

The Lord's Supper in Mennonite tradition

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My task is to review crucial issues in the Mennonite practice and theology of communion in historical perspective. The subject of the Lord's Supper in the life of the church has been close to my heart throughout my scholarly and pastoral ministry. I have encountered many surprises in my study and observation of what we believe about the Lord's table and how we gather around it.

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aspect of congregational life; it is our theology incarnate. At the end of my comments about each historical era, I will venture a summary statement about the church's self-understanding at that time.

Anabaptism came into existence as a movement by means of its renegade celebration of the Holy Supper in January of 1525. It did not become a church through a political or theological declaration but through a liturgical act. Similarly, its most trenchant criticism of the existing theological and social order was not a document but the ceremony of baptism. When everything was

said and done, it arrived at a positive role for ceremonies. What it changed was the actor; it was not the priest but the congregation that "consecrated" the bread and wine. At the same time, the Anabaptists never got over their fear that outward signs easily become a substitute for inward faith. Thus, Mennonitism has always felt a tension between sacraments as corporate symbols of a believers church and an unmediated relationship with God and fellow believers.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Mennonites of Holland and Germany wrote hundreds of prayer books and sermon collections, many of them related to communion. Hundreds of extant hand-copied manuscripts from that era transmit parts of these books and add detailed explanations and instructions. Yet these communities freely put aside ingrained

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habits of ritual life and borrowed from direct experiences of the Spirit and other sources.

By the late nineteenth century, Mennonites in North America were interacting with the larger currents of Protestantism, conservative and liberal. From them, Mennonites imbibed a rationalistic, reductionistic interpretation of the ordinances. This minimalist reading of the supper as “a mere symbol” or “only a human act of remembering” comes much more from science’s suspicion of the miraculous than from Reformation tradition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Mennonites participated in the cultural upheaval in society and the church at large.

Traditional ways of doing ritual were broken open. Diversity and inclusion became primary marks of the church’s life and mission, whether in a charismatic or liturgical direction. The most poignant and contentious expression of these changes came in the Lord’s Supper.

No community of faith is without tensions and contradictions; they come with the pursuit of truth. But why these particular tensions? I will suggest answers to that question by reviewing crucial issues in our eucharistic practice and thought.

The formative tradition

In the New Testament, we have only hints of how the Lord’s Supper was practiced. After spending years pursuing a pristine theology and practice of communion, I have concluded that this sparse record is a blessing, lest we imitate the form rather than the spirit of the event. The same is true of Anabaptism. Reference to its fragmentary remains follows. The only complete service is Balthasar Hubmaier’s Form of Christ’s Supper. It is a “reformed

mass,” a purified version of the medieval liturgy, with a preparatory service, preaching on the sacrifice of Christ, simple prayers of thanks for the bread and cup. The outcome of this gathering is that believers are set free to go out and lay down their lives for their neighbors as Christ laid down his life for them.

Ulrich Zwingli and Conrad Grebel had an interesting debate on the form of distribution. Zwingli saw nothing wrong with

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communicants coming forward to receive from the minister, as of old. But Grebel insisted that the supper must be served in the rows with the members, not the minister, passing the elements to one another.

Eucharistic references by other Anabaptist writers note only that believers met for the breaking of bread as often as they could. For them, the supper was a participatory meal and not an awesome ritual which everyone but the priest observed from a distance. It was the bond of their unity—and the event from which they excommunicated one another.

Like other Protestants, some Anabaptists tried to overcome the medieval dread of unworthy partaking which had led to the practice of once or twice yearly communion. In the end, the Anabaptist tendency toward perfectionism led to a different dread of unworthy communion, and Anabaptists too reverted to communion once or twice a year.

From practices still observed in traditional congregations, we know that Anabaptists carried over other medieval traditions. One is the preparatory service or counsel meeting, especially as practiced by Swiss Mennonites. There are pre-Reformation records of a counsel meeting during Holy Week (before the obligatory Easter Eucharist) in which congregants gathered for a penitential service. At its conclusion they went before the priest individually and declared whether or not they were at peace with God and their neighbor. If they were not, the belligerents had to seek reconciliation before they could come to the Lord's table. This pattern has endured into the present.

In the Prussian-Russian stream (except for the Mennonite Brethren), it was customary to bring along a fine cloth in which to

hold the bread on communion Sundays. In the Amish tradition, there is the practice of bending one knee when receiving the cup. There is no Anabaptist theological warrant for practices so focused on the elements. But their persistence tells us these ancient acts of reverence remained meaningful to people who had come to a different understanding of church and sacrament.

There was no uniform theology of the Eucharist in Anabaptism as was the case in Lutheranism or, to a lesser extent, in Calvinism. The most anticlerical and iconoclastic pronouncements in Anabaptism come from court hearings of ordinary people who refused to bow before the elements or to confess that Christ is physically present in them. This prophetic protest against popular

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magical views of the sacrament is part of our story. Menno Simons is perhaps the closest among the formative theological writers to these iconoclasts in his denunciation of idolatry and seeking salvation in outward things. But in his exegesis of 1 Corinthians 10, Menno also says that the Lord's Supper is "a communion of the body and blood of Christ."

In the pastoral and theological treatises by Anabaptist leaders, we see what diverse influences shaped their views. Yet there are also common characteristics and tendencies.

For all of the writers the holy supper is an act of remembrance and thanksgiving for Jesus' saving sacrifice. This foundational claim is the central but by no means the sole dimension of communion.

There is more. The term "body of Christ" in Anabaptism signifies the historical person of Jesus, the bread of the sacred meal, and the church. The body of Christ is those who have covenanted with Christ and fellow believers in baptism. In the breaking of bread, this community is recreated. The transformation that happens is of people, not things (Grebel, Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, Peter Walpot).

Further, the supper is a "communion of the body and blood of Christ." It is not a static object but a relational event. Christ is present not in the bread and wine, but in the act of their being

shared. In a gathering of believers who break bread in faith and love in the power of the Holy Spirit, there is an assured union with Christ (Marpeck).

At the same time, it is the immediate work of the Spirit through the response of faith that unites us with Christ. Writers muster rational arguments against the medieval belief that a sacred act automatically brings about what it signifies (Menno, Dirk Philips, Hubmaier, Walpot). Bread remains bread. At the same time, this emphasis on the Spirit as the agent of Christ's presence, especially in Hans Denck, Heinrich Rol, and Dirk, leads to an understanding of the supper as the believer's mystical communion of the body and blood of Christ, as in John 6.

The Gospel of John is the most important biblical source for Anabaptist theologies of the Lord's Supper. To illustrate, many of these writers regarded the person and role of Christ and the Spirit as more important than the words of institution in comprehending communion. Christ's ascent and the Spirit's descent are more often invoked in making judgments about the relationship of the elements to the presence of Christ than is exegesis of the words of institution. The supper as the meal of love, and its expression in the act of footwashing, are purely Johannine.

There is a tension in Anabaptism concerning the sign character of ceremonies. Do they signify only the faith of the gathered

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believers or also the grace of God? The Reformation sought to redress the Catholic emphasis on God's initiative as the only necessary cause of a sacrament. Protestants, especially Anabaptists, agreed that grace is the cause but insisted that faith is the condition. That was the difference between a mass church and a believers church. The instinct of most Anabaptists, especially as regards baptism, was to argue that grace is received inwardly. Baptism is the outer enactment of our inner response. This concept is the heart of Hubmaier's and

Menno's sacramental theology. But even according to their writings, something transformative happens in the supper; grace is at work. Marpeck establishes this relationship most fully. In his

thought, a sacrament is the point of intersection between grace and faith.

How did the Anabaptists' practice of communion incarnate their theology? Their practice suggests to me that the Anabaptists had an unbounded vision of mission. They created simple, inviting forms for new converts. But after believers were baptized, the community was closed. Only fellow believers in the narrow sense were welcome at the Lord's table—and in the kingdom of God. Grace was not unconditional; it had to be manifested in holiness of life. The breaking of bread tended to be for those “who need no physician” rather than for the sick.

The classical era

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Anabaptism had changed from a protest movement into a settled, if still renegade, denomination. Its liturgical life reflected the fact that it was no longer a first-generation community. The balance had moved from freedom to form. Everywhere but in Switzerland prominent ministers were writing prayer books and sermon collections in great numbers. By 1625 Leonard Clock had published a prayer collection with three communion prayers, a general or eucharistic prayer (abbreviated in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #787), plus a separate offering of thanks over the bread and the cup. About that time Hans de Ries's book of communion sermons appeared. It included an order of service for communion (Form 2 in *Minister's Manual*, ed. John D. Rempel [Newton and Winnipeg: Faith & Life Pr.; Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1998]). Clock's communion prayers were copied into handwritten manuscripts as well as taken up into the most famous prayer book in Mennonite history, *Die ernsthafte Christenpflicht* (the duty of earnest Christians). They were prayed by congregations all over Europe—including Russia—and North America. Christ on the cross is the heartbeat of these prayers. There is a “real presence” but it is not clearly related to the breaking of bread itself.

Confessions of faith appeared in profusion, all of them containing “eucharistic” articles, on the supper, footwashing, discipline. The Dordrecht Confession of 1632, which was adopted by the Dutch, South Germans, and Amish, emphasizes remembrance and fellowship in its article on the supper. The High

German Confession of 1660, the mother creed of all the Prussian and Russian strands of Mennonitism, adds union with Christ as a mark of the sacred meal. Both confessions emphasize footwashing.

Handwritten manuscripts, often revised as they were recopied, offer the first detailed description of how communion was practiced. They reveal much variation in custom and formulation. This is not surprising, considering the variety of theological interpretations of the supper in the sixteenth century and the wide geographic dispersion of Mennonite communities. Common to

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most of these is a great emphasis on preparation and on the reverence with which the congregation must celebrate communion. Most of them talk of a counsel meeting or preparatory service. Occasionally footwashing is part of that event; usually it follows the supper. Baptism and holiness of life are the door to communion.

Where preaching texts are recommended, they are usually from the passion accounts of the Gospels, Isaiah 53, and 1 Corinthians 11.

Prussian and Russian sources contain

references to a thanksgiving service for the work of Christ on the Sunday after communion, and to the fact that the supper is held at a time apart from public worship, often Sunday afternoon. In these circles, Good Friday and Pentecost (with baptism) are common but not uniform communion days. In the Swiss–South German realm there was a more general practice of spring and fall communion, scheduled so the bishop could be present on a different Sunday in each congregation of the district.

I am told that the older practice in the Lancaster Conference was to go forward for communion (and not to eat beforehand), but all the written references I have seen speak of the bread being served by the bishop himself to each communicant in the rows. In the Swiss tradition, he also served the cup. In the Russian tradition, the deacons passed one cup (or more) through the rows, with each partaker nodding assent to the person next to him or her before passing the cup along.

I know of no theological or spiritual crises that fundamentally altered eucharistic theology or practice in the classical era. Yet it

was not a static time. From the manuscripts, we see that the written prayers were elaborated on and occasionally replaced with new ones. Mennonites often followed conventional formulations, whether from a book or a preacher's memory, but these expressions were freely discarded when they became too confining. Customs were more sacred than words; they endured even when the words changed.

How did the practice of communion in the classical era incarnate the theology of the time? The only mission the community was permitted to pursue was to its own offspring. Thus, the forms of worship became routine and were understood only by insiders. They lost the freshness of the Anabaptist forms that were shaped for and by new converts. The gateway to the Lord's table was conformity more than sanctity.

The nineteenth century

In 1807 Valentine Dahlem, a South German minister, published an incredible book. It was the first Mennonite minister's manual of which copies have been preserved. In more than 300 pages Dahlem included instructions and prayers for every Sunday and for all liturgical and pastoral occasions. And he created two sections on the Lord's Supper! The first included elaborate prayers of thanksgiving and consecration, clearly adapted from Lutheran formularies, as well as prayers of devotion at the Eucharist. The second section, the author tells us, was included for the traditional churches in the Neckar region. It preserves the old practices referred to above.

Dahlem explained that he had created these liturgical resources to bring new life to worship. My sense is that he turned to Lutheran forms because these were richer than Mennonite ones and because Mennonites were assimilating into a Lutheran culture and looked to these sources as models of good worship.

In Canada, three decades later, Benjamin Eby published another manual. His goal was not to innovate but to preserve. Unlike the European compilers of prayer books (and even catechisms with prayer supplements), Eby included no prayers—only instructions on how to pray. This practice suggests that the Mennonites in North America preserved the Swiss aversion to written prayers much longer than their European counterparts.

In 1860, a revolution in communion practice took place in Russia with the formation of the Mennonite Brethren. They protested the tradition-bound practice of the supper, its gracelessness, and its admission of all baptized members whether or not they exhibited holiness of life. Because of their missionary vision, the Brethren simplified the order of service to make spirited participation easier. Their emphasis was on grace and the assurance of salvation. Ministers as well as bishops could officiate. Members passed the bread and the cup through the rows. They

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celebrated the supper monthly (baptisms were often arranged for communion Sundays) and on Good Friday. The strand of Mennonite teaching on union with Christ in communion was emphasized.

Later in the nineteenth century, in North America, Mennonites were reinvigorated (and assimilated) not by Lutheranism but by revivalism. It kindled the missionary impulse and, with it, the transition from German to English as a liturgical language. In revivalism, the emphasis was on inward conversion, and theology had a rationalist bent. “Outward” religion, including sacraments, was suspect. Two developments added fuel to the fires of suspicion. One was a new wave of anti-Catholicism; the other was the popularization of a scientific worldview which attacked

religion—and especially ritual—as magical. Both conservative and liberal Protestantism shared these suspicions. Both left an enduring mark on the Mennonite practice and theology of the Lord’s Supper.

How did the practice of communion in the nineteenth century incarnate the theology of this era? The question is more difficult to address because we have more information and more diverse trends. The wall around the Mennonite church was less firm. There was some openness to fellow believers in other denominations but not enough to make open communion conceivable. A sense of missionary responsibility was rising. The language God spoke was changing. In the most mission-minded

groups, the Mennonite Brethren in Russia and the Mennonite Brethren in Christ in North America, worship, including the Lord's Supper, became simplified and more contemporary.

The twentieth century

The second quarter of the twentieth century was a time of liturgical assimilation in the United States among General Conference Mennonites and the Mennonite Brethren. There is little reflection on record about a Mennonite theology of communion and little evidence of interest in preserving old practices, e.g., in minister's manuals. Conservatives gravitated toward Baptist practices and liberals toward Presbyterian ones. This tendency arose a generation later among "Old" Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada, and among the other groups in Canada. There are always anomalies in such trends. For example, although worship practices among Mennonite Brethren in the States were more influenced by revivalism than they were in Canada, U.S. Mennonite Brethren retained the practice of footwashing longer. Bearing in mind these variations, the outcome of this process was communion as a simple memorial service appended to Sunday morning worship, shorn of a preparatory service and footwashing. Gone was much of the theology of the body of Christ and the real presence.

I consider the pastoral reasons for this shift to be more substantive than the theological ones. The passion for a church "without spot or wrinkle" had led in many settings to a legalistic nonconformity. The counsel meeting had become a day of judgment rather than, as intended, an occasion to mend relationships. The breaking of bread had become burdened with a fear of unworthiness. An evangelical confidence in grace and forgiveness rightly challenged the old forms but had few liturgical resources consistent with a Mennonite understanding of the church with which to replace them.

This process accelerated with the liturgical upheaval of the 1960s. Three trends affected worship and the shape of the Lord's Supper: the charismatic movement, the liturgical movement, and the reappropriation of Mennonite practices through the "Anabaptist vision" movement. Each tendency in the church had different specific concerns, but for all of them the big issue was

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what to make of diversity (e.g., affirming different cultural expressions; seeing variety of style as a gift of the Spirit) and inclusivity (e.g., welcoming unbaptized Christians or those from other denominations; opening the table to divorced and gay people). Particularly in Mennonite Church and General Conference circles the congregation's voice was restored—on the one hand through spontaneous prayer and singing, and on the other hand through liturgical responses. Ordinary members, women and men, took up roles as worship leaders, communion servers, and even presiders.

Theologically, exegetes noticed these themes as they looked for guidance in the New Testament. (Which is the chicken and which the egg?) The revolutionary biblical insight that changed ecumenical and Mennonite eucharistic theology was that the meaning of communion was not exhausted by the Last Supper. The meals Jesus held during his ministry and after his resurrection became an essential part of the church's understanding of the breaking of bread.

The meal encounters of Jesus' ministry were wildly inclusive affairs: he ate and drank with sinners. They were also acts of justice: he fed the hungry. These insights suddenly established a direct link between Eucharist and mission. The church gathers to eat "the bread from heaven" and scatters to offer that bread to the world. Not only that, outsiders are invited in. From an emphasis on Jesus' meals after his resurrection, the supper was seen as a participation not only in his death but also in his living presence. This rereading of Scripture inspired both evangelistic and social mission.

Yet both approaches to mission have had to come to terms with a tension in the meal accounts. In the Last Supper and the resurrection meals, Jesus' companions were only those who had accepted the call into his company and mission (Judas's presence at the Last Supper is the startling exception). The tension raised

by these two strands of Jesus' ministry mirrors that of the church's ministry: unconditional grace and holiness of life.

How did the practice of communion, especially in the late twentieth century, incarnate the theology of the time? First, baptism was less and less seen as the door to the table. In the mid-nineties the Mennonite Brethren, influenced by the church growth movement, officially decided that all believers are welcome to the bread and cup. The new Mennonite Church still links baptism and communion in its confession of faith and minister's manual, but both its pluralist and church growth wings encourage a

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completely open Lord's table. Both place the decisive weight on unconditional grace—but do they mean the same thing by it?

Traditionalists and “Anabaptist vision” types tug in different directions, liturgically and theologically, to hold grace and obedience together.

On the one hand, grace alone saves us. On the other hand, the encounter with grace always makes a claim: it wants to make relationships right. The decisive factor is not being an insider or outsider but being willing to be changed. In my view there is room at the table for unbaptized people who are drawn to the company of Jesus and his friends. But accepting the offer of grace

implies a decision, not agreement on the contentious theological and sexual questions of the day but a decision for Christ. Will they enter the covenant?

Our practice of the Lord's Supper enacts the competing claims at work in our midst—between grace and sanctity, boundary and inclusion. The law of prayer (i.e., worship) determines the law of faith, it was said in the ancient church. How we celebrate the Lord's Supper profoundly shapes and is shaped by our belief about the work of grace and the nature of the new humanity.