



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Do Christians hold Seder Meals?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Out of a profound desire for authenticity, Christians have shown an ever-increasing interest in Seder meals. This desire for authenticity is grounded in the wish to know (and perhaps even experience) the origins of the Eucharistic celebration and to know "what really happened." This desire finds expression in a popular spiritual question: What did Jesus do? (WDJD). Let us consider three dimensions of Seder Meals in a Christian context: historical knowledge, Seder Meals and Holy Communion and Jewish/Christian Relations.

Historical Knowledge

Much of the interest in Seder meals is as stated above: a desire to share in an experience of Jesus. Such intentions to rediscover the past in order to inform the present can be commended, but with important reservations. First, there is the question of whether the Last Supper Jesus celebrated was indeed a Passover meal. The gospel accounts are conflicting on this matter. In the Gospel of John, Jesus celebrated a meal with the disciples before the designated time for the Passover meal. This allowed John to equate the death of Jesus with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. But perhaps even more importantly is the fact that we simply have no written accounts of the Seder meal from the first century. In fact, the earliest written accounts of the Seder meal date from the medieval period; they witness to a Seder meal which had developed and changed significantly from the meal celebrated in the first decades of the first century of the Common Era when the Temple was still the center of Jewish ritual and religious life.

Seder Meals and Holy Communion

Although Jewish ritual influences Christian worship still today, the experience of the Passover meal as something to be recreated is very different than the Christian meal experience of Holy Communion. Many Christians, Lutherans among them, understand Communion as a present moment, the gift of Jesus received in bread and wine. When we commune together, we are not remembering in the sense of reliving the past, a kind of

pretending. A statement from the ELW companion resource *Keeping Time* conveys this well:

The mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ is not primarily a past event but is experienced in the present by the baptized community that is drawn by the Spirit into a future promised by God (*Keeping Time*, 97).

According to Scripture, we know that on the night of his betrayal Jesus took bread, broke it and said: "do this in remembrance of me." We do not know if he celebrated the Jewish Passover. Holy Communion shares roots with Jesus' meal on the night of his betrayal, yet our experience of communion is also rooted in meal traditions of Jesus. If we look at the meal tradition in the gospels, we will notice something peculiar: Jesus was breaking every ritual norm when he celebrated a meal. He would eat with those deemed unworthy (or ritually "unclean") and, when he ate with "religious folk," he always introduced an element to unsettle the ritual purity of the event (Matthew 9:9-13; Luke 7:36-50; Luke 19:1-10). The meal tradition Jesus initiated (constituted by all the meals Jesus celebrated with his followers and not only the Last Supper) was a ritual that pointed away from itself, aware of those who were not present at the celebration. The meal tradition as celebrated by Jesus was so radically different, so radically new that the meal (the sharing of bread and wine – and not the elaborate ceremony of the Seder meal) became the central act by which the early Christians (and all subsequent generations) remembered Jesus.

The desire to celebrate a Seder meal as "Jesus did" can dilute the memory of the radical newness of what Jesus began as it can divert attention from the primary "passage" which Christians celebrate in the Easter Vigil and which culminates in the Eucharistic celebration on Easter Sunday (the Eighth Day). Most Christians around this world call Easter "Pascha" meaning Passover, but this is distinctly Christian Passover, a Jewish ritual set in the home transformed to a Christian public ritual. In a very real sense, the Christian Easter Vigil functions as the Passover does for the Jewish people. Rather than trying to authentically recreate a past event, perhaps a far more urgent concern for Christians in the twenty-first century would be to fully develop our celebration of the vigil and to note, to what extent our celebrations of Holy Communion are attentive to the outsider, to the one who cannot return the invitation.

Jewish/Christian Relations

As scholar Gail Ramshaw has noted, "The seder is the holiest ritual event in the lives of devout practicing Jews (*Treasures Old and New*, p. 188). For this reason, Christians contemplating holding a Seder meal need to consider how it might be perceived by our Jewish neighbors. While it is an admirable and truly Christian practice to be open and welcoming of other religious traditions, taking a tradition that does not belong to us and practicing it in our congregations could be an imitation that is not welcomed at best and very offensive at worst.

That said, providing opportunities for Christians to learn about or experience a Seder outside of worship could be an enriching event. Holding or having a group attend an educational forum about Seder meals would be a possibility. Attending a Jewish Seder meal as invited guest would be not only educational, but a means of creating interfaith community.

RESOURCES

On the Seder in a Christian context:

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail and Mons Teig. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Keeping Time, The Church's Years*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail. *The Three-Day Feast: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.
- 📖 Ramshaw, Gail, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002, pp.182-189.

Other Resources

- 📖 Frank C. Senn. "The Lord's Supper, Not the Passover Seder" *Worship* 60 no. 4 (1986), 362-368.
- 📖 Sarah Simon, Chelsea Simon, David Simon, [*A Christian Passover in the Jewish Tradition*](#), Create Space Independent Publishing Platform; 1 edition (March 19, 2013).

On the origins of Christian and Jewish Worship:

- 📖 Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman. [*The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*](#). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.

On the Seder meal:

- ☐ Pesach: Passover: <http://www.jewfaq.org/holidaya.htm>

Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations:

- 📖 [*The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*](#).
- 📖 [ELCA: Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations](#). This unit's website includes pages on current ELCA ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues, including many resources with study materials and historic documents on Jewish-Christian relations.

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