

THE PASSOVER SEDER AND THE LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

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Is it appropriate for a Lutheran congregation to celebrate a Passover Seder? This is not an unimportant question since the practice has become rather widespread in our Synod. In fact, it has even been promoted (complete with Eucharist!) by the Synod's Board for Evangelism (A Passover Haggadah for Christians, ed. Bruce J. Lieske, no date). But can it be historically or theologically sustained?

The historical question is rather complex, as the history of liturgical forms generally are. To begin with, we have no manuscript of a Seder Haggadah which is early than the tenth century A.D. (*Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon*). Nearly a millennium exists between the time of Jesus and the earliest extant text. Passover Haggadot have never been standardized but have always been shaped and reshaped by circumstances and time. The ritual has been extraordinarily versatile since the tenth century A.D. and in all likelihood was just as versatile in the preceding centuries. The claim that any ritual now in existence is identical with that used by Jesus is both anachronistic and historically suspect.

The theological questions are equally complex. Even if it were proven (which it has not been) that a specific extant Haggadah is identical with that used by Jesus, these problems remain. The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus with the words "the blood of the new covenant." He commanded that we "do this in remembrance of Me." But, to do what? Celebrate a Seder? Or celebrate His Sacrament? The two are simply not the same. On the night in which He was betrayed, the Blessed Savior gave His disciples something new. All that came before converged and found fulfillment in Him. All that has happened since that night has grown from that same point of convergence and fulfillment. The Galatian Christians failed to understand the radical nature of the new order found in Christ; as a result, St. Paul found it necessary to correct their Judaizing error.

It makes no more sense for Christians to gather around a Passover Seder than it does to gather around another sacrificial lamb. The very Lamb of God has been slain, once and for all. We would not and could not offer another sacrifice. The final Sacrifice was offered on Calvary. We now celebrate only that Lamb's own

feast as instituted and commanded by Him. It is the Passover of Jesus, and only the Passover of Jesus, which the Church legitimately celebrates.

One final question might be asked. Why, given the historical and theological questions, do some parishes regularly or even occasionally sponsor a Seder? Two responses have sometimes been given. First, to each Christians about the context of the Last Supper. But given the historical uncertainties of the Haggadah , what anachronisms are being taught as historic facts? Simply teaching our people a biblical and Lutheran Sacramentology and Christology is difficult enough; why confuse the issue?

A second rationale is to reach out and build bridges to the Jewish community. But is a "Christian" Seder not as offensive to Jewish people as a "Jewish" Eucharist would be to Christians? Communication with any group of people is rarely enhanced by misappropriating their beloved traditions. Those Lutherans who use a Seder do so with commendable intentions. But the inherent problems of the practice result in more harm than good.

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