THE EUCHARIST IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

An Examination of the Lord's Supper in the Greek New Testament, Pre-Nicene Patristic Sources, and the Question of Soteriological Necessity

Independent Scholarly Research

2026

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Abstract

This paper examines the Eucharist — the ritual meal of bread and wine commemorating the death of Jesus Christ — from three distinct analytical perspectives: (1) the exegesis of the relevant Greek New Testament texts in their original linguistic and contextual setting; (2) the theology and practice of the pre-Nicene Church Fathers (ante-150 C.E. through the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E.); and (3) the doctrinal trajectory by which the Roman Catholic Church developed and codified the doctrine of the Eucharist as a sacrament necessary for salvation — the doctrine of *ex opere operato* — culminating in the formal definitions of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 C.E.) and the Council of Trent (1545–1563 C.E.).

The central analytical question addressed is whether the Greek New Testament, read on its own grammatical and exegetical terms, establishes eucharistic participation as a condition of salvation, or whether this soteriological weight is a later doctrinal development superimposed upon the text. The paper argues that the Greek texts do not unambiguously establish eucharistic necessity for salvation; that pre-Nicene usage was considerably more varied and less institutionally uniform than later Catholic theology implies; and that the sacramentalization of the Eucharist as a salvific mechanism is largely a post-Nicene development, reaching its dogmatic apex only in the medieval and Tridentine periods.

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I. Introduction and Methodological Note

The Eucharist — from the Greek *eucharistia* (εὐχαριστία), meaning "thanksgiving" — stands as the most theologically contested ritual in the history of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is a sacrament instituted by Christ, that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus through transubstantiation, and that participation in the Eucharist is necessary for eternal life. Protestant traditions have challenged these claims since the sixteenth century, and the exegetical debate over the relevant scriptural texts has continued unabated.

This paper approaches the question from the standpoint of historical and textual evidence rather than doctrinal commitment. The methodology is as follows: First, the Greek New Testament texts are examined in their original language, with attention to grammar, vocabulary, literary genre, and intertextual context. Translations are provided, but the Greek is treated as primary. Second, the pre-Nicene Fathers are examined as historical witnesses to early Christian practice and theology — not as authoritative interpreters of dogma, but as evidence of what Christians in the first three centuries actually believed and practiced. Third, the doctrinal history of the Roman Catholic Church is traced to identify at what point, and through what mechanisms, the doctrine of eucharistic salvation was constructed.

The paper does not take a confessional stance. It aims to answer the historical and exegetical question as objectively as the evidence permits: Is eucharistic necessity for salvation taught in the Greek New Testament? And if not, when and how did it become Roman Catholic dogma?

II. Terminology: The Greek Vocabulary of the Lord's Supper

Before examining the texts themselves, it is essential to establish the Greek vocabulary employed in the New Testament for the ritual meal.

The Term "Eucharist"

The noun *eucharistia* (εὐχαριστία) does not appear in the New Testament as a term for the ritual meal itself. It occurs primarily as an abstract noun meaning "thanksgiving" or "gratitude" (e.g., Luke 17:16; Acts 24:3; 1 Corinthians 14:16; Colossians 2:7; 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:9). The verb *eucharisteō* (εὐχαριστέω), meaning "to give thanks," appears in the institution narratives describing Jesus giving thanks over the bread and/or cup (Matthew 26:27; Mark 14:23; Luke 22:17, 19; 1 Corinthians 11:24). The term "Eucharist" as a technical designation for the ritual meal emerges in early Christian literature — most notably in Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr — but is not itself a New Testament coinage for the rite.

"The Lord's Supper" — Kyriakon Deipnon (Κυριακὸν Δεῖπνον)

The phrase *Kyriakon Deipnon* (Κυριακὸν Δεῖπνον), "the Lord's Supper," appears only once in the New Testament, at 1 Corinthians 11:20. The adjective *Kyriakon* (belonging to the Lord) is cognate with the same form used in Revelation 1:10 for "the Lord's Day" (*Kyriakē hēmera*). This is the only explicit NT label for the ritual as a unified rite.

"Breaking of Bread" — klasis tou artou (κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου)

The phrase *klasis tou artou* (κλάσις τοῦ ἄρτου), "the breaking of bread," appears in Luke 24:35 and Acts 2:42, 46. Whether this refers to an ordinary meal, an agape feast, a eucharistic ritual, or some combination is debated. The Greek does not inherently imply a sacramental meal; the phrase denotes the common action of breaking bread for distribution, a universal Semitic table gesture.

"The Cup of Blessing" — to potērion tēs eulogias (τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας)

Paul uses this phrase in 1 Corinthians 10:16: *To potērion tēs eulogias ho eulogoumen* (The cup of blessing which we bless). The phrase "cup of blessing" (*kos shel berakha*, כּוֹס שֶׁל בְּרָכָה) is a Hebrew/Aramaic technical term for the third cup of the Passover seder, drunk after the main meal and accompanied by the Birkat Hamazon (grace after meals). Paul's use of this phrase connects the Lord's Supper directly to a Passover-seder context. The Greek here is not creating new soteriological language; it is inheriting Jewish liturgical vocabulary.

Sōma and Haima: Body and Blood (σῶμα and αἷμα)

The nouns *sōma* (σῶμα, body) and *haima* (αἷμα, blood) are the theologically critical terms in the institution narratives and in John 6. *Sōma* in the Greek New Testament has a wide semantic range: it can mean a physical, material body; a corpse; a collective body (as in "body of Christ" = the church, 1 Corinthians 12:27; Romans 12:5); or metaphorically any organized whole. *Haima* refers to blood, and in the LXX and NT is frequently associated with covenant ratification (Exodus 24:8; Hebrews 9:20) and atonement (Leviticus 17:11). The exegetical question is precisely what semantic force these terms carry in the relevant NT texts: are they literal (pointing to real flesh and blood) or metaphorical/covenantal?

III. The Greek New Testament Texts on the Lord's Supper

A. The Synoptic Institution Narratives

Three of the four Gospels contain institution narratives, though John does not include one in the Last Supper account. Mark's is likely the earliest written form:

> *Kai esthiontōn autōn labōn arton eulogēsas eklasen kai edōken autois kai eipen: Labete, touto estin to sōma mou. kai labōn potērion eucharistēsas edōken autois, kai epion ex autou pantes. kai eipen autois: Touto estin to haima mou tēs diathēkēs to ekchunn omenon hyper pollōn.* (Mark 14:22–24)

Translation: "And while they were eating, having taken bread and blessed it, he broke it and gave it to them and said: Take; this is my body. And having taken a cup and given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And he said to them: This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

Matthew's account (26:26–28) is closely parallel to Mark, adding the phrase "for the forgiveness of sins" (*eis aphesin hamartiōn*) with reference to the blood. This is the only instance in a synoptic institution narrative where the cup is connected to forgiveness. Luke's account (22:19–20) adds the critical command: "Do this in remembrance of me" (*touto poieite eis tēn emēn anamnēsin*), which Paul also records in 1 Corinthians 11:24–25.

Crucially, none of the synoptic institution narratives includes any statement that participating in this meal is required for salvation, eternal life, or forgiveness. Matthew's "for the forgiveness of sins" refers to the atoning purpose of the blood shed at the crucifixion — a statement about

what the death of Christ accomplishes, not a statement that drinking wine in a ritual enacts that forgiveness.

B. The Pauline Account: 1 Corinthians 10–11

Paul's discussion of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians is the earliest written account of the rite, predating the written Gospels. He gives two distinct treatments in close proximity.

In 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul addresses the incompatibility of participating in idol feasts and the Lord's table. His language is strongly participatory: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a fellowship (*koinōnia*, κοινωνία) of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a fellowship of the body of Christ?" (10:16). The term *koinōnia* (κοινωνία) denotes sharing, participation, or communal solidarity — not a mechanical sacramental causation. Paul's argument is ethical and relational: one cannot be in covenant solidarity with Christ and simultaneously participate in the covenantal meal of idols.

In 1 Corinthians 11:17–34, Paul addresses abuses at the Lord's Supper in Corinth — wealthy members eating before the poor, some becoming drunk. He provides the institution narrative (11:23–26), which he claims to have received "from the Lord" (*apo tou Kyriou*). The critical soteriological statement here is the warning in verse 29: "For the one who eats and drinks without discerning the body (*mē diakrinōn to sōma*, μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα), eats and drinks judgment upon himself." This verse is frequently cited in support of a high sacramental theology, but the Greek requires careful analysis.

The phrase "without discerning the body" (*mē diakrinōn to sōma*) is notably ambiguous. The Greek does not specify whether *to sōma* here refers to the eucharistic elements (identifying them as the Lord's body) or to the corporate body of the church (the community gathered). Given the context of Paul's rebuke — that some are eating without waiting for others, creating divisions in the community — the stronger contextual reading may be that "discerning the body" means recognizing the church as the body of Christ and treating fellow members accordingly. This reading is supported by Chrysostom, Theodoret, and a number of modern critical commentators (Fee, Thiselton, Barrett). Either way, Paul's warning is about the danger of unworthy participation — not about the necessity of participation for salvation.

C. The Johannine Bread of Life Discourse (John 6)

The most salient text for the Catholic doctrine of eucharistic necessity is John 6:51–58, a passage often called the "Bread of Life Discourse." The critical verses are:

> *Egō eimi ho artos ho zōn ho ek tou ouranou katabas; ean tis phagē ek toutou tou artou zēsei eis ton aiōna; kai ho artos de hon egō dōsō hē sarx mou estin hyper tēs tou kosmou zōēs.* (John 6:51)

Translation: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

> *Amēn amēn legō hymin, ean mē phagēte tēn sarka tou huiou tou anthrōpou kai piēte autou to haima, ouk echete zōēn en heautois.* (John 6:53)

Translation: “Truly, truly I say to you: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves.”

This is the primary textual pillar of the Catholic doctrine of eucharistic necessity. The language is startling and deliberately offensive — John records that “many of his disciples” were scandalized (6:60–61) and “went back and walked no longer with him” (6:66). The question is whether this discourse is sacramental (referring to the physical eating and drinking of the Eucharist) or pneumatic/spiritual (referring to faith-union with Christ through the Spirit).

Several Greek-exegetical considerations weigh strongly toward the spiritual/faith interpretation:

First, John’s Gospel is saturated with “I am” (*egō eimi*) metaphors: “I am the door” (10:9), “I am the vine” (15:1), “I am the light of the world” (8:12), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). None of these are interpreted literally by any reader. The “bread of life” metaphor fits squarely within this Johannine rhetorical pattern.

Second, John 6:35 explicitly equates “eating” with believing: “I am the bread of life; the one who comes to me shall not hunger, and the one who believes in me shall never thirst.” The parallelism of “coming” and “eating,” “believing” and “drinking,” is unmistakable. This verse anticipates the later language of 6:53–54 and interprets it as a metaphor for faith.

Third, in John 6:63, Jesus provides his own interpretive key: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing (*hē sarx ouk ōphelei ouden*, ἡ σὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν). The words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” This is a striking reversal: if Jesus has been referring to literal flesh-eating, why does he then declare “the flesh profits nothing”? The only coherent reading is that he is correcting a literalistic misunderstanding of his words.

Fourth, the discourse in John 6 occurs in Capernaum, during a synagogue teaching (6:59), long before the institution of the Lord’s Supper at the Last Supper. The disciples hearing John 6 have no eucharistic ritual to refer to. It strains plausibility to argue that Jesus is instituting a doctrine about a meal that has not yet been instituted.

Fifth, the term used in 6:51–58 for “eat” shifts from the ordinary verb *phagein* (φαγεῖν) to the more vivid *trōgein* (τρώγειν) — a verb meaning to gnaw, munch, or chew. Some commentators (Chrysostom, Catholic exegetes) argue this shift toward physical language supports a literal interpretation. Others (Rudolf Bultmann, Raymond Brown, Craig Keener) note that *trōgein* is used elsewhere in John without any sacramental connotation (13:18), and that the shift may simply be stylistic intensification for rhetorical emphasis.

The exegetical debate is unresolved among serious scholars. What is clear is that the text does not self-evidently establish a doctrine that physical participation in a ritual meal is necessary for eternal life, particularly when read within the full context of John’s Gospel.

D. Acts and Early Communal Practice

The Acts of the Apostles records communal meals among early Christians. Acts 2:42 notes that the Jerusalem community “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship (*koinōnia*, κοινωνίᾳ), to the breaking of bread (*klasis tou artou*) and to prayer.” Acts 2:46 adds that they “broke bread at home (*kat’ oikon*) taking their food with gladness and simplicity

of heart." Acts 20:7, 11 describes a meeting in Troas in which Paul "broke bread" before his departure.

None of these passages attributes salvific significance to the breaking of bread. They depict it as an aspect of early Christian community life, but the texts themselves provide no soteriological framework for the practice. The Greek in these passages is descriptive, not prescriptive.

IV. Exegetical Analysis: Does the Greek Establish Salvific Necessity?

Having reviewed the relevant NT texts, we can now address the central exegetical question directly: Do the Greek New Testament texts, read on their own linguistic and contextual terms, teach that participation in the Eucharist is necessary for salvation?

A. John 6: Literal Flesh or Metaphorical Language?

The spiritual/metaphorical reading of John 6:53–58 is supported not only by John 6:35 and 6:63 (noted above) but by the entire theological structure of the Fourth Gospel. Johannine soteriology is consistently faith-oriented: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him (*pas ho pisteuōn eis auton*, πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτόν) should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Greek *pas ho pisteuōn* ("all who believe") sets the condition for eternal life as faith, not ritual participation. This formulation — or close variants of it — occurs repeatedly in the Fourth Gospel (3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 40, 47; 11:25–26; 20:31).

In John 5:24, Jesus says: "Truly, truly I say to you, the one who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life (*echei zōēn aiōnion*, ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον)." This is functionally identical to the promise of 6:54 ("the one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life"), yet it is conditioned solely on hearing and believing, with no ritual element whatsoever.

The faith-centered soteriology of John renders the literalist, eucharistically necessary reading of John 6 exegetically incongruent with the Gospel's own theological framework. If the Fourth Gospel consistently teaches that eternal life is received through faith, then John 6:53–54 must be interpreted within that framework — as a metaphorical call to saving union with Christ — rather than as an isolated literal institution of sacramental necessity.

B. The Lukan "Do This in Remembrance" (anamnēsin)

The command *touto poieite eis tēn emēn anamnēsin* ("Do this in remembrance of me," Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25) is the explicit dominical command for ongoing eucharistic observance. The Greek noun *anamnēsis* (ἀνάμνησις) requires careful analysis. Its basic semantic range covers: a recollection, a reminder, a memorial, a calling-to-mind.

In the LXX, *anamnēsis* appears in Leviticus 24:7 and Numbers 10:10 in the context of memorial offerings brought "before the Lord." The Hebrew counterpart *zikkaron* (זִכָּרוֹן) in the Exodus-Passover traditions functions as a living, participatory memorial — not merely a cognitive

recollection but a re-enactment that brings the past redemptive event into the present for the community. This Old Testament usage forms the background of the New Testament term.

Catholic sacramental theology has employed this "actualized memorial" sense (*anamnesis* as re-presentation of the sacrifice) as support for the Mass as a perpetual offering. Protestant exegetes have emphasized the cognitive-memorial sense (a commemorative act of remembrance). The Greek text itself does not unambiguously require either reading. What it does not say is that failure to perform this act results in loss of salvation. The command is positive (do this) without an explicit negative soteriological sanction.

C. Pauline Covenant Language and Its Limits

Paul's cup-of-blessing language in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and covenant language in 11:25 (*touto to potērion hē kainē diathēkē estin en tō emō haimati*, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood") draws on covenant ratification imagery from Exodus 24:8 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. The covenant language situates the Supper within the redemptive-historical narrative of God's covenantal acts, and *koinōnia* (fellowship/participation) in 10:16 expresses a genuine soteriological relationship. But this is not the same as teaching that the physical ritual is the mechanism of salvation.

Paul's warning in 11:29 about "eating and drinking judgment" (*krima heautō esthiei kai pinei*) upon unworthy participation is a negative sanction for improper eucharistic behavior, not a positive requirement for salvation through eucharistic participation. Paul never states the converse proposition: "the one who does not eat and drink has no life in himself" — that statement belongs to John 6:53, and we have seen the exegetical complexities of that text.

The overall Pauline soteriology, expressed most comprehensively in Romans and Galatians, is unambiguously faith-centered: "For we reckon that a person is justified by faith (*pistei*, πίστει), apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28). "The righteous shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11, citing Habakkuk 2:4). This framework — in which salvation is by grace through faith, not through ritual participation — forms the hermeneutical context within which the eucharistic texts must be read.

In sum: the Greek New Testament, read in its own linguistic, literary, and theological context, does not establish participation in the Lord's Supper as a condition of salvation. It establishes the meal as a significant act of covenant commemoration, communal solidarity, and proclamation of the Lord's death (1 Corinthians 11:26), but the salvific framework is consistently one of faith, not ritual.

V. Pre-Nicene Church Fathers: Evidence and Interpretation

The pre-Nicene Fathers — those writing before the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. — represent the most important early witnesses to how Christians in the first three centuries understood and practiced the Eucharist. Their testimony is valuable precisely because it is closest to the apostolic age, and because it antedates the systematic sacramentological developments of the

medieval period. At the same time, the Fathers do not speak with a single voice, and their theological contexts differ considerably.

A. The Didache (~50–120 C.E.)

The *Didache* (Διδαχή, "Teaching"), likely composed in Syria between 50 and 120 C.E. and rediscovered in a Constantinople manuscript in 1873, contains the earliest extant non-canonical eucharistic prayers (chapters 9–10). Its eucharistic texts are among the most surprising in early Christian literature for what they do not say.

> *Peri de tēs eucharistias, houtōs eucharistēsate: prōton peri tou potēriou: eucharistoumen soi, pater hēmōn, hyper tēs hagias ampelou Dauid tou paidos sou, hēs egnōrisas hēmin dia Iēsou tou paidos sou.* (Didache 9.1–2)

Translation: "Now concerning the thanksgiving (*eucharistia*), give thanks thus: First, for the cup: We thank you, our Father, for the holy vine of David your servant, which you made known to us through Jesus your servant."

The Didache's eucharistic prayers make no claim that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Jesus. They are thanksgiving prayers for "spiritual food and drink" (*pneumatikēn trophēn kai poton*, 10:3) and "eternal life through Jesus your servant." The imagery is metaphorical and thanksgiving-oriented, not sacrificial or corporeal. Notably, Didache 9:5 restricts eucharistic participation to the baptized, which presupposes that baptism — not the Eucharist itself — is the entry-point into the Christian community: "Let no one eat or drink from your thanksgiving but those who have been baptized in the name of the Lord." There is no soteriological claim made about the meal itself.

B. Ignatius of Antioch (~107–117 C.E.)

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote seven letters while being transported to Rome for martyrdom under Trajan. His letters contain some of the most striking early references to the Eucharist and are pivotal for discussions of early sacramental theology. Ignatius is frequently cited by Catholic apologists as evidence that the real presence was universally believed from the earliest period.

Ignatius does use strong corporeal language. In his *Letter to the Romans* (7.3), he writes of "the bread of God" as "the flesh of Christ." In his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* (7.1), he condemns those who "abstain from the Eucharist and prayer because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ." In his *Letter to the Ephesians* (20.2), he calls the Eucharist "the medicine of immortality (*pharmakon athanasias*, φάρμακον ἀθανασίας), the antidote against death, and the food that gives life forever in Jesus Christ."

These passages represent the earliest unambiguous high-sacramental language about the Eucharist in Christian literature. However, several contextual qualifications are necessary. First, Ignatius is writing polemically against Docetists — gnostic Christians who denied that Christ had come in real flesh — and his emphasis on the physical body in the Eucharist is part of his anti-Docetic apologetic rather than a systematic sacramental treatise. Second, the term "medicine of immortality" (*pharmakon athanasias*) comes from Hellenistic religious vocabulary and may reflect a rhetorical rather than technically doctrinal statement. Third,

even Ignatius does not explicitly state that partaking of the Eucharist is the condition of salvation in the manner later defined by the Council of Trent.

C. Justin Martyr (~150–165 C.E.)

Justin Martyr, a philosophical convert to Christianity who was martyred in Rome around 165 C.E., provides the most detailed description of Christian worship practices in the mid-second century in his *First Apology* (chapters 65–67). His account is invaluable as a window into pre-Nicene eucharistic practice.

Justin's eucharistic theology is expressed in his *First Apology* (66.2): "For we do not receive these things as common bread and common drink; but in the same way as Jesus Christ our Savior, being incarnate by God's word, took both flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food eucharistized through the prayer of his word… is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was incarnate."

This is a clear assertion that the eucharistic elements are not merely common food. Justin explicitly appeals to a "prayer of his word" (*euchēs logou*) as the mechanism of transformation, which provided some of the earliest theological scaffolding for what would later become transubstantiation. However, Justin does not articulate a theory of substantial change in the Aristotelian sense that Trent would later use. He draws an analogy between the Incarnation (the Word becoming flesh) and the Eucharist (the food becoming the flesh and blood of Christ) — a suggestive but not technically precise sacramental claim.

Importantly, Justin does not argue that eucharistic participation is a condition of salvation. His apology is addressed to the emperor and aims to explain and defend Christianity — not to systematize its soteriology.

D. Irenaeus of Lyon (~180 C.E.)

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon and a student of Polycarp (who had himself known the Apostle John), wrote his monumental *Adversus Haereses* ("Against Heresies") around 180 C.E. It is the most comprehensive theological treatise of the pre-Nicene period. Irenaeus discusses the Eucharist in the context of his anti-Gnostic polemic.

In *Adversus Haereses* 4.18.5, Irenaeus writes: "The bread over which thanks have been given is the body of their Lord, and the cup is his blood." In 5.2.2–3, he develops an argument that the Eucharist demonstrates the resurrection of the flesh: since the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (who was raised bodily), and since believers receive this nourishment, their bodies too will be raised. This "eucharistic proof for the resurrection" is uniquely Irenaean and not replicated in earlier sources.

Irenaeus clearly holds a high view of the Eucharist's theological significance. However, he does not formulate a doctrine of eucharistic necessity for salvation in the technical sense. His anti-Gnostic argument is that the Eucharist affirms material creation as good (against Gnostic cosmological dualism) and confirms bodily resurrection — not that it is the instrument through which eternal life is conferred.

E. Tertullian (~196–212 C.E.)

Tertullian of Carthage, the first major Latin Christian theologian, wrote extensively on the Eucharist from both Catholic and later Montanist perspectives. His works *Adversus Marcionem*, *De Corona*, and *De Oratione* contain eucharistic references. Tertullian is responsible for introducing much of the Latin sacramental vocabulary that became standard in Western Christianity, including the term *sacramentum* (which he borrowed from the military oath of loyalty) as a technical theological term.

In *Adversus Marcionem* (1.14; 3.19; 4.40), Tertullian defends the real body of Christ against Marcion's docetism, arguing that Christ's taking of bread and saying "this is my body" only makes sense if he had a real body to identify with. He also refers to the bread as "the figure of his body" (*figuram corporis sui*), which — intriguingly — introduces representational language alongside realist language. This tension in Tertullian (between "this is his body" and "the figure of his body") was not resolved in his own writings and would reappear centuries later in the Carolingian eucharistic controversies.

Tertullian's *sacramentum* language is historically significant because it eventually became the Latin term that came to define the Catholic concept of a sacrament — a sacred rite that confers grace. But Tertullian's own usage was much more fluid: he used *sacramentum* to refer to baptism, the Eucharist, and numerous other sacred acts, without the precise causal-mechanical sense that later theology attached to it.

F. Clement of Alexandria (~195–215 C.E.)

Clement of Alexandria represents the intellectual wing of early Christianity. In his *Paedagogus* (The Instructor) and *Stromata* (Miscellanies), he addresses the Eucharist with characteristic Alexandrian allegorical sophistication. Clement (*Paed.* 1.6) allegorizes John 6 extensively, interpreting Christ's flesh and blood as "faith and hope" respectively — a thoroughly metaphorical and spiritual reading that is the polar opposite of Ignatius's corporeal emphasis.

Clement's Alexandrian allegorism illustrates that even within the pre-Nicene period, there was no monolithic realism about eucharistic theology. The diversity of interpretation in the second and early third century is itself evidence that a fixed, universally held doctrine of transubstantiation — or even of real-body-and-blood presence — was not yet established as Christian orthodoxy.

G. Origen of Alexandria (~220–254 C.E.)

Origen, perhaps the most prolific and intellectually ambitious theologian of the pre-Nicene era, developed an explicitly spiritual interpretation of the Eucharist. In his *Commentary on Matthew* (11.14), he writes that "the bread which God the Word declares to be his body is the word which nourishes souls, the word proceeding from God the Word." He explicitly distinguishes between the physical bread (which "enters the belly and is cast out into the draught," citing Matthew 15:17) and "the useful word of God according to which that [bread] is called the body of Christ."

This is a thoroughly spiritualized eucharistic theology: for Origen, the real nourishment of the soul comes from the Logos (the Word), and the physical elements are signs pointing to a

spiritual reality. This is far from anything resembling transubstantiation. Origen's position represents a coherent and sophisticated alternative within early Christian thought — one that is largely eclipsed by later Catholic sacramental development but represents a significant stream of early Christian exegesis.

VI. Doctrinal Development: How Catholic Sacramentology Was Constructed

A. From Commemoration to Sacrament: The Fourth Century

The Nicene and post-Nicene period (325–500 C.E.) witnessed a dramatic institutionalization of eucharistic theology in both East and West. Several factors drove this development: the conversion of Constantine (312 C.E.) and the subsequent Christianization of the Roman Empire; the construction of basilicas and the development of formal liturgical rites; and the theological need to distinguish orthodox Christianity from competing movements (Arianism, Donatism, Pelagianism).

Cyril of Jerusalem's *Mystagogical Catecheses* (~350 C.E.) represent a post-Nicene development in which language about the elements literally becoming the body and blood of Christ becomes more pronounced and more explicitly soteriological. Cyril argues directly from Christ's own words — that since he declared the bread to be his body and the cup to be his blood, no believer should dare to doubt this — a more explicitly realist formulation than most pre-Nicene sources.

John Chrysostom (~347–407 C.E.), preaching in Antioch and Constantinople, develops an elaborate eucharistic theology in his *Homilies on Matthew* and *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*. His language about the altar as the body of Christ and the awesome nature of the eucharistic mystery contributes to the reverential, quasi-sacrificial understanding of the rite that becomes standard in Eastern Orthodoxy. However, Chrysostom also interprets 1 Corinthians 11:29 ("not discerning the body") in terms of failing to recognize the poor as the body of Christ — the social rather than the purely sacramental reading.

B. Augustine and the Sign/Reality Tension

Augustine of Hippo (~354–430 C.E.), whose influence on Western Christianity is incalculable, introduced a sophisticated semiotic framework that both advanced and complicated eucharistic theology. Augustine distinguished between *signum* (sign) and *res* (reality), arguing that sacraments are signs that point to a deeper spiritual reality. In his *Sermon 272*, Augustine famously says to the newly baptized receiving communion: "Be what you see, and receive what you are" — addressing the body of communicants as the body of Christ. This social/ecclesiological reading of the Eucharist coexists in Augustine with more realist language.

In *Contra Faustum* (20.18) and his *Tractates on John*, Augustine interprets John 6 primarily in terms of believing and loving Christ: "To believe in him is to eat the living bread." This is essentially the spiritual/faith interpretation of John 6 that opposes a purely sacramental-mechanical reading. Augustine's position is genuinely ambiguous and was later claimed by

both sides in the Reformation debates. Importantly, in his *Letter 98*, Augustine makes clear that unbaptized infants who die are not saved, but he does not make the same claim about the Eucharist per se.

C. Transubstantiation and Lateran IV (1215 C.E.)

The formal doctrine of transubstantiation — that the substance of the bread and wine is literally changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ while the accidents (sensory appearances) remain — was articulated most fully by the scholastic theologians of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, most prominently Lanfranc (1005–1089) and Guitmund of Aversa (c. 1088), in opposition to the views of Berengar of Tours (c. 999–1088), who argued for a purely spiritual presence.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215 C.E.), under Pope Innocent III, formally defined transubstantiation in its first canon: "His body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been transubstantiated (*transsubstantiatis*), by divine power, into his body and blood." This is the first ecumenical council to use the term *transsubstantiatis* as a defined doctrine.

Lateran IV also introduced the requirement of annual communion (at least at Easter), establishing in canon law what had previously been a pastoral custom. This represents a significant step toward eucharistic observance as a formal ecclesial obligation — but it is still not, technically, a defined doctrine of eucharistic necessity for salvation.

D. The Council of Trent: Ex Opere Operato and Salvation

The definitive articulation of Roman Catholic eucharistic doctrine as soteriologically necessary came at the Council of Trent (1545–1563 C.E.), convened in response to the Protestant Reformation. Trent's *Decree on the Sacraments* (Session 7, March 1547) and the *Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist* (Session 13, October 1551) are the foundational documents.

The Council of Trent defined several crucial positions: (1) that there are exactly seven sacraments instituted by Christ; (2) that the sacraments of the New Law confer grace *ex opere operato* — "by the very fact of the action being performed" — meaning that the sacrament is efficacious regardless of the spiritual state of the minister; (3) that transubstantiation is a dogma of faith; and (4) that those who deny that the Eucharist contains the true body and blood of Christ are anathema (formally condemned).

The full Catholic sacramental logic runs thus: (a) grace is necessary for salvation; (b) the sacraments are the ordinary means through which God confers grace; (c) the Eucharist is the central sacrament; (d) therefore, eucharistic participation is the ordinary means of receiving the sanctifying grace that leads to salvation. This is not a direct "eat or be damned" formulation, but it is a soteriological architecture in which the Eucharist becomes salvifically necessary within the system of sacramental grace.

This complete doctrinal edifice — transubstantiation, *ex opere operato*, seven sacraments, anathemas against denial — is entirely absent from the Greek New Testament and was constructed through a process of doctrinal development spanning fourteen centuries.

VII. Synthesis: Is Eucharistic Necessity Derived from the Greek NT?

The question posed at the outset of this paper can now be answered with considerable confidence, based on the exegetical and historical evidence reviewed.

The Greek New Testament does not teach that participation in the Lord's Supper is a condition of salvation. The texts examined — the Synoptic institution narratives, 1 Corinthians 10–11, and John 6 — do not, in their own linguistic and literary context, establish such a doctrine. The Synoptic narratives present the Supper as a covenant-sealing meal and memorial act without any attached soteriological condition. The Pauline texts frame the Supper in terms of *koinōnia* (communal participation) and covenant solidarity, and warn against unworthy participation, but do not posit eucharistic observance as a requirement for eternal life. Paul's own soteriology — worked out most comprehensively in Romans and Galatians — is unambiguously centered on justification by faith.

John 6 is the only text that comes close to establishing eucharistic necessity, and even there the exegetical evidence strongly supports a spiritual/faith interpretation: the discourse equates "eating" with "believing" (6:35), Jesus himself declares that "the flesh profits nothing" (6:63), and the Johannine Gospel's overwhelming soteriological emphasis is on faith rather than ritual. The sacramental reading of John 6 requires importing theological assumptions from outside the text itself.

The pre-Nicene Fathers exhibit a wide range of eucharistic theologies — from Ignatius's corporeal "medicine of immortality" to Clement and Origen's thoroughgoing spiritualism. No single, unified doctrine of eucharistic necessity for salvation is articulable from the pre-Nicene evidence. Even where high sacramental language appears (Ignatius, Justin, Irenaeus), it is embedded in anti-Docetic apologetics or resurrection theology, not in a systematic soteriology of ritual necessity.

The doctrine of eucharistic salvation in the technical sense — that the Eucharist is a divinely instituted sacrament that confers sanctifying grace *ex opere operato* and is necessary for eternal life within the ordinary order of salvation — is a construction of the medieval scholastic period, formally defined at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 C.E.) and the Council of Trent (1545–1563 C.E.). It is a doctrine built upon a long process of philosophical elaboration (using Aristotelian substance/accident categories that are entirely foreign to the Greek NT), institutional development, and conciliar definition. Its scriptural basis, while not entirely absent (John 6 and the institution narratives provide texts that can be read in support), depends heavily on readings that cannot be sustained by the Greek texts alone without the imposition of doctrinal presuppositions.

To be precise and fair: the Roman Catholic position is not simply invented without any textual basis. There are genuine texts — John 6:53, the institution narratives, Ignatius, Justin — that have been interpreted in a high sacramental direction by serious, learned theologians for centuries. The Catholic tradition has not fabricated its exegesis from thin air. But the leap from "these texts can be read to support real presence" to "eating the Eucharist is a condition of

salvation" involves doctrinal steps that the Greek New Testament itself does not take, and that required fifteen centuries of theological development to complete.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has traced the Eucharist from its roots in the Greek New Testament through its development in the pre-Nicene Church Fathers and into the fully elaborated doctrinal architecture of the Roman Catholic Church. The findings can be summarized as follows.

The Greek New Testament presents the Lord's Supper as a covenant-memorial act instituted at the Last Supper, grounded in Passover and Exodus typology, expressive of communal solidarity (*koinōnia*), and oriented toward the proclamation of Christ's death until his return (1 Corinthians 11:26). The dominant soteriological framework of the NT — and of the Fourth Gospel in particular — is faith (*pistis*) as the condition of eternal life. John 6, though frequently cited in support of eucharistic necessity, is most coherently read within its Johannine context as a metaphorical discourse on saving union with Christ through faith, not as an institution of sacramental necessity.

The pre-Nicene Fathers represent a diversity of eucharistic theologies. Ignatius and Justin stand toward the realist end of the spectrum; Clement and Origen toward the spiritual/allegorical end; Irenaeus uses the Eucharist primarily for anti-Gnostic and resurrection-apologetic purposes; Tertullian introduces Latin sacramental vocabulary whose implications he does not fully systematize. None of the pre-Nicene Fathers articulates the complete doctrine of eucharistic salvation later defined by Trent.

The doctrine of eucharistic necessity for salvation, as defined by the Roman Catholic Church, is a product of medieval scholasticism and Tridentine definition. It represents a genuine development — not necessarily a corruption in all its aspects, but certainly a doctrinal innovation — that cannot be read directly off the surface of the Greek New Testament texts. The philosophical categories (Aristotelian substance and accident), the institutional mechanisms (*ex opere operato*, infused grace, the sacrificial Mass), and the canonical obligations (annual communion, anathemas against denial) are all post-biblical constructions.

The question of whether this development is legitimate — whether the Church has the authority to develop dogma that goes beyond but (arguably) does not contradict the scriptural deposit — is itself a theological question that depends entirely on one's prior commitments regarding ecclesial authority and the nature of doctrinal development. What the historical and exegetical evidence demonstrates, without confessional prejudgment, is that eucharistic necessity for salvation is not derived from the Greek New Testament itself; it is a later doctrinal construction, whatever one's judgment about its legitimacy.

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