover and the Lord’s Supper,” in Table Talk (Nov. 1989), p. 13.

⁴ This is not to imply that the paschal lamb suffered death vicariously. “The pure life of the victim offered up in the blood served for a covering, and therefore for a purification for the family approaching the sacred meal,” G.F. Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Klock & Klock, rpt., 1978), p. 349.

⁵ Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

⁶ After the destruction of the Temple (70 A.D.), the Passover became a home service, and the Paschal lamb was no longer included. Only the Samaritans have continued this rite to this day. In the Jewish home, a roasted bone is placed on the table in memory of the rite. Cf. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Eerdmans, 1956), vol. IV, p. 2258.

⁷ Warfield, *op. cit.*, p. 337.