

LOVE FEASTS

I. INTRODUCTION

The only clear New Testament reference to “love feasts” is found in Jude 12, where it refers to certain extremely wicked men who attended a “love feast” [i.e., a fellowship meal of the church], where they appeared to gorge themselves and were disruptive (See Lenski, page 635).

An alternate reading of II Pet. 2:13 suggests this passage also refers to these men being present at “love feasts.” (See footnotes in NASB and NIV).

Apparently, early Christians gathered for a shared meal (“pot blessing”?) on certain occasions. Such “love feasts” appear to have been voluntary fellowship times and never ordained by God as part of any commemorative observance which the church was required to continue.

II. BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

There are several Biblical allusions to early Christians gathering together for a common meal. Shortly after the church was established, we are told that the early disciples met daily in homes and ate together (Acts 2:46). This seems to have been a time of rejoicing and probably was necessitated by the fact that the thousands of new converts lingered in Jerusalem before returning to their homes. Baker’s Dictionary of Theology , (pages 333-335) says this about the passage in Acts 2:42-46, “the second phrase obviously indicates a full meal.” In Acts 4:32 we are told that “they shared everything they had” (NIV), which implies having meals together also.

A short time later we find that the church was supplying daily meals for its older widows (Acts 6:1ff). By the mention of some people having to “wait on tables” (Acts 6:2), the idea of group meals is suggested. But note, even at that early time problems arose over who got what, how much and when!

By about A.D. 57, when I Corinthians was written, it appears that some kind of shared meal (was it a “love feast”?) was being eaten by the congregation *before* the Lord’s Supper was served (I Cor. 11:17-34). But again, problems arose over how much certain ones had, when they ate it and the effect it had on the assembly (see verses 21-22).

III. JESUS OFTEN SHARED MEALS WITH HIS DISCIPLES

Of course, there are natural reasons why early Christians may have met together for common meals: To meet people’s needs; To enjoy the fellowship; To give expression to their mutual love (and possibly

others). But, might there be another reason why the early Christians chose to share a meal together, especially in connection with the Lord's Supper?

Some scholars see *the example of Jesus* and His disciples as a basis for Christians assembling together to eat a meal. Following His resurrection Jesus shared a meal with seven disciples (John 21:1-17). It was right after this meal that Jesus asked Peter if he *loved* Him (verse 15). While the tie-in may be only incidental, you can see why some might get the idea that "love" is somehow associated with a meal, especially in the light of the next passage we will consider. (Incidentally, there are a number of early paintings depicting this scene---Jesus eating with *seven* disciples).

Then, the "Last Supper" of Jesus and the Twelve involved eating the Passover meal prior to Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26ff; Mark 16:22ff; Luke 22:19f). The incident of Judas dipping a piece of bread in the sauce with Jesus, just before he walked out to betray Him, is well-known (John 13:21-34). But notice that at the end of that meal Jesus stressed to His disciples that *love* would be the one characteristic by which His disciples would be best known (verse 34). Could the idea of enjoying a meal together as a visible expression of love, with Jesus setting the example, have become a basis for Christians to adopt the practice of "love feasts"?

IV. POST-APOSTOLIC REFERENCES TO "LOVE FEASTS"

Early References: The early "Church Fathers" writings make mention of "love feasts" on a number of occasions. Ignatius (AD 115); Didache (AD 120), suggests that it preceded the Lord's Supper; Tertullian (AD 200), describes the Lord's Supper as being held earlier, then the "love feast" later at a separate service; Clement of Alexandria (AD 190) also mentions them as being held separately; Chrysostom (AD 395) agrees with the order mentioned by Tertullian, but says that the feast had become corrupted by his day. (Baker's Dict. Of Theology, pp. 333-335).

Later References: By the 4th Century "love feasts" fell into disfavor because of disorders and problems connected with their observance and because greater emphasis was being placed on the "Eucharist" (the Catholic equivalent of the Lord's Supper). Augustine (AD 425), mentions their disuse in his day. The Councils of the developing Catholic Church eventually banned them (Councils held in AD 363, AD 393, AD 541, AD 692). Baker, pp. 333-335

V. "LOVE FEASTS" PRACTICED IN MODERN TIMES

John Wesley instituted "love feasts" in the early days of his founding of the Methodist Church (1730-1745). (Baker, p. 335; Religious Bodies, p. 1101); Church of the Brethren Churches (Dunkers), practice "love feasts" today (Mead, p. 65; Religious bodies, p. 276); Eastern Orthodox Churches practice it (Baker, p. 335), etc. Also, several small Pentecostal Churches observe "love feasts" as part of their services.

VI. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “LOVE FEASTS” IN THE CHURCH TODAY

There is no Biblical requirement for “love feasts” to be practiced by the church on an ongoing basis. The only “meal” Christians are urged to continue in is the Lord’s Supper on each first day of the week (Sunday). True, there were meals shared by Jesus and His disciples and between members of the early church on several occasions, but these seem to be simply occasions for meeting normal nutritional needs. Also, in post-apostolic days there were “love feasts” held by various groups, usually in connection with the Lord’s Supper. But, due to problems that seemed to attend such gatherings they were eventually discontinued.

So, may Christians gather for fellowship meals before or after a church service, or at some other time, and even call them “love feasts” today. Of course they can, just so long as attendance is never declared mandatory or turned into some kind of a religious ritual, and so long as they do not cause problems, disorder or division in the body.