

What Are Love Feasts?

Franklin Church of Christ
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PM Worship

Introduction:

In the ***Pulpit Commentary: Jude***, S.D.F. Salmond wrote regarding **Jude 12**:

“What is referred to appears not to be ordinary friendly gatherings or occasions for the interchange of affection, but the well-known *agapae*, or love-feasts, of the primitive Church, the meals provided in connection with the Lord’s Supper, at which rich and poor sat down together.”

To read this statement, one might believe we could find love feasts and descriptions of them all over our New Testaments. However, amazingly enough, the only passage that mentions love feasts is the one about which Salmond was writing. How then can we call them “well-known?” They are called that, not based on the Bible, but based on writings that were written in the two centuries that follow the Bible and based on the modern desire to make eating a part of serving God.

Some suggest that this passage is authorization for “fellowship halls” and church sponsored social meals. Others claim this was just the practice of individual Christians eating with one another. Others suggest that this refers only to the simple Lord’s Supper. Still others claim that this was a common meal within which the early church would partake of the Lord’s Supper. Is it possible to cut through all the preconceived notions and simply look at what the Bible says about these love feasts? I believe we can.

As I have studied these passages, I have traveled down two different paths of understanding. Most are convinced these love feasts are literally meals. I, however, am not so convinced of that. But for sake of argument I want to travel down both paths, seeing where they lead us.

Discussion:

- I. Path #1: The love feasts as literal meals.
 - A. One of the first problems we encounter as we grapple with Jude’s text is the realization that it does not actually say anything about the love feasts. It does not tell us what they were or how they were conducted. There is a parallel passage that due to similarities probably refers to the same thing. But **II Peter 2:13** also only mentions feasts in passing without any description. Further, while the Bible mentions meals and feasts in other contexts, not a single passage says, “Here is the love feast.” Never once does the Bible say the love feast was the Lord’s Supper. Never once does it say it was a common meal.
 - B. With this dilemma in mind, we need to remember that we have to keep these passages in their context. Further, we must see how they fit harmoniously with the rest of the New Testament. What we are not allowed to do is come up with a whole teaching on church feasts based solely on two vague, passing comments. What we are not allowed to do is go outside the Bible and take man’s words, whether ancient or modern, as God’s rule for what was going on here. What we must do is examine the Bible. While the term “love feast” is not used anywhere else, we do see passages that talk about the church and meals. When we examine what they did, we can apply that learning to these passages and have a scriptural guide to follow God’s will.
 - C. We first need to recognize the overarching principle found in **Romans 14:17**. Christ’s kingdom is not about eating and drinking. I am amazed at those who want to make a common meal the very center of the Christian assembly or the most important aspect of Christianity in light of this passage. We cannot rip **Jude 12** and **II Peter 2:13** out of their biblical contexts to rewrite this passage making the centerpiece of our service to God a common meal.
 - D. We find a very interesting dichotomy in **Acts 2:46-47**. The whole church came together daily in one accord in the temple. But they only ate meals from house to house. They ate with one another because they were part of the church together, but they did not come together as the church to eat common meals. The Jerusalem church was not sponsoring fellowship meals.
 - E. In **Acts 20:7**, the church gathered on the first day of the week to break bread. Consistent with other passages, such as **I Corinthians 10:16-17**, we know this was the Lord’s Supper, the memorial established by Jesus Christ on the night of His betrayal. The most enlightening passage in this regard is **I Corinthians 11:17-34**. The Corinthian church had a problem. They were filled with divisions and factions. Their divisiveness was manifesting itself in the way they partook of the Lord’s Supper. Their problem was that instead of taking the Lord’s Supper, each one was taking his own supper. They were not having a memorial meal in honor of the Lord but

a selfish supper honoring only themselves. Being centered on themselves, taking their own supper, they were leaving some out of the whole process entirely. Paul answered these problems with three points.

1. In **vss. 23-32**, he reminded them that this meal was not about their hunger, but about Jesus' death. The partakers are not to discern their hunger while they eat, but their head. That is, they were to keep in mind Who was in control, Jesus, and what He had done for them.
2. In **vs. 33**, he reminded them that this was something they were to do in the assembly, not just when the first person showed up and saw the food.
3. Finally, in **vs. 34**, he pointed out that meals to fulfill hunger were to be eaten at home. Notice that Paul did not say, "If you are so hungry that you won't be able to control yourself..." Or, "If you are starved to the point that you will be selfish, eat at home first." He simply said, "If you are hungry, eat at home." Neither the church's assemblies nor the Lord's Supper are designed to fulfill physical hunger, but spiritual. Thus, making an actual meal out of the Lord's Supper completely misses the point of the observance. Interestingly, there is only one passage that demonstrates a common meal taking place in connection with the Lord's Supper and in that passage it is condemned. In that passage, we are told to fill our hunger at home. We gather here to commemorate our Lord's death with a memorial.

F. What is our conclusion then about love feasts? If we agree that the love feasts were literal times of eating, we must agree that nothing in these passages explains which is the love feast—the Lord's Supper or the common meals. But whichever the case, we cannot blend the common meals and Lord's Supper together based on **Jude** and **II Peter**. Instead, if the love feast refers to the Lord's Supper, as it is a meal in which we remember our Lord's love for us and proclaim our love for Him, all Jude and Peter are saying is that these hypocrites take the supper with us while living however they want to. If on the other hand, love feasts refer to common meals in which we show our love for one another through hospitality, then Jude and Peter are merely saying that the hypocrites are more than happy to eat from house to house with their brethren, while carousing in their sins behind the backs of the brethren.

II. Path #2: The love feast as a metaphor.

- A. I am not altogether convinced that **Jude 12** and **II Peter 2:13** refer to actual meals at all. In fact, I believe it is possible that Jude and Peter were using the terms "feast" and "love feasts" metaphorically and were referring to something altogether different from literal meals.
- B. This claim is completely in keeping with the immediate context of both passages. In **II Peter 2**, Peter uses simile to claim the hypocrites are like natural brute beasts (**vs. 12**) and as those who carouse in the daytime (**vs. 13**). Further in **vs. 17**, he metaphorically says these people are wells without water and clouds carried by a tempest. Jude uses several metaphors to describe the hypocrites that mar the love feasts, saying in **vss. 12-13** that they are clouds without water, autumn trees without fruit, raging waves of the sea and wandering stars.
- C. Considering the possible metaphorical use of feasts, we are reminded of **I Corinthians 5:6-8**. In this passage, Paul was persuading the Corinthians to withdraw fellowship from an immoral Christian. Instead of speaking of congregational fellowship and sin, he presented a picture of the Passover Feast, which under the Old Law was to be eaten without leaven. Pointing out that Jesus is the Passover lamb sacrificed for Christians, he paralleled the brethren's fellowship together as the ongoing feast, which should be eaten without leaven. Therefore, the sinful man should have been purged out because his little leaven would leaven the whole lump. His sin would spread throughout the congregation if they did not do something about it.
- D. I believe Peter and Jude may well have been using "feast" and "love feasts" in the exact same way as Paul. After all, Peter was well aware of Paul's writings and assumed that his audience was as well (**II Peter 3:15**). Jude's book is most certainly modeled after Peter's.
- E. Consider these verses with this possible parallel in mind.
 1. In **II Peter 2:13-14**, when Peter referred to the hypocrite's as "spots and blemishes," he was also calling to mind the picture of the Passover sacrifice, which was to be without spot and blemish. Further, as he spoke of these hypocrites carousing, which meant to live luxuriously, "in their own deceptions," he was making a spiritual contrast. They were feasting with Christians, that is, they appeared to be worshipping with the brethren, but were actually

- deceiving the brethren. Instead of feasting on Jesus, our Passover lamb, they were actually carousing in deception, lusting, sinning and even enticing others to do the same.
2. In **Jude 12**, some translators, based on the parallels between Peter and Jude translated the Greek term “spilas” as “spots.” However, the term actually means “a ledge or reef of rock in the sea.” Just as rock ledges underneath sea level are a danger to sailing ships, these hypocrites are an unseen danger to the congregation. Why are they a danger? Because they serve only themselves. I find it hard to believe that the danger described here is based on the fact that in the setting of a literal meal the hypocrite only fills his own plate. Rather, he was highlighting their dangerous self-serving attitudes. When Jude said “serving only themselves,” he used the same word (poimaino) as Jesus used asking Peter to “tend my lambs,” in **John 21:16**. Instead of being good shepherds, concerned about others, these hypocrites were only focused on themselves. This brings to mind the anti-shepherds of **Isaiah 56:9-12** and **Ezekiel 34:1-6**. Their selfishness rips the flock to shreds. That is truly dangerous. As **James 3:16** said, where self-seeking is, every evil thing is there.
 - F. What is our conclusion then? If I am right and Peter and Jude were using the idea of feasting as a metaphor amid other metaphors, then the love feasts are not to be viewed as literal meals at all. Rather, the feast to which Peter and Jude were referring was the same one about which Paul spoke in **I Corinthians 5:6-8**. They were referring to our continued fellowship with one another in the congregation and our times together feasting on God’s word. They were referring to what we do every time we gather together to worship God. Hypocrites are a spot and blemish in that. We must beware of them. As Jude said in **Jude 22-23**, we will make a distinction, having compassion on some, presumably those who are struggling with sin but are striving to serve God. But we must save some with fear, presumably those who are rebellious hypocrites, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh. However, if they will not allow us to pull them from the fire, then as Paul said, we must remove the leaven so that we can partake in the feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Conclusion:

Brethren, these are our choices. If we believe the love feasts were literal meals, then we must choose between the Lord’s Supper and the eating from house to house that Christians often did. If we believe Peter and Jude were speaking metaphorically, then we learn about our fellowship with one another and our congregational worship and work. But whichever path we take, we do not come up with congregational fellowship meals as some kind of worship. We do not come up with eating the Lord’s Supper as a common meal or as part of a common meal.

I am well aware that we can go to post-biblical Christian writers such as Tertullian, who wrote nearly 100 years after the New Testament was completed, and find descriptions of what churches did in the second and third centuries and what they called love feasts. Considering the fact that Christians during the lives of the apostles were messing things up regarding feasts (**I Corinthians 11**), how wise is it to accept the testimony of Christians 100 years or more after the apostles as accurately reflecting the scriptural teaching we are to follow? Further, I still believe **II Timothy 3:16-17**. The scriptures provide all the equipping we need. If we have to step outside the scriptures to come up with the authority for what we do, then it is not a good work.

The conclusion of this whole matter is that we need to continue on as we have been. We must make the same distinction we find in the New Testament between what the church is to be involved in and what individuals are responsible for. We must continue to gather to remember the death of Jesus, not through a common meal, but a memorial one. We must not make eating the centerpiece of our time together in worship or otherwise. Rather, we must make the centerpiece serving God according to His word. Let us be aware of hypocrites and sinners, restoring them or removing them lest they cause us to lose our souls as well. Let us focus not on pleasing ourselves, but on pleasing our God.