

# **The Lord's Supper as the true Passover meal**

## **Proclaiming the Lamb's death or the Christian's faith?**

David R. Bickel  
Ottawa, Ontario

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On the night of his betrayal, the Lord instituted the Eucharist with the simple words, "Take, eat; this is my body... Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). A multitude of arguments have been employed against taking those words to mean that in the distribution of the bread and wine, he gave his disciples his body to eat and his blood to drink. Jesus could not possibly have done so while remaining truly human, according to Zwingli, Calvin, and a plethora of denominations following them. Other arguments are less philosophically sophisticated. Perhaps the most common seeks to cast doubt on a literal reading of the words of institution by pointing to figures of speech Jesus used, as when he said, "I am the door" and "I am the true vine." This argument indeed proves that Jesus sometimes spoke metaphorically, as everyone already knows, but falls short of providing any evidence that he did so in his Last Supper. As relevant as such expressions may be to interpreting "I am the true bread" as non-Eucharistic, their structure is not sufficiently close to that of "This is my body" (Pieper 1953, vol. 3, 305-311) to take the argument as more than a rhetorical ploy.<sup>1</sup> In fact, it has more force when reversed: there would be no need to use obviously metaphorical passages to bolster a claim that the words of institution are metaphorical if those words were just as clearly metaphorical.<sup>2</sup> As much as these kinds of arguments are advanced in debate, the real reason for much of the opposition to a more straightforward reading of Christ's words may lie elsewhere. Among Protestants, a particularly strong motive for taking the words of institution symbolically is the desire to distance themselves from Tridentine Catholicism, especially from its idea of sacrificing Christ in every mass. The doctrine of the real presence of Christ's body in the bread and his blood in the wine is seen as synonymous with the doctrine of the priest's offering Christ as a sacrifice, even though the former does not imply the latter; indeed, the former, but not the latter, is found in the writings of

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<sup>1</sup>While the grammatical structure of "the Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4) is more similar to that of the words of institution, it is no more pertinent: the Rock referred to is the one who actually followed the Israelites in the wilderness, not an earthly rock (Pieper 1953, vol. 3, 306).

<sup>2</sup>Likewise, a metaphor from an extra-biblical account of the Passover liturgy has been used to shed light on the words "This is my body," as if those words were less clear than the account (Mathison 2002, 242-243). More generally, how one understands the words of institution is largely determined by whether they are seen as no clearer than a parable of Jesus or as clear as his interpretation of a parable (Bickel 2005).

the second-century successors of the apostles. Somewhat more plausibly, Reformed theologians have argued that since the Lord's Supper was instituted in the context of the Passover (Jeremias 1966) and since some of the words of the Passover liturgy have figurative meanings, Christ's words of institution should likewise be interpreted figuratively (Turretin 1997, §§19.29.26, 19.29.31; Mathison 2002, 213). But in those words, Christ also said that he gave his life as a ransom for many. As taking the Reformed argument to an extreme would lead to the conclusion that Christ only gave himself as a ransom figuratively, an interpretation in fact held by some who deny his substitutionary atonement, the bearing of the Passover on the interpretation of the words of institution requires careful examination.

The paschal nature of the Lord's Supper has also been stressed by Lutheran theologians. For example, Scaer observes that the separate mention of body and blood in the words of institution recalls the separation of the blood from the body of a sacrificed animal (Scaer 2004, 166-170). In the sacrificial system of the law of Moses, the blood was poured out before the body of the animal was eaten; consuming blood was forbidden since the life is in the blood. This explains why "Christ our Passover" (1 Corinthians 5:7-8) would have his disciples eat his body, but his having them drink the blood of the sacrifice was something completely new. The unique nature of the wine that is the new covenant in his blood heightens its significance:

These connections [between the action and the words of Jesus on the one hand and the Passover celebration and sacrificial thought in the Old Testament on the other] could not have been introduced only later in the Lord's Supper tradition. This is proved by the great difficulty that the idea of the blood of Christ causes in this connection. That the body of Christ is eaten, in fact *must* be eaten, as the body of the true Passover lamb is understandable if the parallel between the Passover in the Lord's Supper is really to be valid. But the idea of partaking of blood had to cause most serious offense for those whose thinking was schooled in the Old Testament. For partaking of blood was strictly forbidden in the Old Testament, and even the parallel between the covenant blood in Exodus 24:8 and the covenant blood in the Words of Institution is seriously distorted when the latter is given to the disciples to drink. The difficulty is so great that one can credit no one, least of all Paul or John, with having burdened the idea of the Lord's Supper with it after the event. There is really no other possibility than the assumption that Jesus himself is the originator of the idea that not only is His body taken as that of the "Lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:19) but also His blood... But if Jesus did express this idea that was so offensive to Jewish and perhaps all human thought, then His meaning could only have been the following: Partaking of blood is forbidden in the old covenant because according to Lev. 17:11 the body's life is in the blood and because the life belongs to God. But the life of Jesus has been offered up for men. It should be for their benefit. For here men do not bring a sacrifice to God through a priest, but the High Priest offers Himself as a sacrifice to God for the sake of men. **That Christ gives His blood to those redeemed by Him to drink is the strongest expression of the fact that He sacrifices Himself for men entirely, unreservedly, and completely.** (Sasse 1985, 89-90, boldface added)

If the Lord's supper is indeed a Passover meal with Jesus as the sacrificed lamb,<sup>3</sup> then the sacramental partaking either symbolizes a figurative consumption of the sacrifice or it is a literal consumption of the flesh and blood of that sacrifice. Under the symbolic interpretation, the sacramental consumption points to the Christian's appropriating the benefits of Christ's death by faith (Mathison 2002), whereas according to the literal reading, the sacramental consumption draws attention to the sacrificed body and blood being consumed. The latter understanding is therefore supported by the injunctions to perform the sacrament in remembrance of him<sup>4</sup> and to

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<sup>3</sup>Paul called Jesus the Passover, but influential commentators differ on whether the Fourth Gospel refers to Jesus as the true Passover Lamb. John 19:36 cites Exodus 12:46 to refer to Jesus as "the true Paschal Lamb" (Bernard 1928, clv). In the Apocalypse, according to Bernard, calling Christ the lamb "has primary reference to the idea of the lamb as a *victim* (Rev. 5:6-9; 7:14), whose death is an expiatory sacrifice, and efficacious for all mankind" (Bernard 1928, 44, emphasis original, notation of Scripture citation changed). "Secondarily, as Charles shows, the Apocalyptic conceives of the lamb as *leader*, an idea prominent in Jewish Apocalyptic, but not present in the Fourth Gospel" (Bernard 1928, 44, emphasis original). Bernard, however, asserted that John's use of the title, "the Lamb of God," refers to Isaiah 53:6-7 (Bernard 1928, 44), but without commenting on whether Isaiah himself had the Paschal lamb in mind. Likewise, since the Paschal offering was not explicitly called a sin offering, Dodd denied that John referred to the Passover when he called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Dodd 1963). However, the original Paschal offering kept the firstborn in Israel from suffering the penalty of death that the Egyptians suffered as a result of Pharaoh's sin, and all death is seen as the penalty for original sin in early Christian thought (Romans 5; 6:23). If Dodd were correct, the idea of a sacrificial lamb would still not be ruled out, for bulls and goats were not the only sin offerings, but the poor who sinned unknowingly were to sacrifice a lamb (Leviticus 4:27-35). (The concept of the forgiveness of unintentional sin also plays a role in New testament theology: Jesus forgave others because they did not know what they did; Paul was forgiven because he sinned in ignorance.) If Christ indeed fulfilled all of Scripture (Luke 24:27; Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43), then all the biblical sacrifices pointed to him, including but not limited to the explicit sin offerings. In that case, it would be legitimate to follow Paul in calling Christ our Passover and even to see the sacrificial lamb substituted for Isaac as a type of the Lamb of God substituted for the sinful world to be blessed in Abraham.

<sup>4</sup>While staunchly defending the doctrine of the real presence of Jesus' body and blood in the sacramental bread and wine against the Zwinglians and Calvinists, the Lutheran confessions just as staunchly opposed the *ex opere operato* view of the bishops by appealing to the "in remembrance of me" phrase as proof that the sacrament called for faith (Augsburg Confession 24.30; Apology of the Augsburg Confession 24.36-37, 71). Not everyone, however, finds the Lutheran position consistent. Noting that the phrase only appears in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians and Luke, Bernard contrasted Paul's view that the Eucharist is a memorial with John's teaching that it is "a means of spiritual 'feeding' on Christ, the assimilation of His humanity" (Bernard 1928, clxxii). He cited Ignatius (circa 110 A.D.), Justin (circa 145 A.D.), and the Syriac Church (circa 200 A.D.) as proof that "the language [of John 6:51c-58] is Eucharistic and was recognized as such so soon as the Fourth Gospel began to be read" (Bernard 1928, clxviii-clxix). "In the *third* section [vv. 51b-58] the terminology is changed, and not only the terminology but the doctrine as well. For Jesus speaks now, not of *Himself* as the heavenly Bread continually given by the Father to believers, but of the Bread which He is, Himself, to give them *in the future* ( , v. 51)" (Bernard 1928, clxvii, emphasis original). A Eucharistic reading of the text is further supported by Jesus' confirmation of his audience's interpretation (Bickel 2006). The preceding verses refer to a figurative consumption of symbolic bread, not of sacrificed flesh, so they do not favor the figurative consumption view considered herein.

proclaim his death until he comes. The former understanding would have been better supported by injunctions to perform the sacrament as an illustration of the act of remembering him and as a proclamation of Christians' faith. Also supporting a literal consumption of the Lamb of God, the words of institution focus attention on the sacrificed body and blood that are eaten and drunk, but leave unexplained the acts of eating and drinking; such an explanation would instead have focused attention on the Christian's appropriating the benefits of Christ's death by faith, in agreement with the interpretation of a figurative consumption.

In conclusion, to the extent that the Lord's Supper is in some sense a Passover meal, the sacramental acts of eating and drinking were not instituted to symbolize a spiritual consumption of the true Passover, that is, as symbols pointing Christians to their faith or to their act of appropriation, but rather the sacramental acts of eating and drinking constitute a literal consumption of the true Passover; sacramental bread and wine were given as vehicles of the body and blood to call Christians to behold not their faith, but the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Thus, the Reformed can only remain consistent with this objective nature of the Lord's Supper by dissociating it from the Passover meal. When *the Lamb*, rather than *faith* in the Lamb, is made the subject of word and sacrament, Christ is displayed as crucified, and looking to him in saving faith follows: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40; cf. 3:14-15; 1 Corinthians 2:2; Galatians 3:1). "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

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