

THE CHRISTIAN PASSOVER

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THE
CHRISTIAN PASSOVER
AGAPE FEAST OR RITUAL ABUSE?

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PREFACE

THE original version of this essay was first published in *Christianity & Society* Vol. x, No. 2 (April 2000). The present version has been significantly reworked and expanded to more than twice its original length, primarily (but not exclusively) by the addition of Part Two, which gives a brief account of the practice of the agape feast and its relationship to the Eucharist in the early centuries of the Church's history, and an Epilogue.

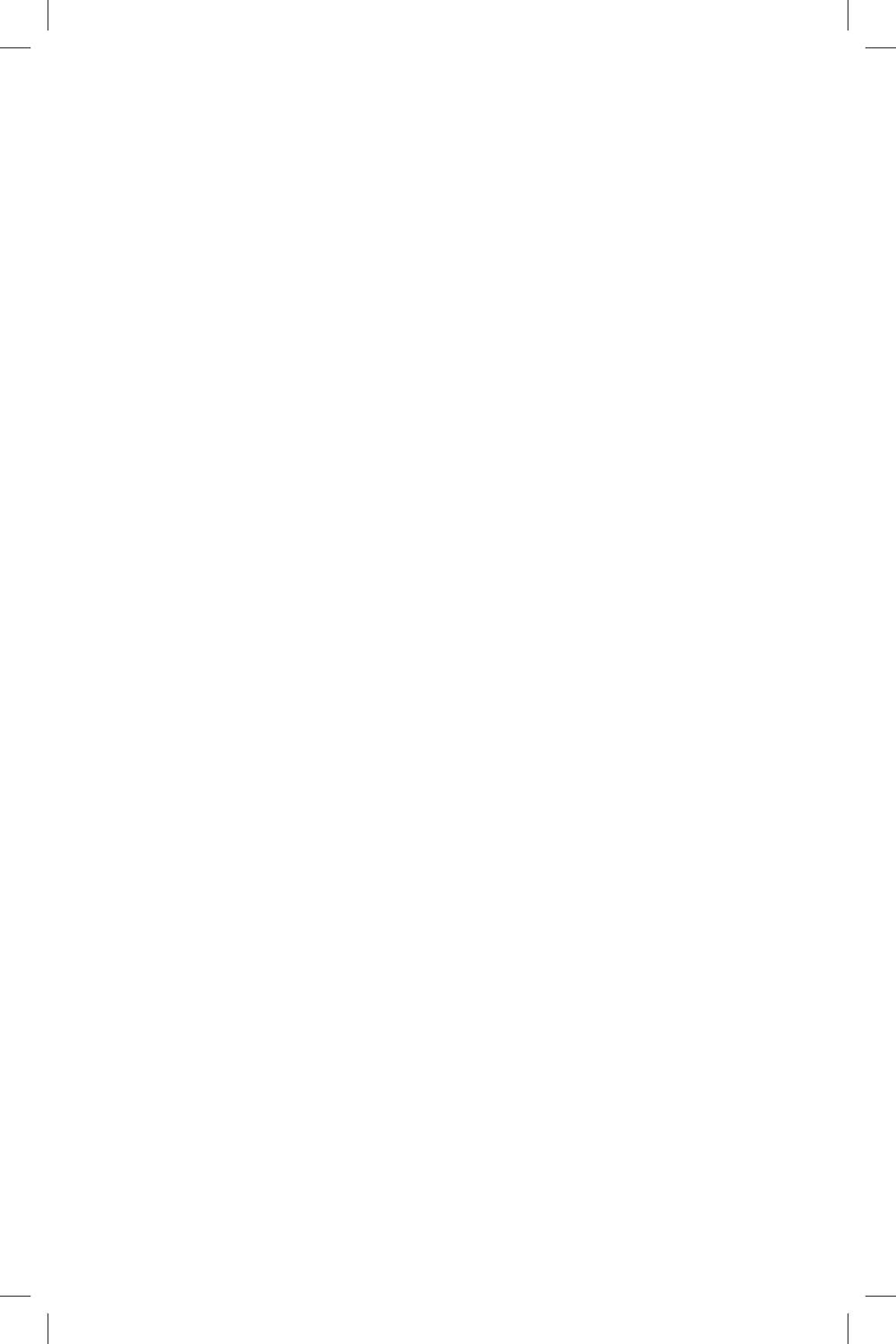


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PART ONE

THE CHRISTIAN PASSOVER

§I

INTRODUCTION

SOME years ago morning worship at an Anglican church I used to attend was suddenly subjected to some changes by the Church leaders. In particular we were asked to treat the ten minutes or so before the service started as a time of preparation for worship, and in order to achieve this state of preparedness we were asked to desist from talking and join in chorus singing or engage in quiet meditation instead. Some weeks later this ten minute spiritual warm-up ceased to be optional. The whole congregation was directed from the front by the singsong maestro to join in with the chorus singing. No choice for the individual was deemed appropriate any longer and an attempt was made to make sure everyone joined in with the chorus singing. A “spiritual” equivalent of the three line whip was imposed.

The obvious implication of this is that talking prior to the start of the service is not appropriate and hinders the creation of the right mood for morning worship. By way of justification for these changes we were asked to consider that we must constantly examine what we do in church to ensure that it helps us to focus on the transcendence of God.

This kind of attitude to worship is not an idiosyncrasy of the particular church I then attended. It is common across the whole spectrum of Church life in the UK: among the Reformed Churches no less than the charismatic, in non-conformist Churches and

Anglican Churches, low Churches as well as high Churches. The creation of the right mood or state of mind is deemed essential to “spiritual” worship. It would not be going too far to say that for many Christians this kind of mood is equated with being led by the Holy Spirit; i.e. it is considered to be a state of being “in the Spirit.” Such a mood is deemed especially appropriate if we are to partake of the divine mystery of the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper), which is, as befits such an understanding of being in the presence of God, a most solemn, indeed almost morbid, event celebrated with the utmost gravitas.

Now, it is true that we must understand the transcendence of God and that our worship must express our recognition of this attribute of the divine nature. But Christianity teaches also the immanence of God. To downplay either side of this theological equation will result in an unbalanced practice of the faith, both in personal life *and* in corporate worship. It is my belief that the Church’s understanding of this truth is, on the whole, unbalanced and that this imbalance works itself out in the practice of the Christian life both individually and corporately, and among other things in the way that we worship together.

Of course, I agree that we should constantly examine what we do in church carefully. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—“The Church reformed must be ever reforming”—was a shibboleth of the Reformation that has too often been forgotten by the heirs of the Reformation. Reform according to the word of God is a biblical ideal. However, the argument that we should desist from talking in church, that church is for “spiritual” services and activities, makes a number of assumptions that I believe cannot be justified from Scripture. It is true that we should examine what we do in church, and it is because this is true that I want to discuss this issue in more detail, try to expose some of these assumptions, and see what the Bible has to say about how we should worship together. Perhaps I ought to make it clear at the outset, however, that I fundamentally disagree with the idea that worship requires the creation of a mood that is only consistent with quiet meditation or chorus singing. Speaking personally, I find that the singing of choruses and the

kind of mood that is supposed to be created by them does not direct my mind or body to the worship that God requires of us as I understand this biblically. Furthermore, this perspective assumes that talking to each other is somehow inherently unspiritual and inappropriate in church. This also I profoundly disagree with. I object as much to the imposition of this erroneous idea of “spirituality” on the Church as those who object to the talk they deem inappropriate before the church service starts because they believe this time should be used for getting oneself into the right mood. So how are we to arrive at a common mind on this issue? Well, the only way, i.e. the only Christian way, is to search the Scriptures in an attempt to ascertain what it is that God’s word requires of us in worship. If we are truly seeking God’s will, we should then be able to unite on the way forward. Theoretically! In this essay I shall attempt to point the way to what I believe the Bible really says about how we should worship, particularly in the context of the Christian Passover, i.e. the Eucharist.

§2

SPIRITUALITY AND FELLOWSHIP

First, let us consider the notion of spirituality. What is spirituality? Is it a mood? Is it, as was claimed by the leaders of the Church mentioned above, an appreciation of “the mystery and wonder of the transcendent God”? Many ideas of spirituality abound today. Unfortunately, very few are biblical. Spirituality, if we must use the term, is summed up in the phrase “Trust and obey.” That’s it. To be spiritual is not to have some mystical feeling, nor is it a mood of contemplation or piety. It is simply trusting and obeying God.¹ If our worship is to be spiritual, therefore, we must seek to obey the Bible in the way that we worship. Only then will our worship be “in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:24).

¹ For a full explanation of this point see “What is Spirituality?” in my book *Common-Law Wives and Concubines: Essays on Covenantal Christianity and Contemporary Western Culture* (Taunton: Kuyper Foundation, 2003), pp. 91–112.

How is it, therefore, that chorus singing, or any other form of “preparation” or “spiritual” exercise for that matter, prepares people for this worship whereas talking to each other does not? Before I can accept this I need to see some explanation, i.e. *biblical* explanation, of this assumption. I need to understand why it is that the cessation of talk, the singing of choruses or the creation of a quiet contemplative mood equips me for worship better than talking to other believers does. And I need to be shown that this is what the Bible says is what equips us for worship, and indeed whether in fact the Bible requires this mood worship of us at all. Because if it does not, this whole notion of spirituality is blown clean out of the water and we had better start thinking again about what spirituality is.

The implication is that talking in church is not spiritual, that communication between believers—i.e. fellowship—prior to the service starting is a hindrance to worship and true spirituality. But I object to this attempt to curtail Christian fellowship in the church, which really amounts to no more than an attempt by the chief “spiritual” persons in the Church to inflict their own mediocre musical tastes and their own ideas of spirituality on everyone else, with the implication that unless one follows suit one is insensitive to the Spirit. And I object because I do not think it can be defended biblically, indeed makes assumptions that are not defensible biblically; in short, is *unbiblical* because it undermines the biblical concept of both spirituality and fellowship. The idea that worship is a matter of mood, of setting aside the mundane world in which we live in an attempt to attain a higher plane or more “spiritual” mood or state of mind is inherently dualistic and assumes a sacred/secular dichotomy that is not found in the Christian Scriptures. This concept of spirituality combines elements of mysticism and paganism, but is essentially a notion derived from the Greek dualistic perspective that underpinned the Alexandrian world-view, which has afflicted the Christian Church from the beginning (and our society at large as well). It is this Greek dualistic heritage that is the source of pietism, which mood worship is a good example of. Spirituality, biblically speaking, is not an attempt to escape from or

rise above this mundane world in any sense, but rather the proper dedication of this mundane world to the service of God.

Second, I also disagree with the notion that the singing of choruses (or hymns) is somehow essential to the creation of the right attitude in worship, and if singing choruses and hymns does not in itself create the right kind of attitude why should we sing so many choruses and hymns in church? Most Churches already sing an inordinate amount of choruses and hymns in their worship services. There is a significant imbalance between this and the fellowship we get together in church. I can only call the kind of worship we get today in most churches the tyranny of hymns and choruses. Someone once commented that if the words for *Roll out the Barrel* were put up at the front of the church the congregation would probably sing it without realising what it is. I know of instances where such experiments have been carried out with interesting results, namely a tendency for congregations to sing whatever is put up on a screen at the front of the church or dictated from the front by the singsong maestro regardless of the meaning of the words, which demonstrates the mindlessness that prevails in much congregational singing. There is a natural tendency for singing, which is primarily a musical activity, to direct the emotions rather than the intellect, so that the mind is not as consciously engaged with regard to the meaning of the words as it is with the music. Hence, it has been observed of musically intense worship services that the emotional intensity reached in congregational singing often relates to musical climaxes not to climaxes in the meaning of the words being sung, since the two are not necessarily coterminous. As long as the appropriate degree of musical intensity is reached the singing is believed to be a good time of worship despite the congregation's being oblivious to the theological content of the songs. With most traditional hymns and Psalms a proper understanding of the meaning of the words being sung requires the engagement of the mind in theological reflection, and in modern Churches both leaders and congregations tend to abominate the very idea of theological reflection, which is often seen as an activity of the mind rather than of the spirit, and because of this deemed to be

a work of the “flesh,” despite the fact that this idea directly and in principle contradicts Scripture. Hence even when hymns and songs with good theological content are being sung the primary effect is often an emotional one that does not engage the reason. Yet Christian worship, according to Scripture, should be *reasonable* worship, i.e. worship that engages the *mind* or *intellect*: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your *reasonable* service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your *mind*, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:1–2). The word translated here as “reasonable” (λογικός) is the word from which we derive our English words *logic* and *logical*.² John Murray makes the following interesting comment on this verse:

The service here in view is worshipful service and the apostle characterizes it as “rational” because it is worship that derives its character as acceptable to God from the fact that it enlists our *mind*, our *reason*, our *intellect*. It is rational in contrast with what is mechanical and automatic. A great many of our bodily functions do not enlist volition on our part. But the worshipful service here enjoined must constrain intelligent volition. The lesson to be derived from the term “rational” is that we are not “Spiritual” in the biblical sense except as the use of our bodies is characterized by conscious, *intelligent*, consecrated devotion to the service of God.³

What real value “spiritually” therefore does this obsession with choruses and hymns have? I suggest that for the most part singing choruses, before, during or after the service has no real effect on our spiritual state of mind or on the spiritual character of our actions—though many Christians may think it does, largely because they confuse spirituality with a particular kind of mood. This is not to say that singing choruses is *necessarily* wrong—I do not think it is. But chorus singing has become a substitute for wor-

² See further my essay “The Antithesis” in *Christianity & Society*, Vol. xvii, No. 1 (Summer, 2007), p. 37ff. See also “What is Spirituality?” in my book *Common-Law Wives and Concubines*, p. 103ff.

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), Vol. II, p. 112; my emphasis.

ship in many churches today, not an aid to it. Far from preparing us for true worship, I believe singing numbs our minds to what we should be doing in church.

Third, in the worship services of most churches I have attended there has been no time for fellowship with others. Fellowship is not seen as central to what we do in church. This is unbiblical because fellowship is central to the biblical concept of corporate worship. Of course, there is often coffee *after* the service, to which all are cordially invited. But this is just the point. Fellowship is an afterthought, an extra for those who want it, or who are prepared to create it. Fellowship is not central to what we do in church. We don't get fellowship as part of what we do in church so we tag it on at the end. What we do in church is meetings that are inherently fellowshipless. And the truth is that coffee after the service does not provide fellowship for everyone. And even if it does for some, they have to go to church and endure up to ninety minutes of ritual to get ten minutes of fellowship. But don't expect to discuss the faith over your coffee, or anything relevant to it, especially anything challenging—the weather will suffice nicely for pre-Sunday lunch chit-chat! (I am not criticising ritual *per se* or coffee after the church service, only the balance between ritual and fellowship, the priorities that we have set for what we do in church). Coffee time after church services, while in itself entirely laudable, is a poor alternative for the fellowship that the Bible shows us should be at the heart of Church life.

Fellowship is not sitting bolt upright in a pew facing the front of the church; nor is it singing choruses together, nor even kneeling in prayer individually and listening to what is being said by the clergy at the front. Neither is it saying the liturgy together (again, please remember I am not criticising these things *per se*, only the balance between these things and the fellowship we get in church). Fellowship is not listening to homilies and sermons or attending organised prayer meetings. The Church of England has tried to remedy this problem with a user friendly “peace” slot in the middle of the communion service. But this does not make up for what is so obviously missing in the life of the Church; in

fact, because fellowship is missing from so much of what we do in church, the user friendly peace slot is actually embarrassing and awkward for many, especially newcomers, because it only makes sense if there really is fellowship, and usually there is not. Again, I am not arguing that we should not do these things, merely that on their own or even together they do not constitute fellowship, and when they take place in a context other than fellowship they lose much of their meaning. Without fellowship there is something missing from Church life on Sundays, something that house groups on their own do not rectify.

My point, therefore, is that Sunday worship in most churches is unbalanced by the near total lack of fellowship, since fellowship is the interaction of people with each other and this is impossible without communication, without talking to each other, something that is virtually impossible to reconcile with the ritual that passes for worship in most churches.

§3

THE BIBLICAL PATTERN V. SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY

How, then, are we to rectify this? How do we best get this fellowship? Well, the best, most congenial, the most efficient and most enjoyable way of having fellowship is at a shared *meal*. Eating together is the best way to have fellowship. Just on a practical level, it is interesting to observe that it is virtually impossible for anyone to monopolise a conversation at a table *and* eat a meal at the same time. At a meal all have opportunity to contribute to the fellowship, the discussion, and all have to shut up at some point while they service their stomachs. A meal, therefore, creates the ideal, the perfect conditions for the natural participation of all in fellowship.

Not surprisingly, therefore, a shared meal is the context of one of the most important Christian rituals in the life of the Church: the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, which was originally, as practised by the early Church, a fellowship meal, i.e. a *feast*. This surely

says something about what is really important to the life of the Church from a biblical perspective. The Last Supper, which was a Passover meal and the model for the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, and therefore the first *Christian* Passover,⁴ was not even remotely like the Eucharists or communions we celebrate in church today; neither was the Jewish Passover. The Passover was a shared meal, a fellowship meal. The ritual and the worship and the fellowship were not distinguishable practically. Analytically we can distinguish the various parts, but to separate them out in practice would have been to wreck the whole event. And all are part of what should characterise our Eucharist services in church since the Eucharist is the Christian Passover (if you are not Anglican just substitute "Lord's Supper" or "communion" for the term "Eucharist"—whatever your Church happens to call it). Why did God make this important and oft-repeated ritual a *meal*? Because, obviously, an essential part of this important ritual is fellowship, and fellowship is best had round the table at a shared meal.

There is something extremely practical and well-suited to our constitution as human beings in the way that God has structured our worship, or at least what our worship should be. Contrary to long established opinion, God does not delight in worship that causes the worshipper pain and suffering, whether of a physical or mental character. I personally judge chorus singing a form of mental torture, though this does not mean it should not be enjoyable to others. And I find hymn and Psalm singing just as excruciating as chorus singing (in fact many choruses are Psalms or based on Psalms)—again, not because there is anything wrong with singing Psalms *per se*, but because we have stylised such forms of worship into rituals that are almost devoid of meaningful context and therefore fail to inspire any genuine heartfelt response (I speak for myself, though I suspect rather more people feel the same way than are prepared to admit it). This is only exacerbated by the lack of any aesthetic qualities that I can appreciate. Granted, these things on their own do not constitute the whole of the service, but it is not much better when we come to the other parts. Preaching

⁴ See further p. 22ff. *infra*.

is virtually devoid of any content, any real explanation of God's word that applies to the reality of life or challenges the idolatry of our culture. Church services have become to me a mirage. They promise so much but deliver nothing; they are like deserts, without spiritual, cultural, aesthetic or intellectual nourishment, or even any real fellowship with other Christians. The result is that I go the church hopeful and come away vexed and troubled, simply bored at best. And this is not a flippant attitude on my part; rather, it is the result of over 35 years of exposure to such torture, a period in which I have genuinely tried to engage with what goes on in church. But the older I get the more difficult this becomes because the type of praise and worship that prevails in church services is for the most part infantile. What we get in the name of worship is adults behaving like children. Most church praise and worship services would not be out of place in a primary school assembly, which seems to be the general level of maturity at which such worship functions. We are even directed from the front to "do the actions" that accompany the choruses like little children in a school assembly, and in one sense this is appropriate because in many churches the rest of the service, including (especially!) the sermon, often takes place at an equally infantile level. This is the level of praise and worship in most churches today. One chorus I have heard being sung in church services includes the words: "Bop bop showaddy-waddy, bop bop showaddy-waddy." Utter drivel! But it is not merely drivel. It has a seriously debilitating effect upon the life of the Church because it trivialises the faith and demeans it.⁵ These comments are not directed only at the Anglican Church; they are the result of my experience of virtually the whole spectrum of Church life in the UK, traditional and evangelical (including every major Protestant denomination).

But God has not instituted singing as what should be at the heart of one of the most important Christian rituals, much less the Christianised rave and heavy rock music that constitutes "wor-

⁵ Unfortunately the problem goes much deeper than congregational singing. The infantile level of praise and worship that prevails in Church services today is really a symptom of a much more profound problem, namely the general level

ship” in many modern charismatic Church services or the kind of infantile choruses that are frequently sung in many evangelical Churches; rather he has put fellowship at the heart of this ritual by making it a meal. Why? Because without this important element of fellowship our Christian lives are impoverished, and no amount of chorus singing or attempting to create the right mood will ameliorate this deficiency. It is a deficiency that can only be remedied by fellowship.

§4

FELLOWSHIP AS AN OPTIONAL EXTRA

But Churches have house groups and the like, someone will say. Well, I do not think there is anything wrong with house groups *per se*. In fact I think they can be very good and sometimes are, though not always. But they cannot take the place of what we should be doing on Sundays as the Church but in fact do not do. Not only are we impoverished by our lack of fellowship on Sundays. As a result we offer God less than he demands of us in terms of worship. Fellowship is not optional in the biblical scheme of worship; it is at the heart of worship. If we cannot square worship and fellowship as taking place at the same time, the problem is our

of spiritual immaturity that pervades the Church. Nor is this a problem that is easily corrected since it affects the leadership of the Church. The spiritual, theological and intellectual immaturity of the clergy is replicated in the Church generally as a consequence of continual congregational exposure to weak leadership that encourages a culture of spiritual immaturity in the Church. Since future clergymen are nurtured in the faith in congregations immersed in this culture of spiritual immaturity the problem gets passed on to the next generation. The result is that the Church has succumbed to a general dumbing-down process that has enfeebled her witness to the world. Spiritual maturity and growth in understanding the faith is essential if the Church is to fulfil the Great Commission. Yet this is conspicuously absent in the modern Church on the whole. This problem seldom gets addressed in the theological colleges since those who run and teach in the colleges are themselves the product of the same culture of immaturity. As a consequence the spiritual, moral, theological and intellectual decrepitude of the Church becomes more severe with each generation.

dualistic world-view not the biblical requirement for worship that is fellowship based. In this respect it has often stuck me as odd that so many Christians will make such a fuss about how Christians should attend church every Sunday because we are required to meet together (i.e. have fellowship with each other) frequently in Scripture (Heb. 10:25); yet what happens when we get to church can hardly be described as fellowship at all much of the time. This is to strain at a gnat and swallow a camel (Mt. 23:24). We are encouraged to meet together frequently in Scripture precisely so that we can encourage each other in the faith—something it is impossible to do if we are not permitted to talk, i.e. communicate with each other.

Fellowship in the biblical scheme of things is not an optional extra thrown in at the end of the church service. It should be as much at the heart of the life of the Church worship service as anything else that takes place in the service. Otherwise why would such a central ritual as the Lord's Supper be a shared meal? If there is no real community, no fellowship, there is no Church, no matter how good the sermon is, or the hymns and choruses, or the liturgy and "sacraments." Fellowshipless worship is *not* the kind of worship that God requires of us.

Yet, if I want fellowship in the Church I must create it outside the Church's official services on a Sunday. Why? Because in reality there is no fellowship in the Eucharist as practised today (and this is as true of the communions celebrated by nonconformist Churches as it is of the Anglican Eucharist). It has become a mere rite, devoid of the context that originally gave it meaning. Everyone remains isolated from each other and maintains a solemn silence. And I suspect there would be a good deal of disapprobation from most Church leaders if people were to start having fellowship during the Eucharist service—despite the fact that biblically the Lord's Supper has been instituted precisely in the context of such fellowship—because such fellowship would spoil the "spiritual" mood that is deemed so important. But what is left of the shared meal, the fellowship around the Lord's table, at the Eucharists or communion services in our "Bible believing" Churches? Nothing!

I think this is wrong. I believe it is a perversion of what the Lord Jesus Christ instituted at the first Christian Passover. Fellowshipless worship services, and especially fellowshipless communions, are an abuse, a form of ritual abuse of God's ordinance, the Christian Passover, which was never instituted to be celebrated in the way that it is celebrated in churches today. Rather, the communion was a fellowship event as much as anything else. To strip it of its fellowship context is to strip it of meaning as a covenant sign celebrated by the body of Christ, i.e. the Christian *community*. Today the Eucharist bears almost no resemblance to the Christian Passover meal that it was originally. Does anyone think there was silence at the celebration of the Passover, that everyone sat silently minding his own business? Celebrations are not usually like that. Funerals are though. Unfortunately, the Eucharist is more akin to a funeral service than a celebration of our deliverance from sin by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The refusal to take seriously the context of the communion service, i.e. the Christian Passover meal, a *feast* celebrating our deliverance from sin by the Lord Jesus Christ, is a serious failure of the Church's duty to God and to her members. Doubtless there are all sorts of reasons why the Church should not follow the Bible in this matter but follow the inventions of men instead.—Oh dear! We might even have to include our children in a shared meal. How dreadful!⁶

Communion is no longer a fellowship meal around the Lord's table. It is a solemn rite, a mere ritual. Instead of having fellowship we sing choruses or sit quietly communicating with no one while we are subjected to the ubiquitous chorus on the assumption that late twentieth-century love ballad-style pop music is somehow more spiritual than the fellowship that the Lord Jesus himself instituted as central to the life of his Church. I believe that such mood creation is no more spiritual than talking with each other in church, indeed is a hindrance to true spirituality because the stripping of talk, communication, fellowship, from our activities in

⁶ On the inclusion of children in the Eucharist see "Covenant Signs and Sacraments" in my book *Common-Law Wives and Concubines*, pp. 32–46.

church does not enhance or enrich our worship together; rather, it impoverishes our life as the Church, i.e. as a *community of faith*.

It is as if fellowship together in church were not really central to our Church life, but an optional extra after the real business of meeting as a Church has been accomplished. I disagree entirely. I see nothing inherently spiritual in working oneself into an emotional or mystical mood by the use of music or any other form of “spiritual” exercise. Is this not really a Christianised version of the chants that pagan religions use anyway? Certainly the effect seems to be similar, namely, a largely *mindless* time of emotional incontinence or mystical self-indulgence.

§5

THE REAL THING: A CHRISTIAN PASSOVER FEAST

The Lord Jesus Christ is the true Passover sacrifice, of which the Jewish paschal lamb was the type. The Last Supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples was the culmination of the Jewish Passover, since Christ is the antitype to which the Jewish type pointed. Just as the Jewish Passover pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, so the Christian Passover, the Lord’s Supper, points back to the sacrifice that Christ made once and for all time. The true celebration of the Passover, therefore, passed from the Jewish rite to the Christian rite, i.e. the Lord’s Supper, the Christian Church’s celebration of the salvation that Christ accomplished for his people by his life, death and resurrection. The model for the latter, the Lord’s Supper, is the Last Supper, which was the last Jewish Passover⁷ and the first Christian Passover. Our Eucharist or Lord’s Supper celebrates this salvation by pointing

⁷ Obviously, the Jews continued to observe the Jewish Passover after Christ’s passion, but in reality it became after this an empty form, devoid of true meaning, since the purpose for which it was instituted, i.e. to typify the sacrifice of Christ for sin, had been fulfilled in Christ’s passion, rendering its observation ineffectual, just as the other sacrificial and ceremonial rituals of the Old Testament became ineffectual after Christ had sacrificed himself on the cross for sin once and for all time because what they pointed to had been fulfilled.

back to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, the true paschal sacrifice. The Lord's Supper (or communion or Eucharist) is therefore the Christian Passover celebration.

But the first Christian Passover gives us, in fact, a very different model of what should happen at the communion service, indeed a radically different model, from anything I have experienced at the Eucharists or communion services of most Churches. In the original Christian Passover service we have a *meal*—the archetypal fellowship situation. People are talking to each other, discussing their situation and the meaning of the events of which they are a part. Jesus is speaking to them about the same events. They ask him questions and he teaches them. They eat a meal together. When Jesus breaks the bread and says “This is my body” he does it in this context. The Jewish Passover, on which the Christian Passover is based, is a shared meal, not a service of the type we are accustomed to in church today. The Eucharistic practice of the Church today is a ritual designed by clergymen for clergymen, not a fellowship meal designed to equip the saints for service (Eph. 4:12).

The Church has signally failed to appreciate the importance of the shared meal in Scripture. As a result the quality of Church life has suffered significantly. This emphasis on the mundane act of eating shows how, in Scripture, there is no sacred/secular dichotomy. All of life is religious. Eating a meal together should be just as much a spiritual activity as praising God by singing a hymn; indeed, in Scripture sharing a meal together has a far greater significance and importance than singing of any kind. Many, however, cannot conceive how such a mundane activity as eating can be spiritual. But it is. Not only can eating be a supremely spiritual activity when thanks are given to God, it is part of one of the most important rituals in the life of the institutional Church. Men cannot do anything more spiritual than eating together with others when their attitude is right. But when did your Church last eat together as a Church? I don't mean when did you last ingest a five millimetre cube of bread—or perhaps it was a stale wafer with the exciting taste of cardboard—and a sip of wine in church;

nor do I mean when did your Church last have a social occasion that some members of the Church attended. I mean when did the Church last have a meal in the context of a service, or rather, a worship service in the context of a shared meal, which is what the Christian Passover is? The importance of communal eating, fellowship around the Lord's table, has been missed by the Church. This is because Christians spend too much time in church doing things that the Bible does not require and too little doing those things it does require.

We need to take seriously the importance of fellowship and eating together in the Bible. Eating together is inherently fellowship oriented. That's why people go out for a meal together, or have people round to their homes for a meal. And that is why Christ has made eating together the context of one of the most important rituals in the life of his Church. Because the Church has failed to listen to the Bible at this point she has seriously underestimated the importance of fellowship and has substituted singing, ritual and the spiritual mood for true fellowship. This failure has blighted the life of the Church.

In the first Christian Passover, as with the Jewish Passover, fellowship together in the context of a social meal was a vitally important element. It is in the context of fellowship that the Lord's Supper finds its meaning, and this is why the shared meal is so important. To strip away the fellowship is to strip away at least half of the meaning of the rite. Yet this is precisely what the Church has done by instituting clergy-designed communion services instead of communion services based on Christ's design. Some reassertion of balance is called for in our corporate worship. The first Christian Passover (communion) gives us much food for thought.

First, as mentioned already, the context of the communion should be fellowship over a shared meal, not a clergy-oriented performance. Fellowship is not an afterthought; it is at the heart of the rite; indeed it is the entire context. This means that talking, discussion, interaction, communication is essential, just as teaching is essential. This is why a meal is so important in Scripture, and should be to us. Breaking bread together does not mean "having

a communion service” in the modern sense, where everyone remains quiet and isolated from each other, maintaining their own personal piety or spiritual mood. It means, on the contrary, having fellowship, having a meal together. This is so important to the practice of the Christian faith that the Lord Jesus Christ made the remembrance and celebration of the salvation he accomplished for his followers part of a shared fellowship meal. We celebrate our deliverance from sin around his table at a *feast*. This is what Scripture teaches about the Lord’s Supper.

Second, singing hymns and choruses is not stressed in the Bible as an important part of the Lord’s Supper (though music and singing are stressed in other contexts⁸). In fact at the first Christian Passover it is singing that has the place of an afterthought at the end of the meal. “And when they had sung *an* hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives” (Mt. 26:30; Mk. 14:26). Please observe the word in italics. They sang *an* hymn at the end. No mention of getting into the right mood and all that. They sang *an* hymn at the end. In other words, at the first Christian Passover, singing had the place that coffee after the service has in most of our churches today. It seems the clergy-designed communion service with its emphasis on “spirituality” has got a number of its priorities upside down here.

Third, in the early Church this emphasis—i.e. the biblical emphasis on the context of the Lord’s Supper—continued after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Lord’s Supper of the early Church was celebrated in the context of the agape feast (cf. Jude 12).⁹ This was the antithesis of what happens in church today. Communion is a feast at the Lord’s table, a communal celebration of Christ’s victory over sin and death and of our deliverance from the same. Without this feast around the Lord’s table communion loses much of its significance and resembles a funeral service more than a feast of celebration.

⁸ On the use of music in church see further my essay “Some Thoughts on the Use of Music in Church” in *Christianity & Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Summer, 2009), pp. 54–57.

⁹ For the historical evidence on this see Part Two *infra*.

Fourth, at Corinth, the New Testament's archetype of what can go wrong in the life of the Church, the agape feasts were being abused—i.e. the members of the Church, the body of Christ, were abusing each other. They turned the agape feast into drunken revelry and disregarded each other, thinking only of themselves¹⁰ (1 Cor. 11:20ff. The pagan religious background of the Corinthian culture may have had an influence in this. The cult of Dionysus—the Roman Bacchus—was celebrated at wild riotous festivals in ancient Greece). In doing this they failed to discern the body, i.e. they failed to appreciate that in treating each other in this way they were abusing Christ himself (Mt. 25:40, 45). Paul dealt with this by applying some discipline to their gatherings. He tells them to eat at home, thereby separating the agape feast from the covenant signs of bread and wine and putting a stop to the former. Why? Because of the abuse. He did this in order to restore order and compassion in their meetings, which had become a disgrace and abusive. He did not do it to establish a new paradigm for the Church universal to follow, and there is no hint of such in 1 Cor. 11:20–34. This was a disciplinary measure. The New Testament does not institute this disciplinary measure as a new practice to be followed by the whole Church. If we read the New Testament in context we should see this more clearly. Paul does not lay down a disciplinary measure intended for one Church as a paradigm to be followed in Churches where such abuse was not present. If such an interpretation were valid we should have to conclude logically that excommunication, a disciplinary measure for those who have apostatised, should also be practised as a matter of course in all church services regardless of whether there is apostasy. Such reasoning would be absurd. And it is just as absurd to apply Paul's disciplinary measure aimed at an abusive situation in Corinth to all church services regardless of whether there is any abuse. Excommunication is not part of the normal life of the Church, it is a remedy used in extreme cases of apostasy. Likewise, the separation of the agape feast from the covenant signs of bread and wine was an extreme disciplinary measure aimed at a Church that had abused the agape feast.

¹⁰ See further the quotation from Godet at note 21 on p. 32f. *infra*.

The Church has now almost universally normalised an extreme disciplinary measure as the abiding practice for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This means that the Christian Passover has become for many primarily a means of discipline; indeed some Churches and clergymen will argue that the Eucharist is primarily a means of discipline, which really means, if the matter is to be stated honestly, that it is a means of maintaining their own power and authority. And of course we have the problem of restriction, i.e. who can come to the Lord's Supper, since despite the fact that all who love the Lord are invited to the "table" in most churches children are usually forbidden from partaking (i.e. they are automatically excommunicated for being children, and this contrary to the specific command of the Lord Jesus Christ himself—Mk 10:14; Lk. 18:16). We observe the Lord's Supper in a disciplinary form, i.e. a form designed for a disobedient Church that cannot be trusted to practise the faith properly. Now, if our Churches are disobedient and abusive when we celebrate the Lord's Supper we need to repent. If not, we need to rehabilitate the normal biblical procedure for the celebration of our deliverance from sin at the Eucharist—the Christian Passover feast. The feast, and therefore the fellowship, should be part of the celebration of our deliverance together around the Lord's table, not an added extra tagged on at the end or after the service has finished. The Eucharist should be the feast. Until we restore this biblical emphasis I suspect that many of our Churches will continue to fall short of being a Christian *community*, much less a social order, and remain a collection of individuals who attend some of the same church rituals.

§6

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

In conclusion I want to reiterate that the form of our communion service today is itself a form of abuse of Christ's ordinance. My comments about this are not directed only at the Church of England. Communion has become many different things to dif-

ferent Churches. The Lord's Supper is the Christian Passover, a celebration of our deliverance from sin through the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ. In some Churches, however, communion has become a form of discipline (e.g. Presbyterianism). To others it has become a magical rite and a substitute for adherence to the covenant (e.g. Episcopalianism). In other Churches it is like a funeral service where people beat their chests to atone for their own sin (e.g. Brethren and assorted Free Churches). All these practices are abuses of the original institution. There is no wonder people are deserting the Church in droves. What they get when they go to church is often a perversion of the biblical message and the biblical emphasis to which the Church should aspire.

The Church is not an attractive community to many non-believers. The Church is not an attractive community to many *believers*. And this is because usually the Church is not a *community* at all, but rather a mere venue for a series of ritual acts that people do at the same time in the same place. In other words, in church so often what we have is not corporate worship but people worshipping individually in the same building at the same time. The Church often does not function as a community at all. Now, it would be odd indeed if the members of a family never talked to each other when they sat down together for a meal. Such a family would be considered dysfunctional. And a Church, which is part of the *family* of God, that acts in the same way is also dysfunctional. Yet this is precisely the case every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. And it is no good hiding behind the Church's rules, procedures and traditions. When clergymen *want* to change things, even on a local basis, they usually have no problems doing so. Yet so often when we wish to follow the Bible, tradition and Church rules are cited as the reason for not doing such things, or we are told such things are not practical. These are excuses for the preservation of "services" that amount to little more than ritual abuse.

How can I expect non-believers to give a hearing to what I myself find to be a perversion of what the Bible sets forth—and many in the Church of England have tacitly acknowledged this deficiency by their endorsement of the social meal setting of the

Alpha course.¹¹ And if we don't like the ritual abuse that goes on in church we are deemed unspiritual (I refer here not merely to Church of England ritual, but to the rituals of most denominations, which in substance vary very little from each other). Until the Church is prepared to address this issue I fear she will merely continue to manage her own decline nicely, oblivious of the remedy that is set forth in the Bible. I suggest that the first thing we need to do is to stop numbing our minds with more of those choruses and hymns and start thinking seriously in church, in the worship service, about what it means, not to *go* to church, but to *be* the Church—i.e. a Christian society, indeed a Christian *social order*—and therefore about what it means to celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

§7

POSTSCRIPT

The more I read and study the Bible the more I find the context of Church life, and especially the Sunday “services,” alien to what I read in the Bible. I find it increasingly hard to reconcile the Scriptures with the context of Church life. The Church seems to live on a different planet, a planet where God does not speak the message of the gospel in the way that he spoke it in the Bible. On the Church planet there is no relevant relationship between what goes on in church and what goes on in the world God has put us in or the nation we are commissioned to disciple.¹² When we go into church we enter a different world, a world that is secluded from the world that God made and that he addresses so uncompromis-

¹¹ Unfortunately, it appears that a high proportion of people who attend Alpha courses never make the transition to regular attendance at church services. It has been observed that “One reason for the high drop-out rate from church of Alpha ‘graduates’ may be that they do not find the social meal setting in church—i.e. they are introduced to one expression of Christianity via Alpha and then expected to adapt to another, less natural one, later on.”

¹² On the nature and meaning of the Great Commission see my essay *The Great Decommision* (Taunton: Kuyper Foundation, 2011).

ingly in the Scriptures. And yet, when we get round to discussing anything that is not directly related to the Church's ritual activities it turns out that precisely the same range of opinions and attitudes that characterises the world-view of non-believers is to be found among believers. The sacred/secular dichotomy has come home to roost! So, we are supposed to get ourselves psyched up into a "spiritual" mood for Sunday worship so that we can appreciate the "mystery and wonder of the transcendent God" but this has no relationship to the real world in which we live, does not affect how we think about the issues that face us as members of society, sent out into that society by the Lord Jesus Christ with a commission to bring it into subjection to his will. We continue as before with the same set of worldly opinions about education, politics, welfare, economics, crime, etc., all of which remain largely untouched by our encounter with the transcendent God. This just does not make sense biblically.

The problem discussed above regarding the Christian Passover is merely one aspect of this dichotomy between the practice of the Church and the message of the Bible. However, because the meeting of Christians together for purposes specified in Scripture is so important, including their equipment for service in the world (Eph. 4:11-16), it is necessary that we think seriously about reforming what we do as the assembled community of faith in accordance with Scripture if we are to be effective missionaries in our daily lives, thereby serving and bearing witness to God in our vocations. I am not saying that reformation of the worship service and restoration of the Christian Passover is all we need to do. Far from it. But it is essential because I believe that without it the body of Christ as a whole will continue to fall short of being the *community of faith*, the *social order*, that the Bible shows she should be and therefore devoid of the spiritual renewal, moral strength, and religious vision she needs to go out into the world and bring it into subjection to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

PART TWO

EUCCHARIST AND AGAPE IN
THE EARLY CHURCH

§1

THE APOSTOLIC AGE

It has been accepted by virtually all Christian traditions that the Last Supper was a Passover meal (Mt. 26:17–30; Mk 14:12–26; Lk. 22:14–38; Jn 13ff.). It has also been accepted by virtually all Christian traditions that in the early Church the Lord's Supper, for which the Last Supper is the model and pattern,¹³—since, as mentioned above, Christ is the true paschal sacrifice of which the Jewish paschal lamb was the type—was celebrated as part of a common fellowship meal, the agape feast,¹⁴ although the precise relationship between the Eucharistic rite (the giving of thanks for and consuming of the wine and bread that symbolise the blood and broken body of Christ) and the common fellowship meal has been subject to some debate.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear that the two were, at least in the primitive Church, celebrated together, indeed were

¹³ It seems, however, that very little of the *liturgy* of the Jewish Passover, with the exception of the cup of blessing and the prayers of thanksgiving, survived into the practice of the Christian Passover, i.e. the Lord's Supper. See Augustus Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1851), Vol. I, p. 448f.

¹⁴ Cf. Joseph A. Jungmann, S.J., *The Early Liturgy To the Time of Gregory the Great* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, [1959] 1960, trans. Francis A. Brunner), p. pp. 30–34.

¹⁵ See A. J. Maclean, "Agape" in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark), Vol. I, p. 166bf.

initially indistinguishable.¹⁶ This is evident from Paul's criticism of how the Corinthian Christians came together to celebrate the feast¹⁷ (1 Cor. 11:20–34). It is generally agreed by commentators that this was a combined Eucharist and agape feast, and the Church Fathers who refer to this Scripture all consider this to have been the case.¹⁸ According to the Church historian Augustus Neander: "After the example of the Jewish Passover, and of the original institution, the Lord's supper was accordingly at first united with a *social meal*. Both constituted a whole, representing the communion of the faithful with their Lord, and their brotherly communion with one another; both together were called the supper of the Lord (δέιπνον τοῦ κυρίου, δέιπνον κυριακόν) the supper of love (ἀγάπη)."¹⁹ Likewise, Lightfoot states: "In the Apostolic age the eucharist [*sic*] formed part of the agape. The original form of the Lord's Supper, as it was first instituted by Christ, was thus in a manner kept up. This appears from 1 Cor. xi.17 sq (comp. Acts xx.7), from which passage we infer that the celebration of the eucharist came, as it naturally would, at a late stage in the entertainment."²⁰ Of course the agape feasts of the Corinthian Church had degenerated into an unacceptable abuse. Frederic Godet summed up the problems with the Corinthian agape feasts in the following way:

all the provisions should have been put together and eaten in common by the whole Church. But selfishness, vanity, sensuality, had prevailed in this usage, and deeply corrupted it. These *Agapæ* at Corinth had degenerated into something like those feasts of friends in use among the Greeks where men gave themselves up to drinking excesses such as we find sketched in the *Symposium* of Plato. And what was still graver . . . each was careful to reserve for himself and his friends the meats he had provided; hence it was inevitable that an offensive inequality should appear between the guests, becoming to many of them a source of humiliation, and contrast-

¹⁶ See W. Lock, "Love-Feasts" in James Hastings, ed., *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1900), Vol. III, p. 157af. Cf. M. H. Shepherd, Jr, "The Agape" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. 1, p. 53af. and "Lord's Supper" in *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 158bf.

¹⁷ See p. 26 *supra*. ¹⁸ Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 167b. ¹⁹ Neander, *op. cit.*, p. 442f.

²⁰ *The Apostolic Fathers*, Part II, *S. Ignatius, S. Polycarp* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889, Second Edition), Vol. II, p. 313b.

ing absolutely with the spirit of love, of which such a feast should have been the symbol.²¹

As discussed above, Paul's remedy for this abuse was to separate partaking of the covenant signs of bread and wine (the Eucharist) from the social meal and to put an end to the latter. But this was not a prescription for the Church generally. It was a disciplinary measure aimed at stopping an abusive practice in a particular Church at a particular time. We do not know whether or when the agape feast was subsequently restored to the Church at Corinth, but the combined Eucharist and agape feast continued for some considerable time in the wider Church, and there is no teaching in Scripture requiring the permanent separation of the two by Paul or any of the other apostles. The epistle of Jude also refers to the Church's love (i.e. agape) feasts (Jude 12, cf. 2 Pet. 2:13), similarly warning the Church of those who abuse them, but there is no attempt to bring the practice to an end and no criticism *per se* of the combined Eucharist and agape feast.

§2

THE SUB-APOSTOLIC AGE

There is also evidence from outside the New Testament that the common fellowship meal, the agape feast, was the context in which the early Church celebrated the Eucharist or Lord's Supper.

The *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* is an early anonymous treatise on the Christian life and Church order and part of the collection of works commonly known as the Apostolic Fathers. The oldest complete manuscript transcription of the *Didache* is dated 1056 A.D.²² but the work is much older than this and its composition is estimated to have been somewhere between 60 and

²¹ Cited in J. F. Keating, *The Agapé and the Eucharist in the Early Church: Studies in the History of the Christian Love-Feasts* (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), p. 48.

²² J. B. Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, 1891, one volume edition), p. 216.

160 A.D.²³ Clement of Alexandria (*c.* 150–215 A.D.) quotes directly from the *Didache* in his work *The Stromata*,²⁴ and Eusebius (*c.* 263–339 A.D.) refers to it in his *Ecclesiastical History*.²⁵ Since the eleventh century manuscript was discovered in 1873 two much earlier papyri fragments have been discovered, one from the fourth century, the other from the fifth century.²⁶ The *Didache* gives instructions for the prayer of thanksgiving at the Eucharist. It then goes on to give instructions for the prayers of thanksgiving to be said “after ye are satisfied.”²⁷ The latter is a prayer to be said at the end of the meal, and distinct from the earlier Eucharistic prayer.²⁸ The implication is that the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist and the agape feast were still celebrated together at this early date.

Ignatius of Antioch, in his epistle to the Smyræans, written early in the second century,²⁹ makes the following statement: “It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast.”³⁰ Although there has been some debate about it³¹ the most reasonable interpretation of this statement is that the agape feast included the Eucharist. According to Lightfoot the words “either to baptize or to hold an agape” “seem to describe the two most important functions in which the bishop could bear a part, so that the ἀγάπη [agape] must include the eucharist. Indeed there

²³ J. A. Robinson, *Barnabas, Hermas and the Didache* (London: SPCK/New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), p. 43.

²⁴ “It is therefore said, ‘Son, be not a liar; for falsehood leads to theft’”—Bk I, Chpt. 20 (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark], Vol. II, p. 324*a*); cf. *Didache*, Chpt. 3, “My child, be not a liar, since lying leads to theft” (Lightfoot, *op. cit.* [1891, one volume edition], p. 230).

²⁵ *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk III, Chpt. 25, §4 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Father of the Church*, Second Series (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark), Vol. I, p. 156.

²⁶ H. M. Shepherd, Jr, “Didache” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 841*bf*. A fragment of a Latin translation also exists (reproduced in Lightfoot, *op. cit.* [1891, one volume edition], p. 225).

²⁷ Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (1891, one volume edition), p. 232*f*.

²⁸ On the various interpretations of this text and alternative theories regarding the order of the events described in it see Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 168, 173*b*, cf. Lock, *op. cit.*, p. 157*b*.

²⁹ Maclean puts the date at *c.* 110 A.D. (*op. cit.*, p. 168*b*).

³⁰ Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (1891, one volume edition), p. 158.

³¹ See Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 169*a*.

would be an incongruity in this juxtaposition, as Zahn truly says (*I. v. A.* p. 348), unless the other great sacrament were intended . . . Nor would the omission of the eucharist be intelligible.”³²

It seems clear from this that the Eucharist and the agape feast were still celebrated together at the beginning of the second century. However, Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus from 110–113 A.D., in a letter to the emperor Trajan *c.* 112 A.D.³³ regarding the treatment of Christians, makes the following statement:

They [i.e. former Christians whom Pliny had questioned but who had subsequently denied the faith—SCP] affirmed, however, the whole of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath [*sacramento*], not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Even this practice, however, they had abandoned after the publication of my edict, by which, according to your orders, I had forbidden political associations.³⁴

It has been argued that Pliny’s reference to an oath here was a misunderstanding. The word used, *sacramentum*, meant *oath* in the ordinary Roman usage of the time. It is believed by some scholars³⁵ that Pliny mistook the Christians’ use of the term to refer to the Eucharist for the ordinary meaning of the term, i.e. *oath*.³⁶ The inference from this is then that the Eucharist had by this time been

³² Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (1889), Part II, Vol. II, p. 313*b*.

³³ See *ibid.*, Part II, Vol. I, p. 56.

³⁴ Pliny the Younger, *Letters* (London: William Heinemann/New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1937, trans. William Melmoth), Book. X, No. xcvi, Vol. II, p. 403*f*.

³⁵ See for example J. F. Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 54*ff.*; Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, Part II, Vol. II, p. 314*a*; Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticæ; or The Antiquities of the Christian Church* (London: William Straker, 1839), Vol. V, p. 403.

³⁶ On the meaning of the word *sacramentum* and its use by the Church for the rites of baptism and the Lord’s Supper see “Covenant Signs and Sacraments” in my book *Common-Law Wives and Concubines*, pp. 32–46.

separated from the agape feast and was celebrated in the morning before dawn while the latter was celebrated in the evening. There are, however, a number of problems with this theory. First, Pliny's letter contains the first recorded use of the Latin word *sacramentum* in relation to Christian worship.³⁷ The word does not appear in Christian writings until at least the late second century since there is little Latin Christian literature before this time.³⁸ It seems that Tertullian (160–220 A.D., fl. 197–220) was the first Christian writer to use the word *sacramentum* in the specifically Christian sense in reference to baptism and the Eucharist,³⁹ although he also uses it to mean *oath*.⁴⁰ After Tertullian *sacramentum* is used by other Christian Latin authors in relation to the Christian faith.⁴¹ To assume that Pliny misunderstood the meaning of *sacramentum*—if indeed it was even the word his informers used, which is another assumption that cannot be proved (see below)—seems to be reading later theological terminology back into the early second century when there is no evidence for such usage, and therefore anachronistic. Second, the use of the word *sacramentum* by Pliny to mean *oath* fits the context precisely. The context does not lend credibility to the idea that Pliny misunderstood his informers. According to Van Slyke,

Pliny specifies that this *sacramentum* does not bind Christians to one another for any criminal purpose. They swear rather to avoid such misdeeds as violating informal and consensual contracts for sales and loans—misdeeds that pagans apparently accused Christians of committing. Pliny's list of wicked acts that Christians swear *not to* commit bears some similarity to the list of deeds that Livy depicts Bacchanalians swearing *to* commit. Pliny keeps the Bacchanalian precedent in mind while investigating the possible crimes of Christians. He also weighs the Christian *sacramentum* in

³⁷ Daniel G. Van Slyke, "The Changing Meaning of *sacramentum*: Historical Sketches" in *Antiphon* (Society for Catholic Liturgy), Vol. 11, No. 3 (2007), p. 250.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

³⁹ E.g. *Against Marcion*, Bk IV, Chpt. 34: "ad sacramentum baptismatis et eucharistiae admittens" (cited in Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (1889), Part II, Vol. I, p. 51*bf*. See *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 405*a*); cf. Van Slyke, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

⁴⁰ *On Idolatry*, Chpt. XIX: "Non conuenit sacramento diuino et humano" (cited in Van Slyke, *op. cit.*, p. 252; see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 73*b*). The reference here is to the military oath of allegiance.

⁴¹ Van Slyke, *op. cit.*, p. 251*ff*.

terms of that sworn by thieves, who do indeed bind themselves together for a criminal purpose. Pliny's goal, after all, is to determine whether or not Christians are guilty of any crimes worthy of punishment.⁴²

Pliny's statement makes complete sense in itself. It does not leave us with questions and doubts about what is being referred to if we read it in a straightforward manner. According to Lightfoot "It would seem as if Pliny had here confused the two sacraments together. The words 'se sacramento obstringere' [to bind themselves by an oath] seem to refer to the baptismal pledge, whereas the recurrence on a stated day before dawn is only appropriate to the eucharist . . . This confusion he might easily have made from his misunderstanding his witnesses, if these witnesses related the one sacrament after the other, as they are related e.g. in Justin Martyr *Apol.* i.65, and in Tertullian *de Cor.* 3; more especially as it was the practice to administer the eucharist immediately to the newly baptized."⁴³ Similarly, Van Slyke says "many questions remain about this episode" and asks "What Christian phenomenon does Pliny have in mind? Does Pliny understand that Christian practice accurately? Pliny might be referring to the rites of Christian initiation, although this is by no means clear."⁴⁴ But this passage is only unclear if we insist on presupposing that Pliny's informers did not say or at least mean what he understood them to be saying, in other words if we insist on reading his account anachronistically. If we do not allow our reading to be coloured by later theological terminology such questions do not arise. Third, however, and ostensibly weighing against the above argument for taking the word *sacramentum* in its straightforward Roman sense, it has been claimed that the early Christians of this era would have objected to taking an oath of any kind⁴⁵ as a consequence of Christ's teaching against oath taking (Mt. 5:33–37). It is assumed, therefore, that the word *sacramentum* must have had some other meaning for Pliny's informers and that Pliny misunderstood what he heard. But on closer examination this objection will bear little weight. Here an-

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 250. ⁴³ Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (1889), Part II, Vol. I, p. 52a.

⁴⁴ Van Slyke, *op. cit.*, p. 250. ⁴⁵ See for example J. F. Keating, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

other of Van Slyke's comments is highly pertinent: "What word did the Christians whom Pliny interrogated use, since they likely did not speak Latin?"⁴⁶ Pliny was in Bithynia and Pontus, not Rome, and the lingua franca of the Roman empire at this time was koine Greek, not Latin. It is more than likely that *sacramentum* is Pliny's word for what he understood his informers to be talking about but not the actual word they themselves used. If this is so, as it almost certainly is, then this fact lends even less credibility to the idea that the Eucharist is what Pliny's informers were referring to and that he got his account of the matter garbled. The most obvious and reasonable interpretation of the account is that when the Christians met in the morning before dawn the Ten Commandments were recited and the congregation gave an undertaking to keep the law of God in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt. 5:17, 28:20; Jn 14:15) and apostolic teaching (Rom. 13:8–10). This does not imply the formal swearing of an oath in the sense forbidden to Christians, though Pliny may naturally have understood it to be the kind of oath he was used to hearing, and therefore used the term *sacramentum* in his letter to the emperor.⁴⁷ Making a promise, i.e. giving one's word, is not the same as swearing an oath in the sense forbidden to Christians, and the former is accepted by Christ (Mt. 5:37) and does not compromise Christian conscience. To assume that there is a reference here to the Eucharist is a great deal more far-fetched than assuming merely that the early Christians pledged themselves to keep God's law in their daily life, as the testimony of Justin Martyr shows,⁴⁸ and Pliny's account fully bears out this interpretation. It seems justifiable to conclude that there is in Pliny's letter no valid reason to assume or infer that *sacramentum* here refers

⁴⁶ Van Slyke, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

⁴⁷ According to Van Slyke, the word *sacramentum* came to mean "oaths, loyalties, and commitments made by four other groups [besides the military—SCP]: philosophers, barbarians, gladiators, and thieves. Of these, the *sacramentum* of thieves most directly impacts the nascent Christian use of the term" (*op. cit.*, p. 247).

⁴⁸ *The First Apology of Justin Martyr*, Chpt. LXV (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, 185a); cf. *The Apostolic Constitutions*, Bk II, Chpt XXXVI, (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VII, p. 413af.).

to the Eucharist, and therefore no reason to conclude that Pliny's letter is evidence of a separation of the Eucharist from the agape feast prior to Pliny's edict forbidding political meetings. Neander comments regarding the Lord's Supper and the agape feast that "we find them both united in the first church at Corinth; and so it probably was with the innocent, simple meal of the Christians of which Pliny speaks, in his report to the emperor Trajan."⁴⁹ Even Lightfoot, who on balance accepts the argument that Pliny's letter is evidence that the Eucharist had by this time been separated from the agape feast,⁵⁰ admits that the inference from Pliny's letter is "precarious."⁵¹ Of course, Pliny's letter does also state that the evening meeting had been abandoned by the Christians as a result of his edict forbidding political societies, and it is therefore conceivable, though by no means conclusive, that the Eucharist was separated from the agape feast thereafter, at least in Bithynia and Pontus.

§3

TERTULLIAN AND BEYOND

It seems, however, that by the time that Tertullian was writing in the late second and early third centuries the Eucharist had become separated from the agape feast. In his *Apologeticus*, dated between c. 198 and 204 A.D.,⁵² Tertullian makes the following statement about the agape feast:

Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it *agapè*, i.e., affection. Whatever it costs, our outlay in the name of piety is gain, since with the good things of the feast we benefit the needy; not as it is with you, do parasites aspire to the glory of satisfying their licentious propensities, selling themselves for a belly-feast to all disgraceful treatment,—but as it is with God himself, a peculiar respect is shown to the lowly. If the object

⁴⁹ Neander, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

⁵⁰ Lightfoot, *op. cit.* (1889), Part II, Vol. I, p. 52*b*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Part II, Vol. II, p. 314*a*.

⁵² *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 17*a*, note 1.

of our feast be good, in the light of that consider its further regulations. As it is an act of religious service, it permits no vileness or immodesty. The participants, before reclining, taste first of prayer to God. As much is eaten as satisfies the cravings of hunger; as much is drunk as befits the chaste. They say it is enough, as those who remember that even during the night they have to worship God; they talk as those who know that the Lord is one of their auditors. After manual ablution [i.e. washing of hands—SCP], and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from holy Scripture or one of his own composing,—a proof of the measure of our drinking. As the feast commenced with prayer, so with prayer it is closed. We go from it, not like troops of mischief-doers, nor bands of vagabonds, nor to break out into licentious acts, but to have as much care of our modesty and chastity as if we had been at a school of virtue rather than a banquet.⁵³

It is clear from the references here to worshipping God in the night and the bringing in of lights that the agape feast ran into the evening. However, in his treatise *De Corona* (or *The Chaplet*), dated c. 204 A.D.,⁵⁴ Tertullian makes the following statement: “We take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike.”⁵⁵ It appears from a comparison of these two passages that the Eucharist had in Tertullian’s time been separated from the agape feast and was celebrated in the morning before dawn while the latter continued to be celebrated in the evening.

It is doubtful there was ever complete uniformity in the way the various Churches throughout the Roman empire celebrated the agape feast, but the above account indicates the general practice. Canon 28 of the Council of Laodicea, which took place sometime between 343 and 381 A.D., forbade the holding of agape feasts in churches,⁵⁶ although agape feasts were not forbidden

⁵³ *Apology*, Chpt. XXXIX, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 47af.

⁵⁴ *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 93a note 1.

⁵⁵ Chpt. III, (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 94b.)

⁵⁶ “It is not permitted to hold love feasts, as they are called, in the Lord’s Houses, or Churches, nor to eat and to spread couches in the house of God” (*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark], Vol. XIV, p. 148).

altogether.⁵⁷ The Council of Gangra, held sometime between 325 and 381 A.D., defended the agape feasts and anathematised anyone who despised them or those who attended them.⁵⁸ The practice of holding agape feasts in churches, however, does not seem to have come to an end entirely with the Council of Laodicea since Canon 74 of the Council of Trullo or Quinisext Council in 692 A.D. repeats the Council of Laodicea's ban.⁵⁹ It seems the agape feast eventually fell into complete disuse after this.

§4

THE SEPARATION OF AGAPE AND EUCHARIST

The questions we must consider now are these: first, why was the Eucharist permanently separated from the agape feast, and second, why did the Church ban the holding of agape feasts in Church buildings, with the eventual result that they ceased altogether? J. A. Robinson gives the following four reasons for the separation of the Eucharist from the agape feast: (a) the increase in numbers of Christians made holding the feast more difficult in itself and unsuitable as the context for the celebration of the Eucharist. (b) Abuses such as those at Corinth in apostolic times were always likely where large numbers met together to feast.⁶⁰ (c) There was a great expansion of liturgical developments accompanying the Eucharist, and (d) celebration of the Eucharist was restricted to occasions when a bishop or his deputy could be there to officiate.⁶¹ Of these four reasons the first two are logistical and Church dis-

⁵⁷ Canon 27 states: "Neither they of the priesthood, nor clergymen, nor laymen, who are invited to a love feast, may take away their portions, for this is to cast reproach on the ecclesiastical order" (*ibid.*).

⁵⁸ "If anyone shall despise those who out of faith make love-feasts and invite the brethren in honour of the Lord, and is not willing to accept these invitations because he despises what is done, let him be anathema" (Canon 11, *ibid.*, p. 96)

⁵⁹ The Canon adds the warning: "If any dare to do so let him cease therefrom or be cut off" (*ibid.*, p. 398).

⁶⁰ See further the Excursus on p. 52ff. *infra*.

⁶¹ J. A. Robinson, "Eucharist" in *Encyclopædia Biblica* (New York: The Macmillan Company/London: Adam and Charles Black, 1903), Vol. II, col. 1425.

cipline problems respectively that are not insurmountable and therefore do not *per se* constitute valid reasons for separating the Eucharist from the agape feast. The real reasons for the separation of the Eucharist from the agape feast are to be found in the last two causes mentioned by Robinson: liturgical expansion and growth of clerical control over the Church, and these two causes really amount to the same thing. “The agapæ” says Robinson “lost more and more their semi-eucharistic character. They became in some places occasions of unseemly riot or mere excuses for wealthy banqueting; and Clement of Alexandria, at the close of the second century, is already indignant that so lofty a name should be given to them, and complains that ‘Charity has fallen from heaven into the soups’.”⁶² According to Neander the reason for the abolition of the agape feast was that “these meals were especially calculated to excite the jealousy of the heathen, and gave birth to the strangest and most malicious reports, a circumstance which may have early led to their abolition or less frequent observance.”⁶³ There were indeed malicious false reports about what Christians got up to at the agape feasts, and these included accusations of sexual immorality, incest and cannibalism. But these rumours were easily refuted⁶⁴ and were not the reason for the Church’s abandonment of the agape feast. Robinson summarises the reasons for the abolition of the practice more realistically:

the original institution underwent a twofold development, according as the liturgical or the social character of it came to predominate. In the one case, the supper itself disappeared, or was but symbolically represented by the consumption of small portions of bread and wine; the spiritual significance was emphasised, and the Eucharist became the centre of the Church’s worship. In the other case, the supper was everything, and the eucharistic acts which accompanied it were little more than graces before and after meat; the spiritual significance had passed elsewhere, and, though under favourable conditions the agapè still had its value and

⁶² *Ibid.*, col. 1425

⁶³ Neander, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

⁶⁴ See for example Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, Chpt. III (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, p. 130b); Theophilus of Antioch, *Theophilus to Autolytus*, Bk III, Chpt. IV (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, p. 112a); Tertullian, *Apology*, Chpt. VII (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. III, p. 23bf.).

lingered long, it had no principle of vitality left, and its place was filled in time by more appropriate methods of charitable assistance.⁶⁵

In other words, on the one hand the Eucharist became a “sacrament,” controlled by the clergy and attended by developed liturgical rituals, while the agape feast, on the other hand, became little more than a means of helping the poor that was superseded by more appropriate works of charity.

The real reason for the separation of the Eucharist from the agape feast, therefore, is intimately connected with the demise of the latter and to be found in the fact that it was difficult to transform the agape feast into a clergy-controlled and regulated ritual, whereas the Eucharist, separated from the Agape and accompanied by an expanding liturgy, was easily transformed into a rite that could be sacralised and subjected to clerical domination. The ritualisation of the Church’s cultic activities was essential if the clergy were to take control of Christ’s Church. The separation of the Eucharist from the social meal along with the sacralisation of the former and abolition of the latter as the permanent practice of the Church, however, goes against the institution established as the norm for the Church by the Lord’s own example and command at the Last Supper. In other words, in order to consolidate their power the clergy hi-jacked the Eucharist and dispensed with the agape feast, since the latter was a hindrance to their ability to control the life of the Church. The life of the Church was then redefined and its most important communal expressions were transformed into rituals performed by the priesthood (sacerdotalism). The ability of the Christian community, the Christian *society* or *nation* (1 Pet. 2:9 cf. Ex 19:5–6),⁶⁶ to achieve the potential of its life as the true *social order*, although by no means completely suppressed, was nevertheless curtailed and restricted as an inevitable consequence. The development of this sacramental theology and practice, to

⁶⁵ Robinson, “Eucharist,” *Encyclopedia Biblica*, Vol. II, col. 1426.

⁶⁶ On the political nature of the Christian faith and the Church as a political community see my essay “Christianity as a Political Faith” in *Christianity & Society*, Vol. xiv, No. 2 (April 2004), pp. 16–23; see also the “Editorial” in the same issue.

put the matter in its true light, was the tool used to bring about the centralised bureaucratic control of the Church by clergymen. This problem can be observed in an incipient form in the efforts of the apostle Peter to establish control of the Church by means of ecclesiastical law-making prior to Pentecost (Acts 2:12–26), an attempt to take the Kingdom by force (Mt. 11:12) that was brought to nothing by the subsequent calling of the apostle Paul and the latter’s direct attack on the principle underpinning Peter’s agenda, namely, knowledge of Christ according to the flesh (2 Cor. 5:16). Of course, ritual *per se* is not sin, nor contrary to God’s word, and in some measure is unavoidable in life. But the development of a sacramental theology inevitably tied to an expanding ritual and the preservation and prioritising of the latter by an exclusive clerical order and its elevation to the most important aspect of the Church’s life and activity has blighted the mission of the Church throughout history. Already in the sub-apostolic era we see this development at work. “It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast” says Ignatius of Antioch. Why not? Whose law is this? Not Christ’s. Such a restriction is not found in Scripture. These are the laws of the bishops and clergymen who benefit from them at the expense of the “laity” and to the detriment of the mission of the Church and the Kingdom of God. “We take . . . from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike” says Tertullian. Why can the bread and wine be received only from the president? Christ did not command this. Neither does the subsequent teaching of the apostles. Who gave these bishops and clergymen this right to restrict the life of the Church in such a way? Not the Lord Jesus Christ or his apostles. “Charity has fallen from heaven into the soups”⁶⁷ says Clement of Alexandria.⁶⁸ Such contempt for the institution established by the Lord himself and the preference for rituals devised by men in its place is entirely worthy of the Pharisaism that Christ rebuked so severely. “Sacraments,”

⁶⁷ Or *saucēs*, see further the Excursus on p. 52ff. *infra*.

⁶⁸ *Pedagogus*, Bk II, Chpt. I.

which are nowhere to be found in Scripture,⁶⁹ were the invention of clerics as a tool for consolidating their own power and control over the Church and an abuse of the legitimate authority given to those who are elected to positions of oversight in the Church.

As the theology and practice of sacramentalism grew the Church was increasingly redefined as a clerical order (sacerdotalism). As a consequence the Christian faith and the Christian social order became over the centuries reduced almost to the function of the clergy, i.e. the *institutional* Church, with dire consequences for the mission of the Church as a social order. As power was concentrated into the hands of clerics (prelacy) the Kingdom of God became a target for those seeking power, as the Lord himself had forewarned (Mt. 11:12), and the Church was corrupted not only from within but also by invasion from without.⁷⁰ If the Church, as the true society,—i.e. a *social order* that is commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ to transform the whole world by discipling the nations—is to fulfil the task entrusted to her by her Lord in the Great Commission, Christians must reclaim their citizenship of the

⁶⁹ On the development of the concept of sacraments see “Covenant Signs and Sacraments” in my book *Common-Law Wives and Concubines*, pp. 32–46.

⁷⁰ It was inevitable that once a clerical order developed as the power base in control of the Church, the latter, as a newly established “principality” (cf. Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21, 3:10, 6:12; Col. 1:6, 2:10, 15; Tit. 3:1), should become subject to invasion from without by those motivated not by service of God but by the acquisition of power, contrary to the command of the Lord himself (Mt. 20:25–28). It should be remembered, however, that the precursor to this was the development of centralised bureaucratic control of the Church by the clerical order, i.e. the establishment of the Church as a principality by the Church leaders themselves. This development was begun and well advanced *before* Christianity became the established religion of the Roman empire. The problem of abuse of ecclesiastical power and the inevitable corruption that must accompany it, therefore, is not to be laid at the door of the establishment of the Christian Church as the religion of the State, as is often quite erroneously thought to be the case, but rather at the form of government adopted by the Church herself, i.e. prelacy, prior to the establishment of the Church as the religion of State. This is another aspect of the life of the Church that requires major reformation, since the present situation is unlikely to last a great deal longer; but this subject, important as it is, goes far beyond the scope of this essay. See further “The Establishment Principle” in my book *A Defence of the Christian State: The Case Against Principled Pluralism and the Christian Alternative* (Taunton: Kuyper Foundation, 1993), pp. 163–173.

Kingdom of God from those who have sought to dispossess them of it for so long. Centralised bureaucratic control of the Church by clergymen has vitiated the life of the Church as a social order and thereby wrecked the mission of the Church. The life of the Church as the true society, the true social order, must be restored if the Great Commission is to be accomplished.

§5

CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

I am aware that the above account of the baneful influence of the professional clergy on the development of the Church as a social order and her mission in the world may well be perceived as a conspiratorial interpretation of Church history. But this would be to misunderstand what I am saying. The truth is rather more prosaic and yet in reality reveals a fact that is certainly more problematic and indeed more dangerous to the well-being of society than the existence of any conspiracy, and it is this, that the logic of an idea, once it has gained a foothold in the human psyche, has a tendency to work itself out with a relentless consistency to its ultimate conclusions even among men of disparate cultures who have little or no contact with or knowledge of each other, but more especially so where that idea is widely accepted by a community—unless it is effectively challenged. And so it has been with sacerdotalism and prelacy, which even the Reformation was not able to expunge entirely from the minds of Christian men, and so the wretched harvest produced by these ideas began to grow once more before the dust thrown up by the ploughing of the Reformation had settled on the ground. And this is all the more remarkable because, as Max Weber pointed out, “every consistent doctrine of predestined grace inevitably implied a radical and ultimate devaluation of all magical, sacramental and institutional distributions of grace, in view of God’s sovereign will.”⁷¹

⁷¹ *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (University of California Press, [1968] 1978), Vol. 1, p. 574. According to Weber, this was “a devaluation

The Church today desperately faces the need for reformation, indeed for a reformation as great as, perhaps even greater than, the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Restoring the biblical Eucharist and agape feast combined according to the original ordinance of the Lord Jesus Christ must form part of this reformation since it is vital to the well-being of the Church. But it is unlikely that such a reformation will ever take place while the present structures of Church authority and the official magic that supports them retain their stranglehold on the life of the Church. It seems therefore inevitable, that the precursor to such a reformation can only be a complete collapse and final discarding of those structures and the ideologies that give them meaning and life. If the house is to be rebuilt again according to the Lord's design, the crooked foundations on which it previously stood must be cleared away for good.

that actually occurred wherever the doctrine of predestination appeared in its full purity and maintained its strength. By far the strongest such devaluation of magical and institutional grace occurred in Puritanism" (*ibid.*). And yet even Puritanism did not succeed in completely eradicating these ideas. See further "Covenant Signs and Sacraments" in my book *Common-Law Wives and Concubines*, pp. 32-46.

EPILOGUE

SINCE the original version of this essay was first published in April 2000 I have become convinced that the subject with which it deals is at the heart of an issue of much greater importance, namely the need for further reformation of the Church. The fossilisation of the Church's social life into a regime of set rituals controlled and performed by a professional priesthood was a major declension of the Church from the pattern set by the doctrine and example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself in his earthly ministry and the practice of the apostolic Church. This declension has had a serious impact on the mission of the Church. Nor is it a problem that is confined to the Episcopal Churches. Protestant Churches have also suffered from the corrupting effects of the same kind of ideology. The differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches with regard to this particular issue have often boiled down to little more than terminology and fancy dress.

As a social order the Church did not develop under this regime in a natural, i.e. biblically informed, way. After the apostolic age those aspects of the life of the Church as a social order that survived and flourished eventually metamorphosed into monastic orders under the influence of spiritual ideals that were alien to the Christian faith as understood in terms of a biblical world-view. According to R. L. Cole:

The most potent of the forces antagonistic to the Agape arose, however, within the Church itself [*sic*]. The fourth and fifth centuries were the age of the monastic ideal in the Church. It began in the East, but speedily, under Jerome's example principally, found firm footing in Western Christendom. There is no doubt that the monastic spirit was unfavourable to the Agape. The notion propagated was that if there were

to be common meals they should be held inside the bounds of the inner brotherhood of monks; if charity was to be controlled and administered, who could do so like those who had renounced the world and its gains? . . . It is much more than a coincidence that the rise of Monasticism and the fall of the Agape synchronize. There is a causal link between the two facts.

We have also to remember that the same period as saw the rise of Monasticism saw also the birth of a deep interest in the ritual of the Church. The earliest of the great cathedrals were being built, service-books were being produced, and a new sense of fitness and arrangement in public worship was developing. It was only to be expected that people would soon get to recognize the incongruity between the Agape and ceremonial worship. The archaic simplicity of the Love-feast was irreconcilable with the solemn splendour and the stately offices of a Gothic or Byzantine building.⁷²

This had a detrimental effect on the wider Church since, as Gerhard Uhlhorn pointed out, it had been on the agape feasts especially that the family-like unity of the Church had been impressed.⁷³

This is not to condemn the life and work of the monasteries completely. It is widely acknowledged that the monasteries preserved learning and by so doing contributed significantly to the development of Western civilisation. But they also preserved much of the life of the Church as a social order; yet they did so in a corrupt form that denied a basic God-given aspect of human nature (sexuality) and that therefore denied the divinely-ordained life of the family as the basic unit of Christian social order. The mediaeval Church rejected the family as the basic unit of the Christian social order and replaced it with the monasteries; the secular Church then became a mere cult controlled by the official priesthood, which maintained its power by means that directly conflicted with the command of the Lord Jesus Christ himself (Mt. 20:25–28). This had a significant impact on how the Church lived as the wider

⁷² *Love-Feasts: A History of the Christian Agape* (London: Charles H. Kelley, 1916), p. 254f.

⁷³ *Christian Charity in the Ancient Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), p. 252.

family of God; the result was that the Church came to function as a principality rather than as a *nation* (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9). Again, this is not to say that the Church did not have a decisive and ameliorative effect on the development of Western civilisation. Much good can be found in the influence of the mediaeval Church on society.⁷⁴ But it does mean that this influence fell far short of what it should have been, and must be in future if the Great Commission is to be fulfilled.

Of course the Reformation brought a much needed correction to many of the abuses of the mediaeval Church. But it did not go nearly far enough, and naturally retained much from the Church's mediaeval past. At the Reformation the Church took a great step forward, but she also stepped backwards in some respects. The Reformed Churches abandoned the monasteries, and with good reason, but they failed to realise the potential of the life of the Church as a social order, which had been preserved, albeit in an inadequate and corrupted form, in the monasteries. For example, the welfare role of the mediaeval Church, which was largely concentrated in the monasteries, was neglected by the Reformed Churches, not entirely, but sufficiently enough to create a vacuum that the modern idolatrous secular State has in our own age filled, and it was neglected largely because the importance of the life of the Church as a social order was not sufficiently understood and prioritised by the heirs of the Reformation. Nor did the Reformed Churches abandon centralised bureaucratic control of the Church by a professional clergy that remained focused, for the most part, on prioritising the Church's ritualised cultic activities as the essence of the life of the Church.

The consequence of this historical development is that the Church today has reached an impasse, and it has been impossible, and will remain impossible, for the Church to overcome this

⁷⁴ See for example Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1983) and Stanley L. Jaki, *Science and Creation: From Eternal Cycles to an Oscillating Universe* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1986); See also my book *Christianity and Law: An Enquiry into the Influence of Christianity on the Development of English Common Law* (Avant Books, 1993).

impasse without a willingness to embrace changes of the most profound and far-reaching kind. The modern Church in Britain had two official “decades of evangelism” in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet the Church still continues to decline. And she does so because she does not understand her mission. The gospel she preaches is a truncated gospel devoid of the vision necessary to breach the impasse, which can only be overcome by a recognition and acceptance of the truth that the Church is meant to be a social order, and not only *a* social order, but the *true* social order, the true society, that must grow until it displaces and then replaces the false and idolatrous social orders of men. For this to happen the Church must embrace a new reformation that will clear away the accretions of false doctrine and practice that continue to vitiate her life as a social order and impede her mission to the world. Only by doing this shall the Church be able to overcome the world and flourish, and as a consequence disciple the nations to Christ. If the need for this reformation is not accepted and embraced the Church will face a difficult and dark road ahead of her. The Church today faces a choice, just as the ancient Hebrews faced a choice after the exodus from Egypt: she can go forward into the place that God has prepared for her, or she can spend a generation, or possibly longer, in the wilderness. The time for making this choice is passing quickly. Unless she acts soon the decision will be made for her. “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: That thou mayest love the Lord thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Dt. 30:19–20).

EXCURSUS

THE claim that the agape feasts of the early Church tended to degenerate into occasions of riotous excess is frequently met with in both primary and secondary sources. That there were abuses on occasion is undeniable, as even the New Testament indicates. That these abuses were one of the main reasons for the eventual obsolescence of the agape feasts is a claim that should not be taken at face value. The early Church quickly came under the influence of an extreme spirit of asceticism the origin of which is not to be found in the Bible but in the pagan religious world-view of the age. This kind of asceticism was the way of life chosen by many of the “spiritual” virtuosi who became leaders and teachers of the Church, and as it has been pointed out, ascetically constituted minds frequently took offence at the agape feasts.⁷⁵ Clement of Alexandria is a good example of this ascetic ideal. He seems to have had a particular aversion to enjoying his food and says of those who do that “They have not yet learned that God has provided for His creatures (man I mean) food and drink, for sustenance, *not* for *pleasure*.”⁷⁶ He complains that “There is no limit to epicurism among men. For it has driven them to sweetmeats, and honey-cakes, and sugar-plums; inventing a multitude of desserts, hunting after all manner of dishes. A man like this seems to me to be all jaw, and nothing else.” Besides being a vegetarian and generally a minimalist in all matters culinary he seems to have had a particular obsession with the evils of sauces (or soups): “Altering these [various meats—SCP] by means of condiments, the gluttons gape for

⁷⁵ Gerhard Uhlhorn, *op. cit.*, p. 252f.

⁷⁶ *Pedagogus (The Instructor)*, Bk II, Chpt. I (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, p. 238a), my emphasis.

the *sauces* . . . whence some, speaking with unbridled tongue, dare to apply the name agape, to pitiful suppers, redolent of savour and *sauces*. Dishonouring the good and saving work of the Word, the consecrated agape, with pots and pouring of *sauce* . . . But the hardest of all cases is for charity, which faileth not, to be cast from heaven above to the ground in the midst of *sauces* . . . And how senseless, to besmear their hands with the condiments, and to be constantly reaching to the *sauce* . . . For is there not within a temperate simplicity a wholesome variety of eatables? Bulbs, olives, certain herbs, milk, cheese, fruits, all kinds of cooked food without *sauces* . . .” Clement nicely sums up his abhorrence of the pleasures of food in the following way: “We must therefore reject different varieties [of food—SCP], which engender various mischiefs, such as a depraved habit of body and disorders of the stomach, the taste being vitiated by an unhappy art—that of cookery, and the useless art of making pastry.”⁷⁷ Not surprisingly wine comes under the same condemnation: “I therefore admire those who have adopted an austere life, and who are fond of water, the medicine of temperance, and flee as far as possible from wine, shunning it as they would the danger of fire.”⁷⁸

Clement viewed all human desires in the same negative way. “Our ideal” he says “is not to experience desire at all . . . We should do nothing from desire . . . A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire which he feels for his wife.”⁷⁹ Origen, Clement’s student and successor at the Catechetical School in Alexandria, took this kind of reasoning to its logical conclusion and castrated himself.⁸⁰ And yet this kind of attitude to the human appetites and desires cannot be found in Scripture. “Delight thyself also in the Lord” says the

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, *passim* (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, pp. 237–242), my emphasis.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Chpt. II (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II, p. 243*d*).

⁷⁹ Cited in Gail Hawkes, *Sex and Pleasure in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 50. This quotation is taken from Book III of *The Stromata* (III. vii.57–58), which the editors of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* published only in Latin due to the sexual nature of the content.

⁸⁰ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Bk VI, Chpt. viii, §1–4 (*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. I, p. 254*df.*).

Psalmist “and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Ps. 37:4). Scripture does not teach that human desire *per se* is sinful or to be avoided. It is only the unlawful fulfilment or unlawful objects of desire that are condemned in Scripture. The Bible is certainly not a manual of asceticism; the enjoyment of lawful sexual relationships and feasting are both encouraged in Scripture. “Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love” (Pr. 5:18–19). In the Old Testament the Hebrews are *commanded* to feast three times each year in Jerusalem, using a portion of their tithe for this purpose (Dt. 14:23). And to those who lived at a great distance from Jerusalem the following instructions are given:

And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it [i.e. the tithe—SCP]; or if the place be too far from thee, which the Lord thy God shall choose to set his name there, when the Lord thy God hath blessed thee: Then shalt thou turn it into money, and bind up the money in thine hand, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose: And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever they soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household. (Dt. 14:24–26)

Clement’s condemnation of the enjoyment of food and of feasting is in stark contrast to the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. The apostle Paul condemned this attitude of asceticism in no uncertain terms as a departure from the faith:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. (1 Tim. 4:1–5 cf. Rom. 14:1–4)

It is no wonder the Agape suffered reproach from the ascetic holy men of the age, “Christian” or otherwise, as did the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who was also accused of being a glutton and a drunkard by the holy men of his own time, the Pharisees (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34). For someone with an ascetic world-view such as Clement’s only the most frugal of diets would be considered decent and all feasting would be condemned as gluttonous and degenerate. Given this perspective, the claims of extreme ascetics such as Clement cannot be relied upon to give a balanced account of the Christian agape feasts, which by definition must have been abhorrent to them. Such an attitude seems almost to be a denial of human nature as God has created it—i.e. all human desires and appetites are evil *per se*—and reveals the overriding influence of the Greek dualistic religious outlook (the Alexandrian world-view), which sharply contrasted the spirit as the divine spark in man with matter, which was deemed to be inferior, even evil. Indeed, Clement says “These gluttons, surrounded with the sound of hissing frying-pans, and wearing their whole life away at the pestle and mortar, cling to matter like fire,” a statement that reveals the pagan dualistic perspective behind his condemnation of feasting. Clement’s attitude towards the human desires and appetites was not a genuine expression of the Christian faith, but rather a *corruption* of the true faith—i.e. a Christianised version of the Alexandrian world-view that was endemic in the Graeco-Roman world. It is interesting that Clement, while on the one hand rejecting false Gnosticism, on the other hand identifies the Christian as the true Gnostic.⁸¹ Speaking of the Gnostics Archibald Robertson writes that “in their attempts at a comprehensive system of religious thought, grotesque and repellent as these attempts often were, they were in a sense the precursors of the great Alexandrian school; not only does Clement habitually use the term ‘Gnostic’ for the fully instructed Christian, but the theology which appears in its developed form in Origen is an endeavour to satisfy, on the basis of the Rule of Faith, the real needs which Gnosticism professed to meet, and to apply

⁸¹ See *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*.

in a rational and purified form whatever genuinely philosophical ideas Gnosticism embodied.” In a footnote Robertson explains that “The fundamental difference was that between the *esoteric Church* of the Gnostics, and the *esoteric perception* of the meaning of the common faith, at which Clement and Origen aimed.”⁸² The dualistic world-view upon which Gnosticism was based pervades Clement’s religious outlook.

The ascetic dualism of men like Clement of Alexandria, of which there were many in the early Church, is thoroughly pagan and cannot be justified from Scripture, which teaches man to give thanks to God for the good things of this earth and to *enjoy* them as an act of worship. The Lord’s Supper is meant to be a *feast* celebrating our deliverance from sin by the Lord Jesus Christ, not an exercise in asceticism.

⁸² *Regnum Dei: Eight Lectures on the Kingdom of God in the History of Christian Thought* (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), p. 152.