

Maintaining unity in faith

Toward a theological link between baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper

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Among Dutch Mennonites, adult baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only two biblical ceremonies practiced today. Foot washing has not been practiced in our circles since the nineteenth century. Dantzig and Groningen Old Flemish Anabaptists maintained foot washing in different ways into the mid-eighteenth century, when these groups died out or merged with the wider Mennonite stream in the Netherlands. The Dantzigers used the practice to express hospitality and service—when a guest came to preach, for example, or when new members were welcomed. The Groningen Old Flemish emphasized service and held foot washing after the Lord's Supper, but under the influence of the Enlightenment, they began to relativize the practice; one answer in a 1759 catechism notes that it might be useful to honor and revere foot washing, not that it is commanded.¹

As a staff member of the Mennonite seminary in Amsterdam, I was invited to participate in a foot washing ceremony with a

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group of thirteen Dutch Mennonite lay preachers who observe this ritual once a year. This event—an unusual practice for Dutch Mennonites—made a profound impression on me. We washed each other's feet and then celebrated the Lord's Supper in an *agape* meal. During this meal, the discussion focused on service. I experienced a spirituality I have never encountered in a Dutch Mennonite congregation. There was great attentiveness,

and the atmosphere was serene. Everyone was focused on the essence of discipleship. Afterward I wondered: Could foot washing be reintroduced in Dutch Mennonite congregations? How could I explain the practice? How could its relationship to baptism and the Lord's Supper be articulated?

In what follows, I will lay out my attempts to answer those questions. The first step is to articulate a theology of Mennonite liturgy, because baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper are always celebrated in a liturgical context. Then I indicate sources of inspiration on the connectedness of these rituals. From this point of departure, I explain these three ritual acts as phenomena and pursue my inquiry into whether a theological link between baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper is sustainable.

Theology of Mennonite liturgy

The first historical attempt—a modest one—to provide a review of Anabaptist-Mennonite liturgy can be found in the 1998 worship book *De gemeente komt samen* (the congregation comes together).² In its explanation of the word *eredienst* (worship), the book appeals to two biblical passages, Romans 12:1–2 and Hebrews 9–10. In that context, the passages are not treated exegetically. However, it is worth noting a few key points in these biblical texts that are important for understanding worship from an Mennonite perspective.

Sacrifice. The term *sacrifice* involves a functional question: How does the congregation approach the Father of Jesus Christ? When Paul speaks about our bodies as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1), we hear a reference to the ceremonial sacrificial system of Israel with which Paul was acquainted before the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE.³ However, Paul's thinking does not follow traditional lines. He gives the Greek word for sacrifice (*thusia*) a metaphorical definition that has something to do with doing good or with the performance of good works. A direct connection is made between sacrifice, our bodies, and an appeal to the compassion of God (12:1). Paul calls this a “spiritual service of worship” (*logikē latreia*).⁴ This spiritual service of worship does not, in any case, occur without the renewing of our minds (12:2).

The renewing of our minds. What is important in Paul's eyes is that we do not allow ourselves to be formed by something that belongs to this age. Rather, we should allow our inner lives to be formed, arranged, and organized by the compassion of God, so that we can become acquainted with God's will—God's good, acceptable, and perfect will.

The difficult letter to the Hebrews explains to us that temple and sacrifice are no longer necessary now that the high priest, Christ himself, has given an eternal sacrifice with his body, once for all time (7:27). According to the author, this sacrifice means that through his own blood Christ has entered the sanctuary “not made with hands,” heaven (9:11–12). The writer denies the efficacy of the traditional sacrifices for the satisfaction of sins

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(10:1–4) and encourages his readers to hold fast to an unshakable confession (*homologian*) (10:23). At the same time, the author emphasizes the cleansing of our conscience from dead works, in order to serve the living God (9:14), and he commends spurring one another on toward love and good works, and not neglecting to meet together (10:24–25). Only in this way can our confession remain alive, summoning us to good works.

In my opinion, we can legitimately make a connection between this text and Paul's view of reformation in Romans 12, which can only be attained by the renewing of our minds. The act of worship recreates the community.

In summary, in the letters to the Romans and the Hebrews, the concept of sacrifice is not given up, but the traditional sacrificial culture is abandoned. The concept of sacrifice has, as Paul indicates, undergone a metamorphosis: it has been transformed into praise and thanksgiving. From a Mennonite perspective, one's whole life is *logikē latreia*, and liturgy is more than the congregational gathering between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m. on Sunday. It is also the organization and the empowerment of Christian, societal, and personal life. We are ourselves living sacrifices; we entrust ourselves to the eternal one, our God, whom we approach.⁵

Sources of inspiration

We can best understand baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper as human, nonsacramental deeds of remembrance that appeal to the compassion of God, and from which two things are made manifest: (1) the source to whom we owe thanks for these institutions, Jesus Christ, and (2) the personal desire to be spiritu-

ally renewed. All in all, we can say that these acts are the offering of a sacrifice that is living, holy, and pleasing to God. These ceremonial acts can also be described, from a Mennonite perspective, as visualizations of consciously confessed faith, which help form the community.

The Dutch Mennonite response to “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.” In 1983, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches approved “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.” In its response to this document, the *Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit* (General Mennonite Society [Netherlands]) offers the beginnings of an Mennonite claim for the mutual relationship between baptism and the Lord’s Supper (and the ministerial office). As a minister in a congregation, I found in this ADS response support for my catechetical teaching.

The response offers a nonsacramental understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In the Dutch Anabaptist tradition, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is called “maintaining unity.” This designation has to be viewed in the light of God’s work “in liberating humankind from its rebellion against him by gathering people into his congregation which is to be a symbol of reconciliation, liberation and hope in this sinfully divided world” (Gal. 3:27–28).⁶ This statement implies that the church, because of our calling to work for God’s kingdom, should not give in to our divisions but should manifest itself as a peace church; this peace is evident in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This celebration, like baptism, should be understood as an act of human confession.

The supper does not achieve or found a new community but presupposes it. Of course, the quality of the church community depends on the commitment of the brothers and sisters to God’s acts of reconciliation and liberation, which empower us to resist all divisive forces as well as those forces that tempt us to self-reliance. Our baptism assumes our willingness to rely on these divine resources, and our commitment to do so should be safeguarded by members of the church. Our mutual pastoral care should be devoted to this task.

Linda Oyer. In her book about foot washing, *Dieu à nos pieds* (God at our feet), Linda Oyer makes a plea for the restitution of the practice and explains it christologically.⁷ In general our orientation in life defines our lifestyle. Sometimes relationships are

severely disturbed, with disastrous consequences. (See, for example, the role played by Judas [John 13:2].) For this reason, Oyer emphasizes the purifying aspect of foot washing. It is a spiritual act in which Jesus reveals God's love to us.

In its soteriological aspect (13:6–11), foot washing is done *to us*. This aspect is evident in Jesus' words to Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me" (13:8). The key idea here is that having a share with Christ is having a share with the Father. The Gospel according to John proclaims the intimate, loving relationship

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between the Father and the Son. As Jesus tells Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:8–9). By washing their feet, Jesus enables them to participate in his intimate, loving relationship with the Father.

In the ethical aspect (13:12–17), this benefit is perpetuated *through us*. Instead of asking his disciples to wash his feet, Jesus now commands them to wash one another's feet. The beneficiaries of this good deed turn out to be those who then demonstrate this intimate and loving relationship of Father and Son in the world. The essence of the foot-

washing ritual, therefore, is to remind ourselves anew of the loving relationship between Father and Son and to express it in mutual service to the outside world. Foot washing so understood is a deed of remembrance.

John H. Yoder. The above analysis takes on greater significance when coupled with John H. Yoder's conception of sacrament as "social process."⁸ Yoder points to sanctification by means of five social practices serving church and society. He explains that these practices can be considered, from the perspective of the new creation in Christ, as models of human restitution, of which Jesus is the bearer. I will focus on the fourth practice, the breaking of bread, because Yoder (like the ADS response to "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry") interprets the Lord's Supper nonsacramentally, as a form of economic sharing.⁹ He explains: "Not merely symbolically but in actual fact it extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity that normally is obtained in the family."¹⁰ Unlike Arthur Paul Boers, who believes that such an approach risks

overestimating ourselves and thereby underestimating God's action in the sacrament,¹¹ I would rather we understand the practice as a matter of offering ourselves to God's mercy through the breaking of bread, which expresses itself, among other things, in solidarity. Economic solidarity, provided it is founded in Christ, is a revelation of God's reign.

Menno Simons. Finally, saying something about the Mennonite practice of adult baptism requires looking at Menno Simons's notion of the congregation. His point of departure is the congregation as a social body founded in unity with Christ. One could say that the congregation is principally a community celebrating unity, and its mission is rooted in that identity. In most Dutch Mennonite congregations, the Lord's Supper is only celebrated a few times a year. Nevertheless, congregational life is rooted in this practice. The union that the congregation celebrates with its Lord transforms a seeker into a covenant companion. Through this congregational unity, the seeker comes to the point of conversion, and this change happens freely on the basis of a confession of faith. In classical Anabaptist terminology, baptism is a conscious transformation of one's old life into a new life in Christ. The convert leads a penitent life, a life which should be full of accountability.

Links between baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper

Baptism. Adult baptism involves the transformation of one's old life to new life in Christ. The conversion includes an absolute concentration on what God has revealed in Christ. Baptism is a symbol of this concentration and marks, at the same time, one's joining of the congregation of Christ, the collected folk who witness to God's reign on earth. Converts turn their lives toward the business of the gospel, with a new mentality and new way of life. With other members of the congregation, converts constitute an interpretation of the nature of the new creation. The congregation walks forward into the new humanity for which the world longs (as Yoder has said). In this way, the congregation is also there *for* the world. Converts witness to this fact through their testimony.

Lord's Supper. One loaf of bread is made from many kernels of grain. The congregation is that one bread; it lives from that one

bread (“I am the bread of life”). In the Spirit, it is actually a congregation characterized by its celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The great words—justice, peace, and the wholeness of creation¹²—find their true meaning in the Lord’s Supper; there is no more room for sin, revolt, or rebellion against God. We invest this hope partly in the symbols of bread and wine. “Maintaining unity” is the expression of our collective recommitment to baptism, a fresh sign of God’s plan for the world. The congregation is interpreter of the new era here and now. The congregation reflects the relationship between the Father and the Son in the world. It is a re-creation, a new humanity; its members are conscious of the reign of God which we are interpreting but have not yet grasped. Using good theological arguments of faith, the congregation becomes a place for practicing the new world. In the Holy Spirit, who penetrates the old world of the present, the congregation lives in the future time through our eschatological faith. In Yoder’s terms, the confessing people of God is the new world on its way.

Disharmony. However, we also know that the congregation is subject to negative influences from the outside. Through the influence of the spirit of the world (the principalities can manifest themselves in many different kinds of evil), this new mentality and way of life can disintegrate. The congregation can then to an extent become caught up in a “divide and conquer” system, where one person is seen as standing above the other, as in the relationship between a master and a slave, and unity in Christ is dissolved. We may then ask: By what manner of penitence and sorrow can unity be restored?¹³

As already noted, Dutch Mennonites are accustomed to viewing baptism and the Lord’s Supper as the only acts that proclaim God’s work “in liberating humankind from its rebellion against him by gathering people into his congregation which is to be a symbol of reconciliation, liberation and hope in this sinfully divided world.”

However, the step from a divided (although baptized) congregation to a congregation engaging in the celebration of unity—the Lord’s Supper—can be a big one if foot washing has not taken its place between baptism and the supper. Here we have reached the matter of a theological link: If parties in conflict have not first talked through the problem at hand, one cannot speak directly of

reconciliation. First, the gospel-induced mentality and way of life must be restored.

Foot washing. In other words, how can the divide-and-conquer congregation become a serving community again? Foot washing can have a restorative function. It is a symbol of the purification of the soul; how we think and believe (mentality) determines where we go (foot). The question Oyer asks is appropriate: How do we once again see the true, serving relationship between the Father and the Son, of which the congregation is, in

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a theological sense, the reflection in the world (John 14:18–21)? Answer: By concentrating anew on what Christ has offered.

In foot washing, the members of the congregation orient themselves anew toward the unity between the Father and the Son. While washing each other's feet, the congregation once again becomes aware of its call to submission, of its call to reject the dominant relationship of slave and master.¹⁴ In this manner, we acknowledge the character of

remembrance inherent in foot washing, as well as in baptism and the Lord's Supper. We remember anew what Christ calls us to even now, to mutual submission, as a witnessing example in and for the world.

The foot acquires a symbolic meaning in John 13, which has to do with one's way of life (mentality).¹⁵ The foot has a direct relation to destination; it is closely related to the means used to reach the destination (the renewing of our minds, a new world). Our Christian witness to God's reign of justice and peace can be tarnished by the means used to reach it. The kiss of peace, which is given to the convert as a sign of victory over enmity, can become the kiss of Judas. A vulnerability among brothers and sisters can be changed into an oppressive relationship of hostility. We cannot find the answer to this problem unless we literally fall on our knees. This posture is not only necessary to reach the foot; it also expresses our giving up of unequal systems and structures. Real unity can be celebrated after this act of service has been testified in actuality.

From a historical Anabaptist viewpoint, this paradigm of baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper cannot be the only one. Foot washing could, of course, be considered in the light of hospitality and welcoming new members. And I could advocate that understanding, too. But I have sought here to identify the mutual relation of baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper, inspired by a nonsacramental answer to God's request for mercy. In doing so, I choose an ethical understanding of liturgy. However, I am aware that one cannot avoid seeing a sacramental motive in the soteriological aspect of the foot-washing ritual.

The importance of the reintroduction of foot washing among Mennonites in the Netherlands and the worldwide church could consist in the community growing in our understanding of what it means to penetrate the existing old world as a living sacrifice.

Notes

¹ *Geloofsbelijdenis der Doopsgezinden van de Sociëteit, Oude Vlamingen genaamt, Opgesteld in Vragen en antwoorden: het geen aan de Gemeente tot een Proef wordt gegeven* (1759), 19th question, page 109.

² *De Gemeente komt samen, dienstboek ten behoeve van doopsgezinde gemeenten* (Zoetermeer/Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1998). This is the most recent Dutch Mennonite minister's manual.

³ After the destruction of the second temple, no more animal sacrifices were offered. Rather, along with acts of love and justice, the study of the Torah was seen as something greater than any sacrifice (*b. Berakhot* 32b). And: "What replaces the steer that we were just supposed to offer for You? Our lips, the prayer that we pray to You" (*Pesiqta of Rab Kahana* 24:19).

⁴ *latreuō* ("serving," in a religious sense).

⁵ John Richard Burkholder links René Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism with the letter to the Hebrews and makes the case that an Anabaptist-Mennonite theology of liturgy can be found via this link. See "Leitourgia Beyond Altar and Sacrifice: How Then Shall We Worship/Serve God?" in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2000): 214–32. In summary, Burkholder claims: The Bible takes the victim as its point of departure (Hosea 6, Amos 5, Micah 6, and Psalm 40). Christ took the place of the victim. His death is a sacrifice against sacrificing, and in this way, it eliminates the sacrifice, brings an end to the culture of sacrifice, and brings the faithful back to the origin of God's purpose. In this manner, the cross receives its meaning. It is the sign of the permanent end of the sacrificial system. The congregation takes part in God's sacrifice, which is a sacrifice against all sacrifices; the congregation itself is a voluntary, living sacrifice, a manifestation of true worship. The ultimate character of Jesus' self-surrender brings about the transformation of the sacrificial culture into a culture of obedience, the movement from the bloody altar to a defenseless discipleship (Heb. 13:12–16).

⁶ "General Mennonite Society (Netherlands)," in *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' Text*, Faith and Order Paper 135, ed.

Max Thurian (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987), 289.

⁷ Linda Oyer, *Dieu à nos pieds: Une étude sur le lavement des pieds* (Montbéliard: Éditions Mennonites, 2002).

⁸ John Howard Yoder, "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 359–73.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Arthur Paul Boers, "In Search of Something More: A Sacramental Approach to Life and Worship," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 2 (Spring 2001): 42–58.

¹² In the 1980s, the commission of the World Council of Churches gave these themes a unique prominence in the mission of the church. See the WCC statement, "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation."

¹³ Certainly when it concerns penance, remorse, and restoration, the pastoral and catechetical disciplines also play a large role here.

¹⁴ C. J. den Heyer and Pieter Schelling, *Symbolen in de Bijbel: Woorden en hun betekenis* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2000), 484.

¹⁵ I am aware of the fact that the meaning of the foot is differently interpreted in several cultures.

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