

An Agape Meal  
1 Corinthians 11:17-22  
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Do you know who St. Valentine was? I did a bit of poking around, and found that history is a bit uncertain about that. There are actually three different saints named Valentine or Valentinus, and all three of them were martyred. One legend contends that Valentine was a priest who served during the third century in Rome. When Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families, he outlawed marriage for young men — his crop of potential soldiers. Valentine, realizing the injustice of the decree, defied Claudius and continued to perform marriages for young lovers in secret. When Valentine's actions were discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death; legend has it that he was buried on February 14. Other stories suggest that Valentine may have been killed for attempting to help Christians escape harsh Roman prisons where they were often beaten and tortured.

According to one legend, Valentine actually sent the first 'valentine' greeting himself. While in prison, it is believed that Valentine fell in love with a young girl — who may have been his jailor's daughter — who visited him during his confinement. Before his death, it is alleged that he wrote her a letter, which he signed 'From your Valentine,' an expression still in use today. Although the truth behind the Valentine legend is murky, the stories certainly emphasize his appeal as a sympathetic, heroic, and, most importantly, romantic figure. Ladies, I hope you enjoy your flowers- Happy Valentine's Day!

Love- especially sacrificial love- has always been a hallmark of the early Christian church; that summarizing verse in John 3:16 emphasizes that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.....” Last week, I spoke of the importance of love-coordinated teamwork- a point emphasized by the Apostle Paul as he compared the church to a body... no one part more important than any other part; no spiritual gift more significant than any other. Contrary to what some suggest- the point emphasized last week is that there is no MVP... and that those who think so tend to create factions in the church. That’s precisely why Paul turned from a discussion of body parts and spiritual gifts to what he called “...the most excellent way” as he launched one of the most famous chapters in the Bible: 1 Corinthians 13’s “Love Chapter.”

At its best, the early church was known for its expressions of love; the ancient Roman historian Tertullian noted of Christians: “See how they love one another.” In Jude’s letter, in 2 Peter, and in several places in Acts, we find descriptions of what sounds like early church potlucks... fellowship meals... where people brought what they had, and shared everything in common in an act of love. **(Show slide- Acts 2:42-47; highlight Acts 2:45-47a; highlight Acts 2:47b)** describes such a setting in the early church: “Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” It wasn’t long before these meals became known as *agape*- the Greek word for self-giving love- meals, or love feasts.

Scholars are divided on just what the phrase “broke bread in their homes” meant. Some suggest that it just meant they ate together; others believe it suggests that it meant

that they celebrated the sacrament of the Lord's Supper together. Most believe that they did both, based on what we're about to read. **(close Acts 2:42-47 slide)**

Corinthians is clearly one of the Apostle Paul's earliest letters, and like most of his letters, was addressed to a church in some conflict. Factions had developed around various leaders and their teachings, around controversy about speaking in tongues, around eating meat offered to idols, around being baptized repeatedly in the name of deceased loved ones, and so on. Paul saw these controversies being scandalously acted out in how the Corinthians were taking part in their *agape* meals; we find these verses just one chapter earlier than last week's body parts teaching, and only two chapters before the love chapter. **(use pew Bible; read 1 Cor 11:17-22)**

Apparently folks were coming to eat, brought food and didn't share- and self-centered cliques were likely based on race- Jew/Gentile, or class- rich/poor. Early on in the church, the wealthy Jewish merchants would joyfully share their T-bone steak with the poor Gentile slaves, who would happily share with rich with their simple pita bread. In Corinth, that attractive practice had degenerated into each clique eating and drinking their own food- even to the point of some getting drunk on fine wine while other believers without food were left to sip water. Interestingly, **in verses 18-19**, Paul saw these factions as inevitable, and wondered if God would perhaps use them to show approval to one group or the other. The practice had become a blatant demonstration of disunity rather than unity, and anything but a witness to the transforming, uniting power of God's love.

Next, in verses **11:23- 26**, we find the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper... almost as if Paul were saying to these folks: "That may be the way you eat

when you come together... but the Lord's Supper is like this.... on the night he was betrayed.... and this is the meal that reminds you of God's great love- drink of it- all of you!" What a contrast to the self-centered meals being consumed by the Corinthians!

Pressing on in **verses 27 to the end of chapter 11**, Paul suggests that the Corinthians re-consider the way they came together for their supposed *agape* meals, or love feasts so that they refrain from sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. There's a need for each person to test his or her own heart attitude and actions before coming to worship- because consuming the Lord's Supper as self-centered, self-justified believers meant that one doesn't so much absorb grace as stand under judgment. Paul's words sound a bit harsh to us, but he reminds us that none of us stand in judgment or under judgment of one another- but solely under the judgment of the Lord who, Paul teaches, disciplines us "so that we will not be condemned with the world."

I read these words as an encouragement to look after one another; when we come together to worship, we're to consciously seek to love each other and not break apart into little coffee-drinking cliques. God will help us practice love, if we ask; Paul encouraged the Corinthians to wait for one before digging into their *agape* meal; maybe we could be a bit more sensitive to reaching out to include others in our own fellowship hall or lobby conversations. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our fellowship gatherings and potluck were more a demonstration of the *agape* spirit than the factionalism addressed by Paul? If each one of us were especially sensitive to the visitors among us, to those you may not know, showing some concern about broadening your circle or reaching to someone you had a disagreement with... maybe Crestview would edge a bit closer to the church Tertullian found when he said: "Look- see how they love one another!"

God willing, maybe someday we will be judged worthy to be spoken of in the same way described in Acts 2 just after Pentecost; where we read “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” **(put Acts 2:42-47 back up, with highlighted verses)** As the 1965 Burt Bacharach song puts it, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love;” there remains a genuine spiritual hunger for that sort of love in our world- because that’s the way God made us... hungry for love. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the world could come to church and discover genuine *agape* love being spoken of here? That doesn’t mean that disagreements will disappear, there will always be Red fans and Cub fans; Bengal fans and Steeler fans; some will pronounce it to-ma-to and others to-mah-to... there will always be contemporary music fans and traditional worship-goers but linking us among our diversity and differences is meant to be the unmistakable aroma of love, sweet love... a gift from God... and believe me, the world knows it when it senses it, and runs from us when its absent... and God will indeed discipline us if its missing among us. **(close Acts 2:432-47 slide)**

Because... after all...don’t forget- that’s what Jesus died for, and it’s for us all.