

The Eucharist and the Agape Feast

A lecture by Steve Gregg

I. Terminology: Eucharist (“Thanksgiving”), Agape (Love Feast)

In the early church, the Eucharist (or “Thanksgiving”) was the memorial meal, and the “Agape” (or, “Love Feast”) was a fellowship meal. These were originally the same meal—possibly with the Eucharist being a conclusion to the regular eating. Eventually, the Eucharist came to be considered a separate ritual, distinguished from the Agape, though the latter was still a significant fellowship time.

Acts 2:46

“...continuing daily...breaking bread” (see also Acts 20:7)

Luke 24:35

“They knew Him in the breaking of bread.” *This was at an ordinary meal, not a special ceremony*

Jude 12

These [false teachers] are spots in your *love [Gr. agape] feasts*, while they feast with you without fear, serving *only* themselves.

The Epistula Apostolorum, 15 (about AD 150, from Egyptian Coptic Church)

“And when ye have accomplished the memorial which is made of me, and the Agape (love-feast)...”

Didache (end of first century)

Concerning the thanksgiving [eucharist], give thanks in this way...

After you are filled, give thanks in this way...

Justin Martyr, First Apology 65-67 (about A.D. 138)

This meal we call Thanksgiving [Eucharist]...For we do not partake of this meal as if it were ordinary food or ordinary drink. Rather, through the Logos of God, our Healing Savior Jesus Christ became flesh and accepted flesh and blood for the sake of our salvation. Hence, as we have been taught, the food taken with thanksgiving in the words of prayer He handed down to us is the flesh and blood of that Christ who became flesh. Our flesh and blood are strengthened by this eating and drinking for our transformation...

On the day named after the sun, we hold a meeting in one place for all who live in the cities or the country nearby. The Memoirs of the Apostles or the Writings of the Prophets are read as long as

time permits. When the reader has finished, the overseer gives a talk urging and inviting us to imitate all these good examples. Then we all stand up together and send up our prayers. As said before, bread is brought and wine and water after we have finished our prayer. The overseer likewise sends up prayers and thanksgivings with all his might. The people give their consent by saying, "Amen." Now the distribution takes place, and each one receives what has been accepted with thanksgiving. Those who are absent receive their share through the table stewards [deacons].

Clement of Alexandria: *Instructor* II.i.4.3-4; 5.3; 6.1-7.1; 9.3 (around AD 200)

If "you shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor," this is the celestial feast in the heavens, but the earthly feast is called a meal, as has been shown from the Scripture. The meal occurs because of love...It is admirable then to lift up our eyes to the true, to depend on the divine food from above, and be filled with the contemplation of him who truly exists...The food which comes from Christ shows this to be the *agape* which we must attain.

Tertullian, *Apology* 39. (around AD 200)

The nature of our Meal and its purpose are explained by its very name. It is called *Agape*, as the Greeks call love in its purest sense...the food brought is used for the benefit of all who are in need. To respect the lowly is all-important with God...The participants do not go to the table unless they have first tasted of prayer to God. As much is eaten as is necessary to satisfy the hungry; as much is drunk as is good for those who live a disciplined life...After the hands are washed and the lights are lit, all are asked to stand forth and to praise God as well as each is able, be it from the Holy Scriptures or from his own heart...the Meal is closed with a prayer. After this we part from one another...always pursuing the same self-control and purity as befits those who have taken in a truth rather than a meal. This is the way Christians meet.

II. How did this fellowship meal become something more (and something less) than a meal—a mere ritual?

AMBROSE (340-397):

But this bread is bread before the words of the sacraments. *When consecration has been added, from bread it becomes the body of Christ.* Let us, therefore, prove this. How is it possible for that which is bread to be the body of Christ? By consecration. In whose words then is the consecration? Those of the Lord Jesus . . . *Before the words of Christ the cup is full of wine and water. When the words of Christ have operated, then is made the blood* which redeems the people. (On the Sacraments IV.iv.14—v.23)

It came to be believed that the bread became the actual body of Jesus, and the wine became the actual blood of Jesus. This came to be called "the sacrament."

III. What is the scriptural basis for this idea?

John 6:40, 54

And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who *sees* the Son and *believes* in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day...Whoever *eats* My flesh and *drinks* My blood *has* eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

The many present-tense verbs indicate that there were, at the time of speaking, people who were already "seeing," "believing," eating," "drinking," and "having" eternal life, in the manner to which Jesus refers. Yet. The Lord's Supper was not instituted until a year later. Therefore, He seems to refer to something unrelated to the Lord's Supper.

The parallels between these two verses suggest that "eats" and "drinks" (v.54) are synonymous with "sees" and "believes" (v.40). That the drinking is metaphorical, rather than literal seems consistent with Jesus' use of the same imagery two chapters earlier, when He speaks of His "food" as being the doing of the will of the Father (4:34), and of "drinking" living water (4:10,14)

Mark 14:22, 24

"This [*bread*] is my body...This [*cup*] is my blood which is shed for many..."

Since Jesus' blood had not yet been literally shed at the time of speaking, the substance in the cup to which He referred could not literally be the "blood which is shed."

*To say, "This [*bread*] is my body" would have the same degree of literalness as would the similar line in the regular Passover ritual: "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt."*

*To say, "This [*cup*] is my blood..." would be understood as no more literal than when David said that the waters from the well in Bethlehem were "the blood of the men who went in jeopardy of their lives" to retrieve it (2 Sam.24:17).*

If Peter had believed that he was drinking literal blood, at the last supper, why would he later protest to the Lord, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean" (Acts 10:14)? Why not raise the same objection at the Last Supper, if he was being asked to drink blood?

Other examples of "is" meaning "signifies" or "corresponds to" would be Gen.41:26 and 1 Corinthians 10:4

1 Cor.10:16-17

"the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread and one body, for we all partake of that one bread."

Paul seems to take the “this is my body” to mean “my body, the Church”

1 Cor.11:25-26

This do, as often as you drink [it], in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

There is no indication that Jesus was establishing a new ritual; only a new meaning to Passover

1 Cor.11:29

“...he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.”

This communion was a full meal where some got drunk and some went home hungry—v.21

IV. The church fathers and the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist?

IGNATIUS (AD 50-117):

[The Docetists] avoid the eucharist and prayer because they do not confess the eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father in his goodness resurrected. (*Smyrnaeans* 7)

JUSTIN (AD 100-165):

And this food is called by us eucharist. It is not lawful for any other one to partake of it than the one who believes the things which have been taught by us to be true, and was washed with the washing for the remission of sins and for regeneration, and lives in the manner Christ taught. We receive these elements not as common bread and common drink. In the same manner as our Savior Jesus Christ was made flesh through the word of God and had flesh and blood for our salvation, even so we were taught that the food for which thanks have been given through the prayer...is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. For the apostles, in their memoirs, which are called Gospels, delivered what was commanded them, that Jesus took bread, gave thanks and said: “Do this for my memorial; this is my body.” (*Apology* I, 66)

IRENÆUS (died 202):

But if the flesh is not saved, neither did the Lord redeem us with his blood, nor is the cup of the eucharist a participation in his blood, nor the bread which we break a participation in his body... (*Against Heresies* V.ii.2, 3)

TERTULLIAN (160-225):

Taking bread, and distributing it to his disciples, he made it his own body by saying, "This is my body, that is, a "figure of my body"... (*Against Marcion* IV.40)

CYPRIAN (AD 200-258):

The cup which is offered in commemoration of him is offered mixed with wine... (*Epistle* 62 [631:2])

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (313-386):

The bread and the wine of the eucharist before the holy invocation of the worshipful Trinity was simple bread and wine, but when the invocation is done, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ. (*Lectures on the Mysteries* i.7 [=Catechetical Lectures XIX:7]. . .

For in the type of the bread there is given to you the body, and in the type of the wine there is given to you the blood, in order that you may become by partaking of the body and blood of Christ the same body and blood with him. (*Ibid*, iv.3 [=XXII:3])

We beseech the loving God to send forth the Holy Spirit upon what is offered in order that he may make the bread the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ. For whatever the Holy Spirit touches he sanctifies and changes. (*Ibid*, v.7 [=XXIII:7])

V. Terminology used in the above quotes:

The Eucharist...

"is the flesh and blood" (Ignatius, Justin)

"is the participation in his blood and body" (Irenaeus)

"is a figure of [the] body" (Tertullian)

"is offered in commemoration of him" (Cyprian)

"becomes the body and the blood of Christ" (Cyril)

"in the type" of bread and wine is body and blood given (Cyril)

"the Holy Spirit changes" the elements (Cyril)

"the bread becomes" and "the wine is made..." (Ambrose)

In Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215), John 6 is interpreted as the partaking of faith, of the Holy Spirit, and of the Divine Word (*Instructor* I.vi.43); and wine is the symbol of the sacred blood and the real presence is that of the Spirit (*Ibid*, II.ii.19f).

VI. If transubstantiation is true:

- 1) It is the only miracle God has done that cannot be seen or verified;
- 2) Then “what goes into a man’s mouth” clearly is spiritually significant (contra. Rom.14:17; Matt.15:11, 17)
- 3) The Jerusalem Council’s command to abstain from blood is unintelligible (Acts 15:28-29)
- 4) Those in Rome who thought they should eat only vegetables were hugely out of step with Christian practice (Rom.14:2-3)
- 5) In Acts 10:14, Peter objected that he had never eaten anything ceremonially unclean—thus he could not have believed that he had regularly been consuming blood and human flesh.
- 6) Why is a thing so bizarre not plainly and frequently declared in scripture?