THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOVE FEAST
IN EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM

by Richard O. Johnson

John Wesley was always quick to make use of forms and devices which would satisfy the peculiar spiritual needs of his Methodist societies. The early history of Methodism was thus characterized by the development of a number of innovative worship forms. Wesley always emphasized that these peculiarly Methodist forms were supplements to the regular services and sacraments of the Church, not replacements for them; but the supplements, because of their effectiveness as expressions of the "Methodist religious experience," often came to be seen as the very heart of Methodist worship.

The Methodist "love feast" became particularly important in the economy of the Methodist societies. Though Wesley himself did not originate the practice, he transformed it and adapted it to the needs of the Methodists so effectively that it came to be seen as primarily a Methodist rite. Much has been written on the love feast's development in Wesley's congregations; but the history of the practice among American Methodists has remained largely unknown. This paper will attempt to summarize Wesley's use of the love feast, and then discuss at some length its introduction and development in American Methodism. The primary resources for this inquiry will be the journals and papers of early American Methodist preachers; attention will also be given to the official Methodist *Disciplines*, which indicate the changing formal position of the rite within the Methodist system. The primary focus of discussion will be the love feast in "early American Methodism", which for the purposes of this paper will be understood as the period of greatest Methodist expansion, up to about the middle of the nineteenth century. The later decline of the rite in American Methodism will also be briefly noted.

The love feast was one of many institutions borrowed by Wesley directly from the Moravians. They had begun holding love feasts in 1727, but they viewed their ceremonies as a re-institution of a primitive church practice. It was this identification of the love feast with the apostolic "agape" that attracted Wesley, as his comment after witnessing his first Moravian love feast in Georgia in 1737 indicates:
After evening prayers, we joined with the Germans in one of their love-feasts. It was begun and ended with thanksgiving and prayer, and celebrated in so decent and solemn a manner as a Christian of the apostolic age would have allowed to be worthy of Christ.¹

Wesley was reintroduced to the love feast on his journey to the Moravian settlement at Herrnhut the next year, and its observance was added to the rules of his Fetter Lane Society soon after his return to London. The emotional power of the first Fetter Lane love feast is evident from Wesley's account of it:

Mr. Hall, Kinchin, Ingham, Whitefield, Hutchins, and my brother Charles were present at our love feast in Fetter Lane, with about sixty of our brethren. About three in the morning, as we were continuing instant in prayer, the power of God came mightily upon us, insomuch that many cried out for exceeding joy, and many fell to the ground. As soon as we were recovered a little from that awe and amazement at the presence of His majesty we broke out with one voice, 'We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.'²

For many years Wesley regarded the love feast as a highly private experience, primarily intended for members of the bands, the smallest and closest fellowship groups in the developing Methodist system. As his movement matured, however, Wesley began to make gradual changes. The Methodist Conference in 1758 agreed that once a year members of the Methodist societies who were not members of a band might be admitted to a love feast. The following year the first society-wide love feast was held at the Foundery. Before many years had passed, a class-ticket — the ordinary proof of regular membership in the Society — was all that was required for admission to any love feast. Even that standard was increasingly difficult to enforce, and in 1789 the Conference was forced to rule that "no person shall be admitted into the Love-feasts without a Society-ticket, or a note from the Assistant."³

The early love feasts were held monthly for the bands, and this practice continued for some time after the whole society began to be admitted annually. Frank Baker's study of Methodist records suggests that by the end of the eighteenth century, monthly love feasts had pretty much given way to a quarterly celebration, though it is very difficult to analyze the changing frequency very precisely. What is clear is that the love feast in Britain was observed with decreasing frequency, and Baker judges that "few, if any, quarterly observances seem to have survived into the twentieth century."⁴

²Ibid., II, 121f.
Wesley’s love feasts seem to have been most frequently held on Sunday evenings, though they were frequently used to mark special occasions such as Conferences, other meetings of various kinds, and sometimes Christian festivals, particularly Christmas.

The procedure at the love feast was simple. John Dungett, a contemporary observer, described one of the Wesleyan love feasts in this way:

They commence with praise and prayer; in a few minutes a little bread and water is distributed, and a collection is made for the poor. The great portion of the time allowed, which is generally about two hours, is occupied by such as feel disposed, in relating their own personal experience of the saving grace of God.⁵

This account points out the most significant change in the love feast as adapted by Wesley from the Moravian practice. In the Moravian love feast, “testimonies” by believers were not an integral part of the ceremony. The emphasis was rather on praise, and on the fellowship symbolized by the common meal of bread and water or tea.

The love feast was brought to America very early in the development of Methodism here. The first Wesleyan “missionaries,” Joseph Pilmore and Richard Boardman, arrived in Philadelphia in the fall of 1769. While some Methodist work had already been begun by a number of lay preachers in various colonies, Pilmore and Boardman were the first to be formally sent by Wesley to America. They began to build on the small societies already meeting, with Pilmore working primarily in Philadelphia, and Boardman in New York. After a few months, at Boardman’s request, the two exchanged locations; but before leaving Philadelphia, Pilmore’s journal records this item:

Friday: 23 (March, 1770). We had a time of refreshing at the Intercession, and in the evening, we had our first American love-feast in Philadelphia, and it was indeed a time of love. The people behaved with as much propriety and decorum as if they had been for many years acquainted with the economy (sic) of the Methodists. Perhaps (sic) this favorable beginning, will encourage the people to wish for such a season again, and may help to prepare them to eat bread together (sic) in the kingdom of God.⁶

This is the first explicit reference to a love feast in the records of American Methodism.

What is apparently a love feast ticket dated in New York, October 1, 1769, is preserved in the Drew University Library.⁷ The ticket is signed by Robert Williams, another one of Wesley’s preachers in America. Its

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⁷See Baker, op. cit., p. 49.
authenticity is difficult to establish, since it is not clear precisely when Williams came to America. He was not appointed by Wesley until 1770, but may have actually come shortly before Pilmore and Boardman. If Williams did introduce the love feast, however, it evidently did not make a very lasting impression; Pilmore's first New York journal entry on May 13, 1770, makes this note:

> In the evening I was greatly enlarged at the preaching, but much more at our Love feast. It is the first that has been kept by the Methodists in N. York, and the Lord was remarkably present. He brought us into his banqueting-house (sic), and his banner over us was love. We felt the softening power of the Holy Ghost, and our Souls were dissolved (sic) with love in the presence of the mighty God of Jacob.⁹

But whichever preacher deserves the credit for introducing the love feast to the American colonies, the custom soon became firmly rooted among the Methodists. The early journals of Methodist preachers abound with references to love feasts — some of them merely noting that a feast was held, others providing elaborate and vivid descriptions of the occasion.

The love feast's record of development was quite naturally one of increasing institutionalization. The Methodists began almost at once to place restrictions of various kinds on the holding of love feasts, and the result was very early a kind of standardization of the practice. There was never any published "ritual form" or "order of service" for a love feast; the devoted Anglicans among the early Methodists had enough trouble trying to maintain some sort of form for the administration of the sacraments! But the formal flexibility of the love feast must not be misunderstood as a license for the Methodists to "do their own thing" and call it a love feast. The practice was carefully controlled by means of proliferating regulations (stated and unstated) concerning frequency, leadership, duration, and conditions of admission.

Pilmore's journal shows that love feasts very soon became essentially a quarterly occasion. In a New York entry in the summer of 1771, he records what has already become known as "our Quarterly love-feast."⁹ Quite a number of other early journals make the same point. This quarterly celebration, of course, corresponds to what was then the normal practice in Britain, but there was another factor in the American quarterly pattern. The love feast tended to coincide with another emerging "standard institution" in American Methodism, the "Quarterly Meeting."¹⁰ The origins of this institution are somewhat obscure. Jesse Lee, the first American Methodist historian, made this remark about the work in 1772:

> The preachers regulated their business at the different Quarterly Meetings . . . At

⁹Pilmore, op. cit., p. 45.
¹⁰Ibid., p. 96.
that time it was customary to have the Quarterly Meeting on Tuesday, and to preach, settle their business, and hold a love-feast...\footnote{Lee, \textit{Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America} \ldots (Baltimore: Magill and Clime, 1810), p. 42.}

It soon became most usual to have the Quarterly Meeting over a weekend. The reason for the switch, according to Lee, was to enable slaves to attend the meetings.\footnote{Ibid.} By the time the Methodists were ready to form themselves into a distinct church, the Quarterly Meetings were almost invariably held on Saturday and Sunday, and the Conference \textit{Minutes} in 1780 required that pattern “when convenient.”\footnote{Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America \ldots (New York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, 1813), p. 26.}

The Quarterly Meeting became the regular occasion for the celebration of love feasts. Thomas Coke, Wesley’s personal emissary to the nascent Methodist Episcopal Church in America and the first Bishop of that church, recorded in his journal in April, 1785:

Their Quarterly-meetings on this Continent are much attended to. The Brethren for twenty miles round, and sometimes for thirty or forty, meet together. The meeting always lasts two days. All the Travelling Preachers in the Circuit are present, and they with perhaps a local Preacher or two, give the people a sermon one after another, besides the Love-feast, and (now) the Sacrament.\footnote{Thomas Coke, \textit{Extracts of the Journals of the Rev. Dr. Coke’s Five Visits to America} (London: G. Paramore, 1793), p. 34-35.}

The evidence suggests that, except for special occasions, the love feast became so identified with the Quarterly Meeting that it was \textit{not} held at other times. The overwhelming majority of early journal references to love feasts describe them in the context of Quarterly Meetings. By 1838, an article in the \textit{Christian Advocate}, the “official” Methodist journal, was able to state plainly that “these love-feasts are usually held on each circuit and station only at the time of the quarterly visits of the presiding elder.”\footnote{T. Spicer, “Love Feast,” \textit{Christian Advocate and Journal}, XIII (Oct. 12, 1838), p. 29.}

The implication of this restriction of love feasts to Quarterly Meetings seems to be that the love feast was ordinarily led by the presiding elder himself. This office, which emerged in American Methodism by the end of the eighteenth century, was held by one of the elders who was appointed by the Bishops to have charge of several circuits. His task was to travel around his several circuits, visiting each one at least once a quarter; there he would hold the Quarterly Meeting, which consisted of extensive preaching, prayer, a business session (“Quarterly Conference”), as well as the love feast and Lord’s Supper.

But the presiding elder was never officially given the responsibility to conduct love feasts. That authority was always carefully designated,
probably following Wesley's rule that only Assistants or Superintendent Ministers (i.e., only those directly responsible to Wesley himself) could conduct love feasts. By 1796 the British Conference was allowing love feasts to be conducted by local preachers, but still only with the prior approval of the Superintendent.16

There seems to have been no distinction among the first traveling preachers in America as to who might conduct love feasts. Pilmore, Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, and Richard Whatcoat all record in their journals love feasts at which they presided, and presumably their assignment to America by Wesley gave them this authority. But when the Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1784, it began to struggle with the very difficult problem of relating a newly received and somewhat irregular provision for ordination to the system of traveling preachers, assistants, and local preachers inherited from the British Methodist societies. The relationship that was worked out was creative, ultimately successful, and still totally unintelligible to modern historians of Methodism! The tensions, however, appear to have had an effect on the developing love feast.

The first Discipline listed the keeping of love feasts and watchnights as the responsibility of the "Assistants."17 In the 1787 edition, however, under the question, "What is the Duty of a Deacon?" is found a lengthy list of responsibilities. The sixth item requires that the Deacon "hold Watch-Nights and Love-Feasts."18 The implication of the change is that the responsibility for love-feasts had been assigned to one of the two orders of ordained ministry! It had thus in some sense taken on a much more sacramental dimension than Wesley himself ever could have imagined. Whether by some Methodist theologian's behind-the-scenes agitating, or by the designs of a tradition-loving Providence, the long list of duties which included the holding of love feasts was transferred in 1792 to a new section entitled "The Duties of those who have the Charge of Circuits," leaving the Deacons with the traditional Anglican diaconal chores of assisting the presbyter (elder, in Methodist terminology).19 "Those who have Charge of Circuits" would ordinarily be elders, but could also, if the church's leadership felt it appropriate, be deacons or even unordained traveling preachers.

The official responsibility for love feasts, then, remained with the preacher (who might or might not be ordained) in charge of the circuit. It seems clear, however, that this responsibility was primarily one of

16Baker, op. cit., p. 29.
17Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1785, p. 20 (hereafter Discipline).
18Discipline, 1787, p. 9.
19Discipline, 1797, p. 70.
discipline rather than any kind of ecclesiastical or spiritual authority. Bishops Coke and Asbury published annotations to the 1797 *Discipline*, and their comment at this point is instructive:

As the Lord is a God of order, and not of confusion, it is highly necessary that *one person* should be invested with the regulation of the watch-nights and love-feasts: and who would be so proper, in the absence of the presiding elder, as the preacher who has the oversight of the circuit? 20

The Bishops' comment also reiterates that, while the preacher in charge of a circuit had the authority to conduct love feasts, it was under normal circumstances the presiding elder who actually officiated. This was never written into the *Discipline*, though a later commentator on the administration of the *Discipline* in the Methodist Episcopal Church noted that "by established usage the presiding elder is entitled to hold the love-feast at the quarterly meeting." 21

A further check on possible abuses of the love feast was a fairly rigid limit on the duration of such celebrations. This was early made a part of the Methodist *Discipline*, and was taken over directly from the British practice. The British Conference had ruled in 1765 that a love feast ought not last more than an hour and a half. 22 The first American *Discipline*, after giving the Assistants responsibility for holding love feasts, amplified this by directing them to "suffer no Love-Feast to last above an Hour and a Half." 23 That direction, like the responsibility for the conducting of love feasts itself, was inherited by the Deacons in 1787 and the preachers in charge of circuits in 1792.

Easily the most interesting and controversial of the love feast regulations was the question of admission. As already noted, Wesley's original love feasts were for the members of the bands only, but gradually came to include all members of the society, and serious outsiders with the permission of the Assistant. In America, membership in the Society was the requirement for entrance to a love feast. Strangers, while able to gain admission if the preacher in charge of the circuit found them serious seekers, were pressed very hard to join the Methodist society. The Minutes of the very first Methodist Conference in 1773 declared:

No person or persons to be admitted into our love-feasts oftener than twice or thrice, unless they become members . . . 24

The first *Discipline* picked up the prohibition — a relatively uncommon variation from Wesley's *Large Minutes*, on which the *Discipline* was

20Ibid., p. 76.
22Frank Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
23*Discipline*, 1785, p. 20.
24*Minutes of the Methodist Conferences Annually Held in America, op. cit.*, p. 6.
based:

Q. 12. How often shall we permit Strangers to be present at our Love-feasts?

A. Let them be admitted with the utmost Caution; and the same Person on no account above twice, unless he becomes a member. This provision remained in the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church with substantially the same wording until 1864; and in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the prohibition on "Strangers" lasted until nearly the end of the 19th century.

The prohibition on outsiders was stringently observed, and was far more than an attempt to keep out rowdies. A commentary on the Discipline as late as 1855 makes it very explicit that in this instance "the term ‘strangers’ embraces all other persons (i.e., other than members, probationers, and baptized children of members) whether members of other Christian communions or not." The love feast was for Methodists only, and was not to be shared even with other Christians.

The means by which outsiders were excluded was the use of the love feast ticket. This device was taken over from Wesley, and was used with great zeal in America. The ticket was at first technically a "class meeting ticket," but since the highest privilege of its holder was admission to the love feast, the term "love feast ticket" was frequently used. By 1820 the ticket’s primary function was admission to the love feast, and the reference in the Discipline to "renewing the ticket" was clarified in that year by the addition of the phrases "for the admission of members into love feasts." The ticket was issued by the preacher in charge of the circuit, and it expired after every quarter. A current ticket was thus required for admission to Methodist functions. These tickets offer a fascinating side-light on American Methodism; a lengthy discussion of their developing form can be found in a chapter by J. B. Wakely.

The love feasts were guarded even against Methodists who might happen to arrive a little late. John Bangs related this experience:

At a certain time, in the town of Kortright, there was a quarterly meeting, and a considerable revival, where many conversions took place. Saturday night the prayer meeting held late, consequently we were rather late in getting to meeting in the morning. Not being so well acquainted with the usages as older members, I was there early enough to go in . . . I stepped out to take care of some horses, and the door was shut. Myself and about thirty more were by this means excluded from the love-feast. I was outside bare-headed. I desired to be admitted . . . The people within, knowing the circumstance, their feelings were hurt, as were ours without; it well nigh spoiled the whole meeting. Satan took the advantage of me. I could not partake of the sacrament that day . . . It would contribute greatly to the advancement and

25 Discipline, 1785, p. 5.
26 Osmon C. Baker, op. cit., p. 79.
27 Discipline, 1820, p. 39.
prosperity of our church if this defect were remedied; and it might be remedied, no
doubt, by enforcing the rule of Discipline, according to its true intent.29

The “true intent” was that, first, none but Methodists and those seriously
interested in becoming Methodists be allowed in after the love feast had
begun. And while the second of these “rules” was never written down,
both appear to have been almost universally enforced.

Why were outsiders so zealously excluded? The notes of Asbury and
Coke give the first articulated explanation, and it is firmly grounded in
Scripture:

It is manifestly our duty to fence in our society, and to preserve it from intruders;
otherwise we should soon become a desolate waste. God would write Ichabod upon
us, and the glory would be departed from Israel. At the same time we should suffer
those who are apparently sincere, if they request it, to see our order and discipline
twice or thrice, that they themselves may judge, whether it will be for their spiritual
advantage to cast in their lot among us. But we should by no means exceed the in-
dulgences here allowed; otherwise we should make our valuable meetings for
Christian fellowship cheap and contemptible, and bring a heavy burden on the minds
of our brethren. Gal. ii.4,5. ‘Because of false brethren unawares brought in, who
came in privily to spy out our liberty, which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might
bring us into bondage; to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour.’
Eph. v.11. ‘Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness.’30

But the essentially pragmatic (and very pastoral!) reason for excluding
outsiders was admitted in the Christian Advocate series on “Love Feasts”
in 1838:

There are good reasons why even pious persons of other Churches should not be
admitted indiscriminately into our love-feasts. There are some of those who do not
believe it proper that women should speak in public. Our sisters, if they knew such
were present, would feel much embarrassed in attempting to speak. Others of these
are not pleased with our modes of worship; such might go away and make unfriendly
remarks. These circumstances would only service to embarras us generally. Our
members would not feel as much at home as could be wished.31

This exclusivism became quite a matter of controversy on the
frontier, where rampant democracy made anything sounding like elitism
extremely suspect. The Methodists were roundly criticized for “un-
Christian behavior,” and the issue became even more serious during the
Second Great Awakening when cooperative revivals and union meetings
were the order of the day on the frontier.

The issue was complicated by the question of intercommunion, a
fascinating part of American church history that has never been explored
in any depth. It is relatively well-known that many of the early 19th-
century camp-meetings were begun as “sacramental meetings,” when

29John Bangs, Autobiography of Rev. John Bangs (New York: Printed for the Author,
30Discipline, 1797, p. 154.
Christians of all denominations (i.e., Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and occasionally Lutherans) would gather for a time of fellowship that would include the Lord’s Supper. These mass meetings were an expedient brought about by the general shortage of ordained clergy. The various groups of Christians would have great fellowship together, but when it came time for the Lord’s Supper the Baptists would invariably separate themselves from the rest and refuse to join in the communion. This refusal was perfectly consistent with their theological affirmation that only baptism by immersion was sufficient for admission to the Lord’s Supper; but one can see how their adamant separatism put a bit of a damper on the accelerating spiritual excitement of the camp-meeting! Peter Cartwright, the flamboyant Methodist presiding elder in the Western Conference, related a very lengthy account of one experience he had with a Baptist communion service:

Next came on their communion ... I was determined to give them another downward tilt, so I took my seat with the communicants; and some of (my) young converts, seeing me do so, seated themselves there also. But when the deacons came with the bread and wine, they passed us by. When they had got round, I rose and asked for the bread and wine for myself and the young converts. This threw a difficulty in the way of the deacons; however, they asked the preacher if they might give us the elements. The preacher peremptorily forbade it ... This treatment enlisted the sympathies of almost the entire assembly, and they cried out, ‘Shame! shame!’

Cartwright then invited the crowd outside the church, where he mounted a log, began to preach, and organized a Methodist Church! By the end of the year, he reported, the Methodist Church had 77 members, “but my Baptist friends blew almost entirely out.”

With the Methodists so critical of the Baptists, it took some real talking to justify their own refusal to allow outsiders into the love feasts. Their position was made more difficult by what appeared on paper to be equally strict rules about admission to communion. The first Discipline had mandated a very close consideratoin of “outsiders” before admission to the sacrament, and had required tickets for communion, as well as for the love feast:

Let no person who is not a member of the society be admitted to the communion without a sacrament ticket, which ticket must be changed every quarter. And we empower the elder or assistant, and no others, to deliver these tickets.

The Bishops’ annotations elaborated the direction:

We must also observe, that our elders should be very cautious how they admit to the communion persons who are not in our society. It would be highly injurious to our brethren, if we suffered any to partake of the Lord’s supper with them, whom

33Ibid., p. 72.
34Discipline, 1785, p. 15.
we would not readily admit into our society on application made to us. Those whom we judge unfit to partake of our profitable, prudential means of grace, we should most certainly think improper to be partakers of an ordinance which has been expressly instituted by Christ himself.  

Behind the careful wording of these provisions, however, lies a crucial difference in understanding of the Lord’s Supper over against the love feast. To gain entry to a love feast, the outsider must have a ticket for admission to that particular love feast, he must be seriously interested in joining the society, and he is under no circumstances to be allowed entry more than two or three times. For the Lord’s Supper, however, a sacramental ticket need only be renewed quarterly; the holder need have no intention of becoming a Methodist, so long as his moral character would allow him admission to the society should he apply; and there is no restriction on the number of times he might be admitted to the Lord’s Supper. By 1792 the ticket no longer had to be renewed quarterly, and in 1848 the rubric about examination was omitted entirely in the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Still outsiders often confused the Lord’s Supper regulations with the love feast rules, and attacked the Methodists as illiberal and exclusivistic. This was particularly true of the Baptists, who quite understandably wished to retaliate for the accusations made by the Methodists against them:

The preachers of no denomination are so clamorous upon the subject of communion as yours. Baptist ’close communion’ — Baptist illiberality and bigotry are the favorite themes of your ministers, upon all public and private occasions, when they think an impression can be made . . . (But) I know of no denomination so rigidly close, so illiberally and unscripturally strict in their communion as are the Methodists, judging from their laws and regulations . . . (They practice) close communion, even in their love feasts . . .

The above polemic was countered directly by a Methodist editor:

When the table is spread, by any one denomination, and the bread and wine placed thereon, it is emphatically the table of the Lord, and not the table of that particular denomination. The duty of the administrator is to invite all orthodox Christians who are in good standing in their respective Churches — as the Methodists invariably do — to join in the commemoration of the death and sufferings of Christ; and he is not at liberty to withhold the sacred elements from such, or to order them to stand aside, as the Baptists do on all occasions.

An earlier writer drew even more explicitly the Methodist view of the difference between “close communion” and “private love feasts”:

Nor do we conceive that close communionists could retort on us for not admitting

35Discipline, 1797, p. 120.
them and others to our love-feasts; for the Lord’s Supper, in which they refuse to let us join with them, is a *divinely instituted* means of grace designed equally for all Christians of every Church, whereas the love-feast is, as I have said, a prudential means adopted by us, and designed exclusively for us, and those of our friends whom we may choose to invite.²⁸

The American Methodists were thus able to “have it both ways” in a significant sense. Their somewhat restrained ecumenical outlook on the Lord’s Supper allowed them to participate in good conscience with other denominations in very close fellowship, while their “prudential” love feasts enabled them to maintain a close-knit fellowship among themselves.

It should be observed that this “official” relationship between the love feast and the sacrament was regularly carried out in real life. The dichotomy can be seen quite easily in most accounts of quarterly meetings. The Sunday session would begin with the love feast, to which only the Methodists were admitted. The doors would be closed and remain closed throughout the session. Then they would be opened again, and outsiders would pour in for a preaching service, which would then be climaxed by the Lord’s Supper — to which any serious person was admitted.

We must summarize our discussion of the love feast by reflecting on its function and purpose in the perspective of American Methodism. The common description of Methodist historians has been that the love feast was primarily “quasi-sacramental”, utilized in the early days as a substitute for the sacraments which were not readily available.³⁹ Like most generalizations, this one has some truth; but it also leads to a rather simplistic understanding of the love feast and all its significance.

A brief comparison with the Wesleyan love feast will be helpful at this point. We noted previously that the love feast as Wesley adapted it placed more emphasis on the role of “personal testimony” and somewhat less on the actual “ceremony” which characterized the Moravian love feast. In America this tendency continued with some acceleration. It is a fascinating commentary on the American practice that the accounts which are preserved very seldom refer to the “sharing of bread and water” at all! The emphasis is entirely on the testimony. One account even suggests that the testimony was really the “love feast” proper:

Next morning, our love-feast began at sunrise; I just made out to get there as the doors were shut . . . After singing and prayer, brother Asbury opened the love-feast and bade the people to speak. Many of them spoke very powerfully; several

³⁸Spicer, *op. cit.*, Nov. 23, 1838, p. 53.
³⁹This, for instance, is the appraisal of Paul S. Sanders, “An Appraisal of John Wesley’s Sacramentalism in the Evolution of Early American Methodism” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1954), pp. 455f.
exhortations were given in intervals by the preachers; we had a precious time.  

It was in the personal testimony that the presence of God was perceived:

In the love feast at eight in the morning, the society enjoyed a little Pentecost, and dwelt as it were in the suburbs of heaven. The presence of God was awfully felt, while the people one after another feelingly declared what God had done for their souls.

A very telling departure from Wesleyan practice was the early omission from the love feast of collections for the poor. Such a collection had been characteristic of Wesley’s love feasts, and also of the Moravian ceremonies. It seems to have been a part of the earliest American services, and the 1787 Discipline mandated “A Collection at Love Feasts, and on sacramental Occasions for the Poor of our own Society.” This regulation disappeared in 1792, never to be seen again, and references to such collections are extremely rare in 19th century journal accounts, if not altogether non-existent! It may be that the dichotomy between “poor” and “not poor” in the American Methodist societies on the frontier was a bit tenuous; but certainly the increasing emphasis on personal religious experience tended to undercut concern for benevolent giving.

In general, one senses a very fundamental shift in emphasis away from Wesley’s original intentions for the love feast. The shift is difficult to define, partly because its formal manifestations are slight; but it seems to exist nevertheless. One 19th century observer came close to admitting the shift:

> We have already intimated that the design of holding these feasts of charity among the primitive Christians was not merely to exhibit the virtue of Christian benevolence, or for the purpose of feeding the poor, but as a token of Christian friendship one toward the other — It will be recollected that among the people of the east, in ancient times more especially, a promise of inviolable friendship was ratified by the parties eating together. In reference to this practice, these love-feasts, as held by Mr. Wesley and his people, have considerable importance attached to them. But although this view may give them some considerable importance, this is far from being the principal object we have in view in holding them. Eating a little bread forms but a very small part of the business of a Methodist love-feast.

Wesley’s chief aim had been fellowship and nurture, and these functions didn’t drop out in America. But some new functions began to emerge, and they gave the American love feast its distinctive shape.

The love feast was, first of all, encouragement for the Methodist preachers. If this seems an odd characteristic to list first, it nevertheless follows several accounts of those preachers who found the love feasts crucial to their own ministry. Encouragement of ministers, for instance,

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42Discipline, 1787, p. 15.

ranks first in the list of love feast benefits described in the *Christian Advocate* series:

They are frequently occasions of great interest to the MINISTERS of the Gospel. Here are some, it may be, in whose conversion the preachers present may have been instrumental. To hear such speak, and allude to this circumstance, cannot but greatly encourage them in the work of the ministry. It enables them to say they 'know their labor is not in vain in the Lord.' Such encouragement ministers sometimes greatly need. The life of an 'itinerant' is a life of sacrifice and arduous toil.44

The last statement must appear a bit of an understatement to anyone who has read the journals of those early preachers! Their stories convince one that they deserved all the encouragement they could get! But the judgment is also stated by other writers. William Watters, one of the earliest American preachers, described a love feast held at a conference of preachers in 1776:

> We had a powerful time in our love feast a little before we parted, while we sat at our divine master's feet, and gladly heard each other tell what the Lord had done for, and by us, in the different places in which we had been labouring.45

It is evident that the relatively small number of preachers spread out over the entire American frontier led to a very severe sense of isolation; the love feasts allowed a number of preachers to hear about the progress of the Gospel in the rest of the Lord's vineyard, and thus to realize the profundity of their involvement in a "connection."

Perhaps the most interesting instance of "encouragement" comes in an Asbury anecdote related by J. B. Finley:

> Bishop Asbury having travelled hard through a western wilderness to reach a quarterly meeting on his way to conference, was unusually tempted at not having seen for some time any direct evidence of his success in the conversion of souls. He felt inclined to believe that his mission had expired, and that he had better retire from the work.

> With this depression of spirit he entered the love-feast on Sabbath morning, in a rude log-chapel in the woods, and took his seat unknown to any in the back part of the congregation . . . A lady rose whose plain but exceedingly neat attire indicated that she was a Methodist . . . 'Two years ago,' said she, 'I was attracted to a Methodist meeting in our neighborhood by being informed that Bishop Asbury was going to preach. I went, and the spirit sealed the truth he uttered on my heart. I fled to Jesus and found redemption in his blood . . . She sat down, and . . . Bishop Asbury was on his feet. He commenced by remarking that 'he was a stranger and pilgrim, halting on his way for rest and refreshment in the house of God, and that he had found both; and' said he, with uplifted hands, while the tears of joy coursed each other freely down his face, 'if I can only be instrumental in the conversion of one soul in travelling round the continent, I'll travel round it till I die.'46

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44Ibid.
If a man of Asbury’s zeal and faith was so encouraged by a love feast, preachers of less stature must have been truly helped by the times of fellowship and testimony!

In the second place, the Americans saw the love feast as a fundamentally important institution for religious education. With the people frequently scattered rather far abroad, the increasingly popular “Sabbath school” was impractical on the frontier. But the love feast provided a chance to train the young, not so much in doctrine as in Christian experience. We have already noted that the baptized children of Methodists were welcome to attend the meetings, and here they received their primary instruction.

It is . . . to the youth in our societies that especial attention should be paid, and every means of grace should be put within their reach, which is in any way calculated to build them up in the faith of the Gospel, and enlist their early energies in well-doing. In the love-feast, they find themselves among Christians advanced in years, and of longer standing in the Church. These have borne the heat and burden of the day, and they are not ignorant of Satan’s devices . . . They talk of the enemies they have met and conquered, until the young soldiers catch the martial fire and cry out in the fulness of their hearts and in the strength of faith, ‘We will go up and possess the goodly land.’

Bishop William McKendree made this catechetical purpose the chief design of the love feast:

Class meetings and love feasts are calculated and designed to instruct and lead the seeker of religion to the knowledge of sins forgiven and his acceptance with God through the Lord Jesus Christ . . . and to conduct the young converts, the babes in Christ, up to Christian perfection, to holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

Finally, American love feasts came to be “converting ordinances” to an extent that might have surprised Wesley. This may at first seem odd, since the love feasts were closed to all but members. But one must remember that the Methodist understanding of Christian experience placed great emphasis on “sanctification” and “holiness,” and this was a religious experience that might come only after years of earnest seeking. Jesse Lee told the effect of the testimony at one extraordinarily large love feast:

So clear, so full, and so strong was their testimony that while some were speaking their experience, hundreds were in tears, and others vehemently crying to God for pardon or holiness.

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47Spicer, op. cit., November 9, 1838, p. 45.
49Lee, op. cit., p. 59.
In some cases the very fact that meetings were so jealously guarded led to the conversion of outsiders:

When the love feast was ended, the doors were opened, and many who had stayed without, came in, and beholding the anguish of some, and the rejoicing of others, were filled with astonishment, and not long after, with trembling apprehensions of their own danger, several of them prostrating themselves before God, cried aloud for mercy.\(^{50}\)

A surprisingly great number of the early 19th century preachers record that their own conversions came from their attendance at a love feast — sometimes after having stolen or forged a ticket to gain admission!

For all its glorious history, the love feast in American Methodism finally faded out, “not with a bang but a whimper.” In 1884, the Methodist Episcopal Discipline dropped the “regulation of love-feast tickets” as a duty of pastors, though it was still claimed that holding love-feasts was among the duties of the pastor. In the same year Bishop DuBose, commenting on an observance at the Centennial Methodist Conference, referred to it as an “old-fashioned love feast.”\(^{51}\) The truncated references to love feasts lingered until the three major branches of American Methodism reunited in 1939; in the new church’s Discipline pastors were told to “hold or appoint . . . love feasts . . . whenever advisable.”\(^{52}\) By that time, however, few pastors knew what a love feast was, let alone whether one was advisable! A similar provision has remained in the Discipline; and for those pastors who might take such responsibilities seriously, the 1964 Book of Worship included a suggested “Form for Use in Observance of the Love Feast.” The availability of such a form, however, has not yet led to the widespread renaissance of the practice.

Clifford Towlson observes that “it is customary for Methodists to lament this departure from time-honored practice,” but he regards it as inevitable, and advises that “it has not all been loss.”\(^{53}\) He is perhaps correct on one level, but it must also be admitted that the love feast was in many ways the very heart of American Methodism for a good many years, and its decline indicates a very significant change in the self-conception of Methodism. In traditional sociological terms, one might describe the love feast’s demise as the symbolic movement of Methodism from “sect” to “church.” But such technical terms fail to convey the loss of passion that accompanied the shift. When Methodists gave up the regular sharing of their experiences with each other, the passion to bring others into the Kingdom cooled off considerably. One no longer found among the

\(^{50}\)Ibid., p. 55.

\(^{51}\)History of American Methodism, op. cit., III, 411.

\(^{52}\)Discipline, 1939, p. 69.

Methodists the almost ecstatic zeal contained in this account of a 1780 love feast:

We sat together in heavenly places; and to express myself in the words which I immediately wrote down, I was as in a little Heaven below, and believe Heaven above will differ more in quantity than in quality. Never did I hear such experiences before. Our eyes overflowed with tears, and our hearts with love to God and each other... O! happy people whose God is the Lord, may none of you ever weary in welldoing. May we after having done the work allotted us, meet in our father’s Kingdom to tell the wonders of redeeming love, and part no more. Till then let us never forget the example of the great apostle to the Gentiles, which ought never to be forgotten even by those in the highest state of grace. ‘But I keep under my body and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway...’ ‘Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.’ May the Lord be as a wall of fire around us, and the glory of God in the midst, until all our days are numbered. Until then may we watch and toil to make the blessed shore.54

However one regards the expression, one can hardly deny that this zeal, which propelled one of the most remarkable missionary movements in the history of the Church, has been unprofitably lost.

54Watters, op. cit., pp. 75-76.