

When should Christians Memorialize Jesus' Death?

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All Christian denominations practice some kind of memorial of Jesus' death. It is called "Communion," the "Lord's Supper," and the "Eucharist." But the manner in which it is memorialized, and the frequency and specific dates, differ greatly. For those wishing to obey Jesus' command, "*Do this in remembrance of Me,*"¹ several difficult issues must be addressed. For Roman Catholics, participation in their version of the Eucharist administered by their own priesthood is essential for salvation. For others, it is just an afterthought. Churches and denominations have split over how and when to observe this command of Jesus. In this article I will deal only with the question of when. In order to address this issue adequately, it is necessary to review how and why Christianity began to evolve away from the apostolic teachings and practice.

From the time of Christ until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, Christianity was considered to be a sect of Judaism by Christians,² Jews,³ and the Roman authorities. The dispute over whether Jesus was the prophesied Messiah was an internal theological debate. This is why Paul was able to enter the diaspora synagogues and preach Jesus in every town he visited on his missionary journeys. The persecution of Christians during the Apostles' ministries was almost always instigated by Jews who rejected Paul's message about Jesus. They created several civil disturbances recorded in Acts which the Romans sought to quell at all costs.⁴ For the most part, Roman officials left Christians alone because they tended to be peaceful and law-abiding. However, the unbelieving Jews were constantly raising an uproar against the Christians because of their success in evangelizing many Jews who became Christians. At one point, the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-53) ordered all Jews (both believing and unbelieving) out of Rome because of the constant unrest.⁵ Eventually, a series of landmark events soon caused the divide between Christians and Jews to boil over to the point where it threatened to fracture the entire Roman Empire. And this eventually led to a radical theological evolution in both Judaism and Christianity, both groups seeking to distance themselves from the other, anathematizing each other. It was a divorce with massive consequences.

¹ Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24

² Acts 28:17-21

³ Acts 24:14

⁴ Acts 14:1-8; Acts 17:5-9; Acts 17:13; Acts 18:12-17; Acts 21:27-36; Acts 23:12-22; 1 Thess. 2:14-16

⁵ Acts 18:2

The Great Fire of Rome

In the city of Rome, Christianity had become widely adopted by the lower classes of both Jews and Gentiles. However, when the great fire destroyed much of Rome in AD 64, the emperor Nero was blamed by the people for setting the city on fire to make room for his proposed construction projects. To deflect the blame, Nero accused the Christians of setting the fire.⁶ They were an easy scapegoat because their Messianic expectations had already been portrayed as a threat to Rome, and because of all of the previous accusations against them by Jews. In the crackdown on Christians under Nero, both Paul (AD 65) and Peter (AD 66) were killed by the Romans as the Colosseum became famous for the sport of killing Christians by gladiators, wild beasts, and by fire.

The Destruction of Jerusalem and Scattering of the Mother Church

At the same time, a genuine military revolt against Rome was brewing among the Jews in Jerusalem. Unlike the Christians who were content to peacefully await the return of Jesus the Messiah from heaven, a large body of Jewish zealots in Judea sought to bring about their own Messianic expectations by forcefully resisting their Roman overlords. The Romans reacted with the complete destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction, Christians throughout the empire began to take extreme measures to distance themselves from the despised and humiliated Jews.⁷ This attitude was especially prominent in Rome and Alexandria, both of which had large Jewish and Christian populations.

Ephesus becomes the new Christian Capitol under John's Leadership

With Jerusalem's destruction and the Jerusalem church scattered, with Peter and Paul having been executed, a leadership vacuum quickly swept over Christianity. John took up residence in Ephesus, the largest of the churches founded by Paul's missionary activity, and this became the new locus of Christianity. John became Paul's successor and authority among the churches of Asia Minor⁸ made up of both Jewish and Gentile Christians. From Ephesus John wrote his Gospel and three epistles. John's writings were all intended to counter the false teachers who had arisen to fill the leadership vacuum. Both Peter⁹ and Paul¹⁰ had warned that this would occur, and Jude (writing shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem) warned that it was already occurring.¹¹ John's ministry and writings from Ephesus greatly helped to hold back the onslaught of false

⁶Carrington, Phillip, *The Early Christian Church* (1957).

⁷ Many of the early Christian writers after AD 70 display significant anti-Semitism. The Epistle of Barnabas and other early documents contain disparaging remarks against the Jews. For example, in Barnabas 16, he calls them "wretched Jews."

⁸ The seven letters in Rev. 2-3 to the churches of Asia Minor illustrate John's authority around AD 96.

⁹ 2 Peter 2

¹⁰ Acts 20:17-38; 1 Tim. 4:1-7; 2 Tim. 3:1-9

¹¹ Jude 1:3-19

prophets and teachers who were bent on reinterpreting Christianity to conform to Greek philosophy. But once John died around AD 100, the influence of the church in Ephesus began to wane.

Rome Becomes the new Christian Capitol

At this time the church in Rome was gaining the leadership role, primarily because it was in the capitol city of the Roman Empire. The saying, "All roads lead to Rome," was largely true as it was the hub of commerce. Christian businessmen and merchants from all over the empire came and went from Rome and reported news to their various churches. One of Rome's claims to fame was that both Peter and Paul had been martyred there. The tombs of both Apostles quickly became shrines where Christian pilgrims came to pray. Certain traditions allegedly from Peter or Paul who were imprisoned there for a short time before their executions were claimed to have been passed on by them. The Roman church easily became the new hub of Christianity while the importance of Ephesus and the traditions handed down there by John became secondary and faded from memory.¹²

At the same time the Christian community in Alexandria, Egypt was also gaining influence due primarily to its location in one of the leading intellectual and philosophical centers that rivaled Athens. Alexandria became the intellectual center of Christianity, as Christians struggled to make Christianity respectable in the philosophical arena. To this end, the Catechetical School of Alexandria was founded, a kind of early seminary and center for Christian scholarship. The activity of the Alexandrian school tended towards syncretism between Christianity and Greek philosophical thought. On the other hand, the churches of Asia Minor, with Ephesus as the center of Apostolic authority, were focused more on preserving the apostolic traditions of Paul and John. Paul had spent decades establishing churches all over Asia Minor, and John resided in Ephesus for decades supporting Paul's former teaching and countering the influence of the false teachers.

After John's death at Ephesus, tension began to arise between the intellectual and scholarly form of Christianity in Alexandria and the apostolic tradition and authority preserved by the churches of Asia Minor and its primary church in Ephesus. The Roman church inherited the role of arbiter between these two forces, and the bishop of Rome was looked to by the churches for solutions to the tensions.

¹²Resistance to apostolic authority had already begun while John was still alive. In 3 John 1:9-10, John wrote of Diotrephes, a local pastor, who refused to receive into the assembly those sent by John himself.

The Great Passover Controversy

After the second Jewish revolt (AD 132-135), Jews were forbidden from entering Jerusalem which had become a Roman city by this time. Christians were under increased pressure to distance themselves and their Faith from Judaism. In the decades and centuries that followed, Christian leaders outlawed the observance of the Sabbath,¹³ and eventually completely abandoned the Feasts of the Lord. This shift was justified by Christian writers appealing to the prophet Isaiah: *"Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies — I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them."*¹⁴ Many early Christians took this statement as God's complete and permanent renouncement of His own appointed Feasts.¹⁵ In addition, they began allegorizing the promises in the prophets concerning the restoration of Jerusalem and the Kingdom Temple prophesied by Isaiah and Ezekiel.¹⁶ They began to alter *"the hope of Israel"*¹⁷ and increasingly interpreted the Scriptures through a Greek philosophical lens.

Both of the physical observances that clearly linked Christianity with Israel and the Jews – Sabbath observance and the Passover – were heavily modified by the new Roman-Alexandrian version of Christianity. The "Eucharist" (Communion) was removed from all linkage to the Passover and instead linked to Resurrection Sunday, which they called *"the eighth day."*¹⁸

Yet, this created tension with certain Scriptures. Jesus had observed His last Passover with His disciples before His death, and in the midst of that observance He told them, *"Do this in remembrance of Me."*¹⁹ He also told them He would observe Passover again with them in His Kingdom when He returned.²⁰ The Passover is one of the Festivals that will be observed in the Kingdom.²¹ Paul had instructed the Corinthians to continue to *"keep the feast"* of Passover,²² and that continuing Jesus' tradition at Passover was proclaiming the Lord's death *"until He comes."*²³ All of these things made the Passover an important Christian memorial and act of obedience. Yet it was an embarrassment to

¹³ Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians, ch. ix

¹⁴ Isaiah 1:13-14

¹⁵ Epistle of Barnabas, ch.xv

¹⁶ Epistle of Barnabas, ch.xvi

¹⁷ Acts 28:20

¹⁸ Epistle of Barnabas, ch. xv

¹⁹ Luke 22:19

²⁰ Luke 22:15-16,30; Matt. 26:29

²¹ Ezek. 45:21

²² 1 Cor. 5:7-8

²³ 1 Cor. 11:26

many Christians that they would be observing the Christian Passover on the same evening that the Jews were observing their Passover.

The Apostle John passed on to the assemblies of Asia Minor the tradition of observing a Christian Passover meal on the same day that the Jews observed it, the evening Jesus observed it with His disciples, starting at sundown when the 14th of Nisan began.²⁴ Paul had previously instructed the Corinthians about the date of the memorial with these words:

*1 Cor. 5:6-7 (NKJV) 6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed **Christ, our Passover**, was sacrificed for us. 8 **Therefore let us keep the feast**, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

*1 Cor. 11:23-26 (NKJV) 23 **For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed** took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; **do this in remembrance of Me.**" 25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, **you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.***

For the churches of Asia Minor, observing Passover on the correct day was an issue of central importance. The Christian Passover was preceded by a day or two of fasting. Then on the following Sunday Jesus' resurrection was celebrated. This was "First-fruits," also known as "*the first day of the Sabbaths.*"²⁵ Obviously, the Christian Passover was different from the original Jewish celebration which required the Temple and Priesthood from where Christians were barred. It was also different from the modified rabbinical Passover which the Jews celebrated after the destruction of the Temple.²⁶ The tradition handed down by John was kept faithfully in Asia Minor and elsewhere until it was challenged towards the close of the second century, about 160 years after Jesus observed it with His disciples for the last time.

²⁴ Lev. 23:5

²⁵ τῇ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων "the first [day] of the Sabbaths," referring to the 7-Sabbath countdown to Pentecost, the 50th day (Lev. 23:15-16). The first day was counted from First-fruits, which was the day of Jesus' resurrection. See the following article: http://www.4windsfellowships.net/feasts/first_day.pdf

²⁶ Even before the destruction of Jerusalem, Paul instructed the Corinthians to "keep the Feast" of Passover, but not like the Jews, where every speck of leaven had to be removed from their homes, (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

In opposition to the Johannine tradition of the churches of Asia Minor, the bishop of Rome, Victor, insisted on a different tradition which omitted the Passover meal entirely, and instead required a three-day fast which ended with celebrations on the Sunday of the Resurrection. Thus, the "Eucharist" (Communion) was no longer integral to Passover (as Jesus kept it with His disciples) but instead became part of a single Resurrection Day observance. Victor was so adamant, he sought to excommunicate all of the assemblies of Asia Minor that would not omit the Passover celebration handed down to them by the Apostle John.

Eusebius, a fourth century Christian historian, described both sides in the controversy, as well as the council of the Roman Catholic Church which eventually abolished the Passover celebration entirely and firmly established the Resurrection Day (later called "Easter") as the official Christian festival. Below are Eusebius' words from his Church History.

"A question of no small importance arose at that time. For the parishes of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should be observed as the feast of the Savior's Passover. It was therefore necessary to end their fast on that day, whatever day of the week it should happen to be. But it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this time, as they observed the practice which, from apostolic tradition, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the resurrection of our Savior. Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all, with one consent, through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree, that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on no other but the Lord's day, and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on this day only. There is still extant a writing of those who were then assembled in Palestine, over whom Theophilus, bishop of Caesarea, and Narcissus, bishop of Jerusalem, presided. And there is also another writing extant of those who were assembled at Rome to consider the same question, which bears the name of Bishop Victor; also of the bishops in Pontus over whom Palmas, as the oldest, presided; and of the parishes in Gaul of which Irenaeus was bishop, and of those in Osrhoene and the cities there; and a personal letter of Bacchylus, bishop of the church at Corinth, and of a great many others, who uttered the same opinion and judgment, and cast the same vote. And that which has been given above was their unanimous decision.

"BUT the bishops of Asia, led by Polycrates, decided to hold to the old custom handed down to them. He himself, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the church of Rome, set forth in the following words the tradition which had come down to him:

*'We observe the exact day; neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord's coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are Philip, one of the twelve apostles, who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord, and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? **All these observed the fourteenth day of the Passover according to the Gospel**, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives **always observed the day when the people put away the leaven**. I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said 'We ought to obey God rather than man.'*

"He then writes of all the bishops who were present with him and thought as he did. His words are as follows:

'I could mention the bishops who were present, whom I summoned at your desire; whose names, should I write them, would constitute a great multitude. And they, beholding my littleness, gave their consent to the letter, knowing that I did not bear my gray hairs in vain, but had always governed my life by the Lord Jesus.'

*"Thereupon Victor, who presided over the church at Rome, immediately attempted to cut off from the common unity the parishes of all Asia, with the churches that agreed with them, as heterodox; and he wrote letters and declared all the brethren there wholly excommunicate. But this did not please all the bishops. And they besought him to consider the things of peace, and of neighborly unity and love. Words of theirs are extant, sharply rebuking Victor. Among them was **Irenaeus**, who, sending letters in the name of the brethren in Gaul over whom he presided, maintained that the mystery of the resurrection of the Lord should be observed only on the Lord's Day. He fittingly admonishes Victor that he should not cut off whole churches of God which observed the*

tradition of an ancient custom and after many other words he [Irenaeus] proceeds as follows:

'For the controversy is not only concerning the day, but also concerning the very manner of the fast. For some think that they should fast one day, others two, yet others more; some, moreover, count their day as consisting of forty hours day and night. And this variety in its observance has not originated in our time; but long before in that of our ancestors. It is likely that they did not hold to strict accuracy, and thus formed a custom for their posterity according to their own simplicity and peculiar mode. Yet all of these lived none the less in peace, and we also live in peace with one another; and the disagreement in regard to the fast confirms the agreement in the faith.'

"He [Irenaeus] adds to this the following account, which I may properly insert:

'Among these were the presbyters before Soter, who presided over the church which thou now rulest. We mean Anicetus, and Plus, and Hyginus, and Telesphorus, and Xystus. They neither observed it themselves, nor did they permit those after them to do so. And yet though not observing it, they were none the less at peace with those who came to them from the parishes in which it was observed; although this observance was more opposed to those who did not observe it. But none were ever cast out on account of this form; but the presbyters before thee who did not observe it, sent the Eucharist to those of other parishes who observed it. And when the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated; neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him. But though matters were in this shape, they communed together, and Anicetus conceded the administration of the eucharist in the church to Polycarp, manifestly as a mark of respect. And they parted from each other in peace, both those who observed, and those who did not, maintaining the peace of the whole church.'

"Thus Irenaeus, who truly was well named, became a peacemaker in this matter, exhorting and negotiating in this way in behalf of the peace of the churches. And he conferred by letter about this mooted question, not only with Victor, but also with most of the other rulers of the churches.

"Those in Palestine whom we have recently mentioned, Narcissus and Theophilus, and with them Cassius, bishop of the church of Tyre, and Clarus of the church of Ptolemais, and those who met with them, having stated many things respecting the tradition concerning the Passover which had come to them in succession from the apostles, at the close of their writing add these words:

*'Endeavor to send copies of our letter to every church, that we may not furnish occasion to those who easily deceive their souls. We show you indeed that also in Alexandria they keep it on the same day that we do. For letters are carried from us to them and from them to us, so that in the same manner and at the same time we keep the sacred day.'"*²⁷

Constantine & Roman Catholicism

Although there had been a somewhat gradual separation of the Christian assemblies from all things Jewish beginning in AD 70, the official "divorce" took place when the emperor Constantine embraced a Platonic version of Christianity.²⁸ The new Christianity replaced the Jewish - Christian hope (the resurrection of the body to reign in Christ's Kingdom in restored Jerusalem) with the Platonic hope of shedding the body to ascend to the heavens as pure spirit. This transformation of the Christian hope was sealed with the allegorizing of all of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the future Kingdom of Messiah. These were reinterpreted as already realized in the present Christian Kingdom centered in Rome. The bishop of Rome became the "vicar of Christ" ruling in Christ's place along-side the emperor. The city of Rome became "the City of God" thanks to some creative interpretive gymnastics by Augustine. Since the marriage of Platonic Christianity with the Roman state, Mystery Babylon, the Mother of Harlots, has handed down to Christians pagan traditions cloaked in Christian garb, while suppressing the Christianized Feasts of the Lord handed down by the Apostles and which speak of God's past faithfulness as well as prefigure the genuine Kingdom of the Messiah that will soon appear.

We have to decide whether to follow the traditions of Rome or those passed on by Paul (which He received from Jesus Himself) and were continued and faithfully supported by John.

Luke 22:14-20 (NKJV) 14 When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. 15 Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; 16 "for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." 17 Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said,

²⁷ Eusebius, Church History, Vol. V, chs. 23-25.

²⁸ See my book, The TIME of the END, pp. 147-177

"Take this and divide it among yourselves; 18 "for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 20 Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

*1 Cor. 5:6-8 (LGV) 6 Your boast is not good. Have you not perceived that a little leaven ferments the whole loaf? 7 Clean out then the old leaven so that you may be a new loaf, according as you are unleavened. For also our Passover, the Anointed, was sacrificed over us. 8 **So too we should observe the Feast**, not with old leaven, neither with leaven of evil and wickedness, but in unleavened things of sincerity and truth.*

*1 Cor. 11:20-34 (LGV) 20 Concerning your assembling together in one place, this is not to eat an elaborate feast! 21 For each one is procuring his own feast beforehand for the meal. And who is indeed hungry, and who indeed is drunk? 22 For don't you have homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the assembly of God and embarrass those who have nothing? What could I say to you? Should I applaud you in this? I do not applaud. 23 **For I received from the Master that which I also delivered to you, that the Master Jesus, in the night in which He was being betrayed**, took bread, 24 and having given thanks, He broke [it] and said, "This is My body being broken for you. **Do this in memory of Me.**" 25 Similarly also [He took] the cup, after the meal, saying, "This is the New Covenant cup in My blood. This do, every time you may do it, unto My memory." 26 For every time you should eat this bread and should drink this cup you are proclaiming the death of the Master until He should come. 27 Consequently, whoever should eat this bread or should drink the cup of the Master unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Master. 28 So let a man examine himself first, and thus let him eat out of the bread and drink out of the cup. 29 For the one eating and drinking unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Master's body. 30 Because of this [there are] many weak and sick among you, and enough are asleep. 31 For if we were judging ourselves we would not have been experiencing judgment. 32 But being judged, we are disciplined under the Master so that we should not be condemned together with the world. 33 Consequently, my brothers, **in gathering together unto the Feast**, anticipate one another. 34 But if anyone should be hungry, let him eat at home so that you may not gather together unto judgment. But the rest I will prescribe when I may come.*

There is some confusion among Christians today, who wish to memorialize Jesus' death on the correct day, whether the Passover was killed and eaten on the 14th day of the lunar month just after sunset when the 13th had ended, or killed at the end of the 14th

before sunset and then eaten at the beginning of the 15th which began at sunset. Clement of Alexandria (AD 153-217) clarified this point in the following quote:

“Accordingly, in the years gone by, Jesus went to eat the Passover sacrificed by the Jews, keeping the feast. But when he had preached He who was the Passover, the Lamb of God, led as a sheep to the slaughter, presently taught His disciples the mystery of the type on the thirteenth day, on which also they inquired, “Where wilt Thou that we prepare for Thee to eat the Passover?” It was on this day, then, that both the consecration of the unleavened bread and the preparation for the feast took place. Whence John naturally describes the disciples as already previously prepared to have their feet washed by the Lord. And on the following day our Savior suffered, He who was the Passover, propitiously sacrificed by the Jews.”

“Suitably, therefore, to the fourteenth day, on which He also suffered, in the morning, the chief priests and the scribes, who brought Him to Pilate, did not enter the Praetorium, that they might not be defiled, but might freely eat the Passover in the evening. With this precise determination of the days both the whole Scriptures agree, and the Gospels harmonize. The resurrection also attests it. He certainly rose on the third day, which fell on the first day of the weeks of harvest, on which the law prescribed that the priest should offer up the sheaf.”²⁹

Much of the confusion can be traced to a Jewish tradition which places the eating of the Passover meal on the 15th so as to avoid the Christian interpretation that Jesus was the “Passover lamb.”

²⁹ Clement of Alexandria, Frag. XI, From the Last Work on the Passover