

# Leadership in the New Testament

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**Christ our Passover: The Eschatological Meal of the New Covenant**

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Theology operates at the level of discourse of basic and consequent beliefs. Standing behind these beliefs are a particular worldview. The NT letters offer a look into the wider worldview and belief system on which Paul draws: the “narrative sequence.”<sup>1</sup> The actual arguments of the letters form the “poetic sequence.” We need to address both of these together in order to avoid reinforcing our own worldview or systematizing a theology which we read into the text.

The task of this paper is to reflect on the poetic sequence of 1 Cor.10-11. I wish to minimize the risks of an exegetical approach by spending a few moments reflecting on Paul’s worldview and beliefs.

In his paper, “Romans and the Theology of Paul,” Wright notes that the symbolic world of Judaism focused on temple, Torah, land, and racial identity. These symbols were enlivened by the festivals and fasts, cult and sacrifice, domestic taboos and customs. The narrative framework which sustained symbol and praxis had to do with the history of Israel: specifically, its continued state of “exile” under Roman occupation and the ways in which Israel hoped for intervention by the God of the exodus.<sup>2</sup>

Both ordinances we have examined, baptism and the meal, connect to the fundamental story of Israel’s redemption: the exodus event. Paul understood baptism in terms of a new exodus. He makes this link in 1 Cor. 10:2, speaking of the wilderness generation being “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Paul brings out the parallel between Israel’s experience and that of Christians, the new exodus people, and then stresses the obligations as a result. In Romans 6 “slavery is abandoned and freedom gained by passing through the water, reenacting the death of Jesus which was already interpreted in terms of Passover imagery.”<sup>3</sup> Now in Corinthians Paul calls us back to those ancient memories. Why here, before he talks about the meal Jesus shared with His disciples?

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<sup>1</sup> Norman R. Petersen. *Rediscovering Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> NT Wright, *Romans and the Theology of Paul*. In *Pauline Theology*, Volume III, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 30-67.

<sup>3</sup> N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans. “ In *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2002) 534.

The meal celebrated by Jesus and the disciples was the Passover meal. Passover<sup>4</sup> has continued to be the defining reenactment of Jewish deliverance, celebrated every year by Jews worldwide. It is traditional for a Jewish family to gather on the first night of Passover for a special dinner called a Seder (סדר—derived from the Hebrew word for "order", referring to the very specific order of the ritual). The table is set with the finest china and silverware to reflect the importance of this meal. During this meal, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is retold using a special text called the Haggadah.<sup>5</sup> Four cups of wine are consumed at various stages in the narrative. The Haggadah divides the night's procedure into 15 parts.

N.T. Wright observes the flow of events that lead to the Passover meal in Luke's gospel.

Luke has told us all along that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to "accomplish his Exodus" (9.31). he has come to do for Israel and the whole world what God did through Moses and Aaron in the first Exodus. When the powers of evil that were enslaving God's people were at their worst, God acted to judge Egypt and save Israel. And the sign and means of both judgment and rescue was the Passover: the angel of death struck down the firstborn of all Egypt, but spared Israel as the firstborn of God, "passing over" their houses because of the blood of the lamb on the doorposts (Exodus 12). Now the judgment that had hung over Israel and Jerusalem, the judgment Jesus had spoken of so often, was to be meted out; and Jesus would deliver his people *by taking its force upon himself*. His own death would enable his people to escape...<sup>6</sup>

In Corinthians Paul makes a direct link between Passover and the sacrifice of Jesus: "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us join the feast" (1 Cor.5:7,8). The meaning is clear: we are that covenant people who were delivered by the blood of the lamb. Our remembrance is as old as Israel's memories, and our deliverance is as new as tomorrow.

The people of God in Christ are marked out by the death and resurrection of Christ, which demonstrates God's righteousness. At the Cross old and new are joined: the lamb was crucified from the

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<sup>4</sup> The primary symbol of Passover is the matzo, a flat, unleavened "bread" which recalls the hurriedly-baked bread that the Israelites ate after their hasty departure from Egypt. According to Halakha, matzo may be made from flour derived from five types of grain: wheat, barley, spelt, oats, rye. The dough for matzo is made when flour is added to water only, which has not been allowed to rise for more than 18–22 minutes prior to baking.

Many Jews observe the positive Torah commandment of eating matzo on the first night of Passover at the Passover Seder, as well as the Torah prohibition against eating or owning Chametz which includes any leavened products — such as bread, cake, cookies, beer, whisky or pasta (or anything whose dough has been mixed with a leavening agent or which has been left to rise more than 18 minutes) — for the duration of the holiday. [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

<sup>5</sup> Haggadah, meaning *telling*, is a fulfillment of the Scriptural commandment to each Jew to "tell your son" about the Jewish liberation from slavery in Egypt, as described in the book of Exodus in the Torah.

<sup>6</sup> NT Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 262.

foundation of the world. The great Jewish apocalyptic story has already begun, and those who share the meal have entered into the community for which this was true. The effect is a moral appeal: we too must flee idolatry. Yet it isn't Torah that checks a slide into paganism, but participation in Christ. In baptism the death and resurrection of Christ is present, and in the meal we celebrate the judgment that fell on the perfect Lamb, and the verdict of the last day. The angel of death has "passed over" us. We are hidden by the blood of the Lamb. Those who belong to the Messiah are the eschatological people of the covenant God. Paul reminds us that "the fulfillment of the ages has come" (11). The future is arriving today with an alternative order known as the kingdom of God.

With this narrative and poetic sequence in mind, I will consider the passage with two questions in mind, noting exegetical matters along the way. First, how does observing the Lord's supper define and give dynamic expression to the essential nature of the church as community of faith? Second, how does the continual involvement of the community together in this ordinance enrich and nurture their spiritual formation individually and corporately?

### **The Meal and the Nature of Christian Community**

In the retelling of the exodus narrative in 10:1-10, Paul is intent on calling the Corinthians to accountability. There has been concern about idolatry, and immorality (Gk: *porniea*). There are people at Corinth who are in danger of God's judgment. God's people who partake of Christ must live in a way that represents Him. Paul invites his readers to test themselves against the Jews in the exodus story.

The necessity of such an accounting is all the more urgent because "the end of the ages have come" (Gk: *ton aenon ta tale ton alonon*). This phrase is Paul's way of speaking about the return of Christ, when God's purposes will be finally completed. J. Paul Sampley writes, "The end of the ages is a time of judgment when each person has two alternatives: Either the individual will "fall" as did the twenty-three in the exodus, or "stand" (*histemi*)."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2002) 914.

“Is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?” (16). The word twice translated “participation” in the NIV is *koinonia*. It can also mean sharing, fellowship, or communion.<sup>8</sup> Paul tells us that this sharing in Christ is fundamentally defining. We are “in Christ” and our actions and attitudes must reflect this objective reality.

After a discussion of the proper treatment of dedicated meat in consideration of the need of the community, and a section on the comportment of women in worship, Paul returns to a discussion of the Lord’s Supper in 11:17-34.

In the Corinthian practice the supper has become highly individualized. “Each one takes his own supper; and one is hungry while another is drunk” (11:21). They have the required elements, but not the right heart. Paul remarks that they are treating the church of God with contempt (22). It is the privatization of the supper which is most in question.

Paul begins his corrective with verse 23, restating what he received from the Lord and passed on to the church. Twice the command, “do this,” is linked to remembrance (24-25). The word *eucharisteo* is the word for thanks (24), and *anamnesis*<sup>9</sup> is the word for remembrance. Kittel notes that the secular Greek usage of the word *eucharist* was originally graceful, then later “to give thanks” and to pray.<sup>10</sup> The other word, *anamnesis*, is perhaps even more important for our consideration, because it connects us back to the narrative sequence.

“Tell all his wonderful acts,” is more than a simple refrain in David’s song (1 Chron. 16:9b); it is the fundamental practice of liturgy (*liturgia*: the work of the people). Every liturgical act places the worshiper on a redemptive time line extending back through salvation history and ahead into a covenantal future, in which God’s past faithfulness is the basis for future hope. In like manner, Christian worship

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<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Kittel. *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans: Paternoster Press, 1985) 449-450.

<sup>9</sup> Schrotenboer notes that this word is abused by some who take “memorial” to justify the idea of representation beyond a calling to mind of what is past and instead to refer to the present efficacy of God’s work where Christ’s sacrifice is “made actual.” Paul Schrotenboer, *An Evangelical Response to Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. World Evangelical Fellowship, 1989. 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 1306.

should anchor our memory in God's work in history, centered in Christ, and in our anticipation in the future coming of Christ and His kingdom.

Sampley notes that in remembering God's mighty acts in history we incorporate the new tellers and hearers as part of the narrative.<sup>11</sup> When the Corinthians tell the story, it becomes *their story*.

In eating the bread and drinking the cup, "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26). The word for proclaim is *katangelo*, and it has a much wider meaning than merely "preach." We would be better to think like this: "The gospel is proclaimed by performance, and performed by proclamation." As George Hunsberger noted, "The daily lived performance by vibrant communities of Christ is the most fundamental testament of the Gospel's force and power."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, taking part in the supper is a performance of the Gospel.

Tim Brown connects *anamnesis* and proclamation:

"With grace offerings of hymn and prayer, chalice and loaf, scroll and blessing, we remind the people of God who they are, whose they are, and what great things have happened in their wilderness past, so that they might have confidence and hope in a promised land future. Sermons without memories, and the preachers who preach them, are like ships without rudders."<sup>13</sup>

In verse 29 we are called to "recognize" the body of the Lord (Gk: *diakrino* to *soma*). Here remembrance and recognition are linked. Jesus is the Risen Lord. If we had only memories of Him, then of all men we should be most pitied. The historical Lord is alive and ruling, and it is His kingdom we wait for when we pray "Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." N.T. Wright comments that,

Jesus is recognized when he takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it (24:30). Yes, Luke says a few verses later, summing up the entire excited announcement of the two disciples: "they told what had happened on the road"—which we already know means the full-dress exposition of scripture, the telling of God's story—"and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24:35).<sup>14</sup>

Lest we miss the significance for our present discussion, we need to recall the flow of Luke's Gospel. The last time Jesus broke bread was at the Last Supper (22:19). They have been waiting in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 935

<sup>12</sup> George Hunsberger. *Stormfront* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003)

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Brown. "A Blueprint for Pulpit and Table." *Perspectives*, May 2002.

<sup>14</sup> N.T. Wright, "The Resurrection and the Postmodern Dilemma." *Sewanee Theological Review*, 41:2, 1998.

Jerusalem for three days in agony. Now here they are walking along the road with Jesus incognito while he expounds Scripture. “Was it not necessary,” he says, “that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (24:26) And their eyes are opened, they know him, and they rush back to Jerusalem full of joy. This is another Passover!

In the supper remembrance and recognition come together. The gathered physical body promises the presence of Christ by His Holy Spirit to nurture and strengthen His body (as Schrotenboer points out in his list of general agreement).<sup>15</sup> “Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there am I among them.” Jesus indwells His body. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed and performed, Christ is present. For this reason Paul warns of judgment and discipline for him who fails to honor the community or who eats the bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner.

Now we can summarize how observing the Supper defines the essential nature of the *ekklesia* as a faith community.

- It is a worshipping community
- It is a Holy community indwelt by Christ
- It is a participatory community
- It is a caring community
- It is a community with memories, rooted in history
- It is a performing and proclaiming community
- It is a gracious and thankful community
- It is a hopeful and expectant community, looking forward to Jesus return
- It is a sacramental community, having a visible form and a hidden spiritual life
- It is a celebratory community, rejoicing together in the faithfulness of God

How does the continual involvement of the community together in this ordinance enrich and nurture their spiritual formation individually and corporately? We can also summarize this answer.

- To participate in the meal is to participate in the community of God’s people in history
- To remember is to recognize the living Presence of Jesus in the church
- To remember is to proclaim and to perform the good news of God’s deliverance in history
- To remember is to give thanks and to declare the mercy of God
- To remember is to live today in the light of God’s action and hope of God’s future

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<sup>15</sup> Schrotenboer, Op Cit. 9.

While the wholeness of the loaf tells us that we are one body, the brokenness of the bread reminds us that Jesus was broken for us, and that our own brokenness will one day be healed. At the same time, it is only the crushed wheat that combines to make a single loaf. Our weakness becomes our opportunity for strength. It is at the broken places that Christ is made known.

The physical reality of the cup and the loaf remind us that the Incarnation was a historical act, and that there is nothing that is separate from God that cannot be reconciled. There is no “secular” realm when Christ is Lord; there is only the Holy and the not-yet-Holy.

Furthermore, spiritual formation is not merely an inward experience, but like the visible and historical act of Passover, must connect with the real world of sails and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings. It is not merely an individual experience, but is primarily the creation of a new humanity. Together we are the body of Christ, and we need one another (see 1 Cor.12-14).

The commonness and smallness of the cup and the loaf remind us that God’s kingdom comes to us in ordinary and simple ways, even in hidden ways. We need discernment to see its coming. It arrives as we partner with God and His people in the work of redemption. It arrives as we sit at table, and as we go out into the world to demonstrate His love.

### **Personal Reflections**

While I have difficulty with a sacramental view as espoused in the high church traditions, I am not entirely happy with the typical evangelical approach. I wish there were a middle place between high and low.. a third space where we could genuinely appreciate the real presence of Jesus by His Spirit while acknowledging that there is no power in the rite itself and no change in the elements. I am struck the paradox: by the commonness of the physical elements, and the power and mystery of God’s presence.

I have never personally participated in a Seder celebration. I doubt whether it is possible to really appreciate the practice of the Supper apart from some experience with the Jewish practice. I’d like in the future to take part in a Jewish celebration of the Passover. I believe my own appreciation and experience of the Supper would be enriched by a deeper understanding of the Seder.

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