

“Do this in remembrance of Me”

The commemoration of Christ’s Last Supper

by

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¹ Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

Introduction

A few hours before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, Christ celebrated a final meal with his disciples. This event is recorded in detail in all four gospels and in one New Testament letter, and it is alluded to elsewhere in the New Testament. From the earliest days of the church, in the first century, Christian believers commemorated this meal when they gathered together. We could designate this as:

- the understanding and practice of the early Christians

Several centuries later a deeply different understanding of the significance of this event emerged. We could designate this as:

- the developments by the Roman Catholic church

However, twenty centuries after the founding of Christianity a third, even more radical, interpretation arose:

- the Jehovah's Witness View.

In this brief article, we shall look at all three views, but the place to start is with the accounts of the original event.

What the New Testament says

The New Testament recounts many details, including:

- the choosing and preparing of the venue
- Jesus washing the feet of the disciples
- discussion of who would betray him
- the teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples on various matters, including the coming of the Holy Spirit.

However, the heart of the commemoration of this event is based on Christ's actions involving the bread and the wine, including his instructions on the significance of this, so we will start with what the Bible reports.

In Luke's gospel we read the following:

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.'²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'
(Luke 22:19-20, NIV)

Matthew's gospel adds one additional phrase at the end of the above:

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"
(Matthew 26:28, NIV)

PART I: The Understanding and Practice of the Early Christians

1. The breaking of bread

From the earliest days of the church, the New Testament record shows us that the believers remembered Jesus' words and celebrated a communal meal or the sharing of bread and wine. Thus, in Acts 2 we read:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (v. 42, NIV)

This is recorded immediately after the account of the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came on the first believers, and about three thousand people accepted the message preached by Peter and were baptised (v. 41). The phrase "the breaking of bread" may just have meant sharing a meal together, but in the light both of Jesus' words and the New Testament record elsewhere, this appears to be a reference to the putting into practice of Christ's instructions to His followers to commemorate His final meal with His followers. We know that the book of Acts was written a number of years after the original day of Pentecost, so both the writer and the readers and hearers of this account will have been aware of the symbolical meaning of the phrase "the breaking of bread".

2. "The Lord's Supper"

One New Testament church is recorded as being very disorganised and undisciplined in its commemoration of Jesus' final meal, and the Apostle Paul wrote to them, introducing the theme by describing this event as "the Lord's Supper" (1 Corinthians 11.20). This phrase appears to have been the standard designation of this event in the New Testament church. At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, this phrase again became popular in churches that separated from the Roman Catholic Church.²

The Apostle Paul then described how this commemoration should be conducted, using almost the same words as are recorded in the gospels:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NIV)

He made it clear that this was not just a meal together, but something quite different:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter! (1 Corinthians 11:20-22 NIV)

² Other popular words and phrases used to designate this event, especially over the past five centuries, have been: "the Lord's Table", "Communion", "The Last Supper" and (in the Anglican church, as well as in the Roman Catholic Church) "Eucharist", a word derived from the Greek for "to give thanks" – which is of course what Christ did at the beginning of the meal during which he instituted this practice.

He also explained that the believers should prepare themselves before participating in this special event:

Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29 NIV)

Early Christian writings from the end of the First Century and the beginning of the Second Century, and subsequently, refer to the celebration of this symbolic meal.³

³ See, for instance, the writings of Ignatius and other late First and early Second century Christian leaders. A good source for these writings, in Greek with a modern English translation, can be found in Holmes, Michael W., "The Apostolic Fathers", 3rd Edition: 2007: Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.

PART II: The Developments by the Roman Catholic Church

However, starting several centuries later, that part of Christianity that in time became known as the Roman Catholic Church both formalised the celebration of this event and added new layers of meaning.

1. New Developments in Doctrine

Briefly, Roman Catholic teaching evolved to contain the following features:

- “The Lord’s Supper” was to be called “The Mass”.
- Its celebration had to be conducted by someone “ordained” by the church as a “priest”.
- Only men could be ordained.

Most important, however, was the following innovation:

- The Mass was not a “commemoration” but a **sacrifice**.
- When the “priest” conducted the Mass, he was offering a sacrifice for sin.

As the concept was elaborated by the Roman Catholic Church, it was eventually decreed that:

- People had to attend Mass to have their sins forgiven.⁴
- A special wafer was to be used to represent the bread. This was given the name “The Host”.
- If people wished to partake of the “Host”, they had to “go to confession”, i.e., to confess their sins individually to a priest in the “confessional”⁵ prior to attending Mass, and to carry out the acts of penance determined by the priest.
- Such penance could range from reciting the “Hail Mary” prayer to Mary a specified number of times (generally, using rosary beads, in order not to lose count), to other “penitential” actions that were much more onerous. (Having to recite the “Hail Mary”, the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or something else, was thus often perceived by the faithful as some sort of punishment for sin, or as a way of compensating for sin.)
- Those who wished to partake of the Host had to attend Mass without having eaten anything that day, which is why Mass was normally celebrated in the morning, not the evening.
- An important part of the ritual was the pronouncement of the “absolution” of sins of the participants.⁶
- The more times that a Mass was celebrated, the greater the number of sins that could be forgiven, or the greater that the time in “purgatory” could be reduced.⁷

⁴ As part of a process, along with confession to a priest, penance, etc. See below.

⁵ The “confessional” was a specially-designed wooden structure, roughly the size of a large wardrobe, with a partition down the middle and two doors, one on the left and the other on the right. The priest would sit in one section, and those who wished to confess their sins entered the other section, one at a time. The theory was that the priest could “hear confession” without knowing the identity of the person who was confessing.

⁶ The Anglican Church worldwide (“the Anglican Communion”) has retained the main features of this part of Roman Catholic tradition, while denying that the Eucharist, as it calls it, is a “sacrifice”. This is not the place to go into further detail of the Roman Catholic and Anglican rituals.

⁷ The Roman Catholic doctrine of “Purgatory” states that on dying, the believer is sent to a place of suffering, to be purged of their sins before they are pure enough to be allowed into heaven. This concept is based on pre-Christian beliefs and rituals concerning the dead. The Latin for this word is first found in documents that were probably written between 1160 and 1180. The first formal adoption of this doctrine by the Roman Catholic Church did not occur until the First Council of Lyon in 1245, with subsequent reaffirmations of it in the Second Council of Lyon (1274), the Council of Florence (1438–1445), and the Council of Trent (1545–63), according to the Wikipedia article, here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatory> (consulted on 15.12.18). This is not the place to look at this doctrine in greater detail.

It thus became common to celebrate the Mass on behalf of someone who had died, in order to reduce their time in purgatory. Friends and family members could pay for a Mass – or for any number of Masses – to be said on behalf of a loved one who had died. However, in recent years priests in some countries would invite a donation to the church for saying Mass, rather than requesting payment, and according to the on-line news website National Catholic Reporter, on 7th March 2018 Pope Francis declared, “Do not pay for Mass, redemption is free.”⁸

The Vatican also decreed that when a Pope died, a team of priests would unceasingly conduct daily Masses “for” the Pope, one Mass after the other, night and day for nine days, in order to diminish the time that he would have to spend in Purgatory.⁹

This is in stark contrast with the teaching in the letter to the Hebrews, for instance, in chapter 7:

Unlike the other [Jewish] high priests, **he [Christ] does not need to offer sacrifices day after day**, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (Hebrews 7:27 NIV)

An integral part of the new Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass was that:

- During the ritual, at some point the bread became the physical body of Christ, and the wine became the physical blood of Christ.

As this doctrine was developed, even Roman Catholic theologians struggled with the concepts. Questions asked included:

- How does this happen?
- When does this happen?

The answers that were eventually given were:

- It happens by the process of “trans-substantiation” (a new word coined to describe the transformation).
- It happens when (on the priest’s instructions) an “altar boy” rings a little bell.

Other aspects of the doctrine were also developed:

- Since the priest was now handling the actual body of Christ, he had to be unmarried, since by definition a man who had had sexual relations with a woman was “unclean” and therefore could not handle the body of Christ.
- The laity were not allowed to touch with their hands the bread that had become the body of Christ, so they had to open their mouths and let the priest place the “Host” on their tongues.
- The “Host” was to be round and flat and small enough to be placed on the tongue of the participant.

It was also decided that only the priest would be allowed to drink the wine.

⁸ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-chronicles/do-not-pay-mass-redemption-free-pope-says> consulted on 15.12.18.

⁹ See, for instance, the Roman Catholic website “Catholic Pages”, here: <http://www.catholic-pages.com/pope/papal-funeral.asp>: Recounting the application of this rule on the occasion of the death of Pope Paul VI, the article states, “For nine days, masses were offered in St. Peter’s and the basilicas and churches of Rome for the deceased.” This shows that in fact Masses were celebrated (some of them simultaneously) in multiple venues. The article states that it is reproduced “from the book “The Church Visible: The Ceremonial Life and Protocol of the Roman Catholic Church” by James-Charles Noonan, Jr. (1996) pp. 24-28.” Article consulted on 15.12.18.

Another problem arose from this new doctrine: what should be done with any surplus body and blood of Christ, if some was left over at the end of the Mass?

It was decided that if the priest had prepared too many wafers to be converted by God into the body of Christ, those left over had to be placed in a box and locked in a small cupboard by the altar. They could be used later.

If the priest had poured out too much wine to be converted by God into the blood of Christ, he had to drink it all up (if necessary, with the help of any other priest who might be present), and then he had to wipe out thoroughly the goblet in which it had been contained, to make sure that none was left that could inadvertently be touched by someone who was not a priest.

There is here clearly a potential risk that a priest may get into a habit of pouring out a large quantity of wine, with possible implications for his own health and well-being. The Roman Catholic Church seeks to minimise this risk by not allowing any alcoholic or former alcoholic to be ordained as a priest.

It likewise does not allow celiacs (people whose bodies cannot tolerate gluten) to become priests, as they would not be able to partake of the body of Christ in the Host. This is because the Church states that “Communion hosts must contain some amount of gluten to be valid matter for consecration”.¹⁰

In recent years, there has been a slight relaxation of some rules. Thus,

- The Roman Catholic Church has quietly dropped the rule that participants must not have eaten anything that day, prior to partaking of the Host in the Mass.
- In many churches the faithful may now stand or kneel at the altar rail, holding their hands cupped together in front of them at chest level, and the priest places the Host in their hands, after which they put it in their mouths, thus being allowed to touch it.
- When a large number of people wish to partake of the Host, to prevent this section of the Mass taking too much time, a suitably-authorised non-ordained assistant may help the priest by distributing the Host to some of the faithful. An even bigger departure from tradition is that in some cases the assistant may even be a woman, usually a nun (on the occasions that I have observed).
- In the absence of adequate numbers of priests in some countries, such devout and authorised lay people are now even allowed to take the Host to sick people in their homes or in hospital.

It must be stated that, throughout the centuries, the majority of the Roman Catholic faithful have frequently had a limited understanding of many of the finer points of these doctrines. To be fair to them, it is clear that the Roman Catholic Church has not given priority to explaining the theological details and reasons to the faithful, and indeed in recent decades it has talked and taught even less about some of these disputed points, quietly letting some details be forgotten and some traditions be abandoned.

However, the Roman Catholic Church categorically affirmed its teaching that the Host is the actual body of Christ, in the Latin used by the Church, the “Corpus Christi”, and in the year 1264 Pope Urban IV instituted a day of the year when the Corpus Christi would be celebrated, the Thursday after Pentecost,¹¹ although the celebration of this feast did not become general until a declaration by

¹⁰ See Catholic News Agency here: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/gluten-and-communion-whats-a-celiac-to-do-72220> (Consulted on 19.12.18.)

¹¹ See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpus_Christi_\(feast\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corpus_Christi_(feast)), consulted on 19.12.18.

Urban IV's successor, Pope John XXII, in 1317.¹² The feast of Corpus Christi is frequently celebrated by a procession through the streets, with a priest holding aloft a Host in a glass container known as a "monstrance", so that it may be venerated by the people.

2. An evaluation of the Roman Catholic teaching

We recognise the sincerity and devotion of many Roman Catholics, both clergy and laity and the care with which they try to conduct the ritual of the Mass in line with the teachings of their church. We appreciate that many of them feel that they draw especially close to God in the Mass, and we do not wish to criticise their actions or to doubt the sincerity of their faith.

However, there is much here that is not found in the Bible, and much that goes against the clear teaching of the Bible. This short article cannot review the whole of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, so we will limit ourselves to a few brief comments, and then focus on the core teaching about the Mass.

- The concept of "ordination" is not established in the New Testament.
- The idea of having two classes of Christians – "ordained" leaders and "the laity" – runs counter to New Testament teaching and practice.
- The belief that sexual relations between a husband and wife are inherently "unclean" or "sinful" is contrary to the whole of the teaching of the Bible on this subject. (See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 7:2-5, Hebrews 13:4.)
- The teaching that the "priest" must be celibate goes against the clear teachings of the Bible. See, for instance, 1 Timothy 4:1-5. This declaration of the value and importance of marriage follows on from Old Testament teaching and practice. See, for instance, Genesis 2:18.¹³
- The idea that only the priest should partake of the wine goes against Christ's command "Drink from it, all of you." (Matthew 26:27, NIV)

However, in this article we shall focus on just two aspects of the Mass:

- Is it a sacrifice for sin?
- Do the bread and the wine become the physical body and the physical blood of Christ?

3. Is "the Lord's Supper" meant to be a sacrifice for sin?

The New Testament letter to the Hebrews gives detailed explanations of the significance of Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. It says that after His death and resurrection, Christ entered heaven, and adds the following clarification:

"Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the [Old Testament Jewish] high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own." (Hebrews 9:25, NIV)

In other words, even though in Old Testament times a symbolical sacrifice for sin was offered once every year, Christ's offering was unique and unrepeatable. This is made clear a few verses later:

"But now he [Christ] has appeared once for all ... to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Hebrews 9:26, NIV)

The same passage continues with the words:

¹² Other Popes have instituted other changes to the dates of this and other feasts. More information on this can be found in the above Wikipedia article.

¹³ This is discussed in further detail in the article "The Lord's Brothers and Sisters", which can be found on this website here: <http://livingwater-spain.com/brothers.pdf>, especially in sections 12 and 13.

“so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.” (Hebrews 9:28, NIV)

The following chapter¹⁴ continues the emphasis on the unique nature of Christ’s sacrifice:

“we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Hebrews 10:10, NIV)

The writer goes on to contrast the uselessness of repeated sacrifices offered by human priests with the efficacy of the unique sacrifice of Christ, who is described as “this priest”. The reference is to the Jewish priests, but its application to the priests of the Roman Catholic Church, repeatedly offering sacrifices, is unavoidable. We note that he emphasises also the final nature of Christ’s sacrifice with two different phrases, “for all time” and “one sacrifice”:

“Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins [i.e., on the Cross], he sat down at the right hand of God.” (Hebrews 10:11-12, NIV)

We also note a further contrast: “every [human] priest stands and performs his religious duties”. In fact, while the Jewish priest was conducting these duties, he never sat down. However, “when [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God”. This emphasises that the work of offering a sacrifice has been completed and ended, with no need for any repetition.

The passage continues by emphasising the same point yet again:

“by one sacrifice he [Christ] has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.” (Hebrews 10:14, NIV)

“Those who are being made holy” is a reference to Christian believers. The verse states that by His one sacrifice Christ has “made perfect for ever” (before God) those who have faith in Him. So believers in Christ have been made spiritually “perfect” before God, with all their sins forgiven (cf Hebrews 10 vv 10-12). As an “improvement” on perfection is not possible, no further sacrifice is necessary.

This is precisely what the writer says next. After further explanation, in which the testimony of the Holy Spirit is invoked (verse 15), he adds:

“there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.” (Hebrews 10:18)

I must emphasise that here we are not presenting any sort of sectarian interpretation of Scripture, but merely quoting what it actually says. Readers are encouraged to read the whole of the letter to the Hebrews for themselves (and even the whole New Testament!), in order to verify this.

This emphasis is not limited to the letter to the Hebrews. Thus, the Apostle Paul writes:

“The death he [Christ] died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.” (Romans 6:10)

¹⁴ The chapter divisions were not in the original text, but were added centuries later. However, this can be a helpful tool (along with verse numbers, which were also added more than a thousand years later), to help us to locate passages.

The Apostle Peter makes the same point:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” (1 Peter 3:18)

These and other New Testament passages that talk about the sufficiency and finality of Christ’s sacrifice make it clear that there can be no further sacrifice for sin. The Roman Catholic concept that the Mass is a sacrifice for sin thus goes completely against the consistent teaching of the New Testament, and leaders of the Roman Catholic Church must have been aware of this centuries ago. This helps us to understand why they forbade the reading of the Bible and burned all copies of translations into the vernacular that they could lay their hands on, even in some cases going to the barbaric extreme of burning the translators alive. We appreciate that in the 21st century, the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church would not condone this savage and profoundly unchristian behaviour, but it is a sad historical fact and it shows the extremes to which the Roman Catholic Church went over many centuries, to prevent the faithful from seeing what the Bible actually said about many aspects of the faith and the Christian life.

For Christians, in the words of Hebrews 10:18, “there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.”¹⁵

In Colossians 1:13-14, we read:

[God] “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in Whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

So – according to the Bible – forgiveness of sins is not provided for us through the confessional, by penance or in the Mass but in Christ. The theological concept of forgiveness through the celebration of the Mass was not developed until more than a thousand years later, but already in New Testament times believers knew that they already had the forgiveness of sins because of the sacrifice of Christ and through faith in Him, and no ritual was needed to make this happen.

4. What led the Roman Catholic Church to institute an endless series of *new* sacrifices for sin?

In the face of the clarity of the Biblical teaching on this subject, it is reasonable to ask what could have possibly led the Roman Catholic Church to institute an endless series of new sacrifices for sin. Ultimately, this question could only be answered by the theologians and Popes who developed and imposed this practice. However, it is well-known that for millennia human beings have offered sacrifices to gods. Humans seem to have an in-built, God-given need to receive forgiveness from God for their sins and an assurance that they are acceptable to God. In fact, when the Jewish system of animal sacrifices was established under Moses, to some extent it was in response to the practices of the nations around them. In Deuteronomy we read:

“You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.” (Deuteronomy 12:31, NIV)

It is though God was reinforcing the fact that human beings do need forgiveness, but not through the savage actions that characterised the surrounding nations, and so limiting sacrifices to the use of

¹⁵ This also explains why reformed and evangelical Christians use the symbol of an empty cross, as there is no further sacrifice for sin, whereas the Roman Catholic Church uses a crucifix – a dead or dying Christ nailed to a cross – to symbolize the constant, on-going and repeated sacrifice of Christ, continuing (as one Roman Catholic priest explained to me) “for eternity”. In this model, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was not adequate, and He is not seated in glory at God’s right hand (Hebrews 10:12), but perpetually in agony on the cross.

animals (and grain and fruit) was a first, temporary step in bringing the people away from sacrifices altogether.

In both Greek culture and the Roman empire at the time of Christ and the first centuries of Christianity, sacrifices to gods were still an essential part of religious and community life, and it would seem that Roman Catholic theologians were guided by that culture, instead of by the teachings of the Bible, and so when they found themselves with the power to prohibit sacrifices to pagan gods, instead of abandoning sacrifices altogether, they instituted a new, alternative system of sacrifices to God, the Mass.

Yet in the letter to the Hebrews we read the following:

when Christ came into the world, he said [to the Father]:
"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased." (Hebrews 10:5-6, NIV)

It is especially significant that this was not a new idea introduced by Christ (or by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews), but in fact a quotation from the book of Psalms, much of which had been composed a thousand years before the time of Christ:

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
...burnt offerings and sin offerings
you did not require. (Psalm 40:6, NIV)

In fact, the same idea is also found elsewhere in the Psalms. To quote just one example, from many, in a prayer to God the Psalmist says

¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17, NIV)

The prophet Isaiah also tells the people of Israel that God doesn't want their sacrifices:

"The multitude of your sacrifices —
what are they to me?" says the Lord.
"I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats." (Isaiah 1:11, NIV)

In the following verses in Isaiah chapter one (vv. 12-20), this message is made abundantly clear. This is in fact a theme throughout the Old Testament,¹⁶ and, significantly, Christ Himself quoted one of these passages:

Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
(Matthew 9:13, NIV, quoting Hosea 6:6)

¹⁶ See, for example, 1 Samuel 15:22, Psalm 50:9-13, Isaiah 66:3, Jeremiah 6:20, Amos 5:21-22, Hosea 6:6.

We must conclude that for the theologians and Popes who instituted the sacrifice of the Mass, the influence of the surrounding, pagan culture was more powerful than the teachings of the Bible and the practice of the early church, or that they were ignorant of the teaching of Scripture and had never grasped the true significance of Christ's death and His teaching about it.

Or perhaps they were seeking to appease a culture that wanted daily sacrifices to the gods, and this was their attempt at making Christianity more acceptable by not requiring non-believers to renounce their former beliefs and traditions. Throughout the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has frequently merged its teachings and practice with local religious beliefs around the world, a practice known as syncretism, and this has resulted in different types of Roman Catholicism in different parts of the world, right up to the present day, even going to the extreme of crucifixion of volunteers. Wikipedia states: "Crucifixion in the Philippines is a devotional practice held every Good Friday, and is part of the local observance of Holy Week."¹⁷ In recent years, the Roman Catholic Church has discouraged this, but it does show a consequence of adopting teachings and practices that deny the fundamental principles of the purpose of Christ's death, which is exactly what happened in the establishment of the doctrine of the Mass as a sacrifice for sin.

5. So what is the purpose of "The Lord's Supper"?

What is the purpose of this re-enactment of Christ's words and the sharing of the bread and wine? At its most fundamental level, we share meals with *friends*, and Christ said to His followers later during the same Passover meal, "You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:14, NIV)

Sharing a meal with friends is a time of bonding and strengthening friendships. It is frequently a special occasion and is normally a joyous one, although a final meal with someone who is about to leave on a long or dangerous journey may include great sadness, perhaps promoting reflection on memories of happier times in the past.

In fact, Christ explained the purpose of the meal. We read His instructions and His explanation in Luke 22:19:

"do this in remembrance of me."

When the Apostle Paul is instructing the church in Corinth, he quotes from these words by Christ:

"The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me'." (1 Corinthians 11:23-24, NIV)

Talking about the wine, he writes:

"In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me'." (1 Corinthians 11:25, NIV)

Thus, for Christians, the Lord's Supper is an occasion when they focus on Christ's sacrifice on the cross in order to bring people back into a right relationship with God. It is a time of deep gratitude, but also a solemn occasion, focussing on the suffering that Christ willingly accepted out of love for humanity, and the human sin and evil in the world that made it necessary. It is a time where, in the privacy of their hearts, believers "examine themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:28), silently confess their

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion_in_the_Philippines consulted on 25.12.18.

sins to God and ask for His forgiveness and His help to live as “new people” (2 Corinthians 5:17) for Christ.

The Apostle Paul describes what Christian believers are doing when they celebrate this “Lord’s Supper”:

“Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death, until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26)

He pointedly does *not* say, “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are offering a new sacrifice for sin.” Such an idea appears nowhere in the New Testament, nor indeed in the early Christian church, until it was introduced centuries later.

There remains just one further question to answer:

6. Do the bread and the wine become the physical body and the physical blood of Christ?

The Roman Catholic Church quotes from Jesus’ words. He clearly does say “this is my body” and “this is my blood”, so what did He mean?

Throughout His ministry Jesus constantly gave vivid illustrations drawn from the everyday experience of his listeners. For instance, in a largely agricultural environment He compared an evangelist preaching the Word of God with a farmer sowing seed in his fields (Mark 4:1-20, with parallel accounts in Matthew and Luke). It is clear that even His closest disciples frequently failed to understand the real significance of these illustrations, and Christ expressed His exasperation at their failure to grasp the real, spiritual meaning:

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?" (Mark 4:13, NIV)

On two occasions He had miraculously multiplied bread and fish to feed vast crowds. The feeding of the five thousand is recounted in all four gospels (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:32-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:1-14). The feeding of another crowd of 4,000 men, plus women and children, is reported on in Matthew 15:32-38 and in Mark 8:1-10. Both incidents are referred to again elsewhere in the gospels.

In both cases, the food used was the staple diet of a rural agricultural community that also had lakes and a long sea shore: bread, and fish.

Christ also spoke of the hidden way in which false teaching can penetrate a community by comparing it to yeast, which, hidden within the dough, causes it to change its nature. In Matthew 16 we read Jesus’ rebuke to His disciples for not understanding the symbolical meaning of his references to yeast and to bread:

⁵ When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. ⁶ "Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."
⁷ They discussed this among themselves and said, "It is because we didn't bring any bread."
⁸ Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, "You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having no bread? ⁹ Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹¹ How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ¹² Then they understood that he was not telling them

to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.
(Matthew 16:5-12, NIV)

In seeking to understand the meaning of Christ's words about bread in the Passover meal, we must remember his rebuke here:

"I was not talking to you about bread."

Because bread was essential for survival, Christ compared Himself to it:

"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35, NIV)

He was saying, "Just as you need bread to survive physically, you need Me to survive eternally." Even although the New Testament is written in Greek, its culture is deeply rooted in the Hebrew thought patterns of the Jewish people. One of these was the repetition of a concept, expressing it in two different ways, to make it easier to understand. This can in particular be seen throughout the Psalms and also in the writings of the prophets of Old Testament times.

Jesus uses this technique here: first a statement ("I am the bread of life"), and then the explanation, with two parallel ideas:

Statement	I am the bread of life.
Explanation	Whoever comes to me will never go hungry
Parallel idea	whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

In this we can see that the phrase "whoever comes to me" means "whoever believes in me". Those who believe will also not be spiritually "thirsty" – in a land where people could and did die from lack of water.

It is for this reason that Jesus addressed a woman who had come to draw water from a well with the words,

"Everyone who drinks this [physical] water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the [spiritual] water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14, NIV)

The Jewish leaders regularly referred to the manna (a substitute for bread) and the water miraculously provided for the Israelites in the desert after their departure from Egypt, and Jesus builds on this important and well-known event to describe Himself as both the real bread and the living water (in John 4, reference as above).

In John chapter 6 we see that Jesus repeatedly said, "I am the bread of life" (verse 35, verse 38). He also said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (v. 51) and repeatedly referred to Himself as "the bread of God who comes down from heaven" (v. 33). See numerous other examples of this in the rest of the account in John 6:25-59.

In verses 47-51 we read:

⁴⁷ I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. (NIV)

Here, the word “eats” is repeatedly used to mean “believes”, and Jesus makes this clear by His initial words. In a prediction of His death on the cross as a sacrifice to open up the possibility of forgiveness and salvation, Jesus adds,

“This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

At this point, the Jews, reveal that they had totally failed to understand the symbolical nature and spiritual meaning of Jesus’ words:

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52, NIV)

However, Jesus persevered with the symbolism: “For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink”. We then read that at this point many of those who heard it left Him (John 6:66).

The gospel writer tells us:

⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶² What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³ The **Spirit** is what gives life; **the flesh counts for nothing**. The words I have spoken to you are **spirit** and they are life. ⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” (John 6:61-64, NIV)

This is the key to understanding the whole passage and the key to understanding Jesus’ words “this is my body” and “this is my blood” at the Passover meal: “The **Spirit** is what gives life; **the flesh counts for nothing**. The words I have spoken to you are **spirit** and they are life.”

If the mediaeval theologians who elaborated the concept of trans-substantiation had just noticed these words, they could have saved themselves decades of disputing, and could have saved the Roman Catholic Church from centuries of arguing with Christians of other traditions.

- Christ also said “I am the door” (John 10:9) – but no-one says that He must be made of wood.
- He said, “I am the light of the world (John 8:12, 9:5) – but no-one says the He must be made of clay like the little lamps of the poor people, or of metal like the torches used by the Romans and the aristocrats.
- He said, “I am the Way”, and the Greek word for “Way”, ὁδός (“hodos”) can also mean a path – but no-one claims that He is a literal path, road or track.
- He said, “I am the true vine ... and you are the branches” (John 15:1, 5) – but no-one claims that He is literally a vine or that His followers are literally branches.

In all these cases – and many more! – the church, including the Roman Catholic Church, understands that all these comparisons are mere symbols and illustrations that are used to convey a greater truth in simple, easy-to-remember words and phrases.

It is only with Jesus’ words about bread and wine that the Roman Catholic Church insisted – centuries after the event – that this time it had to be literal.

In Colossians 1:21-22 we read:

And you at that time being alienated and enemies in your minds, in evil works, he now reconciled in his physical body through death.¹⁸

Here we see clearly that the reconciliation with God is through the physical death of Christ, *not through the celebration of the Mass*.

The above verse goes on to state that the purpose of Christ's death was "to present you before him [God] holy, immaculate and blameless, not accused of having done anything wrong".¹⁹ This clearly indicates that faith in Christ totally eliminates the need for any further action or ritual in order to obtain complete forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

7. Summary of findings on the Roman Catholic Doctrine of the Mass

I regret that there is no gentle way of summarising what we have discovered from the comparison of Roman Catholic Doctrine on the Mass with the Bible's teaching on the sacrifice of Christ: the idea that God would "transubstantiate" bread and wine into the physical body and physical blood of Christ whenever a man somewhere instructed a little boy to ring a bell not only sounds patently absurd; it goes against all that the Bible teaches us about God.

Perhaps this is well illustrated in the words in the book of Isaiah the prophet:

⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.
⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. "
(Isaiah 55:8-10, NIV)

The experience of the Roman Catholic Church in the development of this new doctrine also reveals how one new teaching can frequently lead to the need to introduce another new doctrine, to explain the previous one, or to overcome unforeseen problems caused by it. We have tried to mention only the core doctrine here, but the ramifications are complex and multitudinous, and have occupied the time of Roman Catholic theologians and of Popes over many centuries.

We saw above how Christ expressed His exasperation at His disciples' failure to understand that He was using symbolic language to convey otherwise-abstract spiritual concepts. How much more exasperated must He have been – *over the centuries!* – at the proliferation of complicated regulations, difficult-to-understand doctrines, intricate instructions, perplexing pronouncements, onerous obligations and incomprehensible new rules and requirements, imposed on the faithful by experts in canon law who seemed not to care about the faithful who were compelled to bear these new burdens. One can almost hear again Christ's words to the experts in religious law of His day:

"And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them." (Luke 11:46. NIV)

¹⁸ Translation by the author of this article – but other reputable translations say essentially the same thing, sometimes with slight stylistic differences.

¹⁹ Definition of ἀνεγκλήτους [“aneklētoús”] in Gingrich, “Greek New Testament Lexicon”

To get back to the relative simplicity of the Biblical record, Christ became a real human being. But just one human being. (cf 1 Corinthians 15:21 ff) But how many millions of tons of the flesh of Christ have there been, if the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is correct? How many millions of gallons of the blood of Christ have there been, if the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is correct? Even more fundamentally, how many millions of times has it been necessary (according to Roman Catholic doctrine) to repeat the sacrifice of Christ?

More importantly, what purpose could so many repeated sacrifices serve, when the New Testament stated that Christ's sacrifice for sin was sufficient and there was nothing that humans could add, to increase or extend its validity. Typical of this teaching is the following passage from Ephesians chapter 2, in which the word "grace" plays an important role. Grace is defined as "God's free offer of love and mercy to human beings, who are undeserving of it."²⁰

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:4-10, NIV)

Christ's final words on the cross underline this point. In John 19:30 we read:

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (NIV)

The consensus of theologians is that when Christ said this, He was referring to much more than the end of His life; He was referring to the completion of the work of atonement and reconciliation with God that He came to earth to accomplish: nothing more would need to be done, in order for human beings to receive forgiveness: the work for their salvation was finished, having been completed by Him on the cross.

²⁰ Definition by the author of this article, but in line with statements by theologians over many centuries.

PART III: The Jehovah's Witness View

1. Why the Jehovah's Witnesses needed to evolve new teaching about the Lord's Supper

The current Jehovah's Witness teaching concerning the Lord's Supper is not what they used to teach, and is a consequence of errors that they made early-on in other areas of interpretation of the Bible, so it is necessary to mention those errors briefly, in order to understand how they got into the muddle in which they now find themselves.

The organisation now known as the "Jehovah's Witnesses" developed from a group that formed round a self-taught 19th-century North American preacher and writer, Charles Taze Russell, who founded an organisation that he called "The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania". Inspired by other splinter groups that had prophesied Christ's return in 1844, then in 1874, Russell published articles in which he claimed to give the true interpretation of the Biblical writings about the Second Coming to earth of Christ. He stated that Christ would return to earth in October 1914. When this patently did not happen, he claimed that it had happened, but no-one had noticed. This article is not the place to investigate this matter further.

As another part of his interpretation of the Bible, Russell claimed that all the Christian groups existing and that had existed up to that time were not real Christians, and that only those who followed his teachings were true believers. He also stated that the total number of believers would be 144,000. Russell died in 1916 and was replaced as head of the organisation by Joseph Rutherford. In 1931 Rutherford decreed that members of the organisation should henceforth be called "Jehovah's Witnesses".

By 1935, Christ had still not returned and the "Jehovah's Witnesses" calculated that their numbers now exceeded 144,000. This created a problem.

Rutherford pronounced a whole new series of doctrines. Briefly, he stated that:

1. there would – indeed – be only 144,000 believers in heaven, all of them Jehovah's Witnesses²¹;
2. only these believers were "born again";
3. only these believers were members of "the body of Christ";
4. only these believers had the Holy Spirit;
5. all of these believers had become Jehovah's Witnesses before 1935;
6. only these believers could partake of the bread and wine in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

So what should the organisation now do? Should it stop recruiting new members and just wait until all these "true believers" reached heaven – or until Christ did actually physically return to earth?

If they had taken this route, the organisation would gradually have died off – literally, but Rutherford was in the business of guaranteeing the future of the organisation and its continued growth.

So how could the organisation continue trying to recruit new members if heaven was already full – or would be, once the last of the 144,000 had died?

²¹ In subsequent writings, the Jehovah's Witness organisation has claimed that "Adam was the first Jehovah's Witness", which must throw out their calculations done in 1935 of which of their followers will be in heaven.

Rutherford solved this by creating a new category of believers. These were clearly second-class followers. Rutherford decreed that:

1. These new believers would never go to heaven, but would build a perfect kingdom on earth.
2. They were not “born again”.
3. They were not part of the body of Christ, so His promises did not apply to them.
4. They could not have the Holy Spirit, so would need members of “the organization” who had been converted before 1935 to tell them the true meaning of the Bible.
5. They would be allowed to attend the celebration of “the Lord’s Supper”, but would not be allowed to partake of the bread and wine; they were to have “*observer status*” only.

And so, over the decades, as Jehovah’s Witnesses converted prior to 1935 died off, each year, less members partook of the bread and wine and more of them just observed. As the years went by, the Jehovah’s Witness organisation tried to compensate for the decrease in the numbers of Jehovah’s Witnesses allowed to partake of the bread and wine.

1. First they said that any Jehovah’s Witness aged 15 or older in 1935 could participate.
2. A few years later, they said that any Jehovah’s Witness born by 1935 could participate.

In spite of these efforts to delay the inevitable, by the latter years of the second decade of the 21st century, there cannot be Jehovah’s Witnesses converted (by definition, as adults) prior to 1935 who are still alive (having been born not after 1920), and few if any who were born prior to 1935.

2. Frequency of celebration of the Lord’s Supper

The Jehovah’s Witnesses tried to reduce the embarrassment of celebrating a ritual in which most of those present were not allowed to participate, by changing the celebration of “the Lord’s Supper” from once a week to once a year. They also changed its name to “the Memorial Meal”, a title that is not found in the Bible. They declared that it had to take place on the anniversary of the original Passover meal at which Christ presided.²²

It is significant that the first New Testament reference to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (in Acts 2:42, quoted from above) did not occur on the anniversary of the final Passover meal of Christ, but on the day of Pentecost, which was about seven weeks after Passover (50 days later).

There is no New Testament instruction to celebrate the Lord’s Supper once a year. On the contrary, the Apostle Paul quotes Christ as saying, “do this, whenever you drink it” (1 Corinthians 11:25), which seems to indicate that no specific time or date was mandated or expected.

There is also no instruction to celebrate the Lord’s Supper once a week, as is common with some Christian churches, nor once a month (as in some other churches), nor daily (as is normal in the Roman Catholic Church). However, the New Testament records that Christians soon formed the habit of meeting “on the first day of the week” (1 Corinthians 16:2). Acts 20:7 eliminates any doubt as to whether or not they celebrated the Lord’s Supper on such occasions:

“On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people ...” (NIV)

So making a regulation that the Lord’s Supper may only be celebrated once a year not only lacks any Biblical basis; it goes against the practice of the New Testament church.

²² One cannot help being surprised that the organisation will celebrate the anniversary of anything, when they do not allow their followers even to celebrate the anniversary of their own birthdays (or Christmas).

3. Jehovah's Witness arguments for two classes of believers

Initially, Rutherford stated that this new group of inferior followers was to be called the "Jonadab class". Jonadab was a minor Old Testament character who was not an Israelite, but Rutherford claimed that he helped the true Israelites, and in like manner this second-class group of followers could help out the true believers (those converted prior to 1935) who, alone, would go to heaven.

However, this interpretation seemed a very weak Biblical justification for this new lower-class category of inferior believers, and indeed an investigation of what the Bible says about Jonadab reveals that he was in fact a most unpleasant character. 2 Samuel 13:3 describes him as "a very crafty man" (NRSV).

The Jehovah's Witnesses quietly dropped this "Biblical justification" for their new doctrine.

In its place, they found a "better" verse. In John's gospel, Christ is recorded saying, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen." (John 10:16, NIV) The Jehovah's Witnesses now declared that the earth-bound class of believers were the "other sheep".

Unfortunately – in typical Jehovah's Witness style – they ignored the context of Jesus' words. Here we are not talking about some sort of general context somewhere else in a gospel or in a different part of the Bible, but the very next two sentences that Jesus said about these "other sheep", which are part of the same verse of the Bible:

"I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd". (John 10:16, NIV)

So these "other sheep" wouldn't be second-class followers, but part of the same one flock for whom Christ was the one Shepherd!

Who are these "other sheep" that Christ speaks about? His words make it clear. He had previously during His ministry sent his followers out to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:6, and again in Matthew 15:24), but soon after the day of Pentecost non-Israelites came to faith in Christ (see Acts chapters 10 and 11). Some of the first Christian believers, who were Jews, objected to Gentiles being accepted into the faith without first converting to Judaism, and the resulting division of opinion is exhaustively discussed in the New Testament, with the church eventually accepting that Gentile converts to Christianity did not have to convert first to Judaism or to follow Jewish rituals (see Acts chapter 15).

The Apostle Paul repeatedly comes back to this issue, and one of his clearest summaries can be found in the letter that he wrote to the Gentiles in Ephesus who had become Christians:

remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those [the Jews] who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the body by human hands)-

¹² remember that at that time you were

separate from Christ,

excluded from citizenship in Israel

and

foreigners to the covenants of the promise,
without hope and without God in the world.

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you [Gentiles] who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups [Jews & Gentiles] one

and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,
¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the [Jewish Mosaic] law with its commands and regulations.
 His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,
¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them [Jews & Gentiles] to God through the cross, by
 which he put to death their hostility.
¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you [Gentiles] who were far away
 and peace to those [the Jews] who were near.
¹⁸ For through him we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access to the Father by one Spirit.
¹⁹ Consequently, you [Gentiles] are no longer foreigners and strangers,
 but fellow citizens with God's people [the Jews]
 and also members of his household,
²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief
 cornerstone.
²¹ In him the whole building [both halves] is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in
 the Lord. ²² And in him you too [as well as us Jews] are being built together to become a dwelling
 in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22, NIV 2011, Anglicised)

Undeterred, the Jehovah's Witnesses now turn to a third source to justify their teaching that there are two different types of believers, each type facing a different future.

They now refer to Revelation chapter 7, the chapter from which Russell got the number 144,000. They say that there are two groups in this chapter: the 144,000, who are the original Jehovah's Witnesses converted up to 1935, who are in heaven, and "a great crowd", which does not inherit the Biblical promises and so will remain on earth.

If we turn to this chapter, this is what we find. First, the 144,000 are described:

⁴	Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.	
⁵	from the tribe of Judah	12,000 were sealed,
	from the tribe of Reuben	12,000,
	from the tribe of Gad	12,000,
⁶	from the tribe of Asher	12,000,
	from the tribe of Naphtali	12,000,
	from the tribe of Manasseh	12,000,
⁷	from the tribe of Simeon	12,000,
	from the tribe of Levi	12,000,
	from the tribe of Issachar	12,000,
⁸	from the tribe of Zebulun	12,000,
	from the tribe of Joseph	12,000,
	from the tribe of Benjamin	12,000. (Revelation 7:4-8 NIV)

We note two things from these verses:

1. the 144,000 are described as being "from all the tribes of Israel". The list goes on to specify this in detail, 12,000 from each tribe.
2. Nothing in these verses or anywhere else in the Bible states that this is the maximum number of Israelites in heaven. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the 12,000 from each tribe are symbolic representatives of a potentially much larger number of members of the families of

Israel who had been faithful to God, the “great cloud (sic) of [Old Testament] witnesses” referred to in Hebrews 12.1.

But up to 1935 few if any members of the Watch Tower organization were of Jewish origin. In the nineteenth century, the “Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society” had targeted its publications at existing North American Protestant denominations. So at that time, very few people of Jewish origin, if any, are likely to have been converted to “Watch Tower” beliefs. In the first three decades of the 20th century, the organization’s principal area of activity remained the same in the USA, while also seeking to infiltrate Christian groups in the United Kingdom and a few other countries.

The next verse of Revelation 7 states

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count (Revelation 7:9, NIV)

The Jehovah’s Witnesses state that this “great multitude” is the “other sheep” (previously called the “Jonadab class”). They are the ones who will not go to heaven.

Again, we note two things from Revelation 7:9 – without having to go any further than the rest of *the very same verse*:

1. This great multitude is described as being “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9, NIV). Thus, they are different, not in their *destiny*, but in their *origin* as non-Jews.
2. They are described as “standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9, NIV) The context (chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7) shows that the throne and the Lamb (Christ) are in heaven.²³ Therefore, like the 144,000 representatives of the tribes of Israel, the “great multitude” are in heaven.

“Definitely not!” retort the Jehovah’s Witnesses. “We are all “standing before the throne and the Lamb”, even when we are on earth, so this “great multitude” is on earth!”

There is a logical error here, in that the conclusion does not follow from the statement that precedes it. It also ignores the context and denies the clear and obvious meaning of the text.

However, to avoid a fruitless argument with our Jehovah’s Witness friends, we can refer them to the last section of the book of Revelation, which, after chapters describing events principally on earth, goes back to the scene in heaven:

“After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God’” (Revelation 19:1 NIV)

So here we again see the “great multitude”, and the Bible explicitly states that they are “in heaven”. Our visiting Jehovah’s Witnesses will tell us that it can’t mean that. We have not yet met a Jehovah’s Witness who has been able to explain what it *does* mean, if it doesn’t mean what it says.

²³ In the introduction to this section of the book of Revelation, we read, “After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’” (Revelation 4:1 NIV)

4. Who should partake of the bread and wine in the celebration of the Lord's Supper?

To return to Jesus' instructions concerning the Lord's Supper, we see that He clearly says

“Drink from it, all of you.” (Matthew 26:27, NIV)

While this was addressed to His disciples who were in the room with Him at that time, the New Testament church clearly applied His instructions to all believers, wherever the Lord's Supper was celebrated.

In his instructions to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul makes clear who should participate in the Lord's Supper (which, by definition, includes partaking of both the bread and the wine):

Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1 Corinthians 11:28 NRSV)

Thus, the decision as to whether or not one should partake of the bread and the wine is not dependent on church dogma or the decision of a priest (the Roman Catholic position), nor is it dependent on the year of one's birth (the Jehovah's Witness position). It is dependent on faith and being in a right relationship with Christ, and, ultimately, only the individual Christian can know whether or not they should partake on any given occasion.

5. Summary of findings on Jehovah's Witness Doctrine on the Lord's Supper

In summary, we see that:

1. the two classes of believers claimed by the Jehovah's Witnesses have no basis in the Bible;
2. the idea of celebrating the Lord's Supper just once a year goes against the practice of the early church in the New Testament (and indeed Christendom over the subsequent 2,000 years);
3. the rule of celebrating the Lord's Supper only on the day of the Jewish Passover goes against the practice of the believers on Day One of the church's existence (the day of Pentecost), and subsequently;
4. the teaching that some people should partake of the bread and wine while others should just have “observer status” goes against the instructions given by Jesus Himself – and indeed the whole New Testament concept that all Christian believers form part of one body. See, for instance, 1 Corinthians 12:13, which emphasises that the two groups (Jews and non-Jews, who are sometimes referred to as “Greeks”) have become one.

Conclusion

In this article, we have seen three understandings of the significance and the practice of commemorating “the Lord’s Supper”:

1. the beliefs and actions of the New Testament church;
2. the doctrines developed by the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages;
3. the radically new teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, first introduced about eighty years ago, in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and subsequently modified as the generation of those converted to the organisation prior to 1935 died out.

The teaching and practice of the New Testament was accepted for the first centuries of Christianity and indeed Christians of all backgrounds claim to base their beliefs on the teachings of the New Testament and their actions on the example of the New Testament church.

The Roman Catholic development of the doctrine of the Mass was never accepted by Eastern Christianity (the Eastern Orthodox Church), which had separated from the western branch of Christianity (Roman Catholicism) in 1054 and did not recognise the authority of the “bishop of Rome”, i.e., the Pope. In addition, more than 500 years ago, at the time of the Reformation, many “western” Christians sought to return to the teaching and practice of the New Testament church.

In recent years, the Roman Catholic Church has taken a few small steps in the direction of the teachings of Reformation Christianity, for instance, in the instruction by Pope Francis in 2018 that Roman Catholics should no longer pay for the Mass, as “redemption is free.”²⁴

The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that all of Christianity had misunderstood the teachings of Christ and of the New Testament until *their* organisation was established in the later decades of the 19th century, and over the years since then they have progressively sought to differentiate themselves from all Christian groups, introducing new doctrine after new doctrine, as well as changes in terminology, to enable them to condemn all existing Christianity ever-more forcefully as “in error” and “false”.

As Christians, we need to be constantly aware of our need to examine our assumptions, to see if they really are based on the Bible. And if we find that they are not, we need to modify our beliefs, teachings and practice, in order to fall in line with the Biblical model, as far as we are able to.

There is a time for exuberant worship, but in the Bible the commemoration of the Lord’s Supper was preceded by quiet self-examination, private confession and individual receiving of God’s forgiveness directly from God, without any human intermediary and without the offering of any new “sacrifice”. It was characterised by solemn meditation on the horrendous suffering that Christ experienced when He was crucified and a recognition of His sacrifice for the world, followed by a renewed commitment to follow Him and live in a way worthy of Him. Throughout it all, sharing this profound experience with other believers strengthened the bonds of fellowship and the mutual love and support between believers.

This is what the Lord’s Supper is all about.

²⁴ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-chronicles/do-not-pay-mass-redemption-free-pope-says> consulted on 15.12.18.