

Love Feasts (SR: Jude 8-13)

There has been a recent, renewed surge among even formerly conservative groups in using carnal methods to try to fulfill the church's responsibilities with respect to evangelism, edification, and benevolence. Many of the motivations behind these efforts are understandable, sincere, and in many ways praiseworthy. Christians want others to respond to the gospel, they want to feel close to other Christians, and they want to meet the needs of those who are destitute. Still, these carnal methods are simultaneously motivated by attitudes which assume insufficiency in the gospel message as well as the many mediums which God has authorized for such needs to be sufficiently met through the zealous activity of the church.

One of the largest and most influential of these movements concerns the eating of meals together within, adjacent to, or otherwise in direct connection to our collective worship services. These meals and the means by which they are prepared, cooked, served, and eaten are usually furnished by the treasury of the church, using the assets of the church collective to fill the bellies of its members, visitors, or to draw in any passersby. One of the texts commonly used to support this particular outgrowth of the movement is Jude 12-13 which reads, *"These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever."* This brief, singular reference in the Bible to "love feasts" has largely, though not exclusively, become the pretext by which congregations of the Lord have justified this practice.

Our lesson will ask whether this is a legitimate interpretation & use of this text. Our contention will be that there is insufficient evidence to support this application. Not only that, but in light of other passages, it is a cavalier and presumptuous application of this text as it irreverently gives preference to the faulted opinions of people over what the biblical text sufficiently reveals.

I. A History: This Is Not A New Position and Argument

- A. The argument traditionally goes that several early church writers interpreted and applied the term "love feast" to a common meal, or a fuller meal in tandem with the Lord's Supper. Appeals are made to the writings of Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and other Ante-Nicene Fathers. When one looks at these references, there may be some who lean more towards this application, but often it is unclear what exactly they are referring to & modern interpretation of their comments is often mixed among scholarship & translators.
- B. This appeal to early interpretation and application of "love feasts" is reflected in popular lexicons (i.e., dictionaries of Bible words).
 1. Thayer's – *"feasts expressing and fostering mutual love which used to be held by Christians before the celebration of the Lord's supper, and at which the poorer Christians mingled with the wealthier and partook in common with the rest of food provided at the expense of the wealthy"*
 2. BDAG – *"a common meal eaten by early Christians in connection with their worship, for the purpose of fostering and expressing mutual affection and concern, fellowship meal, a love-feast"*

3. Cautions:

- a. These explanations often offer commentary rather than lexicography. A lexicon is supposed to, by nature, offer translations into modern language. They are not commentaries by nature & often their additional comments detract from their stated purpose, superimposing doctrinal positions of the authors over the definitions they are obligated to offer. While we understand this w/ commentaries themselves, we must also realize that it can occur in more “objective” resources (dictionaries, encyclopedias).
 - b. Second, the average (majority of?) Christians have not read the works of Tertullian, Ignatius, Clement of Alexandria, and all the other Church Fathers? Appeals to these writers and their writings is often met by an audience ignorant with such writings.
 - c. You will also see in many commentaries on these writings, in reference to this application of “love feasts,” either appeals to, “the majority of scholars,” “the opinion of many,” and/or phrases like, “seems to,” “possibly,” & “appears to.” Tentative surmising & appeals to majority hardly build a solid case for proper Bible interpretation.
 - d. The Ante-Nicene writings often speak of developments that became heretical, particularly in reference to the Lord’s Supper. For instance, separations became evident during this period between the Lord’s Supper and the “Eucharist” which eventually gave root to transubstantiation, consubstantiation, & other false teachings.
- C. There are Ante Nicene writers who do not mention love feasts AT ALL or that clearly identify love feasts with the Lord's Supper ALONE. Indeed some distinctly stand opposed to the idea of using “love feasts” as a pretext for common meals:
1. *“When we come to Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 150) we find that in his account of church worship he does not mention the agape (love feast) at all, but speaks of the Eucharist (Lord's supper) as following a service which consisted of the reading of Scripture, prayers, and exhortation.”* (I.S.B.E. revised. 'Agape', p. 66)
 2. *“The apostle, restraining those who transgress in their conduct at entertainments, says 'For everyone takes beforehand in eating his own supper. And one is hungry and another drunk.'”* (Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 195), 2.240)
- D. The data, interpretations, & applications are mixed. If someone argues, “We know that the early church had a common meal in the assembly based on Jude 12 and other passages,” or, “It is obvious and well-proven that the early church had love feasts and we should have these today; otherwise we are not following the apostolic pattern or caring about the fellowship of Christians,” these statements are false. We do NOT know these things and we are supremely underinformed to make that application. That may be how some have interpreted it, even very early in the church, but we do not KNOW this to be the case. There are others who did not see it that way and even argued against it. We cannot depend on

the authority of fallible men to build an entire doctrine off of unexplained and passing mentions in the Bible. I'll be the first to admit that these writings are valuable to study and that they add to our understanding of how people have seen things religiously, but they are not authoritative in establishing church practice. There is a big difference!

E. Modern writers, influential preachers, and even assemblies in our area are making the same age-old arguments.

1. One significant factor in this recycling of old interpretations among churches was F. Lagard Smith's publication of *Radical Restoration* in which he argued for love feasts as scripturally binding.

2. Another key factor in this was the Abilene Lectureship of 1947 in which M. Norvel Young argued for the church to start building fellowship rooms and cooking facilities. He followed this lecture with an abundance of articles defending this position, but it was not originally widely received.

3. Note how even B.C. Goodpasture in the *Gospel Advocate* in 1951 condemned the use of church funds to provide for carnal fulfillments:

"It is not the mission of the church to furnish amusement for the world or even for its own members. Innocent amusement in proper proportion has its place in the life of all normal persons but it is not the business of the church to furnish it...The church was not established to feature athletics...For the church to turn aside from its divine work to furnish amusement and recreation is to pervert its mission. It is to degrade its mission.... Building recreation rooms, and providing and supervising recreational activities at the expense of the church, is a departure from the simple gospel plan as revealed in the New Testament.... The church might as well relieve the parents of feeding and disciplining all of the young people at church expense as to take over the job of entertaining and supervising the recreation at church expense." (229)

4. In addition to the "love feasts" mention in Jude, appeals are also made to the Passover Meal observed at the Last Supper with the argument that Christians today are to observe a fuller meal in connection to the Lord's Supper. Likewise, some argue that fellowship between Christians requires sharing in fuller meals in worship or that the good works of the church requires benevolence as expressed in open community meals. Still some try to link this passage to others, including 1 Corinthians 10-11, arguing for a broader meal with the Lord's Supper. I will address this latter use of the passage in our final installment on this subject.

F. As we proceed in this lesson, I commend the following thought from Bill Hall: *"Let me say again, that when differences arise, and it doesn't matter whether it's over these things that we've been talking about, or over divorce and remarriage, or whatever, one of our problems is we don't listen to one another. We either already have our minds made up, or we are thinking about what we are going to say next, or how we're going to answer this person, that we really don't listen. And consequently, a lot of times, we try to answer an argument before we even*

know the argument. We try to answer an issue before we even know what the issue is. And we make a very sad mistake. I may have been guilty of that. Any of us may have been. But we need to listen to one another.” (Kitchens and Fellowship Halls: What Was the Issue? By Bill Hall on the La Vista COC website)

II. How Do We Establish God’s Approval? (e.g., Acts 15)

- A. In communication theory, there are three ways to share a message:
1. Command/Tell – Direct statement informing someone to action (“You shall...”)
 2. Approved Example/Show – A legitimated presentation of what is expected which informs someone to action (“They did...[under divine/apostolic approval]...”)
 3. Necessary Inference/Imply – An inescapable conclusion which informs someone to action (e.g., Acts 2:27-32, 36)
- B. While we more often use the CENI construction in religious discussions, the same points are evident. This is not an exclusive COC or even religious construction. It is an inescapable truth related to any and all communication. If you do not believe me, then I challenge you to disagree with me without directly telling me, showing me where I am wrong, or directly and inescapably implying my error.
- C. *“TSI [aka CENI] is foundational to any form of communication. There is no communication without it. It is inherent in any spoken or written communication (not just in studying the Bible). It is not, in itself, a hermeneutic or method of interpreting, but is rather foundational to any hermeneutic. That is, any hermeneutic will already assume the reality of TSI. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It is what we as the recipients (readers, hearers) bring to the communication process. TSI, on the other hand, is inherent in what the communicator gives. That is, we, the readers or listeners, do not provide the TSI; we take the TSI that is given to us and try to understand what that means. TSI, then, is not a method of interpretation; it is the material that we try to interpret. We might misinterpret it. We might fail to get out of it what is intended. Nevertheless, it is the raw material that we use in order to try to understand what the author or speaker intends. There is no getting around this. No one interprets anything that is not first told, shown, or implied in some way. We are speaking of the bare bones of what we work with when we do interpret. Instead of criticizing the communication process, let’s recognize it for what it is and then deal with how we should properly understand the statements, examples, and implications.” (Moyer, Doy. *Mind Your King: Lessons and Essays on Biblical Authority* (pp. 180-181). Moyer Press)*
- D. Overall, there are two sources for authority: human & divine (Mt. 21:23-27). In the realm of the work of the church, we need God’s authority (Col. 3:17; 2Ti. 3:16f).

III. What Does Jude 12-13 Itself Indicate?

- A. The truth is that because “love feasts” are only mentioned 1x in the Bible we do not know much about them. Based on this passage alone, it is unspecified whether we are to even observe these “love feasts.”

- B. The word whence "love feasts" is "*agapais*" and by itself only means "*loves*." In fact, there is some evidence that another similar word, "*apatais*" may be the intended reading in Jude 12 (cf. 2Pet. 2:13). If so, Jude 12 would read, "*These are the men who are hidden reefs by your deceptions when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted*". Whichever word is intended is a matter of dispute and using one possibility to legitimate an idea one wishes to read into the text is bad scholarship (2Tim. 2:15; 2Pet. 3:14-18).
- C. There is some indication that addition of "the" in front of *agapais* indicates something more concrete as an act/activity, but that itself is not determinative.
- D. The translator's addition of "feasts" may be appropriate though since the verb after "*agapais*" is "*suneuocheomoi*" which does mean "*feasting with*".
- E. However, nothing in Jude 12-13 necessarily indicates "*love feasts*" happened in the worship assembly. The location of the love feasts is unspecified. Should we assume, without warrant, that God approves of us using the assembly for our own private desires as we see fit? (cf. Lev. 10:1-3; 2Sam. 6:1-11; Heb. 7:14)
- F. Are there other parallel passages that clarify this text? There is a parallel in 2 Peter 2:13, but it provides no added insight. It too has the same variant reading issue.

IV. Are There Other Options for "Love Feasts" Than What We See Today?

- A. *"All reasoning contains inferences or interpretations by which we draw conclusions and give meaning to data. To what extent do the data support your conclusions? Are your inferences consistent with each other? Are there other reasonable inferences that should be considered?"* (Paul, Richard; Elder, Linda. "Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools." *Foundation for Critical Thinking*)
- B. Several alternatives supported by other passages:
 1. Potlucks Outside of the Assembly (Acts 2:46 – notice that this was "daily")
 2. Church Sponsored Benevolence Meals for Poor Members Exclusively (Acts 2:45; 4:34f; 11:27-30; Rom. 15:26; 1Cor. 16:1-3; 2Cor. 8-9). Modern day "love feasts" are rarely for benevolent purposes for members, nor do we see precedent in the NT for using the funds of the church to be used in drawing non-Christians to the gospel.
 3. Church Sponsored Benevolence Meals for Widows Indeed
 - a. Acts 6:1-6 – notice that these were "daily servings" in v. 1
 - b. 1Tim. 5:3-16 – notice that there was a "list" contingent upon several requirements, and that if provisions were available from another source, the church was not to be "burdened" in order to provide.
 4. The Lord's Supper By Itself
 - a. Calling the Lord's Supper a "love feast" would be an appropriate designation. In the context of Jesus' institution of it at the Last Supper, He spoke repeatedly of love as shown by sacrifice (John 13:34f; 14:15-31; 15:9-17).
 - b. 1Cor. 5:6-8 speaks of Christians observing a *feast*, using imagery of the Lord's Supper itself (e.g., "Unleavened bread").

- c. Lord's Supper is to be observed every 1st day of the week, in line with approved apostolic example (Acts 20:7; cf. 1Cor. 11:23ff; 16:1-3).
- d. The elements of the Lord's Supper are stated – unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. Other items defile the meal and presume upon God's authority. In fact, the Corinthian church is specifically rebuked for mingling the common with the holy in their observance of the Lord's Supper (1Cor. 10-11). They were to eat their common meals at home (11:22, 34). Their example is not approved; it is condemned!

V. Can We Confidently Identify and Show Authorization for "Love Feasts" As Observed Today?

- A. Are we directly told to observe "love feasts" in Jude 12-13. No.
- B. Are "love feasts" set forth as clearly approved examples in Jude 12-13? No.
- C. Do the "love feasts" of Jude 12-13 provide a direct and inescapable inference or forced conclusion that we should be observing either a fuller Passover meal in conjunction with the Lord's Supper, or a common meal for any & all attendants, provided for by the collective assets of the church? No. Neither are an inescapable or forced conclusion. There are other actionable options for interpreting the text that do not create the same difficulties in harmonization.

Due to the lack of information and heavy reliance of proponents of social meals upon unclear extra-biblical sources (who in various and demonstrable ways often show heretical views), it is exceedingly precarious to identify love feasts as social meals in the assembly. Moreover, to use this shabby scaffolding to justify building \$50,000 kitchens and million-dollar "fellowship halls" flies in the face of responsible Bible interpretation.

It is far better hermeneutically to see this passing reference in Jude 12 as either to the Lord's Supper (unembellished in the assembly), to social meals/potlucks outside of the assembly, or to benevolence meals for needy saints which may or may not have been provided thru church funds. This accords with the inspired apostolic command to observe social gatherings, especially social meals, outside of the assembly and separate from corporate worship (1Cor. 11:22, 34). This in turn also preserves the sanctity of the Lord's Supper and keeps it from being diluted by common meals and common attitudes (1Cor. 10:15-17). Furthermore, we can be certain that this was not a church-sponsored free meal for believers and unbelievers alike, as that would violate personal responsibilities in benevolence and also act presumptuously against the New Testament's restrictive authorities for collective benevolence (1Tim. 5:16).