

# “The Sacrament” Is Not a Sacrament

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Wait a minute, isn't that like saying, “sugar is not sugar,” or “green is not green”? Well, not exactly. It is more like saying, “the green is not green.” “The green” means something different than a reference to the color green. “The green” refers to a part of a golf course which is described as not being the color green. In the title of this article, “*the* Sacrament” refers to the Christian rite of the Lord's Supper, or Communion, or the Eucharist. “A sacrament” refers to the historic usage of this word that serves to describe this Christian rite. The Protestant Reformer John Calvin explains, “The reason the ancients used this word in this sense is clear enough. For wherever the old translator wished to render into Latin the Greek word 'mysterion' (mystery), especially where it refers to divine things, he translated it 'sacrament.' For example, in Ephesians: 'That he may make known the sacrament [mystery] of his will' (1:9).”<sup>1</sup>

This is also stated in the Catholic Catechism: “The mysteries of Christ's life are the foundations of what he would henceforth dispense in the sacraments, through the ministers of his Church, for 'what was visible in our Savior has passed over into his mysteries.’”<sup>2</sup>

So according to Calvin and the Catholic Catechism, the Christian rite of the Supper is called a “sacrament” because, in part, it is a mysterious rite. Of course, both Calvin and Catholic teaching affirm the rite as a holy sign, to which the word sacrament also refers. But our concern in this article is to explore the belief that the Supper is a “mysterious rite.”

The Catholic church accused the Reformers of denying the “mysterious” aspect of the Eucharist by denying Christ's real *physical presence* in the bread and the wine. They accused the Reformers of being rationalists who were not willing to submit to God's “mysterious” work in changing the elements into His actual body and blood. Calvin responds to this charge:

But the infamy of this falsehood cannot be completely purged until another accusation is wiped away. For they boast that we are so bound to human reason that we attribute no more to the power of God than the order of nature allows and common sense dictates. From such wicked slanders I appeal to the very doctrine I have taught, which shows clearly enough that I do not at all measure *this mystery* with the measure of human reason, or subject its laws to nature.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin clearly considers the Lord's Supper to be “mysterious,” but not in the same way the Catholic church considers it to be so. A significant part of the mysterious aspect of the Supper for the Catholic church is in how the bread and the wine, which are clearly bread and wine, can at the very same time be the actual body and blood of Christ. Calvin's affirms the mystery of the Supper differently:

I ask whether it is from physics we have learned that Christ feeds our souls from heaven with his flesh, but our bodies are nourished by bread and wine. Whence does this power to quicken souls come to flesh?...We say that Christ descends to us both by the outward symbol and by his flesh and of his blood. He who does not perceive that many miracles

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1John McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of Christian Religion* vol.2 p.1277

2Catechism of the Catholic Church, p.316

3McNeill, p.1390

are subsumed in these few words is more than stupid.<sup>4</sup>

Calvin's teaching is that Christ is *spiritually present* in the symbols of the bread and the wine, and feeds our souls in this way. The common link between the Catholic teaching and the teaching of Calvin is that they both teach we receive the grace of God, or are "spiritually nourished," simply by partaking in the elements of the Lord's Supper. Despite the differences, there is a significant similarity between the two. The Catholic teaching is that we receive grace through the eating of the Eucharist, apart from a rational understanding of any meaning associated with the elements. They put it this way:

Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify. They are efficacious because *in them* Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts *in his sacraments* in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies....As fire transforms into itself everything it touches, so the Holy Spirit transforms into the divine life whatever is subject to its power....This is the meaning of the Church's affirmation that the sacraments act *ex opere operato* (literally: 'by the very fact of the actions being performed').<sup>5</sup>

Notice, the grace of Christ is "in his sacraments" and affects who they touch just as fire affects whatever it touches. The sign does not *only* signify the grace of God for His people, but actually, in its physical consumption, gives the grace it signifies. This is what the Catholic church calls "sacramental grace." Since Christ is at work in the sacrament, the sacraments are understood as those things which contain and dispense the grace of God. The power contained in this sacrament is such that its effectiveness to confer the grace of God is in no way dependent upon "the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God."<sup>6</sup> However, the Catholic church does not negate the necessity of faith and the proper "disposition of the one who receives" the sacrament. As we have read, the Catechism states, "*Celebrated worthily in faith*, the sacraments confer the grace they signify." But what must be believed by the recipient? It is hard to find the answer to that question in the Catechism, but an encyclopedia of Catholic doctrine states, "Minimally, the person must believe that this is really and truly the Body of Christ and nothing less."<sup>7</sup> This is quite a revealing statement. There is no mention here of the need for faith in the historic event of Christ's death and resurrection as fundamental to the sacrament's effectiveness.

Of special importance to us for this discussion is that faith serves as an important prerequisite for the effectiveness of grace given "in the sacrament." But the grace given in the sacrament works secretly through the physical engagement between the element and the celebrant. This is the "mysterious work" of God through the sacrament. In this sense, God's grace is given apart from any intellectual engagement of the worshiper. In fact, "minimally" all that is needed, by way of prerequisite, is the belief that Christ's actual body and blood is being consumed and grace is given.

John Calvin as well spoke of the importance of faith as a prerequisite to being spiritually nourished through the Lord's Supper. For him, apart from faith, the Supper does no good. However, his conception of God's secret spiritual work through the sacrament bears a striking similarity to Catholic teaching. He writes:

Now, even though all these things have to do with faith, I leave no place for the

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<sup>4</sup>McNeill, p.1390

<sup>5</sup>Catholic Catechism, p.319

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, p.319

<sup>7</sup>Russel Shaw ed. *Our Sunday Visitor's Encyclopedia of Catholic Doctrine*, p.589

sophistry that what I mean when I say Christ is received by faith is that he is received only by understanding and imagination. For the promises offer *him*, not for us to halt in the appearance and bare knowledge alone, *but to enjoy true participation in him*. And indeed, I do not see how anyone can trust that he has redemption and righteousness in the cross of Christ, and life in his death, unless he relies chiefly upon *a true participation in Christ himself*. For those benefits would not come to us unless Christ first made himself ours. I say, therefore, that in the *mystery of the Supper*, Christ is truly shown to us through the symbols of the bread and the wine, his very body and blood, in which he has fulfilled all obedience to obtain righteousness for us. Why? First, that we may grow into one body with him; secondly, *having been made partakers of his substance*, that we may also *feel his power* in partaking of all his benefits.<sup>8</sup>

Notice, for Calvin, Christ is received in a way *other than* through “understanding and imagination.” The Supper constitutes the way *other than* knowledge. He insists we are not offered him to our knowledge alone, in the Supper, but “to enjoy a true participation in him.” In fact, as with Catholicism, the effectiveness of the cross “relies chiefly upon a true participation in Christ himself” through the Supper. In the Supper is an engagement with Christ that transcends the intellect, in which “we feel his power.” Calvin goes so far as to state that in partaking of the Supper we “have been made partakers of his substance.”<sup>9</sup>

This is why I call faith a prerequisite for both Catholics and Calvin. It is true that Calvin is stronger and more expansive on the *necessity* of this prerequisite. It is also true that they both speak of the Supper as something that strengthens faith. However, it must be seen, that they both understood the actual event of the transference of grace to be apart from faith, a secret and mysterious work of God through either the spiritual eating and drinking (Calvin) or the literal eating and drinking (Catholic) of Christ's body and blood. This eating and drinking results in a spiritual union with Christ taking place in a physical and trans-intellectual way. This is why, for both of them the Sacrament (the Supper) is a sacrament (mystery).

In this it must be shown that neither of them have come up to a fully biblical understanding of the Lord's Supper. Both remain captive to pagan conceptions of participation with divinity through physical engagement which transcends the intellect.

Notice how both become ahistorical. As we saw, for the Catholic, a “minimal” yet effective faith can be spoken of without reference at all to God's historical acts. Calvin can speak of a fundamental engagement with God that has nothing to do with memory. They both conceive of an *essential* participation with deity which is devoid of historical reference. This has absolutely no relation at all to the biblical conception of the Lord's Supper being a Passover meal which derives its meaning *historically*. The meal, by Christ's institution, looks forward and backward to events that take place in time and space. It invokes memory about an historical event and looks forward to events which are to come. What we must all remember and appreciate anew, and sometimes for the first time, is that the Lord's Supper was a Passover meal. The Passover did not transcend rational thought. The Passover did not contain a grace that was dispensed mysteriously in its consumption. It had comprehensible or rational meaning, because its very purpose was to illuminate the intellect and the imagination with the past and future redemptive and historical mighty acts of God.

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<sup>8</sup>McNeill, p.1372

<sup>9</sup> By this I take him to not mean the substance of is divinity, or divine nature, but the substance of his human nature. So we in a mysterious way do eat of his actual body. From this it is easy to see why Luther was pleased with Calvin's conception, and how both were still heavily influenced by Aristotle's philosophical distinctions just as Rome was.

From the very beginning, this was the expressed purpose of eating and drinking. We find the first description of the purpose of the Passover meal in Exodus 12:14, “This day you are to *commemorate*; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord— a lasting ordinance.” The Passover was to be instructional in nature: “And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” (Ex.12:26,27)

Notice the purpose is to bring the redemptive and historical act of God into the present by means of recollection with the mind engaged. However, it is important to understand that the point was not just to remember these historical events. Remembering the great act of God in the past reinforces faith in the God who promises to be with His people in the present and future if they continue to walk in His revealed ways. Exodus 13:9,10 teaches, “This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead *that the law of God is to be on your lips*. For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand.”

The Passover was to remind the Israelites that they belonged to the Lord God and were obligated to keep His ways. And if they continued in His ways, then God promised to remain faithful to His promise to protect and provide for His people, as Leviticus clearly reveals,

*If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands,[then] I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field their fruit....I will look on you with favor and make you fruitful and increase your numbers, and I will keep my covenant with you....I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high (26:3,4,9,12,13).*

So the Passover meal was given to reinforce faith by reminding God's people of His faithfulness in the past, so they would continue to keep His ways in order to enjoy God's promised blessing in the future. As Leviticus clearly shows, the promise of God's future blessing (and not cursing) was dependent upon His people's faithfulness to walk in his “decrees” and “commands.” Notice that Leviticus 26 closes with a strong reminder of God's great act of redemption from Egyptian slavery.

It is beyond dispute that when Jesus celebrated the Lord's Supper in the upper room, he was in fact celebrating the Jewish Passover meal. Everyone acknowledges this. Luke's gospel reports it this way;

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the *Passover* lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the *Passover*.” “Where do you want us to prepare it,” they asked. He replied, “As you enter the the city, a man carrying a water jar will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the *Passover* with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there.” They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the *Passover*” (22:7-13).

Jesus, in the upper room, states, “I have eagerly desired to eat *this Passover with you* before I suffer.

For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” Then Jesus took the elements of the Jewish Passover, the unleavened bread and the cup of thanksgiving, and invested them with new meaning. The unleavened bread now represents his body, not the original unleavened bread eaten in haste in Egypt. And the cup of thanksgiving, rather than a grateful look to the Exodus of the past, now represents the blood that He was about to shed on the cross. Even though the focus of the elements change, they still represent an *historical* event. Jesus now looks forward to his impending death. In fact, that very night he would be betrayed by Judas into the hands of his enemies. He would die a public death as the sacrificial lamb, and be the fulfillment of the Passover lamb sacrificed in Egypt, and commemorated by Israel for generations after. While the focus of this Passover meal changes, the purpose of the Passover clearly does not. Jesus' words of institution reflect the commemorative purpose of the Passover:

“This is my body given for you; *do this in remembrance of me*” (Lk.22:19).

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, *in remembrance of me*”(1 Cor.11:25).

As with the old covenant Passover, the purpose is to invoke memory, to illuminate and bring to mind the great redemptive and historical act of God for His people. Of course, Jesus was celebrating *the* crowning jewel of God's redemptive work for His people, Christ's substitutionary atonement upon a Roman cross on which his body would be broken, and His blood spilled for the gracious pardon and redemption of the world.

As with the Old Covenant exodus, this new exodus would need to be remembered and celebrated. We would need to remember again and again that we are not our own, that we have been purchased from slavery and now belong to God. As Paul put it, “You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor.6:19b).

And like the Old Covenant people, we remember the faithfulness of our God so that we trust him for what he promises us in the future. Jesus spoke about this as well at His New Covenant Passover when he said, “I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on *until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom*” (Mt.26:29). The Passover looks forward to the historic consummation of all things. We celebrate the Supper with our minds and imaginations reinforced to contemplate God's redemptive act through Christ and the great homecoming that awaits His people. The past remembered inspires faith in what has been promised for the future. “He who did not spare his own Son [remember], how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things [believe]?”(Rom.8:32) In other words, how can anyone who remembers all that God *has done* for us in giving His own Son not trust Him for our future?

The meaning and the purpose and the gracious work of the Lord's Supper is no mystery. Its meaning is clear. Perhaps the Reformer who had the best grasp of this was the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli. His writings reflect a mature appreciation of the covenantal purpose of the Passover, old and new. Zwingli did not deny the existence of the presence of the Lord through the Lord's Supper, but his understanding is consistent with the purpose of the meal. The scholar Charles Hambrick-Stowe reflects Zwingli's thinking: “I believe that in the holy meal of the eucharist, the true body of Christ is present *in the mind* of the believer; that is to say that those who thank the Lord for the benefits conferred on us in his son acknowledge that he became true flesh, truly suffered therein and truly washed away our sins by his blood. *Thus everything done by Christ becomes as it were present to them in their believing*

*minds.*”<sup>10</sup>

Zwingli appreciated the historical meaning of the Supper as a Passover. He understood that the very purpose of the Supper was to fill the minds of God's people with Christ's historic work of redemption. Notice his grounding in history, that through participation in the Supper we “acknowledge that he *became* true flesh, truly suffered therein and truly washed away our sins by his blood.” So contrary to the Catholic and Calvinic conception of a “mysterious” work of sacramental grace that transcends the mind, Zwingli reflects a more thoroughly biblical understanding that the very purpose of the Supper was to effect the mind with the gracious and historical work of God. This is a means by which God preserves His people in faith and faithfulness. To remember God's faithfulness in the past is the basis for hoping in God's deliverance in the future.

The Catholic and Calvinistic conception fails to rise to the fullness of the meaning of the Supper, and imports a notion that is quite foreign to God's revelation. The idea that a mysterious work of grace happens through interacting with physical elements, and is at heart devoid of intellectual content, is thoroughly pagan. Central to the pagan mystery cult is the idea that physical elements of various kinds contain in them a divine power which affects the celebrant, which transcends the intellect. This, Zwingli understood in his day: “As an Old Testament scholar and a humanist, Zwingli already realized to an astonishing degree that the idea of linking the presence of Christ with the elements of the Lord's Supper has more to do with ancient mystery cults and a magical worldview than with the tradition of Hebrew thought (cp. the Pessach/Passover) which shaped the New Testament authors and Jesus himself.”<sup>11</sup> Zwingli was helped by the insights of the Dutch writer Cornelius Hendricks Hoen, who wrote, “For if we adore and worship this consecrated bread, honoring it in every way as if it were God, even though it is not God, how, I ask you, do we differ from those heathens who worshiped wood and stones? They believed that there was some divinity (numen) in them, which there was not, for they would not have wished to adore stones unless perhaps they had first believed that these stones were gods.”<sup>12</sup> Fundamental to pagan magic is the belief that there are powers that exist within natural elements. The natural elements of fire, earth, air and water contain a greater reality, a power into which we can gain access.<sup>13</sup> It is held that certain ritual acts will unleash this power for our benefit. This divine power is contained in “the elements.” However, for the ritual to be beneficial for the practitioner, he or she must *believe* in the teaching that there is power to be had.<sup>14</sup> It is striking how similar this is to the Catholic and Calvinistic conception of how grace works through the sacrament. It is also not surprising that this has become a reason for pagan claims that Christianity has pagan origins! Paganism does not require history to find its meaning. Christianity does because it has Hebrew origins, not pagan.

We must purge these foreign ideas from our conception of our Supper ritual. The Supper is not a mysterious rite, its meaning has been clearly revealed. We must continue to reform our thinking according to the light of God's Word, and receive the gracious knowledge, again and again, of God's mighty acts in history. And through the Supper we become part of God's redemptive story, as it unfolds and finds its consummation at the great future Supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God, a Supper of celebration, of coming home at last.

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10 Charles Hambrick-Stowe. “Ulrich Zwingli: Prophet of the Modern World” *Christian Century*, April 4, 1984, pg. 335

11 Peter Opitz, “At the Table of the Lord: To Zwingli's View on the Lord's Supper.” Sixteenth Century Society Conference, Montreal, CA, 2010.

12 Alister McGrath ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, p.308

13 Scott Cunningham *Earth Power* p.21

14 Scott Cunningham, *Earth Power*, p.

*“At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.”*

*-Psalm 106:19-22*

*“Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced, O descendants of Israel, O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones. He is the Lord our God; his judgments are in all the earth.”*

*-Psalm 105:5-7*