



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 9 [MB Confession of Faith]

Lord's Supper

PASTORAL APPLICATION

The Lord's Supper has a long history. The roots of the Lord's Supper are found in the Exodus event of Israel's national history.

Setting the Stage

God instituted the Passover meal to remind Israel that salvation from bondage in Egypt was at great cost. The lamb which was slain and eaten on Passover night, and whose blood was applied to the door posts of the homes of the covenant people, was to be an eternal witness to the salvation which God would miraculously provide (see Exodus 12:1-30).

The disciples of Jesus, on the night before his execution, ate the Passover meal together with Jesus. On his instruction, the meaning of the Passover was changed to symbolize the sacrifice and salvation provided by Jesus the Lamb of God (Matt. 26:17ff.; Luke 22:7ff.; Mark 14:12ff.; John 13:21ff.), whose atoning death ended forever the need for animals to be sacrificed.

Jesus promised that this meal would continue on into eternity where, after his atoning death, resurrection, and ascension, he would drink new wine with his bride, the new people of God, in his kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

So, when the church gathers to partake of the Lord's Supper it brings not only all of biblical salvation history into memory, but also projects its thinking forward to the day when we will drink new wine with the Savior in paradise.

The Need for a Pastoral Application

The Scriptures provide us with some clear teaching regarding the meaning and practice of the Lord's Supper, but we do not have finely-tuned details to address the practical questions which arise in our church life. The call to practice the Lord's Supper is clearly taught in the Scriptures but since our culture is so far removed from the New Testament days, we need to think carefully about its meaning and practice in our times and in our churches. The paragraphs which follow are intended to address some of the practical issues facing our churches as we seek to be true to our understanding of the biblical teaching concerning the Lord's Supper.

The Importance of Teaching its Meaning

We can no longer assume that all who attend our congregations understand the Lord's Supper in the same way. It is important that we clearly teach what we understand the Bible to say about this commemorative meal. Three issues will need to be addressed.

First, we as Anabaptists understand the Lord's Supper to be a "sign" event. This is in contrast to other Christian traditions which believe in transubstantiation (the belief that when the elements of the Lord's Supper are sanctified through prayer they actually become the physical flesh and blood of Christ) or in consubstantiation (the belief that when the elements are sanctified through prayer, the real presence of the Lord Jesus is in and around and among them).

The Anabaptist position is that the Supper is an ordinance and not a sacrament. Grace, pardon, forgiveness, and new covenant are not effected through participation in the Supper, but rather participation in the Supper represents the fact that grace has been accepted and people have entered a new covenant



relationship and community. In the Supper we eat and drink to the reality that we are the redeemed people of God. In participating, we acknowledge the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf, our incorporation into the new covenant people of God, and celebrate our union with Christ in the church.

Second, the Lord's Supper is uniquely a church event. The normal pattern in the New Testament is that baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper. Our historic practice also required baptism as a prerequisite to participation in the Lord's Supper. It is the church which celebrates its union with Christ. Care must be given so that the Lord's Supper does not become something other than a celebration of our unity with Christ. For example, we strongly discourage using this symbolic meal at weddings to symbolize the union of a woman and a man in marriage.

Third, it is important that we understand the context of the Lord's Supper. It calls us to the past, to remember that which has happened in history and to us; it calls us to the present, to examine ourselves in the light of the new life to which we have been born again; and it calls us to the future, to do this repeatedly until the end of history.

The nature and all-inclusiveness of the Lord's Supper, in that it embraces all three tenses of human experience, means that care must be given that we do not rush into it nor lead the church mechanically through its practice. In a world where we seldom stop to reflect on the meaning of our faith-life, the Lord's Supper calls us to silence and reflection. Celebration in this setting flows from us to God through thoughtfulness and meditation.

The Administration of the Lord's Supper

Many questions are voiced regarding the matter of who may administer the elements of the Lord's Supper. Must a pastor be present? Who may distribute/serve the elements? May a family have a legitimate Lord's Supper in the home? Can it be practiced at youth retreats, camp weekends, and other such gatherings away from the home congregations? May shut-ins have the Lord's Supper privately in homes and hospital rooms?

The confessional statement addresses these matters only by inference, noting that it is "the church" which observes the Lord's Supper. It then appears that what the church sanctions is approved for practice.

Further, the New Testament does not assign the leading of the Lord's Supper to clergy. In fact, the New Testament goes in the opposite direction by assigning priesthood to all believers. At the same time, the church "binds and looses," so it is expected to provide guidance and direction in order to preserve the meal's integrity and holiness. Many of the New Testament churches met in homes where the Lord's Supper was regularly celebrated in small groupings, but they were not leaderless. There is something very intimate and powerful about a small gathering focusing attention on salvation through participation at the Lord's Table. Care must be given that the Lord's Supper not become trivialized.

The matter of frequency is also an issue. Some church traditions celebrate weekly, others monthly, some even annually. Many Mennonite Brethren congregations have settled on a pattern of about once a month. This seems to provide an effective guard against it becoming an empty, oft-repeated ritual, and yet offers adequate frequency of opportunity to express thankfulness and joy in salvation.

In our tradition small pieces of bread and grape juice are usually used as elements. Though most of our churches no longer serve wine, there are still some congregations who choose to do so. In a day when both voluntary and clinical abstinence may be necessary, this also needs consideration and review.

It may be helpful to vary the bread symbol occasionally to help reinforce the idea that the elements are the sign rather than the reality. The settings may also vary. It may be a workable idea to combine the Lord's Supper with a meal occasionally so that both fellowship with God and with believers are set side by side.

Participation in the Lord's Supper

In recent years some congregations have chosen to invite believers who are not baptized to join in the Lord's Supper. This raises a number of questions. Who is invited to the Lord's Supper? Who may participate in its practice? This matter may be addressed at several levels.

First, it is imperative that it be the *Lord's* table. He is the convener, the one who invites us to



participate. The participants are those who have heeded the invitation to become the people of God, the bride, the church. There is a very intentional exclusiveness to this invitation. Only those who have made a deliberate personal choice to believe in Jesus as Savior, have repented of their sins, and have received forgiveness of sin and eternal life are invited to the Lord's Table.

The second issue is the age of readiness. When are young Christians old enough to participate in the Lord's Supper? The confessional statement puts it this way: "All those who have understood its meaning, confess Jesus Christ as Lord in word and life, are accountable to their congregation and are living in right relationship with God and others are invited to participate in the Lord's Supper."

Children usually think more concretely than abstractly. To understand the Lord's Supper means that one must be able to separate event from symbol. The confessional statement infers this kind of stance when it states that the Supper "points to Christ" and that in the Supper "the church identifies with the life of Christ."

When preadolescent children and/or their parents press for participation, a gentle shepherding visit to review the confessional material is wise. It is well to affirm children for their love for Christ and their desire to follow and obey him. This can become the foundation for a discussion which will help them to begin to understand what they do not yet know in fullness. It is usually wise to reassure children that waiting will result in a more mature and joyful participation in the event.

Another issue is the call to self-examination before participation in the Lord's Supper. If this self-examination results in the need for confession or restoration, it is preferred that this be dealt with immediately. Each believer in the congregation is to live in mutual accountability. First Corinthians 11:27-32 infers that when repentance and confession have been made, participation is encouraged. Resistance to repentance is grounds for non-participation. If confession will have to be accomplished following the Lord's Supper, a heart commitment to do so is adequate preparation for participation.

There is another side to this question that needs pastoral counsel and leadership. The Lord's Supper by definition is for us as humans, women and men who are marked by sinfulness. It is sinners saved by grace who are invited to this Supper. If we overemphasize the ideal of moral perfection and under emphasize the redeeming grace of Christ, we will tend to focus attention on our unworthiness rather than to celebrate our new status as adopted children of God.

Finally, we are comforted by the knowledge that God sees the heart and inner life of each believer. Some will feel unworthy and will not participate while others who are unworthy will participate anyway. In the end, it is God's table, and God is the final arbiter of all that happens at His table.

