

## THE AGAPE/EUCHARIST RELATIONSHIP IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11

J. TIMOTHY COYLE

*The earliest passage which presents the clear perpetuation of the eucharist, 1 Cor 11:17-34, places it in the context of a meal known as the Lord's Supper or agape. This study analyzes the communion service in this passage in its biblical, theological, and historical contexts. The agape is the ideal setting for both the eucharist and the ordinance of footwashing. It offers an opportunity to anticipate the joy of what lies ahead in the kingdom of God, to reflect upon the events and meaning of the Last Supper, and to celebrate the present fellowship of believers with one another and God.*

\* \* \*

### INTRODUCTION

FROM the inception of the Brethren church in the early eighteenth century by Alexander Mack and a small band of believers, Brethren churches have practiced a communion service that consists of three parts: the washing of the saints' feet, the love feast, and the bread and the cup. Because these three observances are practiced in conjunction with one another, the service is referred to as a "three-fold communion service." This service has become one of the distinctives of Brethren churches. In harmony with the traditional practice of the Brethren, the only communion service observed today by the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches is threefold. No one part is regarded as more important than the others, nor practiced separately from them. This is done not simply because this service is a Brethren distinctive, but because it is believed to be the form of communion that the Lord intended his followers to practice as act forth in the NT.

Aside from passages in the gospels in which Christ instituted the communion service on the night of the Last Supper, perhaps the key passage regarding the communion service is 1 Cor 11:17-34. In this passage reference is made both to the love feast (also referred to as the agape) and to the bread and the cup (also referred to as the

eucharist). While most Christians believe that the eucharist is to be observed by the church today, most do not practice the love feast. Various reasons for this are given, but the most common one is that, although the early church practiced the love feast, there is no command or even suggestion in the NT for it to be continued. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the agape was intended to be perpetuated, and that the eucharist is inseparably linked to it.

#### THE CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11

1 Corinthians 11 begins with the exhortation, "Be imitators of me, just as I am also of Christ" (v 1).<sup>1</sup> This could refer back to what Paul had just concluded in chap. 10 concerning the exercise of Christian liberty, or it could look forward to what he was to say next. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty which is the case. Support can be given for both views and authorities are divided.<sup>2</sup> Since Paul refers to himself and to his own actions in both 10:33 and 11:2, it could go with either the preceding or the following. In fact, it could very well serve as a transition between the two. The point is that *μιμηταί μου γίνεσθε* / 'be imitators of me' is a command. If this is to be taken with what follows, then there is a direct command for the perpetuation of the practices which Paul then deals with.

In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul deals with two practices in the local church. The first is the woman's head covering. It seems that the church at Corinth was correctly observing this practice, but had forgotten its significance. The second practice is the agape. Once again the church was observing this practice, but doing it improperly, and for this they were rebuked. If 11:1 goes with what follows, then there is a definite command to practice the agape.

#### *The Παραδόσεις*

While there is some room for doubt as to the reference of 11:1, the meaning of 11:2 is clear. There Paul says, referring to what he was about to deal with, "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you." Of primary importance in this verse is the word *παραδόσεις*, which the *NASB* translates "traditions." The term comes

<sup>1</sup>All quotations are from the *NASB* unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>Referring back: F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 246; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963) 428; and Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 150. Looking forward: James L. Boyer, *For a World Like Ours* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1971) 99.

from the verb παραδίδωμι, "to hand over, pass down, or deliver,"<sup>3</sup> and thus παραδοσις refers to something passed down, handed over, or delivered. The traditions (παραδόσεις) are what Paul delivered (παρέδωκα) to the Corinthians. The connotation of the English word "tradition," however, makes it difficult to grasp Paul's meaning. He did not use it in a cultural sense to refer to those practices of a people which are passed down from generation to generation, nor did he use it in the ecclesiastical sense to refer to those practices and beliefs which became established in the church, and although not written in scripture, later came to have equal authority with it. Rather Paul used the term to refer to teaching derived from the Lord and handed down to the apostles.<sup>4</sup> This is what they in turn delivered to the saints. When used in this way, it functions as a technical term.

At the penning of 1 Corinthians the apostolic "traditions" could have been either oral or written. However, the only "traditions" that have any authority today are contained in scripture. God superintended the writing of the NT so as to record those things which he desired to be passed on to and obeyed by his church. The instruction could refer either to matters of faith or practice.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this function of παράδοσις is paralleled two other times in the epistles. In 2 Thess 2:15 Paul wrote, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." These "traditions" could either be oral or written, but in either case they clearly had apostolic authority. Later in the same epistle Paul wrote "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (3:6). Once again the importance and authority of the apostolic "tradition" can be seen.

It is true that παράδοσις can be used in scripture to refer to the traditions of men. In Mark 7:3, for instance, Jesus makes reference to the traditions of the elders. Here the term refers to a merely human teaching which is untrustworthy. This is very different from its use in connection with the apostles. Paul's use of the term in no way conflicts with that of the Lord since they are both opposed to human tradition (Col 2:8). In every NT use of παράδοσις the context clearly distinguishes which type of tradition is being referred to. What mattered to Paul was that his traditions were derived from the Lord.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Paul's use of the term refers to teaching which came from Christ, and carried the full weight of apostolic authority.

<sup>3</sup>BAGD, 619-20. Παράδοσις is translated "ordinances" in the *KJV*, "teachings" in the *NIV*, and "traditions" in the *RSV*.

<sup>4</sup>F. Buchsel, "ἰδωμι," TDNT 2 (1964) 172.

<sup>5</sup>C. Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (reprint; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978) 206.

<sup>6</sup>Buchsel, "ἰδωμι," 172.

*The Connection Between the Παράδοσις and 1 Cor 11:17-34*

Although separated by intervening text, 1 Cor 11:2 and 11:17-34 are linked conceptually. This can be seen for at least two reasons. First, the term "traditions" in 11:2 is plural, referring to more than one teaching. The term is not a collective noun that must always be used in the plural, because it is also used in the singular (e.g., 2 Thess 3:16). Hence when it appears in the plural it refers to more than one "tradition." In 1 Corinthians 11 it refers to two "traditions," namely, the woman's head covering (11:3-16) and the agape (11:17-34). The second reason for connecting 11:17-34 with 11:2 is the repeated concept of "praise" found in both 11:2 and 11:17. When Paul begins his discussion of the agape in 11:17 with the words, "But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you," he is clearly linking the discussion which follows with the thought of 11:2. Therefore the practice of the agape had all the importance and significance of any apostolic παράδοσις. Further, it was intended to be observed and perpetuated as much as anything else that the apostles taught. Although there were abuses of the agape, Paul did not instruct the Corinthians to abolish it. Rather he tried to correct the abuses and even praised them for holding firmly to it (11:2).

## THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE EUCHARIST TO THE AGAPE

*In 1 Corinthians 11*

It is clear that the agape was meant to symbolize the kind of love which the Lord had for his followers and which his followers were to have for each other (John 13:34-35). The Corinthians, however, demonstrated the opposite attitude in their love feasts. No regard was shown for the others who were there, especially those who had less. Each one was concerned with eating what he had brought for himself, or at least getting enough for himself (11:21). As a result, divisions existed among them (11:18-19), and these had to be addressed by Paul. But why was the eucharist (the bread and the cup) mentioned in this passage? The eucharist is certainly part of the "traditions" of the apostles, too. Even here Paul mentions it as that which he had received from the Lord and delivered (παρέδωκα) to the Corinthians (11:23). But Paul does not view the eucharist as a third element of the "traditions" since he does not introduce it in a manner similar to the way he introduced the agape in 11:7. Rather, Paul introduces his discussion of the eucharist with an explanatory γάρ / 'for' in 11:23. As is normal, the word here introduces an explanation or illustration of what has just been said. Thus what Paul is about to say concerning

the eucharist is closely linked to what he has just said about the agape.

As Paul sought to correct the Corinthians' attitude and conduct in the agape, he turned to a consideration of the eucharist. The words that Jesus had used when he instituted the eucharist on the night in which he was betrayed were an indication that the bread and the cup were a remembrance of him (11:23-25). Paul added that they were a proclamation of his death (11:26). It was very important that the eucharist be conducted in a proper manner; if it were not, the observance would be profaned (11:27-28), bringing judgment upon the believer (11:29-30). Thus a believer must examine his attitude and conduct in the communion service, especially concerning his relationship to others in the church (11:29). He could not have the proper spirit in the eucharist if he did not regard his brothers rightly. Judging from the abuse of the agape, this was a major problem in Corinth.

Of particular interest here is the close relationship between the agape and the eucharist that existed in the mind of Paul. He moved freely from a discussion of one to the other and back again without even an indication or explanation that he was doing so. So even though he begins by speaking of the agape (11:17-22), to illustrate the importance of a believer's attitude he refers to the eucharist (11:23-28). But in 11:29 he switches back to a consideration of the agape, because the words "if he does not judge the body rightly" refer not to the Lord's physical body as symbolized in the bread of the eucharist, but rather to the church, his spiritual body. In 11:33-34 Paul makes some final comments regarding the agape. He could move freely from one to the other because the two were closely linked in origin, concept, and practice.

### *In the Institution of the Communion Service*

The close relationship between the meal and the eucharist can be seen in the institution of the communion service. The eucharist was instituted in the context of a meal, the Last Supper. The eucharist followed the meal (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), and the elements of the eucharist came directly from the meal itself. There is no indication that the Lord set aside some bread and wine to be used later to represent his body and blood. Rather bread and wine which remained from the meal were used for the eucharist. No doubt this was also the practice of the early church. The eucharist came from the agape. There is an organic bond between the agape and the eucharist since the elements of the eucharist come from the agape itself. Had there been no agape, there would have been no eucharist. Thus Jesus'

command to practice the eucharist (1 Cor 11:24–25) assumes the practice of the agape and applies to it by extension.

#### THE DATE OF I CORINTHIANS

When Paul wrote this epistle, the communion service (which included both the agape and the eucharist) was already an established practice in the Corinthian church. Paul was not writing to encourage them to *begin* the practice of the communion service, but to correct their abuses of it. Paul had instituted the communion service when he founded the church (11:2), and the communion service he instructed them to practice was one that included an agape, followed by the bread and the cup.

In this light it is significant to consider how Paul gained his understanding of the communion service. He did not derive it from the gospel accounts, since the synoptic gospels were written during a period which began at least five years after the writing of 1 Corinthians.<sup>7</sup>

Nor did Paul gain his understanding of the communion service by consulting with the other apostles. In Gal 1:16–18 Paul states what he did following his conversion: “I did not immediately consult with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem.” Paul learned of the communion service in the same way that he learned of the other essentials of the Christian faith—by direct revelation from the Lord himself. This is supported by Paul’s words in 1 Cor 11:23: “For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you.” What Paul received from the Lord became a part of the traditions which were then delivered to the churches, including a communion service with the eucharist in the context of the agape. There is no instruction anywhere in scripture for the eucharist to be taken apart from the agape.

Regarding the gospel accounts Guthrie has commented that there is no clear demand for perpetuation of the bread and cup:

It is striking that none of the synoptic gospels gives any indication that the Lord gave a specific command that the supper was to be observed in the future. It is only in Paul’s record of the institution that the words are recorded, “Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me” (1 Cor. 11:25). It is natural to suppose that the disciples after Pentecost recognized the theological importance of the words of institution, and

<sup>7</sup>Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1970) 72–76 with 441.

not only preserved the words, but also repeated the act because of the particular authority with which the words were given.<sup>8</sup>

If one were to argue that the apostles understood that the practice of the eucharist should extend beyond that night, then the same expectation should be attached to the meal of which the eucharist was a part. The record of the eucharist in 1 Corinthians is found in conjunction with a meal. Thus there is no authority in scripture for partaking of the eucharist apart from the meal.

#### THE AGAPE ELSEWHERE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Another consideration in the relationship of the agape and the eucharist is the place which the agape occupies in the rest of the NT. Aside from 1 Corinthians 11, reference is also made to the agape in Jude 12. In warning the believers to whom he was writing of certain ungodly persons who had crept in among them unnoticed, Jude wrote, "These men are those who are hidden reefs in your love-feasts when they feast with you without fear." Another possible reference is 2 Pet 2:13. There Peter said of certain false prophets that they were "spots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions (ἀπάταις), as they carouse with you." An alternative reading for ἀπάταις is ἀγάπαις, which would then refer to the agape. Thus Jude 12 (and possibly 2 Pet 2:13) demonstrates that the practice of the agape was not limited to the ministry of the apostle Paul.

In Acts there are a number of references to the breaking of bread. While many assume this refers to the eucharist, it more likely refers to the agape. The expression appears numerous times in contexts that refer to a meal since bread was the main element, much as rice is the main element of a meal in the Far East. As Behm states, a meal began with the breaking of bread. Thus the expression "breaking of bread" referred to a meal in terms of its opening action.<sup>9</sup> It is true that the expression "to break bread" is used to refer to the eucharist (e.g., Matt 26:26; 1 Cor 11:24), but this is always in the context of the meal and is accompanied by a reference to the cup. Therefore unless there is a specific reason for seeing the expression as referring to the eucharist, it should be understood as referring to the agape.

The first example in Acts of "breaking bread" is in 2:42. There it is listed as one of the four activities that the converts on the day of Pentecost continually practiced. If this were a reference to the eucharist alone, it is strange that no reference is made to the cup. Nowhere

<sup>8</sup>Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1981) 720.

<sup>9</sup>J. Behm, "κλάω," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 729.

in Scripture can it be demonstrated that "breaking bread" refers to both the bread and the cup.

The second example is in 2:46: "And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart." On this verse Cole notes, "The phrase 'breaking of bread' cannot refer to ordinary meals, else we should have a redundancy of expression, which is quite foreign to St. Luke's style."<sup>10</sup> Cole assumes that "breaking bread" refers to the agape.<sup>11</sup> He then adds, "The same expression, 'break bread,' became later an almost technical expression, as in the *Didache*, either for the Agape itself (*Didache*, ix.) or for the Agape and the Eucharist combined (xiv.)."<sup>12</sup> Thus immediately following the apostolic age the church used the expression "breaking of bread" to refer to the agape or to the agape and the eucharist, but not to the eucharist alone. This argues strongly that the NT usage of this expression refers to the agape.

The expression is also used two times in Acts 20. The importance of the agape is seen in that it is said that the believers were gathered together on the first day of the week to break bread (20:7), and that later they broke bread and ate (20:11). The addition of "ate" (*γευσάμενος*) further indicates that a common meal had been consumed, and not just the eucharist.<sup>13</sup>

Thus it can be seen that the agape was commonly practiced in the NT and considered to be significant. There is no example of partaking of the eucharist apart from the agape or any biblical authority for doing so.

#### THE NAMES OF THE LOVE FEAST

So far in this study the love feast has been referred to primarily as the agape. However, little has been said as to the origin or significance of the name. This name and an additional one will now be considered.

The term love feast or agape derives its name from the Greek word *ἀγάπη*. It is the term used most often for love in the recorded words of Jesus. John's entire account of the Last Supper is couched in this concept. John begins by saying that Jesus "having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (13:1). Before they left the upper room, He said to them, "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that

<sup>10</sup>R. Lee Cole, *Love-Feasts* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1916) 47.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 50.



you also *love* one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have *love* for one another" (13:34–35). It is therefore not surprising that the meal which commemorates the Last Supper came to be known as the agape. According to 1 John 4:19, "we love because He first loved us," and our love for our brothers shows the genuineness of our love for God (3:17; 4:20; cf. Matt 22:36–39). Thus the meal is to be a demonstration of the love and oneness that exists among believers as a result of God's love.

The love feast is also referred to as the Lord's Supper. This term is considered by many Christians to be synonymous with the bread and cup. This term appears only once in Scripture (1 Cor 11:20), yet it is clear that the use of the term there refers to the agape, not the eucharist. Paul's purpose in writing was to correct abuses of the meal. It is possible that the term refers to both activities taken together, or rather to the whole communion service, but it cannot refer to the eucharist alone.

It should also be noted that the term used for supper (δειπνον) always refers to a meal, even the chief meal of the day or a feast,<sup>14</sup> lending support to the idea that the Lord's Supper must refer to a full meal. This is further supported by the use of the term in John 13:4–5 when Jesus rose from supper and began to wash the disciples' feet. Also, in Luke 22:20 the infinitive δειπνήσαι is used to describe the supper which preceded the cup. Thus there is no biblical precedent for describing the small portions of bread and juice used in many "communion" services today as "the Lord's Supper." The term may refer to the whole communion service, including both the meal and the eucharist, but it cannot refer to the eucharist alone.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF FOOTWASHING TO THE AGAPE

At the beginning of this study it was stated that the Brethren practice is a threefold communion service. Although the focus so far has been upon the agape and the eucharist, footwashing should also be mentioned. Like the agape and the eucharist it was also instituted on the night of the Last Supper (John 13). Like the eucharist, the footwashing took place in the context of the meal (13:2, 4, 12, 26). Thus the three activities—the meal, footwashing, and eucharist—were instituted together. When Jesus finished washing the disciples' feet, he made it clear that the act was to be perpetuated. The term used in 13:14 to indicate that the disciples ought to wash one another's feet is *ὑμῶν ἀλλήλων*, which expresses not an option but an obligation.<sup>15</sup> Other uses of *ὑμῶν ἀλλήλων* make this clear (e.g., Eph 5:28; 2 Thess 1:3; 1 John

<sup>14</sup>J. Behm, "δειπνον," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 34.

<sup>15</sup>F. Hauck, "ὑμῶν ἀλλήλων," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 564.

4:11). It is also clear from 1 Tim 5:10 that footwashing was an important practice in the early church. Since explicit commands are given to practice the eucharist and footwashing, and since both were instituted in the context of the meal, it seems reasonable to expect that the meal should be continued too, and that the three should be practiced together.

It may be asked why footwashing is not mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11 if all three were to be practiced together. The answer to this is based upon Paul's purpose in 1 Corinthians 11. He was not instructing them on the procedure for a communion service. He had done that during his earlier ministry with them. Rather he was trying to correct a problem with the agape. His silence on footwashing simply means that there was no problem with their practice of it and that therefore Paul did not need to deal with it. The communion service is like other biblical doctrines which are formulated by comparing Scripture with Scripture. It is not necessary to have all three parts of the communion service mandated in one passage in order for Scripture to teach a threefold communion service. The cumulative effect of the NT evidence, from the institution of the communion service to its practice in the early church, indicates that this is what God intended the church to practice.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AGAPE

Along with the names and the practice of the agape, its significance also needs to be considered. It is true that common meals were a frequent occurrence throughout the Mediterranean world in ancient days. But these were sponsored primarily by guilds, associations, clubs, or brotherhoods.<sup>16</sup> They were found in both Roman and Greek culture. Those of Sparta were known as φιλιτία, a name which suggests love (φιλία).<sup>17</sup> The Jews, especially the Essenes, also observed common meals.<sup>18</sup> There was also the *kiddush*, a meal that was held in preparation for the Sabbath and other festivals, such as the Passover.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Its Future Significance*

The agape did not originate in a pagan custom or even a Jewish practice though. Rather the basis for the agape was the Last Supper. This is most obvious from the other name which is used to refer to the agape, the Lord's Supper. Its origin is also confirmed by its

<sup>16</sup>Cole, *Love Feasts*, 17-34.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 35-43.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 42; and Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 779-82.

association with the eucharist. It is by looking at the Last Supper and Jesus' use of it that one can understand the meaning and the symbolism of the agape. This is particularly evident in Luke's account. Throughout the meal Jesus made several references to a future meal which he would eat with his disciples in his kingdom. At the beginning of the meal Jesus explained his desire to eat the Passover<sup>20</sup> with the disciples by saying, "I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (22:16). Then after drinking the first cup, which was part of the meal, Jesus said, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes" (22:18). This especially sets forth the eschatological symbolism of the meal. At the conclusion of the meal Jesus told the disciples, "And just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at my table in My kingdom" (22:29-30). Thus Jesus used the meal on the last night to symbolize a future meal that He would eat with His disciples in His kingdom.

Yet this is not the only occasion in which Jesus connected the eating of a meal with a future celebration in the kingdom—he did so several times throughout his ministry. In Luke 13:29 Jesus said of those who would be able to enter the kingdom of God, "And they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God" (cf. Matt 8:11). This is also seen in several of the parables that Jesus used to describe the kingdom of God. In Luke 14:15 Jesus said, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." He then told the parable of the great supper (14:16-24). The same teaching is found in the parable of the watchful servant (Luke 12:35-40) and the wedding feast (Matt 22:2-14).

Thus it seems that when Jesus wanted to refer to a believer's fellowship with God in the coming kingdom, he did so in the context of eating a meal. This culminated in the eschatological perspective which Jesus gave to the Last Supper. Just such a meal is set forth in Rev 19:7-9 and described as the marriage supper of the Lamb. Once again the same word for supper, δεῖπνον, is used. At this time God's work of salvation in the believer will be completed, and the church, the bride of Christ, will be eternally joined to the Lord. The Last Supper looked forward to this and the agape was also intended to anticipate it. While 1 Corinthians 11 does not specify the symbolic value of the meal, it is clear that more than just the satisfaction of hunger was in view. Just as the symbolic value of the eucharist was established by Jesus on the night of the Last Supper, the same is true of the meal.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. the article in this issue of *GTJ* by Donald Farner which discusses the chronological question of the Passover in reference to the Lord's Supper.

*Its Past Significance*

It has already been stated that the agape finds its basis in the Last Supper. In a sense then, just as the agape looks forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb, it also looks back to the Last Supper. In the same sense that the eucharist is a remembrance of Jesus' sacrificial death, so the agape is a remembrance of Jesus' love and fellowship with the disciples, especially on the night of the Last Supper. This was expressed in his desire to eat the Passover with them (Luke 22:15). The use of the strong adjectival form for "Lord's" (κυριακός) seems to suggest this commemorating significance.<sup>21</sup> In this sense the agape provides the ideal context for the eucharist.

*Its Present Significance*

Not only does the meal have a future and a past significance, it has significance for the present as well. Fellowship with Christ will be fully experienced in the future kingdom. Yet through the new birth and the indwelling presence of the Lord, believers are able to experience a measure of that fellowship and love even now. And because all believers have the same Lord, fellowship with Christ should naturally lead to the oneness and fellowship that we are to have with one another. It is no wonder, then, that the meal is referred to as an agape.

This use of a meal to symbolize fellowship with God has a long history. In the OT several of the most significant times of celebration and worship in the Jewish calendar were the feast days: Passover and the feast of unleavened bread (Lev 23:5-8); the feast of weeks (Exod 23:16; 34:22; Num 28:26); the feast of trumpets (Lev 23:24-25); and the feast of booths (Lev 23:34-44). Also in the peace offering (one of the four blood sacrifices), part of the animal that was sacrificed was eaten by the priests and by the one who offered it with his family or friends (Exod 29:20-28; Deut 12:7, 18). Part of the symbolism of the peace offering was fellowship with God.<sup>22</sup> Similarly the twelve cakes which were on the table of showbread in the tabernacle, and which were eaten on the Sabbath by Aaron and his sons (Lev 24:9), represented fellowship between God and his redeemed. In addition fellowship with God was symbolized by a meal at certain special occasions (e.g., the ratification of the covenant in Exod 24:9-11). A shared

<sup>21</sup>David R. Plaster, *Ordinances: What Are They?* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1985) 62; and W. Foerster, "κύριος," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 1095-96.

<sup>22</sup>J. H. Kurtz, *Sacrificial Worship of the Old Testament* (reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 175.

meal was a common way of sealing a covenant.<sup>23</sup> But this occasion was unique in that the covenant had been made with God. Thus the practice of eating a meal which signified fellowship with God was well-established in Israel.

From what has been said concerning the future in the kingdom of God and the past in the nation of Israel, a pattern seems to emerge. When contemplation of fellowship with God is in view, a meal is often involved. In light of the past and future practices, it would not be at all surprising to find this same symbolism in the present. In fact, when the meal is viewed in the context of the past and future practice, its absence in the present age is rather striking.

#### CONCLUSION

It is obvious that Paul thought that the agape was important, since he included it in his apostolic παράδοσις. The early church practiced it because they realized its significance. In fact, for nearly three centuries the agape continued to be a familiar part of Christian worship in every locality of Christianity that left records. In remote areas it persisted for several centuries more, and in a few cases has lasted to the present.<sup>24</sup> There were abuses of the agape, but the main reason for its separation from the eucharist in much of Christendom was the increase of asceticism, mysticism, and ritualism during the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>25</sup>

It is true that the agape is not widely practiced in Christian circles today—perhaps because it suffered some abuses in the early church. Yet Paul's response to such abuses in I Corinthians 11 was not to stop the practice but to correct the abuses. Paul's manner of speaking of the agape, his reference to it as the Lord's Supper, and its inclusion as part of the apostolic παράδοσις, all demonstrate that the agape was important to Paul. He sought to perpetuate it with the full weight of his apostolic authority.

The unity of the agape and eucharist can also be seen in I Corinthians 11. Just as in the Last Supper, the elements of the bread and the cup come from the meal. Had there been no meal, there would have been no eucharist. There is an organic bond between the agape and the eucharist. As one surveys the practice of the agape throughout the NT, there is no instruction, example, or basis for partaking of the

<sup>23</sup>B. Klappert, "Lord's Supper," *NIDNTT* 2 (1971) 521; and R. Alan Cole, *Exodus* (TOTC; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1973) 186.

<sup>24</sup>Cole, *Love Feasts*, 12.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 254–55.

eucharist apart from the agape. Neither is there any justification for not practicing the agape.

When seen in terms of its significance, the agape provides the ideal context for both footwashing and the eucharist, just as the meal did on the night of the Last Supper. Therefore, for the believer today the agape should be seen as an opportunity to reflect upon the events and meaning of the Last Supper, to anticipate the joy of what lies ahead in the kingdom of God, and to celebrate the fellowship which he now has with God and with fellow believers.