

Break the Word and Build the Community: Reflections on the Eucharist in John's Gospel

*Rekha M. Chennattu, RA*¹

Throughout the ages, the Johannine presentation of the Eucharist has been the subject of lively discussion among New Testament scholars.² In his important study of the Eucharist in the New Testament, Xavier Léon-Dufour points out that the early Church preserved the Eucharistic traditions in two forms: the "cultic form" (liturgical account) and the "testamentary form" (farewell meal).³ He goes on to show that John's Gospel contains an important Eucharistic tradition in the testamentary form and that it avoids the cultic form.⁴ Unlike the Synoptic tradition, John's Gospel makes no mention of the institution of the Eucharist. The fourth evangelist, however, uses Eucharistic vocabulary, symbols, and categories.⁵ It is interesting that (1) John dissociates his teaching on the Eucharist from the traditional setting of the Last Supper, and associates it with the multiplication of the bread and feeding of the multitude (John 6); (2) John replaces the synoptic account of the institution of the Eucharist with the foot-washing scene (John 13). So the important questions for modern readers can be summarized as follows: (1) How do we interpret these changes and shifts in focus in John's Gospel? (2) What is John's unique contribution to the understanding of the Eucharist and its celebration in community? (3) What are its implications for readers today? This paper is an attempt to respond to these

¹ **Rekha M. Chennattu, RA** is the Department Head and Professor of Scriptural Studies at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (the Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion), Pune, India and is an editorial board member of Asian Christian Review. This article first appeared in: Kurien Kunnumparam, ed., *The Eucharist and Life: Indian Christian Reflections on the Lord's Supper* (Mumbai: St Paul's Publications, 2007). Grateful acknowledgement is made to the publisher for reprint permission.

² Scholars differ in their views on the presence or absence of sacramental elements in general and Eucharistic teaching in particular in John's Gospel. For a survey of the various scholarly opinions, see Francis J. Moloney, "When is John talking about Sacraments?," *Australian Biblical Review* 30 (1982), 10-33; *A Body Broken for a Broken People: Eucharist in the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 113-50. For the presence of the Eucharist in John 6, see Vernon Ruland, "Sign and Sacrament: John's Bread of Life Discourse (Chapter 6)," *Interpretation* 18 (1964), 454. Against this view, see James D. G. Dunn, "John VI – A Eucharistic Discourse?" *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970-71), 328-38.

³ Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 82-95

⁴ Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 249-52.

⁵ Ruland, "Sign and Sacrament," 450-62; G. Ziener, "Johannesevangelium und urchristliche Passaeier," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 2 (1958), 263-74; see also the important work of O. Cullmann, *Early Christian Worship* (London: SCM, 1953), 93-102.

questions.

1. The Johannine Presentation of the Eucharist

The pastoral concerns of the Johannine community seem to have shaped the form and theology of the Eucharistic material in John. It is my contention that both the experience of expulsion from the synagogues and its consequences as well as the practice of the Eucharistic celebration and its misuse and/or misunderstanding form the background to the Johannine presentation of the Eucharistic discourses in John 6 and 13.

a. The Expulsion from the Synagogue and John 6

It is generally accepted that the Jewish Christians in the Johannine community were expelled from the synagogue because of their faith in Jesus. This separation of the community from official post-70 CE Judaism is reflected in the story of the man born blind in John 9 (see vv. 22 and 34) and is alluded to elsewhere in John's Gospel (12:42; 16:2). In these passages, the evangelist uses the technical expression ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται ("to be put out of the synagogue") to describe the experience of the community.⁶ This expulsion created many social, pastoral and theological problems in the community. Jewish Christians not only lost their Jewish friends; they also could no longer participate in the celebration of traditional feasts. As a result, they thought they lost their communion and communication with Yahweh. The evangelist responded to these pastoral problems of the community in chapters 5-10, focusing on the relationship between Jesus and the Jewish feasts.⁷ The evangelist explores for the community the true meaning of these feasts and reveals the identity of Jesus in his relationship to Yahweh, who is celebrated in and through them.

John 6 is dedicated to the feast of the Passover and the sign of the multiplication of the bread and to its interpretation. It is important to note that only the fourth evangelist situates this miracle of the multiplication of the bread within the setting of the Jewish Passover feast (6:4; cf. Matt 14; Mark 6; Luke 9).⁸ The evangelist situates the ministry of Jesus – the feeding of the multitude, within the context of the feast of the Passover and develops a unique Christology through the discourse on the Bread of Life. The Passover celebration

⁶ The ever-growing tension between the Johannine community and the post-war Jewish community seems to have led to a complete expulsion of the Johannine community from the synagogue. See Francis J. Moloney, *Belief in the Word: Reading John 1-4* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 15-16. See also the classic study of J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox press, 2003), 35-66.

⁷ For this interpretation, see Gale A. Yee, *Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 31-92; Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 1-153.

⁸ See also the discussion in David Stanley, "Bread of Life," *Worship* 32 (1958), 479-80.

is characterized by the fellowship meal and its *berakah* thanking God for the deliverance from slavery in Egypt and for the abiding covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. The Passover context of covenant fidelity and communion is therefore a most revealing setting for Jesus' teaching on the Bread of Life. Jesus has provided food for a large crowd at Passover time when the gift of manna is recalled. Therefore Jesus' action, placed within the setting of the Passover feast, reminds the readers of the manna given by God in the wilderness, through the mediation of Moses.

John's audience demands a sign: "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?" (6:30). The sign that Jesus gives is the discourse on the Bread of Life. From the very beginning of the discourse, John makes the distinction between the bread that perishes (the bread given by Moses to the ancestors of Israel in the wilderness) and the bread that offers eternal life. Like Moses, Jesus went up to the mountain and fed a vast multitude of people. Unlike Moses, Jesus asked the disciples to gather the fragments of bread (6:12-13; cf. Exod 16:19).⁹ The bread that Moses gave perished but the true bread from heaven offered by Jesus is imperishable. The old manna was an earthly food which nourished the physical body, and those who ate it are now dead (6:50, 60). Unlike the perishable manna of the Exodus event, the bread that Jesus offers ensures eternal life and resurrection from the dead (6:32, 49-51). The new bread given by Jesus offers eternal life to believers, thus empowering them to share the life of God (6:48-51).

This new bread is reminiscent of the gift of the new manna envisaged by the Jewish tradition during the messianic era. This new manna is referred to in Israel's historical and sapiential traditions: as "heavenly bread" (Psa 78:24; Lxx 77:24), as "bread from heaven" (Psa 105:40), as "bread of the mighty" (Psa 78:25), as "immortal food" (Wis 19:21). Later, manna came to be interpreted in terms of God's instruction articulated in Torah (e.g., the bread is identified as Torah in Amos 8:11-12). Therefore, the nourishing bread for Israel is Torah. According to the Apocalyptic literature, manna was also associated with the signs of the messianic age (The Sibylline Oracles 3:48-49; 2 Baruch 29:8-30:2). The new gift of bread offered by Jesus (6:58) transcends the boundaries of both time ("now and *forever*") and ethnicity ("*all* those who eat this bread"). It is against this background that we understand the response of the crowd, who, after seeing the sign of the bread in abundance, could recognize Jesus as the prophet who was to come into the world and wanted to make him their King (6:14-15).

The evangelist establishes that it is Jesus who provides this new manna that surpasses and perfects the manna received by the ancestors of the Jews in the wilderness. The Johannine Jesus identifies himself as the bread of life, the true

⁹ It is important to note that in John 6, it is Jesus, not the disciples (cf. Matt 14:19), who distributes the bread to the people (6:11).

Bread from Heaven (6:48-51). Jesus, the personification of the eternal Word, has now perfected the former gift of Torah. The narratives in John 6 reveal that “what was done in the Jewish celebration of the Passover was but a sign and shadow of the perfection of the gift of God in the person Jesus Christ,” the one who has come to give life eternal to those who believe in him.¹⁰ Jesus challenges all the characters in the story as well as his disciples to be open to the ongoing revelation of God in him and to believe in him by entering into an abiding relationship with him.¹¹ In other words, the Johannine Jesus is the incarnation or personification of the presence of Yahweh once celebrated in the Jewish feast of the Passover.

b. John 6 and the Celebrations of the Eucharistic Rite

The use of Eucharistic vocabulary in John 6 suggests that the celebration of the Eucharist played an important role in the community. It is generally accepted that John 6 shows signs of being influenced by the early Christian Passover liturgy.¹² The expressions like “Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated” (6:11); “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51c) etc. are believed to be borrowed from the Eucharistic words of Jesus, as they echo the Synoptic and Pauline Eucharistic words (cf. Matt 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-26). It is reasonable to assume that, since the community was not allowed to participate in the traditional Passover celebrations, the disciples introduced a Christian form of the Passover celebration interpreted in the light of the Christ-event, which eventually became the Eucharistic liturgy. The Christian Passover was therefore a feast of redemption in Christ, whose redemptive work is understood as the fulfilment of the deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 12).¹³ The Eucharistic celebration thus replaces and perfects the Jewish Passover, as it proclaims and celebrates the living presence of Jesus in the believing community.

Why did the fourth evangelist omit the institution of the Eucharist? The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd is important to understanding the Johannine perspective on the Eucharist. Certain objections of the Jewish characters in John 6 and Jesus’ response to them reveal something more about the life of the community. According to Léon-Dufour, the evangelist wants to

¹⁰ Moloney, *Signs and Shadows*, 64.

¹¹ The different responses, both negative and positive, given by the disciples in 6:60-71, bear this point out. For similar challenges raised by Jesus to the various characters and groups in the Johannine narrative, see 5:44; 6:36; 8:45, 46; 9:35; 10:26.

¹² Edward J. Kilmartin, “Liturgical Influence on John 6,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 22 (1960), 183-91. See also B. Gärtner, *John 6 and the Jewish Passover* (Lund: Copenhagen, 1959); Ziener, “Johannesevangelium und urchristliche Passafeier,” 263-74.

¹³ For the existence and meaning of the Christian Passover celebrations, see Kilmartin, “Liturgical Influence on John 6,” 184-85.

“ward off the danger of magical thinking that may well threaten sacramental practice in a Hellenistic environment.”¹⁴ John seems to be responding to the misuse and/or the misunderstandings created by “the influence of the realistic magic-sacramentalism of the mystery-cults.”¹⁵ The traditions of the mystery-cults separated the cult from the life of the participants. Therefore, John had to underline, together with the cultic forms, the spiritual and social implications of the Eucharistic practices.

The Johannine Jesus challenges the crowd: “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (6:26). One can compare the response of Jesus in 6:26 with the rebuke of Saint Paul in Corinthians 11.¹⁶ Jesus’ response seems to be a warning against the unworthy participation in the Eucharistic celebration.¹⁷ The attitude of the crowd reflects the situation of the community whose members were more concerned about physical nourishment rather than the eternal life that Jesus is offering.

The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd in 6:27-29 is important to understand the meaning of the discourse on the Bread of Life.

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal. Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (NRSV John 6:27-29).

This brief dialogue makes two things clear to the readers: (1) the characters in the story identify working for the food that endures for eternal life with performing the work of God; (2) performing the work of God means believing in Jesus whom God has sent. Now what does it mean to believe in Jesus? This is not the only time that the disciples receive the command to “believe” (e.g., 5:44; 6:36, 64; 8:45, 46; 9:35; 10:26; 14:1, 10-12).¹⁸ John 14 makes this command very precise and concrete with regard to its challenges and implications. First, Jesus demands that the disciples should believe in him and his words, as they

¹⁴ Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 251.

¹⁵ G. H. C. Macgregor, “The Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 9 (1962-63), 118.

¹⁶ “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!” (NRSV 1Cor 11:20-22). Paul here alludes to the abuses that had entered into the Eucharistic meal at Corinth; see the discussion in Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 80-85.

¹⁷ Macgregor, “Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel,” 113.

¹⁸ See also Rekha M. Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 110.

believe in God (14:1).¹⁹ This command is defined and elaborated further by revealing the oneness of love that exists between the Father and the Son and their common mission or work (14:10). Jesus is not talking about metaphysical union but the intense union of love that is shared by them (cf. 5:20; 14:20-24). The command to believe in this union of love is an invitation to participate in the life-of-love of Jesus and God by sharing a mutual relationship of knowing Jesus/God/the Paraclete and being known and loved by them (e.g., 14:7, 17). As Sandra M. Schneiders maintains, “[the Johannine] faith is not a spiritual acquisition or a state of being but an activity, an ever-active relationship in the present.”²⁰ The oneness or the relationship of love and life between the Father and the Son is to be understood in terms of their common work or mission (14:11-12). Jesus is making an inseparable link between working for the bread that gives eternal life, and believing, loving, and doing God’s work.

The narratives in John 6 seem to presuppose the practice of the Eucharistic rite and the presence of problems created by the misunderstandings of the Eucharistic words. The objection, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (6:52) seems to be more a concern at the end of the first century than of Jesus’ own day. Commenting on this verse, Macgregor argues that “the whole setting belongs to a later age when the Eucharist had become the main target of the Jewish attack on Christianity.”²¹ Jesus’ command to eat, literally, “chew” (τρώγων) his true flesh (6:54.56) and drink his blood must have been scandalizing for the traditional Jewish audience prohibited by Torah to eat anything with its blood (Lev 19:26; see also Gen 9:4; 1 Sam 14:32-35). The objection raised by the crowd provides an opportunity for Jesus to clarify the misunderstanding and to develop the deeper meaning of the Eucharistic rite. The Johannine Jesus explains that expressions such as “to eat my flesh” and “drink my cup” etc are symbolic language expressing the need for the community to participate in Christ’s redemptive work by believing in Jesus and all his claims.²² The words of Jesus seem to have been understood literally by some of the members. The Johannine Jesus clarifies and interprets his words for the readers in 6:63: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” It is not the eating and drinking *per se* that gives eternal life, but the Spirit, whom Jesus further defines as his words. The bread is also identified with the person of Jesus: “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 38-40, 49).

¹⁹ In 14:1, I take the first *pisteuete* (believe) as an indicative and the second *pisteuete* as an imperative. Believing in God is not a problem for the listeners of Jesus, but believing in Jesus is. Some scholars, however, take both verbs as imperatives; see Francis J. Moloney, *Glory not Dishonor: Reading John 13–21* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 29.

²⁰ S. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 51-52.

²¹ Macgregor, “Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel,” 118.

²² For the metaphorical interpretation of ‘drinking’ and ‘eating’, see Patrick J. Temple, “The Eucharist in St John 6,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 9 (1947), 448.

This new bread and the person of Jesus stand for the will or the work of God (6:37-40; 4:34). The bread is also identified with the Word of God taught by the Son (6:45-47). Therefore, it is breaking the Word, discerning the will of God and collaborating with God's life-giving work, that ensures eternal life.

After revealing his identity as the bread of life (6:48), Jesus makes two claims: that those who eat this bread abide (μένει) in him (6:56) and will live forever (6:58). Eating the bread of Jesus therefore enables the disciples to abide in Jesus and to share the life of God that transcends death.

What does abiding in Jesus imply? The verb abide (μένει) is charged with persuasive theological significance in the gospel.²³ The evangelist applied the verb μένει for the first time in the context of Jesus' baptism to reveal his divine origin and identity as the one in whom the Spirit abides (1:31-34).²⁴ The abiding of the Spirit in Jesus is the sign of his identity as the incarnate Word of God (1:14), the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33), the one who is constantly in communication with God and in relationship with God (1:1-2, 18). The second occurrence of μένει is during the dialogue between Jesus and the disciples in 1:38: "Rabbi, where do you abide?"²⁵ The disciples want to know where Jesus abides. This is what Jesus reveals to the disciples throughout the gospel, viz., the intimacy shared between Jesus and the Father (e.g., 5:19-20; 14:2, 23; 15:9-10). By inviting the disciples to abide in Jesus and in his words (cf. 4:40; 6:27, 56; 8:31-32) and making it an integral part of the process of becoming his disciple (1:35-51; 4:4-42), the evangelist presents discipleship, from the very beginning, in terms of an everlasting covenant relationship with God.²⁶ The evangelist later develops the abiding motif by the use of the metaphor of the vine and branches, teasing out the intimate and binding covenant relationship between Jesus and his disciples (John 15:1-17).²⁷ The disciples, designated as the "fruitful branches" (15:3-5) abiding in Jesus, the true vine, become new symbols of the community. The organic oneness of the branches with the vine and with one another communicates so powerfully the

²³ For a discussion on the metaphor of 'abiding' in John's Gospel, see Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship*, 112-115.

²⁴ Both the Hebrew Scripture's use of μένει (God's abiding presence) and κατασκηνοω (God's indwelling presence) are important for the understanding of Johannine use of μένει. See the discussions in F. Hauck, "μένω" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, 574-76; J. Heise, *Bleiben: Menein in den Johanneischen Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1967), 22-28; D. Lee, *Flesh and Glory: Symbolism, Gender and Theology in the Gospel of John* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 88-89.

²⁵ The dialogue between Jesus and the disciples can be interpreted either literally (Where do you stay?) or symbolically (Where do you abide?). The confession of faith in v. 41 ("We have found the Messiah") suggests the symbolic meaning of their query in v. 38 ("Where do you abide?"), since the object of their seeing is not Jesus' home or village but the revelation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah. For the symbolic reading of v. 38, see also X. Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean*, Paris: Seuil, 1988-96, vol. 1, 189.

²⁶ Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship*, 22-49.

²⁷ See also the use of μένει in 8:31 and 12:46.

mutual indwelling of Jesus and his disciples. Abiding is an imperative for the disciples, an evocative and powerful metaphor of communion shared among the disciples in the community and their commitment to the works of God.

Because many of the disciples find Jesus' teaching very hard, they respond with outright rejection and completely abandon him (6:66). Jesus then asks the remaining disciples, "Do you also wish to go away?" (6:67). Simon Peter makes a public confession for the first time in the story, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6:68-69). The fact that some disciples, along with the crowd, decide to defect from the group implicitly alludes to the struggle and division in the Johannine community. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that John is responding to the problems created by both the expulsion from the synagogues and the cultic celebration of the Eucharist in his community. John is trying to make the Eucharistic celebration relevant to the church of his day by explaining the true significance of the Eucharistic worship and by highlighting its social and spiritual implications for the daily life of the believers.

c. The Celebrations of the Eucharistic Rite and John 13

The absence of the Eucharistic words of Jesus from John's account of the Last Supper is still a subject of scholarly debate. There is, however, consensus among scholars that the meal and the foot-washing in John 13 are analogous in function to the synoptic narratives of the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:14-23; Matt 26:20-30).²⁸ In the words of Léon-Dufour, "the presence of the testamentary tradition in the Eucharistic texts and especially the fact that John can simply pass over the cultic tradition help make it clear that . . . the cultic way, while continuing to be at the centre of Christian life, is not the only way by which Christ continues his presence in the midst of his disciples; love and service are likewise a privileged way."²⁹ According to Macgregor, "the result of the substitution is to stress the fact that the Sacrament can be effective only when the Spirit of the Master possesses the disciples."³⁰ John makes the outward rite subordinate to the spirit of love and service that will unite the disciples in communion with one another and

²⁸ For the sacramental and baptismal significance of the foot-washing, see Moloney, "A Sacramental Reading of John 13:1-38," 237-56; idem, *Glory not Dishonor*, 14-15; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966-70), 558-59; S. M. Schneiders, "The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981), 81-82; P. Grelot, "L'interprétation pénitentielle du lavement des pieds," in *L'homme devant Dieu: Mélanges H. de Lubac* (Paris: Aubier, 1963), vol. 1, 75-91; M. C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 283-92. Against this view, see J. C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 19-25; C. Niemand, *Die Fusswaschungserzählung des Johannesevangeliums: Untersuchung zu ihrer Entstehung und Überlieferung in Urchristentum* (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1993), 252-56.

²⁹ Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 95.

³⁰ Macgregor, "Eucharist in the Fourth Gospel," 113.

with God (13:34-35). John wants to make sure that those who participate in the Eucharist are aware of the moral and social obligations implicit in the fact of being in communion with the risen Jesus and with one another.

The foot-washing is a symbolic action. It has been traditionally accepted that it symbolizes in a dramatic way the humble service of Jesus, which the disciples are to imitate.³¹ Commentators today, however, differ in their interpretations of this symbolic act. Schneiders points out that “both the action over the bread and wine and the foot-washing serve as prophetic gestures revealing the true significance of the death of Jesus within the theological perspectives of the respective evangelists.”³² The literary setting (13:1-3) suggests that the foot-washing in itself should be viewed as both Jesus’ perfect love and his love to the end (13:1c). The foot-washing is therefore the representative act of love symbolizing the whole ministry of Jesus.³³ The dialogue between Jesus and Peter is another important narrative moment that helps the readers to determine the symbolic meaning and significance of Jesus’ action, as it points out that the foot-washing is necessary for the disciples if they are to share the inheritance with Jesus (13:6-10).³⁴ The foot-washing thus establishes an everlasting covenant relationship between Jesus and his disciples and grants them eternal life.³⁵ Elsewhere the Johannine Jesus regarded his disciples as his friends (John 15:13-15). Based on the fact that the service rendered among friends is an expression of self-giving love, Schneiders interprets the foot-washing as a manifestation of Jesus’ self-giving friendship love *which* makes his disciples equal partners. Jesus, their teacher and Lord, thus overcame the inequality that naturally existed between the Lord and his disciples by washing their feet. Jesus’ prophetic and symbolic action overthrows all structures of inequality and domination and fosters mutual service in friendship and love among his disciples.³⁶ The command of Jesus is therefore not that the disciples

³¹ C. K. Barrett regards John 13 as “a Johannine construction based on the synoptic tradition that Jesus was in the midst of his disciples as ὁ διακονῶν (Luke 22:27)” (*The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], 436). See also M. Sabbe, “Footwashing in John 13 and Its Relations to the Synoptic Gospels,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 58 (1982), 279-308. Against this view, see Niemand, *Fusswaschungserzählung*, 65-71. For a survey of different views, see Brown, *John*, 558-59.

³² Sandra Schneiders, “The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutics,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981), 81 n. 22. Schneiders underlines the revelatory character of the event by designating the foot-washing as a “prophetic action.” Prophetic action refers to “an action which is presented as divinely inspired, revelatory in content, proleptic in structure, symbolic in form, and pedagogical in intent” (*ibid.*, n. 21).

³³ J. Michl, “Der Sinn der Fusswaschung,” *Biblica* 40 (1959), 697-708, esp. 701.

³⁴ Schnackenburg comments that “since the evangelist concentrates all his attention on the following conversation between Jesus and Peter, any attempts to provide a further interpretation are out of the question here” (*John*, 3. 18). See also Brown, *John*, 565; Schneiders, “The Foot Washing,” 82-83.

³⁵ Chennattu, *Johannine Discipleship*, 91-96.

³⁶ Schneiders, “Foot Washing (John 13:1-20),” 76-92.

should wash the feet of their servants or slaves as a model of humble service but rather they should “wash one another’s feet” (13:14). The symbolic action of Jesus is meant to promote equality and interdependence. Therefore, the celebration of the Eucharist, symbolized by the washing of the feet, implies entering into an abiding relationship with Jesus, and participating in the work of Jesus to build a just and egalitarian community.

2. Johannine Contribution and Its Implications for us today

The Eucharist is a symbolic celebration of Jesus’ redemptive work and God’s life-giving presence in human history. John rereads and interprets the Eucharistic practice of the community purposely dissociating his teaching on the Eucharist from the liturgical or cultic context of the Last Supper. He accepts the Eucharist as a memorial of the Christ-event, but “the stress is not so much on the notion of oblation or sacrifice; it is on the notion of self-giving, out of love, for the life of man [sic] in this world.”³⁷ John is responding to the ritualistic practice of Eucharistic celebrations totally unrelated to life. In the words of Léon-Dufour, “His (John’s) special contribution is to make known the real and abiding meaning of Eucharist.”³⁸ John tries to bring out the intrinsic connection between the Eucharistic celebration and a life committed to God’s work of creation and liberation.

The fourth evangelist challenges his readers to expand their understanding of the liturgical celebration of the breaking of the word and the Eucharist to the building up of a just society that manifests the reign of God in the world. Each Eucharistic celebration breaks the Word by reminding the participants of God’s work of creation, liberation and sanctification in the unfolding history of humanity. The Eucharist is also an invitation to abide in God’s love and to participate in Jesus’ work of transforming the sinful and enslaving structures operative in human society according to the model of foot-washing and to establish a community of friends and covenant partners, expressing itself in life-giving mutual service unto death. A certain commitment and way of life are expected of the disciples of Jesus manifesting God’s life-of-love and revealing God’s creative presence in the world. Breaking the Word and building the community are shown as two inseparable and complementary aspects of celebrating the Eucharist and of celebrating Jesus’ redemptive love for humanity.

³⁷ Jean Giblet, “The Eucharist in St John’s Gospel: John 6,” *Concilium* 10:4 (1968), 34.

³⁸ Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread*, 251.