

Keynote Scripture Passage for Tom Cabeen (9/16/09):

Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. —**Matthew 26:26-28**

This passage, more than any other, attracted me to the Catholic Church. Here is the story behind it:

I was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. My understanding of this verse was very different from what it is now. To show how my understanding changed, I must explain a bit about how JWs understand Jesus' ransom.

The Watchtower view of atonement and the meaning of the Lord's Evening Meal

In Watchtower (WT) theology, God originally intended for all humans to live forever on a paradise earth. No one was bound for heaven. *This is a key concept.* The first human pair, Adam and Eve, were given perfect human life. When Adam sinned, he could no longer pass on earthly perfection to his offspring. He damaged himself and thus lost his capacity to father perfect children. In the WT view of atonement, only what was lost could and would be restored.

Adam had a whole unborn race of persons in his loins when he sinned. His sin plunged mankind into sin. What had been lost could be regained only by balancing the scales, by the death of a perfect human man with an unborn race of humans in his loins; exactly what had been lost: nothing more, nothing less.

One of God's created angels, an archangel, one so close to God he could be called his "only-begotten" son, agreed to become a human, an exact equal of Adam. This angel became the man Jesus. He rescued us from death by satisfying God's justice, like for like. Jesus died, going out of existence in the process. He was resurrected (that is, re-created anew) on the third day, and raised to heaven, restored to exactly what he had been before coming to earth, a spirit creature, an archangel, *not* a glorified human possessing both divine and human natures, *not* God the Son, *not* the second person of the Trinity.

Adam's offspring had no opportunity to live sinless lives. In the WT view, some means would ultimately be needed to train them to be what Adam was meant to be before he sinned: perfect humans who would live forever on a perfect earth. This is what JWs believe "the Kingdom of God" to be, a sort of temporary administration which will train sinners how to live perfect lives, like Adam and Eve.

Although not originally part of God's plan, he added a new feature after Adam's sin: a very limited number of persons would be brought to heaven to serve as members of this heavenly government which is to administer the rehabilitation process; mainly a matter of teaching people how to obey God's rules. (Oddly enough, in this scheme, those who go to heaven have the devil to thank for it! Had Adam and Eve not sinned, all their offspring would have been living on earth in paradise, blissfully unaware of the existence of sin or death, and no one would be in heaven.)

JWs teach that Jesus has technically been reigning since 1914, but that he has turned over all the *earthly* interests of his kingdom to the Witnesses. Their current administration of his affairs is only a sort of "trial run." Jesus' *real* Kingdom, the millennial one, begins after the end of this age, after the war of Armageddon. In the meantime, for the past hundred years or so, the Watchtower Society has been in charge of preparing the relatively small Society of people who will form the core of a whole New World, a new system of things or age which will begin after the cataclysmic end of this present one.

In the WT scheme of things, final and complete reconciliation to God occurs only at the end of a literal,

future, thousand-year reign of Christ along with his 144,000 joint human rulers, who go to heaven specifically to reign with Him. During the millennial reign, all or nearly all of dead mankind will be resurrected to earthly life and taught to live by "biblical" (that is, JW) rules and regulations, as currently taught by the WTS. Those who don't want to live as JWs will die again and stay dead forever.

When the survivors reach perfection at the end of the thousand years, they are all given a final test, orchestrated by Satan, who will be released from a thousand year prison term. Only those who pass this final test will be given, as a reward, exactly what Adam and Eve had when they were created: the prospect of living forever on a paradise earth. This, in a nutshell, is the WT vision of mankind's reconciliation to God.

In the WT model, the *mechanism* or plan of salvation is for a person to be made aware of "the Good News" that they were born just at the right time to get in on the ground floor of a New World Order by joining the "New World Society" (JWs), and being cooperative and obedient to its leaders, whom Jesus has put in charge of bringing all mankind back to human perfection. The WT leaders include a few of the remaining members of the 144,000 destined to rule the whole earth along with Jesus. The president of the WTS decided that this number was completed around 1935, so most "anointed" JWs were adults then, and are now in their eighties at least. They are a small, very elite group among JWs.

JWs call the Lord's Evening Meal "the Memorial," a reminder of what Jesus did. Since they connect this commemorative meal with the 144,000 that go to heaven, *only those with that hope* actually participate in the celebration. It must be rather bizarre for any traditional Christian to see a "communion" celebration in which at most one or two persons actually consumes the bread and wine. In most congregations, not even one person does. But "partaking" serves to identify those who claim to be of the exclusive group Jesus has called to be part of the heavenly administration during the millennium. For most JWs, this is probably the most significant thing about the celebration, that is, confirmation of who among them is bound for heaven.

The Evangelical Protestant view of atonement and the meaning of "Communion"

We left the JWs in 1982, and in time replaced their view with a typical evangelical Protestant one. The Protestant vision of atonement is generally simpler, although it comes in a number of varieties and flavors. A widely-held view says it works like this:

Man is sinful, separated from God. Our sin creates a gap or gulf we cannot cross. Sinners, by reason of their sin, are deserving of God's wrath. All sins are ultimately against an infinite person, God, so sins can only be atoned for by the death of an infinite person, which the divine Jesus is. So Jesus, God's divine Son, the second Person of the Trinity, became man and died in our place. He took our place; substituted for us, and took the punishment for all the sins of all humans, past, present and future.

By paying the penalty for our sins, Jesus opened the way for sinful humans to be reconciled to a righteous God. In a popular model, "salvation" happens at a moment in time, when sinners learn of Christ's loving sacrifice on their behalf, feels sorry for his or her sins, and believes in the reality of Christ's redemptive work. This belief is called "putting faith in Jesus." As saved believers trust more in Jesus, He works in their lives to make them the kind of persons He wants His followers to be.

In this "substitutionary" view, Jesus' righteousness, in effect "covers" the sinful person like a white robe, although under the robe, the sinner is still sinful. Some have explained it as if the redeemed are like 'balls

of dung covered by a white layer of snow.' In other words, God looks at the sinner, but instead of seeing the sinner, he sees only Christ, whose righteousness effectively hides or covers our sins, making them invisible to God, who, thanks to Christ, sees us as if we were completely holy.

In this view, the "mechanism" of salvation is entirely in the hands of Jesus. He not only does the heavy lifting, he does *all* the lifting. The believer's primary participation in salvation is limited to *believing that he did it*, in accepting that particular salvation teaching or model as the true one. That is the essence of salvation by faith for many evangelical Protestants.

Some Protestant denominations focus more than others on the need for some kind of outward, visible response to Jesus' saving work in our hearts. The believer is expected to strive to become holy or "sanctified." Even though they cannot possibly achieve actual holiness due to a "sin nature" in all of Adam's descendants, which makes actual holiness impossible, many strive for it in vain anyway. But since it cannot possibly be achieved, its lack does not prevent the salvation of the believer.

In some traditions, progress toward sanctification is expected to be reflected in the believer's own "works befitting repentance," while others insist that *any* works done by believers in an effort to make progress toward sanctification is a pitifully inadequate attempt to "save themselves" by works, which amounts to a lack of faith in Jesus' "finished work on the cross."

There is much said about the "indwelling" of the Holy Spirit, but since the Spirit indwells all believers from the moment of salvation, there is no little confusion about precisely how and when "sanctification" comes about in the believer. How does one replace the works of the flesh with the fruits of the Spirit, without trying to work one's own way to salvation? There are numerous opinions.

Most Protestant denominations offer the Communion meal to all baptized Christians. The bread and wine are viewed as a means to remind us that Christ died for our sins as well as a sign of shared belief in Christ and his atoning work on our behalf. In many Protestant fellowships, the Communion meal is only celebrated once a month. Although the celebration was always meaningful to me, I considered it only to be a reminder of Christ's death and my membership in a faith community. It was in this way, keeping me from forgetting that Christ died for my sins, that I viewed the "elements," as we called them.

The Early Christian View of the Atonement

It was in the late 1990s that I began to read the writings of the early Christians, I came to see that their view of the process by which sinful men and women were reconciled with God was not neatly packaged. It was a multi-faceted teaching with many nuanced and interrelated parts. Many aspects of it are outside the scope of this discussion. But one thing that stood out to me was the idea that actual holiness was an achievable goal.

About 2003, I was reading an early Christian document called *The Shepherd of Hermas*. Written in the second century, it was widely read and very popular among Christians. In one section, an angel (the Shepherd) gives Hermas twelve mandates or ethical precepts for Christians. He then says:

"Walk in these commandments, and exhort your hearers that their repentance may be pure during the remainder of their life. Fulfill carefully this ministry which I now entrust to you, and you will accomplish much."

Hermas replies: "Sir, these commandments are great, and good, and glorious, and fitted to gladden the heart of the man who can perform them. But I do not know if these commandments can be kept by man, because they are exceeding[ly] hard."

The angel replies: "If you lay it down as certain that they can be kept, then you will easily keep them, and they will not be hard. But if you come to imagine that they cannot be kept by man, then you will not keep them. Now I say to you, if you do not keep them, but neglect them, you will not be saved."

At the time, I was an evangelical Protestant. From that perspective, this passage hit me like a ton of bricks. For the first time in my life, I began to see a possibility that God actually expects humans to *obey* his commandments, not just give them a passing nod. I had been taught that we humans all have a "sin nature" which prevents us from obeying Christ's commands. Because of that sin nature, God doesn't really expect us to actually *keep* his commands, but rather just to sort of "aim toward" keeping them, while believing in the back of our minds that such a thing is impossible. I am not saying that the early Christians taught that God expects us all to live completely sinless lives, only that in their view our efforts toward obedience could be much more fruitful than I had ever expected them to be.

How many times had I read and quoted to others Jesus' so-called "Great Commission"? Just prior to his ascent into heaven, he told his apostles to make disciples of people of all nations, teaching these new followers *to obey all the things he had commanded them*. For the first time, I saw that in this passage, Jesus' clearly implies that his disciples are expected to actually obey his commands. Why would Jesus command us to do something that our "sin nature" makes impossible?

As I continued to read, I began to adjust my understanding of sin, particularly serious sin. I had lumped imperfections and unintentional mistakes right along with deliberate willful decisions to disobey God's clear commands. The ancient Christians defined only the latter as serious sin.

I began to notice passages of Scripture that seemed to say that it is actually possible to be free from sin:

"What then shall we say? *Shall we persist in sin* that grace may abound? *Of course not!* How can we who died to sin yet live in it? ... Our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, *that we might no longer be in slavery to sin*. ... You too must think of yourselves as (being) *dead to sin and living for God* in Christ Jesus. Therefore, *sin must not reign* over your mortal bodies *so that you obey their desires*. ... *For sin is not to have any power over you*, since you are not under the law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Of course not! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, *although you were once slaves of sin, you have become obedient* from the heart to the pattern of teaching to which you were entrusted." (Rom 6:1-2, 6, 11-12, 14-17)

"He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, *free from sin*, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." (1 Pet 2:24)

I had read most of these passage previously, but now I saw them in a whole new light. They still retained much of the meaning they had for me before, but I certainly saw more in them than I had previously.

The biggest change for me had to do with the *way* in which Christians are empowered to "live for righteousness" in obedience to Jesus' commands. It was centered in the early Christian view of the Lord's Evening Meal, or the "Eucharist," which is simply the Greek word for "thanksgiving."

Early Christians believed that Jesus Christ was actually made present in the Eucharist. This teaching, with some slight variations by Anglicans, Orthodox and Catholics, is called the doctrine of the Real Presence. Here is how Justin, writing in the second century, described how he had been taught:

Not as common bread and common drink do we receive [the Eucharist]; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that *the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word, and from which our blood and flesh by transmutation are nourished, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.* For the apostles, in the Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, "This do ye in remembrance of Me, *this is My body*;" and that, after the same manner, having taken the cup and given thanks, He said, "*This is My blood*" and gave it to them alone. —Justin Martyr, *1st Apology*, Chap 66.

The early Christians directly connected the sacred Eucharistic meal with salvation in a way that was totally new to me. I had never heard of such a thing before. I was completely unfamiliar with the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation. I had always viewed Jesus' words "this is my body...this is my blood" to be symbolic. I believed that we *figuratively* eat and drink of Jesus' flesh and blood by calling to mind the central role his sacrifice on the cross played in our salvation. The early Christians certainly did keep these things in mind. But they saw in the sacred meal far more than that.

Ignatius, a bishop martyred early in the second century, called the Eucharist "the medicine of immortality;" "the antidote to prevent us from dying, so that we should live forever in Jesus Christ." He called the consecrated meal "the bread and drink of God."

Irenaeus, a bishop writing later in the second century, says "the bread, produced from the earth, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist—consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly." What is the effect of eating such miraculous food? He continues: "Our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, *are no longer corruptible*, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity." He then says why: "The wine and bread...having received the Word of God, become the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ."

Near the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria wrote: "To drink the blood of Jesus is to become a *partaker of the Lord's immortality*...Those who by faith partake of it are *sanctified both in body and soul*."

These are the expressions of Christians who lived and wrote within 100 years of the death of the last of the apostles. The earliest of them, Ignatius, had been *taught personally by both Peter and John*. These are but a few samples of many such quotations which intimately connect salvation with actually *consuming* the body and blood of Christ in the sacred Eucharistic meal.

As I studied, I saw that the implications of this teaching are very far-reaching. These early Christians taught that Jesus not only gave his life by dying on the cross, but also shares his life post-resurrection life with his followers. In this way they become, in St. Peter's words, "sharers in the divine nature." (2 Pet 1:4)

This was such a new idea to me, I had to read the passages again and again to make sure I really understood what they were saying. This put a whole new perspective on the process by which believers in Christ are brought from sin to salvation. I urge anyone to examine the overwhelming historical evidence that this is actually what Christians have believed and taught from the time of the apostles down through the centuries. Many Protestants are not even aware of this. But even today, Christians who believe this doctrine represent an overwhelming majority of Christians on earth, and always have.

Viewed from this perspective, the Eucharist began to take on a whole new meaning for me. I began to think deeply about the concept of a believer being empowered by actually *consuming* Jesus Christ, by having our souls actually nourished by heavenly food, just as the body is nourished with physical food. By actually *eating* Jesus' flesh and blood, we invite him, including his divine nature, to come into our sinful human bodies, to not only cleanse them from the inside out (partaking of the Eucharist effects complete forgiveness of all venial sins), but also to empower us to avoid sin as we move forward. This concept transformed my whole view of Jesus and his redemptive work.

I began to see the connection between the Eucharist and discipleship, how eating this divine meal enables us to obey Jesus' commands, referred to in the Great Commission. Obviously, sinful humans need divine help to do this, including the obligation to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourself. Now I could see how we receive that divine help. I could see much more clearly *how it is that* "we are saved by grace." The Eucharist does not replace grace. Rather, *it is a primary means by which we receive grace.*

From this new perspective, words like those of St Augustin began to make much more sense to me:

"Happy are we if we do the deeds of which we have heard and sung. Our hearing of them means having them planted in us, while our *doing them shows that the seed has borne fruit.* By saying this, I wish to caution you, dearly beloved, not to enter the Church fruitlessly, satisfied with mere hearing of such mighty blessings and *failing to do good works.* ...

For "we have been saved by his grace," says the Apostle, and "not by our works, lest anyone may boast; for it is by his grace that we have been saved." It is not as if a good life of some sort came first, and that thereupon God showed his love and esteem for it from on high, saying: "Let us come to the aid of these men and assist them quickly because they are living a good life." No, our life was displeasing to him. He will, therefore, *condemn what we have done but he will save what he himself has done in us.* ...

Such is the grace we have received! Let us live so as to be worthy of that great grace, and not do injury to it. So mighty is the physician who has come to us that he has healed all our sins! If we choose to be sick once again, we will not only harm ourselves, but show ingratitude to the physician as well."

Church Authority

As I read the writings of the early Christians, another transformation was taking place in me, one I had not anticipated: I was becoming increasingly open to being taught by the leaders of the ancient Church, primarily her bishops, who have served as the guardians of orthodoxy since she was founded.

I hadn't even realized it until that time, but my paradigm for finding truth had been unproductive. I would read Scripture, pray for God's Spirit, try in all sincerity to figure out what a particular passage meant, then try to put the sum of all the passages about a given subject into a coherent whole. The process was difficult, time-consuming and unreliable. As I read, this method was slowly being replaced by a very different (and much easier!) paradigm: Listen and learn Christ's teachings from those who had heard it from Christ himself. Surely this was far better!

Every serious Christian or Bible student I had ever known of made use of the resources of others. There is certainly no shortage of commentary on the meaning of Scripture. Some commentators are immensely intelligent and well educated, yet I observed that they often, apparently in all sincerity, come to very different conclusions about the meaning of either a particular passage of Scripture or the "big picture"

that results when one attempts to put passages together.

I finally saw the problem: at the end of the day, my old paradigm came down to *me*. The conclusions I reached were *my* conclusions. Whether I tried to choose the correct meaning of Scripture from among several possibilities, or chose whom to believe, whether a philosopher or scholar or Bible teacher of some sort, *I was the one making the final choice*.

It was a big change for me, but I was reassured by the consistency and overall uniformity of the teaching of the early Christians, as well as their harmony with Scripture. It gave me the confidence that Jesus had, in the most real way imaginable, kept the promise he made to the apostles just prior to his ascension: "Look! I am with you all the days until the end of the age." My newfound understanding of the Eucharist added new meaning to that promise.

Meanwhile, the significance and power of the teaching of the Real Presence continued to grow in my mind and heart. I began to see why the Church had always, from the very beginning, emphasized the absolute centrality of the Eucharist for Christians. I began to understand with increasing clarity the need for Christians to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the divine Jesus to be freed from sin. This liberation is what Jesus came to do. *How* he chose to do it was by giving us his own flesh and blood to feed on. Here is how Origen explained it in the third century:

The Lamb of God became like an innocent sheep being led to the slaughter, that He might take away the sin of the world. He ...is made like a lamb which is dumb before her shearer, that we might be purified by His death, *which is given as a sort of medicine against the opposing power, and also against the sin of those who open their minds to the truth*. For the death of Christ reduced to impotence those powers which war against the human race, *and it set free from sin by a power beyond our words the life of each believer*. ... His taking away sin is still going on, He is taking it away from every individual in the world, till sin be taken away from the whole world, and the Savior deliver the kingdom prepared and completed to the Father, a kingdom in which no sin is left at all, and which, therefore, is ready to accept the Father as its king, ... "That God may be all in all."— Origen, *Commentary on John*, 37, 38.

Today, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions teach precisely what the early church taught: that the bread and wine are transformed into Jesus' literal body and blood. A few others believe that the bread and wine retain their original substance, but that after consecration, in some way Jesus actually becomes present within them. That view is known as "consubstantiation", whereas the Catholic view came to be called "transubstantiation," which describes a change in *substance*, what the material actually *is*, even while recognizing that the "accidents" or external characteristics, by which we normally identify an object, remain unchanged. The bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine rather than human flesh and blood. But, the ancient unanimous testimony tells us, it *is* flesh and blood.

Holy Orders

My new picture of the Eucharist was almost complete. I only needed one more piece to finish the puzzle. Bread and wine start out as common physical food; they become "the bread from heaven," the literal life-giving body and blood of Christ. What accomplishes the transformation? According to Justin (for one), it is a blessing. Who can give this blessing of consecration? Since apostolic times, it has always been given by a priest who was appointed by a bishop in a direct line of succession from the apostles. Every such appointment is an outward sign of an inward grace, a gift given by God, which includes among other things the power to change ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This is the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Again returning to Justin's words: "We been taught that the food *which is blessed by the prayer of His word ...is the flesh and blood of [Jesus].*" Whenever a bishop in a direct line of succession from the apostles, or a priest appointed by such a bishop, blesses ordinary bread and wine during the celebration of the Mass, they become the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

At the time I learned these things, I was very comfortable as a rather recent convert to the Anglican communion. My parish was relatively orthodox, although such are becoming increasingly rare in the USA. I loved my parish congregation and the Anglican liturgy and music. But I had become absolutely convinced that the actual body and blood of Jesus play a critical role in salvation, and that valid Holy Orders, which require valid apostolic succession, are critical to the transformation.

Both Roman Catholics and Orthodox can make a solid, unimpeachable case that all of their bishops are in genuine apostolic succession. All of their priests have been ordained by these genuine bishops. But I was sad to learn that a legitimate question can be raised about the validity of the Anglican Holy Orders. I researched the subject and discovered that at the time of the Reformation, the line of succession may have been broken. If that happened, at least some modern Anglican bishops, and the priests they ordained, were not ordained by a bishop in direct succession from the apostles. If it is a case of some being valid and others not so, there appears to be no way to tell for certain who is and who isn't.

I simply could not take a chance on such a critical matter. Jesus himself clearly told us what is at stake:

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. ... Whoever eats this bread will live forever. —John 6:53-58

John, Bishop of Constantinople (347-407) writes of the unimaginable honor of sharing in the Eucharist:

Neither was it enough for [Jesus] to be made man, to be smitten and slaughtered, but He also commingles Himself with us, and not by faith only, but also in very deed [He] makes us His body. ... Consider with what sort of honor you were honored, of what sort of table you are partaking. That which when angels behold, they tremble, and dare not so much as look up at it without awe on account of the brightness that comes thence, *with this we are fed, with this we are commingled, and we are made one body and one flesh with Christ.*—St John Chrysostom, *Homily 82 on Matthew*

Far beyond any other factor, this is what drew me to the Roman Catholic Church. I believed what Jesus said, that I could never live forever without partaking of the actual body and blood of Christ, which, according to the most ancient Christian traditions, only happens when bread and wine are blessed by a priest ordained by a bishop in valid apostolic succession. I entered the Roman Catholic Church to partake of that heavenly life-giving food.