

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	47		Gary L.W. Johnson
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The Lord's Supper

25. Lord's Day

Question 67. Are both word and sacraments, then, ordained and appointed for this end, that they may direct our faith to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, as the only ground of our salvation? (a)

Answer: Yes, indeed: for the Holy Ghost teaches us in the gospel, and assures us by the sacraments, that the whole of our salvation depends upon that one sacrifice of Christ which he offered for us on the cross.

(a) Rom. 6:3 Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Gal. 3:27 For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Question 68. How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant, or testament?

Answer: Two: namely, holy baptism, and the holy supper.

“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. Much of the disputation at the time of the Protestant Reformation centered around the Lord's Supper. The Reformers 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 will briefly look at these as we examine the question, “What is the *fundamental* significance of the Lord's Supper?”

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.”¹

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.²

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.³ 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."⁴

C. The Significance of the Lord's Supper.

The Lamb of God⁵, 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.”⁶

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.

ADDENDUM: THE LORD’S SUPPER IN CHURCH HISTORY

I. EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Early in the second century, communion was also called the EUCHARIST (lit. to make thanks). Justin Martyr (c.a. 150) tells us it was celebrated weekly. The concept of transubstantiation is entirely missing in his theology. The Eucharist is viewed as a consecration of the bread and wine. It is a mystery and represented Christ’s saving work in some actual sense. Ambrose (c.a. 339-97) begins to speak of the elements becoming the actual body and blood of Christ. This is called realism. Augustine, the most famous Christian theologian of the early Church (and a contemporary of Ambrose) rejected this realistic position and spoke of the sacrament in a more symbolic way. However, medieval Catholicism adopted Ambrose’s view and developed what is called transubstantiation, the Church’s official position (affirmed as dogma at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215).

II. ROMAN CATHOLIC: TRANSUBSTANTIATION

The Council of Trent (1545-63) in reaction to the Reformation refined and polished the Catholic understanding of the Lord’s Supper as the Mass. The Mass is called a Eucharistic Sacrifice and is declared as follows:

- A. The same Christ is contained in the bloodless sacrifice as he who “on the altar of the cross once offered himself with the shedding of blood.”
- B. On this ground the sacrifice is truly propitiatory.
- C. To profit from it, we must come with true hearts, right faith, fear and reverence.
- D. If we do, God, propitiated by it, will grant grace, penitence, and remission.
- E. The fruits of the primary oblation are perceived most fully through the bloodless oblation (the term is applied both to the bread and wine and to any other kind of gift presented at the Mass).
- F. It is offered for the sins, penances, satisfactions, and other necessities of both the faithful living and also the faithful dead in purgatory whose purification is not yet completed.⁷ All those who do not accept this teaching are anathema.

III. PROTESTANT POSITIONS

We will give attention to the three major positions (these are representative of most evangelical groups).

- A. The Lutheran Position. Although Luther rejected the concept of transubstantiation, he also rejected any figurative interpretations of this sacrament. His position is known as consubstantiation, a simultaneous coexistence of two substances (the word, however, does not appear in Luther's writings). In Luther's words, the actual body and blood of Christ exists "in, with, or under" the elements of bread and wine (thus affirming a real presence). The relationship of the Word to the sacrament is key. The transformation is effected by the Word, not by a priest.
- B. The Zwinglian Position. Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss Reformation is considered the foremost advocate for the figurative interpretation (taking the word "is" – this is my body – to mean "signifies" [citing John 10:9 and 15:1 as parallels]). The elements are symbols only, and the sacrament is an act of commemoration. Christ is present only to the contemplation of faith. Those who partake without faith may be said improperly to eat sacramentally, but they do not eat spiritually.
- C. The Calvinistic Position. John Calvin, the French reformer, held an intermediate position. He agreed with Zwingli in rejecting the bodily, local, and substantial presence of Christ in the sacrament, and he concurred with Zwingli's understanding of "is" as "signifies" – but Calvin insisted that the activity of God (rather than the activity of believers) in the sacrament is foremost. Zwingli, in Calvin's opinion, put too much stress on the subjective aspect of the recipient. Calvin agreed with Luther that Christ is really and essentially present (but not physically). The presence of Christ is a spiritual presence. The bread and the wine work through the Holy Spirit in that Christ gives himself to the participants at the Supper.

SUMMARY: Luther understood the presence of Christ in an objective (tangible) fashion; Zwingli in an idealistic (intellectual, as opposed to material) fashion; and for Calvin, the presence of Christ is understood in a spiritual fashion. Calvin's position was adopted by most of the Reformed confessions. Zwingli's position (with variations) has been adopted by most Arminian groups along with Baptists, who put even more emphasis on the concept of the memorial (strictly speaking) than Zwingli did.

¹ B.B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), vol. I, p. 332.

² 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. VanGemen, "Passover and the Lord's Supper," in *Table Talk* (Nov. 1989), p. 13.

³ 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.

⁴ Warfield, op. cit., p. 336.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Warfield, op. cit., p. 337.

⁷ Cf. G. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 284-85, for extended discussion, and James R. White, *The Fatal Flaw* (Crowne Pub., 1990), pp. 39-71, for a complete analysis of the mass as set forth at Trent and Vatican II.