

The Agape Feast

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Agape—The brotherly common meals of the early Church.

I. In the New Testament

Although the word agape was used constantly in the sense of love-feast in the postcanonical literature from the time of Ignatius onward, it is found in the NT only in Jude 12 (AV “feasts of charity”; RSV, NEB, “love-feasts”), and in 2 Pet. 2:13 according to a very doubtful reading (cf. AV “deceivings”; NEB “deceptions”; RSV “dissipation”). For the existence of the Christian common meal, however, we have abundant NT evidence.

The “breaking of bread” practiced by the primitive community in Jerusalem according to Acts 2:42, 46 must certainly be interpreted in the light of Pauline usage (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24) as referring to the ceremonial act of the Lord’s Supper. But the added clause in v 46, “they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart,” implies that a social meal was connected in some way with this ceremonial act Paul’s references to the abuses that had sprung up in the Corinthian church at the meetings for the observance of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20–22, 33f) make it evident that in Corinth as in Jerusalem the celebration of the rite was associated with participation in a meal of a more general character. And in one of the “we” sections of Acts

(20:11) where Luke is giving personal testimony as to the manner in which the Lord’s Supper was observed by Paul in a church of his own founding, we find the breaking of bread associated with and yet distinguished from an eating of food, in a manner which makes it natural to conclude that in Troas, as in Jerusalem and Corinth, Christians when they met together on the first day of the week were accustomed to partake of a common meal. That the word agape or love-feast used in Jude 12 is found early in the 2nd cent, and often afterward, as a technical expression for the religious common meals of the Church puts the meaning of Jude’s reference beyond doubt.

II. Origin

In the Jerusalem community, the common meal appears to have sprung out of the *koinōnía* or communion that characterized the first days of the Christian Church (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:1; etc.). The religious meals familiar to Jews—the Passover being the great type—would make it natural in Jerusalem to give expression to the sense of brotherhood by means of table fellowship; and the community of goods practiced by the infant Church (2:44; 4:32) would readily take the particular form of a common table at which the wants of the poor were supplied out of the abundance of the rich (6:1ff). The presence of the agape in the Greek church of Corinth was no doubt due to the initiative of Paul, who would hand on the observances associated with the

Lord's Supper just as he had received them from the earlier disciples; but participation in a social meal would commend itself very easily to men familiar with the common meals that formed a regular part of the procedure at meetings of those religious clubs and associations which were so numerous at that time throughout the Greco-Roman world.

III. Relation to the Eucharist

In the opinion of the great majority of scholars the agape was a meal at which not only bread and wine but all kinds of viands were used, a meal which had the double purpose of satisfying hunger and thirst and giving expression to the sense of Christian brotherhood. At the end of this feast, bread and wine were taken according to the Lord's command, and after thanksgiving to God were eaten and drunk in remembrance of Christ and as a special means of communion with the Lord Himself and through Him with one another. The agape was thus related to the eucharist as Christ's last Passover to the Christian rite which He grafted upon it. It preceded and led up to the eucharist, and was quite distinct from it.

In opposition to this view it has been strongly urged by some modern critical scholars that in the apostolic age the Lord's supper was not distinguished from the agape, but that the agape itself from beginning to end was the Lord's Supper which was held in memory of Jesus. It seems fatal to such an idea, however, that while Paul makes it quite evident that bread and wine were the only elements of the memorial rite instituted by Jesus (1 Cor. 11:23-29), the abuses which had come to prevail at the social gatherings of the Corinthian church would have been impossible in the case of a meal consisting only of bread and wine (cf. vv 21, 33f). Moreover, unless the eucharist in the apostolic age had been discriminated from the common meal, it would be difficult to explain how at a later period the two could be found diverging from each other so completely.

IV. Separation from the Eucharist

In the Didache (ca a.d. 100) there is no sign as yet of any separation. The direction that the second eucharistic prayer should be offered "after being filled" (10:1) appears to imply that a regular meal had immediately preceded the observance of the sacrament. In the Ignatian epistles (ca a.d. 110) the Lord's Supper and the agape are still found in

combination (Smyrn 8:2). It has sometimes been assumed that Pliny's letter to Trajan (ca a.d. 112) proves that the separation had already taken place, for he speaks of two meetings of the Christians in Bithynia, one before the dawn at which they bound themselves by a "sacramentum" or oath to do no kind of crime, and another at a later hour when they partook of food of an ordinary and harmless character (Ep x.96). But as the word "sacramentum" cannot be taken here as necessarily or even probably referring to the Lord's Supper, the evidence of this passage is of little weight.

When we come to Justin Martyr (ca a.d. 150) we find that in his account of church worship he does not mention the agape at all, but speaks of the eucharist as following a service which consisted of the reading of Scripture, prayers, and exhortation (Apol i.67); so by his time the separation must have taken place. Tertullian (ca a.d. 200) testifies to the continued existence of the agape (Apol. 39), but shows clearly that in the church of the West the eucharist was no longer associated with it (*De Corona* 3). In the East the connection appears to have been longer maintained, but by and by the severance became universal; and though the agape continued for long to maintain itself as a social function of the Church, it gradually passed out of existence or was preserved only as a feast of charity for the poor.

Various influences appear to have cooperated in this direction. Trajan's enforcement of the old law against clubs may have had something to do with it (cf. Pliny, loccit), but a stronger influence probably came from the rise of a popular suspicion that the evening meals of the Church were scenes of licentious revelry and even of crime. The actual abuses which already are attested in the apostolic age (1 Cor. 11:20ff; Jude 12), and which would tend to multiply as the Church grew in numbers and came into closer contact with the heathen world, might suggest the advisability of separating the two observances.

The strongest influence of all, however, would come from the growth of the ceremonial and sacerdotal spirit by which Christ's simple institution was slowly turned into a mysterious priestly sacrifice. To Christ Himself it had seemed natural and fitting to institute the supper at the close of a social meal. But when this memorial supper had been transformed into a repetition of the sacrifice of Calvary by the action of the ministering priest, the ascetic idea became natural that the eucharist ought to be received fasting, and that it would be sacrilegious to link it on to the observances of an ordinary social meal.