

St. Matthew A.M.E. Church

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INFORMATION ON LOVE FEAST



Servant Church of the Oranges
SAINT MATTHEW
AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
God's Love for God's People

THE LOVE FEAST

The love feast is rich in tradition, symbolism, and Christian community. It is a service in which portions of bread, the element of a simple meal, are distributed to those present and shared with each other as members of one family united by love. The love feast has its roots in the Agape meal of the early church. Luke records of the early Christians, "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47, NIV). The symbolic breaking of bread carries profound meaning from the ancient rituals of the Old Testament to the present fellowship of believers. The Passover bread symbolizes to this day the power of God to deliver His people from bondage. The broken and shared bread of the Last Supper represents the willing sacrifice of Christ that we might not die. Reconciliation of the most noble sort is represented in the breaking of bread. The broken bread offered by Jesus to the disciples, including Judas, in the Upper Room was a final act of forgiving love on the part of the Master. When Jesus fed the multitude with five broken loaves and two fish He demonstrated His caring love for all people in need. This simple yet miraculous act opened the compassionate heart of Jesus to a hungry multitude. Hence the breaking of bread in many different ways and places becomes a significant part of the miracle producing fellowship experienced in the early church. It is both a celebration of the forgiving love of Christ at Calvary and a participation in that love in the fellowship of reconciled, joy filled believers.

The love feast practiced in the Methodist tradition was borrowed from the Moravians for reasons given by Wesley himself: In order to increase in them [persons in bands] a grateful sense of all God's mercies, I desired that one evening in a quarter all men in band, on a second all the women, would meet, and on a third both men and women together, that we might together "[break] bread," as the ancient Christians did, "with gladness and singleness of heart." At these love-feasts (so we termed them, retaining the name as well as the thing, which was in use from the beginning) our food is only a little plain cake and water; but we seldom return from them without being fed not only with the "meat which perisheth," but with "that which endureth to everlasting life." In larger Methodist societies the love feast was held every quarter on a Sunday afternoon or following the Sunday evening service. Smaller societies observed it only once a year. Methodist historian Dr. Frank Baker attributed the decline and virtual disappearance of the Love Feast to the fact that it was a product and instrument of revivalism. Although the observance of the love feast has declined in Free Methodism in recent years, where it has been re-introduced it provides the church an opportunity to maintain "singleness of heart" through forgiving love which overcomes petty differences or misunderstandings.

At St. Matthew, Love Feast is celebrated usually on the Wednesday before the First Sunday of the month, when we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion

PERSONAL PREPARATION QUESTIONS TO ASK AT LOVE FEAST

1. Am I willing to know myself and accept responsibility for what I am and for what I do, or do I blame others?
2. Am I honest, or do I profess principles in public that I do not practice in private?
3. Am I more severe in my judgment of others than I am in judgment of myself?
4. Am I making demands upon others which I do not make of myself?
5. Am I listening to others so I may understand them, or do I think only of my own thoughts when others speak?
6. Am I gracious and courteous toward all my family, my associates, and the strangers whom I meet?
7. Am I forgiving toward all who have wronged me or spoken unkindly, remembering that God forgives even more through Christ Jesus my Lord?
8. Am I doing all in my power to keep peace and unity within the fellowship of Christian believers?
9. Am I ready to ask forgiveness of any I have wronged, humbling myself that Jesus Christ may be exalted in the congregation?
10. Am I willing to be known by others and to love my Christian brothers and sisters when I know them?
11. Am I ready to speak with others, “Not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts”?

More Information on Love Feast

If you were to ask the ordinary Christian today what a Christian meeting was like in the days of the apostles, you would probably get different answers. An evangelical Christian would probably answer that it consisted primarily of preaching and singing. A charismatic Christian might reply that it primarily incorporated worship, praise, and the exercise of miraculous gifts. An Anglican might reply that it was principally a celebration of the Eucharist. Of course, all of those responses are partially right. However, a rather dominant part of apostolic worship that few Christians would think of today is that it centered around a meal.

That's right—a meal! The early Christians referred to this meal as the agape. Even after the death of the apostles, the pre-Nicene Church continued to practice the agape or love feast. Yet, within a century or so after Constantine's conversion, this important part of apostolic worship totally disappeared.

How Did the Love Feast Originate?

For the origin of the love feast, we need to look no further than the Last Supper. “As *they were eating*, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body” (Matt. 26:26). So the very first Eucharist was instituted in the context of a meal! A meal continued to be the normal setting in which

Christians met together for fellowship and worship. Acts 2:46 tells us: “Continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart.” The expression, “breaking bread,” no doubt includes the celebration of the Eucharist. However, the phrase, “they ate their food with gladness” would also indicate that this was more than communion; it was also a meal.

Nowhere is this practice more clearly confirmed than in the communion passage of 1 Corinthians 11:20-34. Paul begins that passage by saying, “Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.” Now, this is obviously talking about more than just the Eucharist. Nobody gets drunk from the small amount of wine taken in communion, nor is it credible that various persons would receive communion before others because they were hungry. No, Paul is obviously describing a meal—the love feast—that preceded the actual Eucharist.

Yet, that the Eucharist was celebrated at the end of the love feast (or, as part of it) is quite clear from verses 23-30 of that passage. In those verses, Paul expressly mentions Jesus taking bread and saying, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you” (1 Cor. 11:24).

Another place in Scripture that describes eating as an integral part of a New Testament worship service is Acts 20:11, where it mentions: “When he had come up, had broken bread and eaten, and talked a long while, even till daybreak, he departed.” So Paul didn’t just preach; he also ate!

And, then, of course, there is the well-known reference in Jude, where Jude refers to those who are “spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves” (Jude 12). Here Jude uses the Greek word *agape* to refer to what is commonly known today as the love feast.

Almost All Scholars Are Agreed

The rather amazing thing is that nearly all biblical and patristic scholars—catholic and Protestant, liberal and conservative alike—are agreed on this matter: that New Testament worship consisted of the love feast, followed by preaching and the Eucharist. Here are just a few samples:

From the conservative *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*: “Certainly by the time of Paul’s writing to the Corinthians (ca. AD 55) it is evident that that church observed the practice of meeting together for a common meal before partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34). ...The situation described here is possible only in the context of a meal more substantial than, and preceding the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. [p. 660] From *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, which generally represents an

Anglo-Catholic perspective: “The term [agape] is applied also to the common religious meal which seems to have been in use in the early Church in close relation to the Eucharist. The classic NT ref. is 1 Cor. 11:17-34, where abuses which accompanied the common meals that preceded the Eucharist are condemned.” [p. 23] The liberal *Oxford Companion to the Bible* notes: “The love-feast is the common meal with which Christians first followed Christ’s command at the Last Supper to “do this in remembrance of me.” [p. 469] The Protestant *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* notes this about the agape: “In the opinion of the great majority of scholars, the agape was a meal at which not only bread and wine, but all kinds of viands were used, a meal which had the double purpose of satisfying hunger and thirst and giving expression to the sense of Christian brotherhood.. At the end of this feast, bread and wine were taken according to the Lord’s command, and after thanksgiving to God were eaten and drunk in remembrance of Christ, and as a special means of communion with the Lord Himself and through Him with one another. The agape was thus related to the Eucharist as Christ’s last Passover [was] to the Christian rite which he grafted upon it. It preceded and led up to the Eucharist, and was quite distinct from it.” [vol. 1, p. 66] Finally, *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, which represents both catholic and Protestant views, says this about the love feast: “In the history of early Christian practice, however, agape is also a liturgical term. Translated “love-feast” (Jude 12), it springs from the meal that the New Testament variously calls the “breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42-47; 20:7-12) and “Eucharist” (1 Cor. 11:20-34). A core tradition in the early church, the meal explicitly recalls the meals Jesus celebrated with his disciples, especially the Last Supper ... and the post-resurrection meals recounted in Luke 24 and John 20-21.” [p. 17]

What Happened to the Love Feast?

If the love feast was such an integral part of apostolic worship, why is it not still around today? The answer is that the apostolic pattern was eventually altered. Even though Jesus and His apostles handed down the model of having a common meal before the Eucharist, some churches began changing this after the apostles died. During the second and third centuries, the agape was eventually separated from the Eucharist. Churches began celebrating the Eucharist in the morning and hosting the love feast in the evening.

The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity offers this observation: “Eventually, abuses, coupled with imperial rescripts forbidding the meals of secret societies, brought about the separation of the fraternal meal (agape) and Eucharist, but not everywhere and not at once. In Ignatius (ca. 110), for instance, the celebration of the agape is related to but distinct from the Eucharist; so also, the Didache. In Justin Martyr, the Eucharist seems to have absorbed the fraternal functions characteristic of agape. ...On the other hand, in Clement’s Alexandria (ca. 200) agape and Eucharist are joined, in spite of the signal abuses to which Clement gives witness.

“There is general agreement that from the mid-third century, agape and Eucharist go their separate ways.” [p. 17]

Nevertheless, even though the agape and communion went their separate ways, the church continued to practice both of them until some time after the time of Constantine. Perhaps the love feast would have continued on down to our times if the original apostolic pattern (holding the love feast and the Eucharist together) had not been broken. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* makes this observation on the separation of the agape and Eucharist, and the eventual extinguishment of the agape:

In the Didache (ca. A.D. 100) there is no sign as yet of any separation. The direction that the second Eucharistic prayer should be offered “after being filled” appears to imply that a regular meal had immediately preceded the observance of the sacrament. In the Ignatian epistles (ca. A.D. 110), the Lord’s Supper and the agape are still found in combination...

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 at all, but speaks of the Eucharist as following a service which consisted of the reading of Scripture, prayers, and exhortation. Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200) testifies to the continued existence of the agape, but shows clearly that in the church of the West, the Eucharist was no longer associated with it. In the East, the connection appears to have been longer maintained, but by and by the severance became universal; and though the agape continued for a long time to maintain itself as a social function of the Church, it gradually passed out of existence.” [Vol. 1, p. 66]