American Methodism and the Love Feast

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It is small wonder that so few contemporary Methodists know or care very much about the observance of the Love Feast. Since the end of third-century Christianity, this feast, or Agape, has been the subject of considerable controversy and confusion within the Christian Church. Like many such matters, we have noted them, appointed study committees, and have reached a policy of good evasive expediency in round Methodist terms. Let me cite, with proper unction, Paragraph 352, Section 8 of \textit{The Discipline of the Methodist Church}, where the duties of a Methodist pastor are defined, "To hold or appoint prayer meetings, love feasts, and watch night meetings, whenever advisable."

The purpose of this paper is to review the history of the Love Feast with particular reference to its place in American Methodism. I am especially indebted to the Association of Methodist Historical Societies for their invitation to prepare the study for it has sent me on a thoroughly interesting tour of study which I am sure would not have otherwise been made by me. I am also indebted to my own father, the late Dr. J. E. A. Bucke, who throughout his long ministry in the Central Pennsylvania Conference, took seriously the role of the Love Feast and conducted them in such a way that I have within me a deep and abiding respect for that observance. For the British Methodist history of The Love Feast, the best book available is \textit{Methodism and the Love Feast} by Dr. Frank Baker. The American edition of this was published in 1957 by Macmillan, New York. I have leaned heavily on Dr. Baker's excellent work.

The oldest known document on the orders of the church is the Didache and it is here that the primitive Christians spelled out the first regulations for the Agape. Several things seem to be established from examination of this document: (1) The Agape was not the Eucharist, or Communion, though it did prescribe prayers of thanksgiving before and after the celebration of The Lord's Supper; (2) It was conducted in the absence of a settled ministry by the laymen who belonged to the little bands of gathered Christians; it obviously was the Christian carry-over of the Jewish customs observed by families when a blessing was said before the meal, and a thanksgiving following the meal. M. H. Shepherd \textsuperscript{2} says that by the third century, the Agape had deteriorated as the early Christians began to
include in the feast aspects of pagan banquets associated with the funerals of fellow Christians.

The Eastern Orthodox Church and the Coptic Christians are credited by most scholars for continuing the practice of the Love Feast during the remaining centuries until the German pietists revived the custom in Europe in the late 1600's. Wesley met the Agape for the first time in 1737 when he was in Savannah, Georgia, and attended a Moravian Love Feast. (Wesley's *Journal*, August 8, 1737). Frank Baker indicates that shortly after Wesley's heart-warning at Aldersgate in 1738, the Fetter Lane Religious Society, to which he then belonged, listed among its rules the fixing of regular times for observance of the Love Feast. At this point the feasts began at 7 o'clock and ended at 10:00—but one record shows a Fetter Lane Love Feast starting at 9:00 p.m. and ending at 3:00 a.m.! Wesley records in his *Journal* for December 31, 1738 that he, his brother Charles, Whitfield, and others attended such a feast at Fetter Lane and that "about three in the morning . . . the power of God came mightily upon us."

High on the list of reasons for Wesley's withdrawal from the Fetter Lane Society was his dispute with the Moravians on matters relating to the Love Feast. Separation of the men from the women had already taken place because the frankness of testimony and confession had been too much for the women to bear; the increasing insistence of the Moravians about remaining quiet as over against the Methodists' insistence on testimony was the other difference for while Methodists were pietistic, they were not and still are not able to cope with what to do with quiet times. Baker quotes Wesley's reaction to the period of silence at a Fetter Lane meeting in 1742 as saying, "For about an hour all were silent: no singing, no prayer, no word of exhortation. Then Mr. S—— said, 'my sisters, I was thinking in my heart how many Scripture-names there are among you.'" (Might he not as well have been thinking how many barley corns would reach from London to Edinburgh?)

It was natural, therefore, that soon Wesley would find a way of exercising controls over the Love Feast observances. With the class meetings and the bands and the circuits already in good organization, he propounded rules so that by 1744 a monthly general love feast was to be held and twice a month a Watch Night service was to be held on a Friday evening. Since the organized bands provided the most intimate fellowship for small groups of Methodists, the Love Feast became a natural part of that organization where full confession, questioning and admonition of each other, and witnessing could take place. At first only the members of the bands could be admitted, for these discussions were too intimate for the non-
oriented; later visitors were allowed on a few rare occasions. The pattern of the service established by Wesley went as follows:  

- Hymn
- Prayer
- Grace (sung)
- Bread distributed by the stewards
- Collection for the poor
- Circulation of the loving cup (tea or water)
- Address by the presiding minister
- Testimonies and stanzas of hymns
- Spontaneous prayers and stanzas of hymns
- Closing exhortation by the minister
- Hymn
- Benediction

As Methodism grew in America and established itself as a church in 1784, the Love Feast was an integral part of its pattern. The Love Feast and the Lord's Supper were immediately identified as the proper places to receive offerings for the poor. By 1789 the Discipline 5 not only listed as a required duty for the preachers the regular watch night services, the prayer services, but also the love Feast. To strengthen the evidence of the role of the Love Feast, the clear directions of Wesley contained in his "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection" were included in the Disciplines of 1792, 1794, 1796, and 1797.6 They also ruled, "Suffer no Love Feast to last above one hour and a half."

The Discipline of 1852 shows a liberalizing trend in the matter of who could attend the Love Feast. In Section III of that Discipline, question 5 reads, "How often shall we permit strangers to be present at our Love Feasts?" The answer, "Let them be admitted with utmost caution; and the same person on no account above twice or thrice, unless he become a member." 7

The pastor (Sec. XI, Discipline of The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1852) was responsible for the renewal of all tickets to admit members to the Quarterly Love Feast.8 When this requirement was established, I do not know, but by 1887 A. B. Hyde in his HISTORY OF METHODISM, looking at both branches of Episcopal Methodism, said, "The use of tickets to the Love Feasts has been discontinued. In Wesley's plan these were certificates of standing. Membership in the societies was held to be a privilege to be retained only by Christian activity and usefulness, and the quarterly visitation of the preacher in charge was to ascertain, as far as possible, each member's religious character. In this country, the ticket system has gone out within the memory of those now living. It was found that few cared to come in who were not already serious, and
that it was better to put no hindrance in the way of their coming. The love feast is a place of joyous witness for Christ, and it often happens that such witness affects some hearts more deeply than any formal sermon. The ticket system was therefore easily discarded, and the love feast has come to be a public service, in which bread and water are taken together in token of Christian friendship, and the time is given to cheerful, soul-expanding fellowship."

Two problems that could not be solved are probably the reasons for contemporary Methodism’s indifference to the observance of The Love Feast. First, even in Wesley’s time, the development of Calvinistic Methodism with Lady Huntingdon’s money and Whitfield’s collaboration, pointed to an extreme demonstration of sanctification; secondly, in American Methodism in the middle 1800’s came the Holiness Movement. Had the Methodists followed the Moravian custom of observing silence instead of insisting in testimonies, these two extremist positions would not have had the hearing they got, and the more moderate Methodists would not have been driven away from the Love Feasts. The bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, were adamant in their treatment of the extremist holiness movement that had made it difficult for Methodists to encourage testimony, and in their Episcopal Address of 1894 they declared:

“There has sprung up among us a party with holiness as a watchword; they have holiness associations, holiness meetings, holiness preachers, holiness evangelists, and holiness properties. Religious experience is represented as if it consists of only two steps: the first step out of condemnation into peace, and the next step into Christian perfection. . . . We do not question the sincerity and zeal of these brethren; we desire the Church to profit by their earnest preaching and their godly example; but we deplore their teaching and methods in so far as they claim a monopoly of the experience, practice, and advocacy of holiness, and separate themselves from the body of ministers and disciples.”

Mention should also be made here of the continuing attacks on the deteriorated, almost pagan Agape of the third century. Even Chrysostom lamented the suspicion it was under. Because of admission by ticket only in Wesley’s day, and the Amenian problem of infiltration by the holiness extremists of the late 1800’s it was suspect. Baker quotes a scurrilous poem which appeared in London in 1778 titled “The Love Feast: A Poem.”

There Saints, new-born, lascivious orgies hold,
Meek Lambs by day, at night no wolves so bold!
There the new Adam tries the old one’s fort,
And children of the Light in Darkness sport.
My earliest childhood memories of the Love Feast as I saw it observed in the churches served by my own father in Central Pennsylvania make me bold enough to describe what impressed me most. First of all, I remember that the Love Feasts were held on regular prayer meeting evening just prior to Communion Sunday. Water had been put in the individual glasses we used for regular Communion. Bread was usually cut in small squares, although I remember that on several occasions a large uncut loaf of bread was used and each participant broke off a small piece as the loaf would be passed from person to person. The service would begin with singing of Love Feast hymns, a fairly good variety of familiar gospel songs—but never Communion Hymns. The Scripture Lessons were, as I remember them, always divided into two basic sections: the first having to do with bread of life; the second with the waters of mercy and the concept of never thirsting.

After hearing the selections dealing with the bread, the people seated in a semi-circle would pass the loaf, or the cut bread, to each other, partake of it, and then after testimonies or voluntary quotations of scripture or a favorite stanza of a hymn, the minister would make a brief statement about the importance of one or more of the scripture selections. Next was the offering for the poor. This was then followed by the passing of the cups of water and appropriate testimonies; scripture and hymns would follow. Despite occasional interruptions by too much testimony by a few of the sincere but tiresome “saints,” I never left one of those services without feeling a close fellowship with the people attending. Moreover I felt that when we went to communion the following Sunday, we were better prepared for “The Lord’s Table” because we had been together at Love Feast. The service was not a substitute for Communion, but really was a simple and humble way of preparing for Communion.

At our forthcoming 1964 General Conference it is the intention of our Commission on Worship to recommend that in addition to other historical services of Methodism, we shall also include in THE BOOK OF WORSHIP a suggested form for the conduct of a Love Feast. So far as I know, this will be the first time any such effort will have been made in American Methodism to give the Love Feast a recognition of this type. Note that we use the word “form” rather than “an order of service,” for obviously it would seriously restrict such a service to build it on formal lines. I conclude the paper, therefore, by including here what we plan to recommend.

A SUGGESTED OBSERVANCE OF THE LOVE FEAST

Historical Note: Patterned on the agape of New Testament and apostolic times, the Love Feast became an important devotion
among Methodists in the days of John Wesley and has been observed on occasions by Methodists ever since.

When possible, worshipers may be seated in a circle or around a table. Bread may be broken into small portions, or a common loaf may be passed from hand to hand. Traditionally a loving cup with two handles is provided for water, but individual glasses may be used.

A Prelude
A Hymn of Praise
The Scripture, St. John 6:26-35
Voluntary Prayers and the Lord's Prayer
An Address
A Hymn of Christian Fellowship
The Passing of Bread with Blessing
The Passing of the Cup with Blessing
A Thanksgiving in unison
An offering for the poor
Testimonies
A Hymn of Thanksgiving
A Blessing
A Postlude

6 THE DOCTRINES AND DISCIPLINE OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN AMERICA, revised and approved at the General Conference held at Baltimore, Maryland, in November, 1792, to which are added the Minutes of the GENERAL CONFERENCE held at Baltimore, October 20, 1796. Printed by Henry Tuckness, sold by John Dickius, Philadelphia, 1797. Ninth Edition.
8 Ibid, Page 59.
10 JOURNAL OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH, 1894; Nashville.
11 Baker, Page 32.