

Views from the Pews – Origins of the Eucharist

The central act of worship in the Christian Church is the Eucharist. It is known variously as Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, or the Eucharist and because of the words He used in doing so it was intended to be a sacred meal. As we are well aware, it was instituted by Our Lord at the meal that He took with his disciples on the night prior to His betrayal, trial and crucifixion.

We can be certain that it was intended to be a sacred rite for Christians and it amounts to new covenant with His followers. The evidence that allows us to be sure that this sacred meal was to be the central act of worship is that it's institution is recorded in the three synoptic Gospels and in St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. There are other references to the Eucharist in scripture but no other direct account of the institution. There is to some extent a remarkable correspondence between the central aspects of the rite. But there are also differences, but these should not cause us any doubts about its authenticity as the central act of worship.

The differences arise, principally, in the detail of the order in which the elements are recorded and the time at which the institution took place. Did the cup precede the bread (Luke 22; I Cor 11) or was the order the other way round (Matt 26, Mark 14). Did the institution take place during the Passover meal (Matt 26; Mark 14; Luke 22) or was it something that followed the conclusion of the Passover ritual? (I Cor, 11 although this is not particularly clear)

As well as the Passover meal that provides a kind of model for the Eucharist, there were other kinds of ritual meals prevalent in Roman society that would have been known to the population generally. The Jews would have had no particular problem understanding that the Eucharist was a ritual meal but other groups had their own ritual meals (the mystery cults were a case in point). Accordingly, Gentile believers would have had little problem in accepting that Christians also worshipped through the means of a ritual meal. While the mystery religions were secretive, as to detail, that ritual meals were part of the rite was reasonably well known. We can happily leave such considerations to the theologians.

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