

**BEYOND THE LAST SUPPER: The Institution
Narrative Revisited
by William S. Kervin**

Popular parodies are often a clue to the cherished beliefs of a culture, its practices and institutions. Consider how costumed children have waved their hands over a shrouded object while intoning the magical words, “hocus pocus!” The origins of this playful incantation are found in the Latin eucharistic rite — *Hoc est enim corpus meum*, or “This is my body” — which words figure so significantly in sacramental history and theology. As Gail Ramshaw puts it: “over these enigmatic words considerably many heads have rolled”. And while, thankfully, “we no longer burn one another at the stake over philosophical categories, we continue to probe the meaning of these words. How is Christ present in our midst?”¹

That the probing continues is evident in the range of contemporary communion practices and their engagement with the biblical source of those words — which are usually referred to as “the Institution Narrative”, or “Words of Institution” — attributed to Jesus in the accounts of the Last Supper in the synoptic gospels (Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:14-20), and “received” and “handed on” by Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

On the one hand, it is not uncommon in some United Church congregations to hear only the Pauline version of the Institution Narrative read at Communion, without any larger eucharistic prayer. This custom has roots in the work of the 16th century Reformers, and their insistence on citing a biblical warrant for sacramental practice. That insistence was in turn founded on a series of medieval assumptions. I will suggest in this article that those assumptions deserve to be critiqued; we would do well to move beyond them.

On the other hand, in some congregations the eucharistic prayers omit any reference to the Institution Narrative, or include

¹P Gail Ramshaw, *Words Around the Table* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991) p. 93.

a rewritten form of it, sometimes because of objections to beliefs about Jesus' death as a propitiatory sacrifice. With those concerns in mind, I will be arguing for a more holistic appreciation of the liturgical history, and for an examination of the biblical roots of the Institution Narrative.

Focussing too much, or too little, on the Words of Institution is, each in its own way, reductionistic. I wish to commend a "third way", beyond the divides of the liturgical or theological "right" and "left", and to that end will revisit some of the sources of the problem. Due to the constraints of space, we will limit our exploration to an overview of the eucharistic legacy of the Reformation (which gives rise to the biases of Western liturgical traditions, including that of the United Church), followed by a review of some emerging perspectives on the biblical evidence.

The Legacy of the Reformation

While it is customary to begin considerations of the Reformation by focussing on Luther's iconic *Ninety-Five Theses* of 1517, it was his work of liturgical revision that had the most direct impact on the average Protestant Christian. His principles of worship reform were first presented in 1520 in his treatise *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.² The title alone illustrates its inflammatory tone. Like the Jews in Babylon of old, he argued, Christians had been forced into captivity by the Antichrist, the Pope, walled in by corrupt sacraments based on human works and therein denied the free gift and promise of God's grace and salvation. It was this "manifesto of the Protestant Reformation"³ which became the subsequent "foundation for all Protestant worship".⁴

²For this and related references to follow see Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (1520) in James F. White, ed., *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretative Sources* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) pp. 197-199.

³Susan J. White, *Foundations of Christian Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) p. 98.

⁴James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989) p. 37.

There were actually three “captivities” that Luther identified in relation to the eucharistic theology and practice of his time. The first was the withholding of the cup from the people, the by-then universal practice in the West of giving only the bread to the laity, with the priest alone partaking of the cup. “The sacrament does not belong to priests but to all men” [sic], he argued. “The priests are not lords, but servants in duty bound to administer both kinds to those who desire them”, just as Jesus had done at the Last Supper. The second “captivity” was the doctrine of transubstantiation. Though Luther was firm in his belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, he regarded transubstantiation as a metaphysical formulation which was “a figment of the human mind” resting “neither on scripture nor on reason”. “What shall we say when Aristotle and the doctrines of men are made to be the arbiters of such lofty and divine matters?” he asked, rhetorically. “Why do we not put aside such curiosity and cling simply to the words of Christ, ... content that the real body of Christ is present by virtue of the words?” The third “captivity” was the “common belief that the mass is a sacrifice”. Luther was not denying that there were sacrificial dimensions to Christ’s death, but rather asserting that the sacrament itself was not a sacrifice — that is to say, “not a work” of mere human beings to be repeatedly offered to God as a means to atone for one’s sin or obtain God’s favour. His interest was to liberate the sacrament from any notion of it being a work of righteousness, thus allowing it to be the free gift and promise of God “for the strengthening and nourishing of each one’s own faith”. It is for this reason that Luther called this third captivity “the most wicked abuse of all”, for it led to the Mass being “turned into mere merchandise, a market, and a profit-making business”.

Note that what underlies Luther’s enumeration of the captivities of the Eucharist is the gravitational pull of the Last Supper and the centrality of the Institution Narrative. “The more closely our mass resembles that first mass of all, which Christ performed at the Last Supper, the more Christian it will be.”

Three years later (1523) Luther published his first revision of the Mass, the *Formula Missae*. In this version he retained the

Latin, and the use of vestments and ceremonial, but significant changes included the omission of both the Offertory (“which... smacks and savors of sacrifice”⁵) and most of the lengthy Eucharistic Prayer. What remained as the focus of the sacrament were the Words of Institution. While Luther offered his proposals with the allowance that people were “free to change them how and whenever they wish”, the limits of his liturgical liberality were drawn at the biblical witness: “All that matters is that the Words of Institution should be kept intact and that everything should be done by faith.”

In 1526 Luther went further, and published a version of the Mass in German. Though originally intended only for local use among “unlearned lay folk”, it quickly became the liturgical standard for the Protestant Reformation in two important respects. The first, of course, was the use of the vernacular. One cannot overestimate the impact of hearing all the words of worship in one’s own language for the very first time. Second, now the whole of the eucharistic prayer was replaced by a lengthy exhortation, followed by the Institution Narrative, itself called the “Consecration”.⁶ The lasting irony of this kind of liturgical reductionism was that “in one stroke, [Luther] outmedievalizes the Roman Catholic Church, which had located the moment of consecration precisely at the words of institution.”⁷

Space does not permit a close examination of the equally significant liturgical revisions of other Reformers such as Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin and, later, Knox. However, we can point briefly to their roles in the further entrenchment of similar results. Zwingli’s second and final revision of the Roman Mass resulted in an order

⁵For this and related references see Martin Luther, “Formula Missae et Communionis for the Church at Wittenberg” (1523) in R. C. D. Jasper and G. J. Cuming, ed., *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1987) pp. 191-195.

⁶For this and related references see Martin Luther, “The German Mass” (1526) in Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist*, pp. 195-199.

⁷James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*. Third Edition Revised and Expanded. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) p. 245.

for “The Lord’s Supper” (not a “Mass”) to be used only four times a year — a simple fellowship meal of believers sitting around a table, focussed on the Words of Institution. Introduced in Zurich on Maundy Thursday of 1525, the bare commemoration of the Last Supper inherent in Zwingli’s memorialism could not have been clearer.⁸

Bucer, Calvin and Knox represent a third trajectory in the eucharistic traditions of the Reformation. Building on many aspects of each other’s work, they established a Reformed liturgical ethos which provided both a selection of carefully crafted liturgies and prayers while allowing for the liberty of using “similar words” — the roots of the United Church’s tradition of “ordered liberty” in worship, for example. Nevertheless, their communion services were characterized by lengthy exhortations, the “fencing of the table”, and excommunication of unworthy communicants. The Institution Narrative was again increasingly separated from the eucharistic prayer and functioned as a biblical warrant. The liturgical pendulum having fully swung the other way, communion became as much a sermon as a sacrament. In Knox’s case, for example, the Pauline Words of Institution were read from the pulpit, followed by a series of long exhortations fencing the table. Only then did the minister move to the table, where he often read the Institution Narrative yet again during the distribution of the elements.

For all its advances in the cause of faithfulness and integrity, the legacy of the Reformation with respect to the Words of Institution was largely reductionistic, didactic and penitential — a spirit which continues to haunt eucharistic theology and practice

⁸For this and related references see Huldrych Zwingli, “De Canone Missae Epicheiresis” (An Attack upon the Canon of the Mass) 1523, “Action oder Brauch des Nachtmahls” (Action or Use of the Lord’s Supper) 1525; Martin Bucer, “Order for the Lord’s Supper” (1539); John Calvin, “The Form of Church Prayers” (1542); John Knox, “The Form of Prayers and Ministration of the Sacraments (1556); each in Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist*, pp. 181-188, 204-212, 213-218, 250-257, respectively. See also, William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989) pp. 128-163.

in the Reformed traditions to this day. In the West, the notion of eucharistic consecration became even more deeply associated with the Institution Narrative, an important contrast to the churches in the East where the emphasis continued to be on the invocation of the Holy Spirit. In addition, while for most of Christian history, the rationale for, and even the number of, sacraments varied considerably, the Reformers' applied the narrow criterion of "Dominical institution" (instituted by the Lord) as a kind of liturgical defence. Divorced from the larger liturgical context of *eucharistia* (thanksgiving), the Words of Institution came to function more pedagogically than liturgically, a kind of proof-text directed at the congregation, rather than a Jewish-style narrative-prayer of remembrance and praise to God. Finally, in spite of the doctrinal differences over the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist, all of the Reformers literally equated the Last Supper with the sacrament, seeing it as the "first Mass". The resulting liturgical spirituality, in spite of the debates over the language and theology of sacrifice, was reduced to a Maundy Thursday mode, a penitential, even funereal, key. At such extremes, one begins to wonder if there is a thin line between the Eucharist as sacrifice and an exaggerated penitential piety. When the experience of the Eucharist is entirely penitential, it risks becoming itself a means of atonement. When the "sacrifice of thanksgiving" (e.g., Psalm 50:14; Hebrews 13:15) becomes a perpetual offering of one's own unworthiness, sorrow and regret, we are getting dangerously close to returning to where the Reformation began — the Mass as sacrifice. In this respect, the Reformers were not able to break free of the medieval piety which formed them.

The Search for Biblical Origins

The Reformers' treatment of the Words of Institution begs an obvious exegetical question worth revisiting: What, then, is the Institution Narrative about? Or, to put it differently, is it an account of the "first Mass," the first "Eucharist", or the institution of the first "Lord's Supper"?

One of the things one notices about the form of the Institution Narrative in liturgical history are its subtle but significant variations. “The liturgical use of the narrative...has classically developed in such a way as to be influenced freely by the various biblical accounts of the Supper but to be determined finally by none of them.”⁹ The most recent biblical translations take into account variations found in the most ancient manuscripts in which Jesus in the Upper Room speaks of his body and blood as “broken,” “given,” “shed,” “poured out,” or simply “for you,” or none of these.¹⁰ Clearly, the variations in early biblical and liturgical sources point to their origins in an oral tradition. It is possible to speak of at least three stages of development in the biblical texts: the historical stage, involving the experience of Jesus’ earthly life, ministry, death and resurrection; the oral tradition stage of the early Christian communities; the redaction (editorial) stage of the New Testament documents themselves.¹¹ It is humbling to be reminded that to examine the biblical texts associated with the Words of Institution is to join a hermeneutical process already in progress, to tune in to a piece already in its third movement.

In terms of the textual sources, the contemporary consensus distinguishes between the Paul-Luke tradition of the “after supper” cup (a typical Jewish, therefore early, practice) and the later Mark-Matthew tradition (in which there is no mention of a meal between the bread and cup). A few scholars have even advanced a provocative dual origin theory of eucharistic liturgies in the early Church. In this view, one tradition finds its beginning in the celebrative and communitarian “breaking of bread” depicted in Acts 2:46, while the other originates in the Pauline memorial of Jesus’ death and its associated ethical admonition, as in 1 Corinthians 11.

⁹Gordon W. Lathrop, “The Institution Narrative,” *New Eucharistic Prayers: An Ecumenical Study of their Development*. Frank C. Senn, ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987) p. 139; see also Susan J. White, p. 104.

¹⁰Compare, for example, the King James Version to the New Revised Standard Version.

¹¹Crockett, pp. 2-3.

However, because of inconclusive evidence, most prefer to speak of these as simply “two strands” within the Supper tradition — the eschatological and the memorial.

Recent scholarship also points to the convergence of a rich, if not bewildering, array of related but distinct traditions at work, found in varying degrees of presence, absence and emphasis in the biblical texts, including: Passover themes (e.g., in the synoptics the Last Supper is a Passover meal; in John 13 it is held “before the festival of the Passover”); covenant connections (especially in association with the cup); remembrance (“in remembrance of me” is in Luke and Paul only); and eschatological interpretations (references to the coming Kingdom, etc.).¹²

Similarly, on the subject of sacrifice, while it is present in varying degrees throughout the narratives, it would be an oversimplification to read only later doctrinal formulations of substitutionary atonement into the biblical texts. Hebrew sacrificial customs were more theologically nuanced and culturally complex. Theologians now speak in the plural of biblically-rooted eucharistic meanings, categories, and metaphors. I have found it helpful to gather material under seven words, each rich in biblical, historical and liturgical meaning and practice: remembrance, church, thanksgiving, invocation, community, repentance, future anticipation.¹³

But perhaps the most stimulating analysis of the Eucharist arises when it is placed in the larger context of Jesus’ table fellowship.¹⁴ So many are the accounts of Jesus at table, and his

¹²For a sample see: Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Liturgy*. Second Edition. (London: SPCK, 2002) pp. 65-71; Crockett 3-4, 9-17; James F. White, *Introduction*, 232; Miriam Therese Winter, *eucharist with a small “e”* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005) pp. 26-38.

¹³Yngve Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice* (London: SPCK, 1953); James F. White, *Introduction*, 249-251; Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast With the Church* (Nashville, KY: Abingdon Press, 1993) pp. 14-26.

¹⁴See, for example: Crockett, 1-3; Edward Foley, “Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points,” *Worship* 82:1 (January 2008), 41-44; Paul Galbreath, *Leading from the Table* (Herdon, VG: The Alban Institute, 2008) pp. 22-40; Nathan Mitchell, *Real Presence: The Work of Eucharist* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 2000) pp. 54-79; Stookey, p. 20-22; Susan J. White, pp. 89-92; Winter, pp. 41-43.

talk of eating and feasting, hospitality and ethics, that it is a wonder it has only recently been taken more seriously by liturgical scholars. One could tell the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and coming advent as a drama about a life lived radically at table with others in the light of a vision of the banquet-like Reign of God. He eats and drinks with all the wrong people, offending virtually everyone, miraculously feeds the hungry by the thousands, teaches, challenges and inspires with reference to eating, meals and feasts, laments his betrayal at the beginning of the meal, and appears in resurrected form in association with eating.

In Luke's Gospel "Jesus seems to be either at table or on his way to or from a meal."¹⁵ And while the Gospel of John is sometimes thought of as less eucharistic because of its lack of a traditional Institution Narrative (John focusses on foot-washing; 13:1-30), in fact, it turns out to be "the most sacramental of the four"¹⁶ — from the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana (John 2:1-12, which is not reported in the synoptics) to the feeding of the thousands (John 6, which leads into the lengthy "bread of life" discourse and culminates in the "difficult teaching" on abiding in Jesus through the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood), and the resurrection breakfast on the lakeshore (John 21). Note especially how the feeding of the thousands, the only miracle found in all four gospels, is marked by the four-fold action of Jesus taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread, a sure sign of early church eucharistic interpretative influence on the redaction of the story.¹⁷ In the same way, Luke's story of the resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus culminates in Jesus at table in the village, where upon taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread, their eyes are opened and he is "made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). According to Stookey, "this story is crucial for the contemporary church because it stands in judgment over our preoccupation with the upper room on Thursday evening as the dominant focus of our Eucharists."¹⁸

¹⁵Mitchell, p. 65

¹⁶Stookey, p. 38.

¹⁷Mitchell, p. 79; James F. White, *Introduction*, pp. 233-234.

¹⁸Stookey, p. 36.

Miriam Therese Winter examines fifteen meal-related parables of Jesus, eighteen meal scenes with Jesus, and three resurrection meals, to argue for “a new way of seeing” Eucharist in all of life, which she calls “eucharist with a small ‘e’”.¹⁹ John Dominic Crossan argues that it was “open commensality during his life rather than the Last Supper before his death that was at the root of any later ritualization”.²⁰ All the accounts of the Last Supper point to the fact that “every Christian community in the New Testament seems to have practised and found deep meaning in a meal centered on Jesus’ habit of eating and drinking with his followers.”²¹ But as Mitchell puts it, “the focus is not what’s on the table but who’s at the table”.²² Thus, a two-fold conclusion begins to emerge from this cursory examination of biblical origins. First, “Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate.”²³ Second, more specifically, the Last Supper cannot be separated from the larger context of Jesus’ table talk and witness, before and after his crucifixion, and the rich variety of theological themes and eucharistic meanings they evoke.

Conclusions

In what sense, then, can it be said that Jesus “instituted” the Eucharist? Certainly he did not institute anything *ex nihilo*, creating something out of nothing. There is more going on in the Last Supper than the events of the upper room itself. Beyond that scene is the context of Jesus’ Jewish culture, his practice of radical table fellowship, his ministry, teaching, crucifixion, the testimonies to his resurrection and the promise of his coming again — all are constitutive of the meaning of both the narrative itself and that which is “instituted”, the Eucharist. The scene is a convergence of

¹⁹Winter, pp. 17-18.

²⁰John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 179. See also Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: MacMillan, 1993) pp. 117, 260, 378, 445.

²¹Stookey, p. 35.

²²Mitchell, p. 54.

²³Robert Karris as quoted in Foley, p. 49.

all that has gone before and all that is yet to come, reaching both backward and forward in drama of the Gospel. It is this world of meaning which is evoked by the Institution Narrative, when placed in the context of a whole eucharistic prayer in a full eucharistic liturgy of rich remembrance and celebration.

While space does not permit a fuller exploration of liturgical possibilities to embody such convictions, a modest proposal may be suggestive. One small step beyond the Last Supper would be to evoke more of the larger context of Jesus' table fellowship in the language and imagery of the eucharistic prayer, as in the following post-sanctus, to be used as an introduction to the Words of Institution:

. . . and now we remember especially all those grace-filled meals
which make of this ordinary food an extraordinary feast:
unleavened bread in the terrors of the night
and manna in the wilderness;
partying with outcasts
and picking corn on the Sabbath;
a picnic on the hillside
and a breakfast on the lakeshore;
breaking bread in Emmaus
and, before that, a meal in an upper room where Jesus took bread . . .

To limit eucharistic celebration to the recitation of the Institution Narrative alone, or to omit any reference to it, would each be equally reductionistic — its overemphasis a reduction to magical “hocus pocus”; its omission, a reduction to selective amnesia.

A closing analogy may be helpful. The Institution Narrative can be thought of as the climax in a dramatic plot. To include it alone would be like arriving for the climactic scene of a play, not knowing any of the plot development which preceded it, then leaving before any of the resulting consequences or denouement. To leave it out would make both the entire plot and its resolution fundamentally incomplete. Thus, when it comes to the Gospel, the whole play is the thing.