

and delicacies" by which some imagine "the promise of God might be bought with suppers." He declares firmly, "such entertainments the Lord has not called *agapai*" (*The Instructor* 2.1 On Eating). Clement also does not connect the Lord's Supper with these feasts even though some appear to have done this. By the fourth and fifth-centuries the Councils of Gangra (ca. 365 A. D.), Laodicea (365 A. D.), and Carthage (419 A. D.) issued declarations prohibiting bishops from holding "love-feasts" in the churches. While this may show that some churches had (like Corinth) observed common meals as a church (with or without a connection to the Lord's Supper) the preserved evidence from history does not allow us to back-interpret the reference to the "love-feast" in Jude 12 as authorization for the church to sponsor meals or connect a common meal with the Lord's Supper.[2]

[2] There is a disputed text some attribute to Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 365 A. D.) called either *Apostolic Traditions* or *Egyptian Church Order* that describes an odd mix of a common meal and the Lord's Supper within a church assembly. This unusual text also describes the use cups of water (symbolizing baptism) and milk and honey (symbolizing the promised land)—practices never taught in Scripture! Scholars are divided over whether Hippolytus was actually the author, when this text was written, and whether or not it reflects customs that were ever actually practiced. Because of this its witness to the historical record is highly suspect.

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ISSUE 18.52
BULLETIN OF THE OLSEN PARK CHURCH OF CHRIST
December 25, 2016

Faithful Sayings



Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM
10:00 AM
11:00 AM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Arend Gressley
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope

"Love Feasts"

By Kyle Pope

Brethren have struggled over the years to understand the proper role Scripture teaches social interaction should have in our relationships with one another in Christ. Clearly, Christians should spend time together. The apostolic example for the church is that individual Christians spent time with one another **"breaking bread from house to house"** (Acts 2:46). It is also clear, however, abuses that mingled the Lord's Supper with common social meals led to the prohibition of Christians eating together as a church. When the Corinthians committed such abuse, the command was given, **"if anyone is hungry let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment"** (1 Cor. 11:34). This prohibits churches from sponsoring meals and recreation, building kitchens and dining halls, or observing the Lord's Supper in the context of a full meal.

In spite of these clear teachings churches have done these very things. Some will use church sponsored meals as tools for evangelism or benevolence. Others will argue that the Lord's Supper is incomplete if it is not in the context of a full meal. Whenever they are asked to show scriptural authority for their practices invariably appeal is made to a passage in the epistle of Jude. While warning of wicked men among their number Jude writes, **"These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves"** (Jude 12, NKJV).

What was the Love Feast?

The word translated **"love feasts"** is the familiar Greek noun *agapē* (ἀγάπη) generally translated simply **"love"** (1 Cor. 13:4-7; Rom. 12:9; 1 John

4:16). In Jude alone in the New Testament it takes on a special meaning referring to a feast (in some sense). Unfortunately, the biblical text leaves a number of questions unanswered about how to understand this. Was Jude speaking of the Lord's Supper? Was he speaking of some meal Christians ate together in a context outside of the church assembly? In Acts **"breaking bread from house to house"** and eating **"their food with gladness and simplicity of heart"** (Acts 2:46b), is set in contrast to the assembly of the whole church which involved, **"continuing daily with one accord in the temple"** (Acts 2:46a). On the other hand, was Jude even speaking literally? Jesus described feeding upon His life and teaching as eating His flesh and drinking His blood (John 6:48-56, 63). Was Jude referring to the spiritual feast these wicked men defiled? In a nearly parallel text Peter speaks of the same wicked men among the Lord's people, **"who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. They are spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you"** (2 Pet. 2:13b). Unfortunately the same questions arise from Peter's words, but this comprises the full extent of the biblical evidence regarding the **"love feast."**

In spite of this, many reference works look at the use of the term "love feasts" in church history and back-interpret its meaning to Jude 12 in light of its later application. J. C. Lambert, for example, in his entry for "Agape" in the well respected *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* edited by James Orr writes, "The fact that the name *agapē* or love-feast used in Jude 12 is found early in the 2nd century and often afterward as a technical expression for the religious common meals of the church puts the meaning of Jude's reference beyond doubt" (1.69). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* takes a similar approach. After addressing the general meaning of *agapē* it states, "The term is applied also to the religious meal which seems to have been in use in the early Church in close relation to the Eucharist [i.e. the denominational term sometimes applied to the Lord's Supper]" (26). Is this truly "beyond doubt"? If this was a literal meal was it truly connected to the Lord's Supper in Scripture? Bro. W. Frank Walton, in his excellent article on "Love Feasts" featured in the April-May, 2011 issue of *Focus Magazine* states well the nature of the problem. He writes, "Those who claim that a 'love feast' universally preceded the Lord's Supper in the second century church, supposedly reflecting first century apostolic doctrine, are vastly overstating the claim" (28).



Olsen Park church of Christ

The Love-Feast in Early Church History

Brother Walton is absolutely correct. The evidence from the second-century is nowhere near as conclusive as Lambert asserts. For example, the two texts that give full descriptions of the observance of the Lord's Supper in the second-century make no reference to a common meal at all (*Didache* 9-10, 14; Justin, *First Apology* 65-67).[1] The earliest text to refer to the "love-feast (*agapē*)" is an epistle written by Ignatius the bishop of Antioch (ca. 35-108 A.D.) to the church in Smyrna. By the time of Ignatius an apostasy had already developed by which a single bishop was appointed over a church. Ignatius teaches the brethren to respect this bishop and to consider no Lord's Supper valid unless it is "under the bishop or one to whom he shall have committed it" (8.1). Shortly after this he writes, "It is not lawful apart from the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast" (8.2). Is he restating what he had just taught—calling the Lord's Supper "a love-feast"? Some have understood a statement Ignatius makes in a letter to the church in Rome as a reference to the Lord's Supper as "an incorruptible love-feast (*agapē*)" (*To the Romans* 7.3). If he is not referring to the Lord's Supper he demonstrates a distinction between the two. Is he instructing them to make sure a bishop is present at times when their common meals were eaten away from the church assembly or is he inferring that these meals were conducted as a church? We must be careful not to read more into the text than it actually states.

Another early piece of evidence comes in some correspondence between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus around 112 A. D. He is describing his treatment of Christians, forcing some to renounce their faith in Christ while torturing and executing others. In this description Pliny relates to the emperor what some Christians had told him about their custom of meeting on a "certain day" for a morning worship, adding, "When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food" (*Epistles* 10.96). No reference is made to a "love-feast" but this clearly shows a separation between Christians worshipping and a separate get-together for food. This sounds more like what we would call a "potluck" than a common meal in connection with the Lord's Supper.

Finally, near the end of the second-century and early into the third-century we have two clear references to "love-feasts" yet from dramatically different perspectives. The Carthaginian apologist Tertullian (ca. 155-240 A. D.) wrote in defense of the meals among Christians that had received false criticism from pagans for being wild and uncontrolled. Writing in Latin he says, "Our feast explains itself by its name. The Greeks call it *agapē*, i.e., affection" (*Apology* 39). He goes on to describe such meals as chaste, controlled, charitable meals in which food was shared to help the poor. Although he mentions singing of songs and reading of Scripture no mention is made of the Lord's Supper. In contrast to this, a teacher named Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 A.D.) was highly critical of calling meals "*agapai*" that involve "pots and pouring of sauce" with "drink

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[1] Some have argued that the *Didache* attests a connection between the Lord's Supper and a common meal because after the memorial some translators use the expression "after you are filled" (Roberts-Donaldson); "after ye are satisfied" (J. B. Lightfoot); or "after you are satisfied with food" (Kirsopp Lake). We should note, however, the original Greek text of this work does not contain the word "food" nor a second person plural pronoun "ye." The phrase uses a form known as an articular infinitive [*to emplēsthēnai* (τὸ ἐμπλησθῆναι)] that acts as a verbal noun with no specified subject. The idea is "after the fulfillment [of the instructions just given]." Charles H. Hoole's translation puts this "after it has been completed."