

Should Churches observe Passover ("Seder")?

Written by Calvin Fox

Saturday, 27 March 2010 12:48 - Last Updated Saturday, 03 April 2010 18:16

We live on the edge of the Jewish Community in this area. There are a number of "Temples" (formerly known as synagogues). This is a big week for our Jewish neighbors. Many of them are in the supermarkets buying what they need for their Seders, celebrating the annual Passover.

This week I watched a PBS documentary about the celebration of the Passover. The Passover itself was barely mentioned in passing and I heard nothing about the blood of the lamb being put on the doorposts. It seems the main point of the celebration is deliverance from bondage. That Theme is picked up by many and used for their own stories. Thus we have celebration by African Americans from slavery. There are feminist groups and gay groups who use the occasion to celebrate what they see as victories in their experience. There are others for whom the main point of Passover is the exodus and the wondering of the tribes of Israel to the Promised Land. Immigrant groups celebrate similar journeys in their histories. A Rabbi that was interviewed for the film said it made no difference whether there really was a parting of waters or a literal exodus from Egypt. The story is about moving forward in our lives, leaving our past and entering into the promises of our future. Nothing about the poor lambs which were slain.

On the other hand, many evangelicals make a lot out of the Seder and fill the ritual meal with Christian symbolism that no one else sees in it. These Christians not only focus on the lamb's blood, they see the story as a foretelling of the Gospel in which Jesus shed his blood to atone for the sins of the world. They do not see the meal as a celebration of deliverance from political oppression at all. Rather, the deliverance is from personal bondage to sins. Only Christians see this in the Passover.

Well, the original story is about the physical, social deliverance of the Israelite People from their physical, political bondage in Egypt. Most Christians miss this important Theme or minimize it, but that is what Passover is meant to celebrate. The Seder Meal does include lamb and unleavened bread and bitter herbs. But those elements and others are reminders of the hurried and difficult experience the Israelites went through in leaving Egypt. The lambs were slain in order to obtain their blood to smear on door posts to identify their houses and spare them from the angel of death who passed over. The lamb and its blood was not a sin offering. There was no atonement for sin involved. Christians are changing the story when they read this doctrine into it. The Gospel promises us that if sinners believe in Jesus and his atoning death (his sacrifice) and repent of their sins, they will not perish for their sins but have eternal life. The Passover story can be used metaphorically to illustrate that. Paul does this with his admonition to the Corinthians to "keep the feast" But to me, the recreation of a

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"Seder Meal" that is not true to the original story is neither honest nor necessary. The Jewish and secular usage of the story have their shortcomings, but are closer to the intent of the original. That intent was to celebrate that God has invaded and is active in real history on behalf of those who are oppressed to set them free physically, politically and socially. By changing the original story, changing the original Theme, most evangelicals who have "Seders" in their churches this week are failing to give God glory for what He has done and is still doing in the world.

That is worth celebrating.