



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 9 [MB Confession of Faith]

Lord's Supper

COMMENTARY

The institution of the Lord's Supper is narrated in four accounts in the New Testament: Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-22; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The Supper is interpreted by five themes in these accounts.

Major Themes

Three themes are common in all four accounts of the Lord's Supper. One theme is "this is my body" in reference to the bread. A second theme is the association of the blood of Christ and the establishment of a covenant ("This is my blood of the covenant" in Matthew and Mark; "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" in Luke and 1 Corinthians 11). The third theme is the Supper as an anticipation of the future ("not drink . . . until that day" in Matthew, Mark, Luke; "you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" in 1 Corinthians). The central meaning of the Lord's Supper is defined by these three themes.

The Lord's Supper, first of all, points to the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Second, the Lord's Supper is a covenant event; it establishes a covenant between God and the people of God. Third, the Supper points to eschatological fulfillment and the messianic banquet.

The historical roots of the Lord's Supper are the context for understanding the death of Christ and the establishment of a covenant. The Supper was observed as part of the Jewish Passover, the great event of liberation and salvation of Israel through the Exodus. Salvation through blood/death and the establishment of God's covenant with Israel are the key components of meaning in the Passover. The Lord's Supper during Passover signals the inauguration of a new exodus from bondage to liberation and the inauguration of a new covenant. The people of the new covenant are those who accept God's salvation through Jesus Christ and who enter the covenant community established by the life and death of Jesus.

Additional Themes

In addition to the three central themes, two others are found in the various accounts. First, the cup as a symbol of Christ's atoning death is added to the "covenant" interpretation in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The "cup of blood" is "poured out for many for forgiveness" in Matthew, the cup "poured out for many" in Mark, the cup "poured out for you" in Luke. Jesus' death as a covenant event offers forgiveness of sin to the people of the covenant.

Second, the Lord's Supper is described as an event of remembrance in Luke and 1 Corinthians 11. It reminds believers of the life and death of Christ for them to establish the covenant.

These themes represent the continuity of past, present, and future. Christ died in the past in order to forgive and establish a new covenant in the present that is to be fulfilled in the future.

Covenantal Implications

In addition to the interpretations of the Lord's Supper within the four narratives of the Supper, Paul outlines two interpretations of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:27-34. Both interpretations center on the covenant theme. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul is combating the problem of idolatry. He reverses the order of the Supper; the cup precedes the bread in the interpretation. The sacrificial element is connected more explicitly to the covenant theme. The sacrificial death of Jesus is for the establishment of a covenant, a covenant of oneness, a body, a partnership of being. Because Christ is one, the body of Christ or the



covenant community is one. The Supper produces an intimate relationship among those who participate. The oneness with Christ and each other precludes a covenant or partnership with the gods behind the idols.

Paul interprets the meaning of the church in terms of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34. The sacrifice of Christ does not only establish a relationship between the individual and Christ; it also establishes the covenant community of God's people. Paul interprets the "this is my body" phrase to refer to the church. "Recognizing the body" (v. 29) means to see the connection between belonging to Christ and belonging to the church. Failure to practice oneness within the church shows that one does not belong to Christ, and thus is subject to judgment. The problem in Corinth is that people were fragmenting the covenant community which God established through Christ by disregarding their unity as members of the body. The members of the church are exhorted to heal the divisions among them and "to wait each other" so that the Supper may represent the oneness in Christ and the church.

Observance

The Supper as covenant and as remembrance explains why the early church observed the Supper often, probably at every gathering of believers in house churches and in larger gatherings. Israel renewed the covenant by remembering the exodus in Passover. Christians renew the covenant by remembering the life and death of Jesus.

Meaning

In the larger Christian church the Lord's Supper has often been interpreted sacramentally (it mediates the grace of God) or symbolically (it symbolizes an internal reality). As in the case of baptism, we interpret the Lord's Supper as less than sacrament but more than symbol. Mennonite Brethren have used "sign" to talk about the meaning of the Supper. It represents both God's saving action and new covenant in Christ, and the recommitment of believers to faithfulness in covenant with God and fellow believers. Believers are reunited with Christ in the event and with each other. That is why the Supper is often called "communion." It both represents and effects community—renewed fellowship with Christ and with fellow believers. The Supper also is called "eucharist," which simply means "thanksgiving," because it celebrates God's salvation and covenant through Christ and looks forward to the eschatological fulfillment of Christ's kingdom. The Supper is called "the Lord's Supper" or "Lord's Table" because Christ established it and invites believers to participate in the Supper.

