

'Come and Let Us Sweetly Join': Engaging with the Dynamics of Early Methodist Practice and its Persecution through an Examination of Two Artefacts Related to the Love-Feast

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Abstract

As proto-Methodism spread and developed in the early to mid-eighteenth century the movement was challenged by excessively vituperative satire which attacked the fervour, expansionism and method of its doctrine and practices. This article explores two artefacts related to the history and representation of a prominent Methodist practice, the Love-feast, and suggests that, far from exposing and destroying the movement, satire served to strengthen and energise it, creating and perpetuating a sect mentality which eventually separated Methodism from the Church of England and transformed its future as an independent Christian denomination.

In the catacombs of San Callisto and San Domitilla in Rome there are several Paleochristian frescoes which depict groups of people eating and drinking together.¹ They take their food from large communal plates, their heads are turned towards each other as they converse and their postures appear relaxed and congenial, the semi-circular configuration of the table implying equality and communality. Written around AD70,² the Acts of the Apostles reported of the early Christians that 'all who believed had all things in common...attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people'.³ Described in the Bible as an 'agape' or love-feast, this private gathering became a representative feature of the early Christian church, conflating worship and socialising in a ritualised shared experience. Sometimes celebrated, sometimes oppressed,⁴ the Love-feast was differentiated from the Eucharist⁵ and as such St. Chrysostom described it as 'a custom most beautiful and beneficial [...] a supporter of love, a solace of poverty, and a discipline of humility'.⁶ For the first few hundred years of the Christian Church the agape feast featured in spiritual practice but by the end of the fourth century the early anxieties expressed by St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians in AD54⁷ had indeed developed: it became associated with debauchery and inequality and was discountenanced and virtually eliminated by the Church itself – the Council of Laodicia in AD363 said 'it is not lawful to hold the so-called Agape in the Church or Assemblies, and to eat or set out couches in the house of God'.⁸ In one or two outposts of apostolic Paulician Christianity the tradition persevered, however, and one of these was Moravia, where in the early eighteenth century the pietistic Count Zinzendorf bought an estate for the domicile of a group of 'scattered and persecuted co-religionists'.⁹ It was through his association with these Moravians that John Wesley

¹ It is possible to gain access to these tombs to view the frescoes. See <www.catacombe.roma.it/en/catacombe.php>

² See *ESV Study Bible* (Illinois: Crossway, 2008), p. 2073.

³ Acts of the Apostles 2.44-46.

⁴ See, for example, Pliny's letters to Trajan <<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>> or those of Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-smyrnaeans-hoole.html>>

⁵ Scholarship differs as to how far the Eucharist was incorporated into the Agape and at what point it became separate. See J.F. Keating, *The Agape and the Eucharist in the Early Church* (London: Methuen, 1901) for an exhaustive investigation into this point.

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *The homilies: of S. John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, on the first epistle of St. Paul the apostle to the Corinthians* (Oxford: J.H.Parker, 1854), Homily on I Corinthians 11.

⁷ I Corinthians 11.17-22.

⁸ Quoted in Keating, p. 152.

⁹ R. Lee Cole, *Love Feasts: A History of the Christian Agape* (London: Charles Kelly, 1916), p. 268.

encountered the Love-feast – it facilitated all the aspects of 'social holiness'¹⁰ that he sought in his systemisation of the proto-Methodist orthodoxy.

This article examines two artefacts connected with this aspect of early Methodist practice. The first is a hymn written specifically for the Love-feast by Charles Wesley in 1740; the second is a satirical print from 1772 which attacks the Love-feast as a synecdoche for all Methodist practice. Together the artefacts show that the very prescriptive ritual which promulgated familiarity and security within the Society served to engender fear and hatred without. The article finally uses Benton Johnson's theory of religious variation¹¹ to suggest that the incremental ferocity of the sectarian satire and ridicule directed at the Methodists¹² created a tension which forced the Methodist Society further along the axis towards sectism, thus shaping the Methodist culture, reinforcing Methodist separatism and eventually leading in the early nineteenth century to the schism from the Anglican Church, against the express wishes of the Wesleys.¹³

Although eighteenth-century Anglican churchgoers were used to music during services, this traditionally was in the form of plainsong chants or metrical Psalms.¹⁴ The purpose of the music was to worship God rather than to express any personal religious experience and was usually performed by the clergy or by a choir. John and Charles Wesley were familiar with church music, both through their upbringing in their father's parish at Epworth and through their own ministering experience.¹⁵ Neither John nor Charles had any intention of leaving the Church of England¹⁶ so the 'Methodist' meetings which they originally proposed were held at different times from the Church services and were intended as an opportunity to intensify and explore the Anglican religious experience. Realising that music and song could be communal activities to underpin and cohere the intensely individualistic evangelical experience, Charles Wesley began to write 'sacred poems' and looked around for tunes to accompany them.¹⁷ These early compositions, which were not set to any prescriptive melodies, began to transform church music forever, at once interpreting, exploring and representing the individual religious experience. Vigorous and unaccompanied singing became one of the most widely acknowledged aspects of Methodist practice¹⁸ and it was circumscribed and regulated as were all practices.¹⁹ Familiar both with Anglican psalmody and with the German chorales utilised by the Moravians,²⁰ the Wesleys gave some guidance in their hymnals as to which tune to use for the hymns but there was still room for improvisation and any familiar tunes could be used.²¹ Marini describes these early Evangelical hymns as 'a primary vehicle of transcendence' where 'hearing or meditating upon hymns often mediate(d) the new birth'.²² As such they were sung both at the meetings and at the

¹⁰ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. by A. C. Outler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Vol. XIV, p. 321.

¹¹ Benton Johnson, 'On Church and Sect', *American Sociological Review*, 28:4 (1963), pp. 539-549.

¹² See Albert M. Lyles, *Methodism Mocked: The Satiric Reaction to Methodism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth, 1960).

¹³ For instance, in 1758 John Wesley wrote a pamphlet entitled *Reasons Against a Separation from the Church of England* (London: Strachan, 1760) and Charles wrote in the Preface, 'His twelve reasons for not separating from the Church of England are mine also. I subscribe to them with all my heart'.

¹⁴ James T. Lightwood, *Methodist Music of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth, 1927) p. 9.

¹⁵ Lightwood, p. 9.

¹⁶ See note 13 above.

¹⁷ See Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (Bristol: Farley, 1745).

¹⁸ Accounts such as William Riley's in *Parochial Music Corrected* (London, 1762), speaking of the 'deluded' Methodists' 'profane way of singing' and John Scott's in *A fine picture of enthusiasm* (London: Noon, 1744), where he reports 'there is great harmony in their singing and it is very enchanting' give an idea of the variety and intensity of opinion surrounding Methodist music.

¹⁹ Just as Love-feasts were discussed and systemised at the Methodist annual conferences, so hymn-singing was subjected to rules and guidance. In the Preface to *Select Hymns with Tunes Annexed*, Wesley's instructions included 'Sing lustily...sing them exactly as printed...sing modestly...sing in time...above all sing spiritually'. See Lightwood for an account of the developing formal guidelines for Methodist music.

²⁰ Lightwood, p. 14.

²¹ See William Riley, p.3, where some of the 'ballad-tunes' used by the Methodists are listed, for example, 'Busy, curious, thirsty fly' or 'Sure Jocky was the bonniest swain'.

²² Stephen Marini, 'Hymnody as History: Early Evangelical Hymns and the Recovery of American Popular Culture', *Church History*, 71.02 (2002), pp. 273-306 (p. 273).

Love-feasts, which John Wesley had adopted as another form of Methodist practice; after his visit to the Moravian settlement in Herrnhut, he incorporated this communal eating and drinking occasion into the regular London calendar.²³

The image of a supper or feast is used consistently throughout the Bible for the presence of God or Heaven, so for Wesley the Love-feast was a logical extension of Methodist practice – fellowship, with Scriptural evidence to support it. Because there was no Eucharist it was possible for lay preachers to lead this gathering, organising the order of prayers, conversion stories, hymns, eating and drinking into a cohesive pattern. At first the Love-feasts were only for men and were held monthly or quarterly but over time Wesley decided that there could be Love-feasts for women and eventually for mixed groups.²⁴ The men and women would still sit separately, however. In order to differentiate the Love-feast from the Eucharist, the common food was cake and water, the cake shared on large plates or in baskets, while the water was drunk from a two-handled cup which was handed from person to person.²⁵ Hymns were sung and testimonies were heard but there was usually no sermon at this gathering. Held in the evening so that working people might attend, the first 'general Love-feast', in September 1738, lasted 'from 7 until 10 in the evening' but by April of the following year it lasted until 3am.²⁶ It was confined to certain groups of people within the Society, especially at first, when only the members of the Bands were allowed.²⁷ Gradually, the invitation list expanded but entry was only permitted with a ticket and had to hold the name of the person attending.²⁸ The late hours and exclusivity, coupled with the sound of raucous singing²⁹ and the reputation of discord meant that non-Methodists viewed it with suspicion. Contemporary accounts spoke of 'the passions of the people [...] rising too high, and breaking through all restraint' and 'the anguish of some, and the rejoicing of others'.³⁰ In 1741 Charles Wesley wrote, 'my soul was exceedingly sorrowful at the Love-feast to find so little soul and so much dispute'.³¹ As with all aspects of the Methodist Societies, John Wesley sought to regulate the Love-feast, its timing, its frequency and its segregation. In spite of the transparent regulations surrounding the Love-feast, however, it remained odd, elitist and divisive even as Wesleyan Methodism rejected the doctrine of the Elect³² and, believing that all could gain the 'new-birth', established and maintained a policy of universality.

²³ See Frank Baker, *Methodism and the Love-feast* (London: Epworth, 1957).

²⁴ Baker, p. 11.

²⁵ Baker, p. 13.

²⁶ Baker, p. 11.

²⁷ See John Wesley's *A Plain Account of the people Called Methodists, a letter* (6th edn, Bristol, 1764).

²⁸ Baker, p. 36.

²⁹ The volume of the singing is implied by the final words of *A confession of faith, sung by all the brethren and sisters at the general love-feast, November 4th, 1744. in the Tabernacle, London* (London, 1744): 'And Loud like many Waters join!/To shout the Lamb, the Man Divine'.

³⁰ Quoted in Philip Tovey, *The Theory and Practice of Extended Communion* (London: Ashgate, 2009), p. 42.

³¹ Charles Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley* (London, 1849), 13 April 1740, p. 216.

³² See John Wesley's argument against this Calvinist doctrine: *The Question, What is an Arminian? Answered. By a Lover of Free Grace*. 1798 (London: Hargreaves Publishing, 2014. Kindle Edition). This conflict created the first major schism in the evangelical movement of the eighteenth century.

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| Come and let us sweetly join, Christ to praise in hymns divine; Give we all with one accord Glory to our common Lord | Call, O call us each by name, To the marriage of the Lamb; Let us lean upon Thy breast, Love be there our endless feast! |
| Sing we then in Jesus' Name, Now as yesterday the same; One in every time and place, Full for all of truth and grace. | God His blessings shall dispense, God shall crown His ordinance; Meet in His appointed ways; Nourish us with social grace. |
| Witnesses that Christ hath died, We with Him are crucified; Christ hath burst the bands of death, We His quickening Spirit breathe. | Plead we thus for faith alone, Faith which by our works is shown: God it is Who justifies; Only faith the grace applies. |
| Hands and hearts and voices raise, Sing as in the ancient days; Antedate the joys above, Celebrate the feast of love. | Active faith that lives within, Conquers earth, and hell, and sin, Sanctifies, and makes us whole, Forms the Savior in the soul. |
| Jesus, dear expected guest, Thou art bidden to the feast, For Thyself our hearts prepare, Come, and sit, and banquet there! | Every vile affection kill, Root out every seed of ill, Utterly abolish sin, Write Thy law of love within. |
| Jesus, we Thy promise claim, We are met in Thy great Name; In the midst do Thou appear, Manifest Thy presence here! | Hence may all our actions flow, Love the proof that Christ we know; Mutual love the token be, Lord, that we belong to Thee |
| Sanctify us, Lord, and bless, Breathe Thy Spirit, give Thy peace, Thou Thyself within us move, Make our feast a feast of love. | Love, Thine image, love impart! Stamp it on our face and heart! Only love to us be given! Lord, we ask no other heaven |

Figure 1. Charles Wesley Hymn: Love-feast (1740)

This hymn (Figure 1), written specifically for the Love-feast, uses a metrical form of catalectic trochaic tetrameter, regulated, predictable and an easy form for communal singing. Choosing the trochaic means that each verse can start with a strong imperative – an exhortation familiar to the congregation – ‘Come...’; ‘Sing...’; ‘Call...’. Similarly, the missing final syllable allows the line to end on a stress, useful when the leader may be ‘lining out’, that is, reading out the hymns line by line, either for an illiterate congregation or in learning new tunes. John Wesley also encouraged preachers to break off the singing at times and check whether the congregation understood what they were singing. In this hymn the strength of the opening exhortation is softened by the use of the word ‘sweetly’ and in fact this blend of agency and amelioration runs throughout the work and is representative of how a complex sense of spirituality was incorporated into Methodist practice. The hymn also has a unifying theme of time; temporal references such as ‘Now’, ‘yesterday’, ‘ancient’, ‘antedate’, at once praise the omniscience of God and reference the paleochristian experience. The hint of ancient ritual reinforced the sense of stability and tradition which John Wesley in particular wanted to perpetuate. The lyrics of the hymn refer to several Biblical verses, echoing the Methodist reliance on Scripture; the ‘bands of death’ comes from Psalm 107:14, for instance, while ‘the marriage of the Lamb’ is from Revelation 19:6-9. Charles Wesley evidences a comprehensive knowledge of both the Old and New Testament and would rely on that recognition in the congregation. The hymn also uses a lexicon of commonality – ‘join’, ‘accord’ ‘mutual’ – which attests to the Wesleyan doctrine of ‘social grace’ but at the same time it acknowledges the individual experience of the congregant, asking for Jesus

to be 'manifest', to 'within us move', in a Lockean³³ expression of the power of individual experience. In this it suggests the Methodist quest for a conversion experience which will signify true belief and assurance. The lyrics also acknowledge other Methodist doctrine – such as the idea of justification by faith, 'Plead we thus for faith alone' and 'God it is Who justifies' – but also talks of Methodist practice, such as helping others, 'Faith which by our works is shown'. However, as would be expected in a hymn written specifically for the Love-feast, it is the yearning for 'love' which underpins the narrative course of the lyrics. This is both the 'mutual love' of the group and the love of God. In fact, at the end of the hymn 'love' becomes synonymous with 'heaven': 'Only love to us be given!/Lord, we ask no other heaven'. Connoting both the idea of heaven on earth and of human perfection, Wesley thus acknowledges the essence of Methodist doctrine, that the 'new birth' can lead, after a period of perseverance, trial, good works and receiving of grace, to a condition of 'perfection'.³⁴

It is in the sense of surfeit and excess that the hymn is linked most closely with the satirical print. Satire of Methodist practice was long-lived and far-reaching³⁵ but the Love-feast conjured up particular venom in the minds of Methodist detractors.³⁶ Its semantic implications of illicit sex and excess combined with the evening or late-night timings and rules of exclusivity created mistrust, fear and envy which fed into the satire. Although the Methodist regulations advocated abstinence, austerity and regularity the Love-feast seemed to contravene all these rules: the hymn talks of 'the feast of love', the 'banquet', the 'endless feast' and it is clear that phrases such as 'We His quickening Spirit breathe' or 'Thou Thyself within us move' conflate religious and sexualised lexicons. The satirists were thus enabled to hurl accusations of broken boundaries, of loss of sense, of family breakdown, of betrayal, promiscuity and foolishness into the highly regulated and circumscribed practice pattern of the Methodists.



Figure 2. A Methodist, Love Feast. Published 1772. I Read. Source: Library of Congress.

³³ John Locke recounts his theory of epistemic individualism in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), II.I.2, p. 104.

³⁴ See John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (London: The Foundry, 1766).

³⁵ See Clive Field, *Anti-Methodist Publications of the Eighteenth Century: A Revised Bibliography* for an exhaustive list of publications from 1732 to 1800. Between 1738 and 1800 there was no year in which anti-Methodist literature did not appear.

³⁶ See, for instance, Anon., *The Love Feast, a Poem by the Author of the Saints* (London, J. Bew, 1778).

In *A Methodist, Love Feast* (Figure 2) the print-maker uses a combination of text and image which work contrapuntally to emphasise the satire. The woman, we are told, is 'Our sister, Rachel'. The choice of a Biblical name with its meaning of 'female sheep' and the description of her as 'sister' instantly places her in an evangelical context of inclusivity. Relying on a persecutory discourse which links religious and sexual fervour and which connotes the evangelical leaders as sexual predators,³⁷ the poem describes Rachel as inviting the priest, Cantwell,³⁸ into her home 'to ease her flame of holy Love'. Verbs which may well be used to describe Methodist 'enthusiasm' at prayer-meetings and sermons are here used to describe sexual passion and infidelity: 'She sighs, he groans, she bares her breast/Each longs to make each other Blest'. We know that this is Mr. Dwindle's home because his box is on a shelf beside the door and he arrives home unexpectedly, 'thund'ring at the door'. The priest cowers on the floor, vermin-like,³⁹ his hand raised this time in defence rather than exhortation. The disrupted meal is scavenged by a cat and dog, the upturned table and broken crockery symbolic of the fear of loss of order.⁴⁰ It is a sparse interior, the only decoration being portraits of Whitefield and Wesley, religious tracts pinned on the wall and a large list of the 'Rules and Orders' of the Christian Society for the meeting to be held at 'Brother Dwindle's'. There are also the words of a 'Grace Affirming Hymn' on the wall, thus with great artistic economy the satirist comments on the fact that Methodist meetings are held in private homes and that there is hymn-singing at these events. The evangelical message is undermined by Rachel holding the bellows, a trope for the 'hot air' preached by the Methodists. In looking at these two artefacts together, the line of text from the hymn, 'Hearts and Hands and voices raise', commingles with the picture of George Whitefield on the wall in his characteristic raised-hands pose and with the echoing image of Rachel, to intensify the clichés on which the satirist relies. In the print, then, Methodists are represented as deceitful, derivative, greedy, cowardly and promiscuous. They represent broken boundaries, loss of moral order and social chaos.

Satirical forces raged against the Methodist Societies. A combination of scepticism, fear and curiosity produced some extremely vicious and antagonistic satire in poems, plays, music and images.⁴¹ Often linked with either Papists or Jacobites, the Methodists were seen as attacking Christianity from within, as threatening the order of society and as creating moral chaos. A doctrinal belief such as justification by faith, for instance, was seen as both undermining the Christian concept of doing good works and as proclaiming that evil works had no consequence, as once you were justified you had eternal salvation whatever you did. Although the hymn shows Charles Wesley as addressing this solifidian criticism, 'Plead we thus for faith alone/Faith which by our works is shown' the satirists were interested only in caricature and used a blanket criticism of 'Enthusiasm'⁴² to undermine any Methodist voice of reason.

The determination of the Wesleys to remain as part of the Church of England was increasingly challenged by the swelling environment of satirical and physical persecution faced by the Methodists, much of it by Anglican clergy.⁴³ John Wesley's attempts to regulate and systemise such practices as Love-feasts and hymn-singing were not sufficient to legitimise those practices outside the Methodist Society and they remained objects of ridicule, further distancing the Society from the Church. In an investigation of what constitutes church or sect Benton Johnson suggested that 'the distinction between church and sect involves a single variable the values of which range along a

³⁷ See, for example, *The Amorous Humours and Audacious Adventures of one Wh...d* (London, 1760), which depicts George Whitefield as a predatory and promiscuous manipulator.

³⁸ This name was familiarly used in satire for evangelical priests – see Isaac Bickerstaffe's *The Hypocrite* (London: Griffin, 1769), for instance, or *The Love-feast, a poem, by the author of The Saints* (London: J. Bew, 1778).

³⁹ *The Love Feast' a Poem*, is dedicated to 'The Whole Communion of Fanatics who infest Great Britain'.

⁴⁰ Lyles, pp. 25-31.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Lyles and Misty Anderson, *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief & Borders of the Self* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

⁴² Lyles, Chapter Two.

⁴³ Lyles, p. 19.

continuum from complete acceptance to complete rejection of the environment';⁴⁴ churches are in low tension with their environment while sects are in high tension. The Methodists rejected society and maintained tension by condemnation of its value system – as Charles Wesley writes in the hymn, 'Every vile affection kill/Root out every seed of ill' – by establishing entrance-restricted group activities denoted in the print and by creating a strict, punishing and alienating quotidian schedule for themselves. The high state of tension with the environment is both represented and reinforced by the tension between the Love-feast hymn and the Love-feast satirical print; the satirical attack on schism served only to perpetuate it, to improve cohesion and to augment a sect mentality⁴⁵ which ultimately separated the Methodist Society from the Wesleys' revered and venerated Church of England.

⁴⁴ Johnson, p. 544.

⁴⁵ See Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2000), Chapter Six, for an investigation into religious group dynamics.

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