

# A Changeable Feast: The Evolution of the Eucharist

By John R. Mabry, PhD

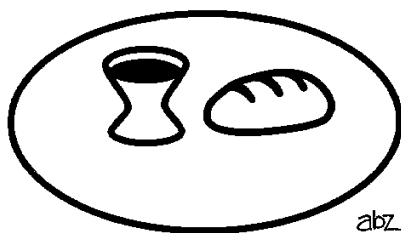
## How It All Got Started

Meeting on the eve of the Passover to celebrate God's faithfulness with the bounty of the earth, a Rabbi began the meal in the traditional manner. Taking bread in his hands, he blessed the Creator, Sovereign of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. He broke the bread and passed it to his friends. Then, in a moment of inspiration, he added something that was not in the liturgy. Looking at the broken crust of bread in his hands, he surprised them all by saying, "This is my body."

His friends were stunned. Their teacher had been acting very strange of late, dwelling on his impending death and possessed of a tired melancholy. Peter's hand had frozen halfway to his mouth at his teacher's cryptic utterance. What did he mean by that? Peter's mind reeled with the possible implications of the words. He felt a stab of fear in his gut. Passover would never be the same.

In this way begins the Eucharistic rite, which has held its place at the center of Christian worship through two millennia. With very few exceptions, this ritual of blessing and sharing bread and wine has been celebrated by all Christians in every time and place, from Baptists to Russian Orthodox, Pentecostals to Plymouth Brethren, Calvinists to Roman Catholics, Mennonites to Lutherans. In fact, chances are, if you are a Christian, and unless you are a Quaker or a soldier in the Salvation Army, then you, too, feast at the Eucharistic table.

The word "Eucharist" comes from the Greek *eucharisteo*, which means "I give thanks." Thus, gratefulness and thanksgiving were originally the purpose of the rite, just as they were the purpose of the



Jewish Sabbath Supper after which it is fashioned. *The Book of Common Prayer* calls the Eucharist "The Great Thanksgiving" for this very reason. Known to Roman Catholics as the "Mass," this name derives from the conclusion of the service in Latin: "Ite, missa est" ("Go, it is over"). To many Protestants, the "Lord's Supper" is the title of choice, while the Orthodox call it the "Divine Liturgy."

Now that's a lot of different names, and as might be expected, each one signifies a different outlook on the meal. For centuries, Christians have argued, fought wars, and issued proclamations of damnation upon each other over questions such as, "Exactly how is Christ present in the Eucharist?" The history of these arguments is replete with complementary and conflicting opinions co-existing, often within the same faith community. For although the actions of this rite—the taking, blessing, and distribution of bread and wine—have been retained, the meaning ascribed to these actions has never stopped evolving in the imaginations of its participants.

## Threads of Meaning

Even at the beginning of the Christian movement there was no clear consensus on the meaning of the rite. What happened during the first few centuries of

the church's life was the emergence of various theological "threads," independent traditions concerning the Eucharist, which throughout the next two millennia can be found weaving in and out of the church's life. Though most "threads" began as singular understandings, before long, Eucharistic practice often saw two or more "threads" woven through a prayer, culminating in the more complex prayers we are familiar with today.

Many of these threads are complementary. Some others might be seen as contradictory, while some are built on differing assumptions of what the crucifixion and resurrection actually mean. But all of the threads—whether they have been subsumed by other threads, evolved beyond recognition, or been forgotten altogether—have at one time or another in the church's history been regarded as orthodox (or as the "correct teaching").

The theologies which define these threads usually arose in response to various crises encountered by the church. Generations of Christians, faced with new political and spiritual challenges, shaped their understanding of their ritual meal in order to help them meet their challenges, creating new threads of tradition, and reinterpreting old ones, giving them new life, new hue, and new meaning.

## The Thanksgiving & Community Thread

The earliest Christians were, of course, Jews, for whom the observance of a sacred meal was infused with great symbolic meaning and was an important aspect of religious life. Belief in Jesus as the Messiah did not impair the practice of their native faith until much later

when Paul began to challenge the inherent “Jewishness” of Christianity. The book of Acts, St. Luke’s record of the early church, records that the apostles and their followers continued to worship in the synagogue.

Following the liturgy at the synagogue Jewish believers would come home, and assembling at the table, thanked God over the bread: “Blessed be God, Sovereign of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

After the meal the diners shared a cup of wine which was first blessed by the father of the family, who called upon the group to stand: “Lift up your hearts,” and asked their permission to give thanks in their name: “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” God was then blessed as creator, sustainer, and redeemer, and prayer was offered. The wine was blessed by blessing God.

The recitation of the prayer of blessing over the bread (and, on more festive occasions, the wine) would have been the normative act of celebration for Jesus and his followers. For the Jews this practice of table-fellowship carried deep symbolic significance, of which Jesus made profound and extensive use during his ministry. To sit at table with someone was to testify to one’s acceptance of them, one’s unity with them. To eat a meal with someone (especially a sacred meal such as the Sabbath or Passover) was to recognize that your fellow diners were in good standing with God and the community, and also to communicate to them the blessing pronounced in the prayers. Jesus frequently scandalized his religious contemporaries by making a habit of sharing meals with “outcasts and sinners.” For Jesus there were none who were excluded from God’s love and the benefits of religious community. Those whom the religious leaders of the time scorned were, in Jesus’ eyes, those most in need of friendship and support.

Jesus asked his followers to act “as if” the coming Community of God were already come, to participate in it by choice, by sharing a meal together to

which none would be unwelcome, no matter how scandalous their behavior or reputation. Jesus sought to teach them to see each other as God sees them: as equals, as equally flawed and equally loved human beings.

Thankfully, this Thanksgiving and Community thread did not die out with Jesus. Early Christians, especially of the second century, although embarking on threads of their own, continued to be influenced by this, Jesus’ own thread, using the bread and wine to celebrate

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God’s goodness in creation, God’s faithfulness, and the Community God has made of them, adding special thanksgivings for the gift of Christ Jesus.

The earliest recorded Eucharistic liturgy emphasizes this theme of Thanksgiving. It’s found in the *Didache*, an early second century “church handbook.” The *Didache*’s Eucharistic prayer is a fascinating document, for it reveals just how closely early Christian worship continued to be modeled on Jewish practice. The prayer contained in it is simply a series of thanksgivings for Jesus. It contains no institutional narrative (where Jesus says “this is my body”), nor does it contain any sacrificial emphasis. It is, in fact, most representative of Jesus’ own tradition of table-fellowship in the context of a common meal, and echoes Jesus’ own concerns for unity, especially the beautiful passage that speaks of “these

grains that were scattered upon the mountains” being brought together to form one loaf.

We see this thread in our own liturgy in the introductory thanksgiving before the proper preface (p. 361 in *The Book of Common Prayer*): “it is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” The Closing Prayer from the Church of England’s new *Book of Common Worship* also contains this thread (p. 182): “Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.”

It is important to point out that in the period of the early church we are discussing here, Christians still understood Christ’s words of institution figuratively, as pertaining not to the offerings of the bread and wine which were used to give thanks, but to the communicants themselves as a gathered body of believers. They saw themselves as Jesus’ body and blood.

The earliest of Christians also tolerated a great deal of diversity in their understanding of the Eucharist. It had not yet come to be understood as a “sacrament” but was a carryover of the Jewish meal-time prayers using bread and wine to give thanks. Jesus was understood to be among them wherever and whenever two or more followers were gathered. Thus the early church carried on Jesus’ own mealtime ministry to an extent, eschewing differences between themselves and striving to be a community of liberation and support as Jesus had taught them. But soon, scandals, persecutions—and, surprisingly, the greatest difficulty of all: acceptance—would rock the early church and change forever its attitudes and celebrations.

## **Persecution and the Eschatological Thread**

As the Christian movement began to grow, it invariably met with a great deal of opposition. In the first few centuries, Christians met with ghastly persecution,

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and under such extreme duress, the Christian community drew upon Jesus' promise that the end of the world was imminent and that the eschatological Kingdom would dawn within the apostles' own lifetimes. The persecuted church began to look with renewed vigor towards a time when their suffering would end and their cause would be vindicated. Therefore, while the early church continued to focus on the realized eschatology of Christ in their midst in the Eucharist, they also renewed their commitment to the coming feast of the Community of God that Jesus had taught. For them, the Eucharist became both a proclamation of the reality of Christ in their midst, and a foretaste of the messianic feast when all that they prayed for would come to pass.

In proclaiming the coming "Kingdom" as pre-figured in their own community, the early Christians strove to live with each other in the same spirit of unity, harmony, and love that would be shared by all the redeemed in the "Kingdom" of God. The church became the "little Kingdom" that would eventually overcome the world. Sadly, this optimism which was born of external pressure of persecution was to be thwarted by the church's own internal struggles.

This thread survives in our current liturgy, Prayer B (p. 369): "In the fullness of time, put all things in subjection under your Christ, and bring us to that heavenly country where, with all your saints, we may enter the everlasting heritage of your sons and daughters; through Jesus Christ our Lord..." ▲

*Next time: The Gnostics and the Incarnationalist Thread; the Metabolist Thread; and the Divinization Thread.*

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