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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Communion

Editorial

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What kind of event is it: sign, corporate symbol, sacrament, ordinance, ceremony, ritual? What really happens in the event? Who should preside and serve? What occasions or contexts are appropriate for enacting the event: formal church gatherings only, or also other informal gatherings of Christians? Who is welcome to participate? What preparatory activities are proper: self-examination, corporate sharing or reconciliation, table fellowship? How should the physical dynamics be orchestrated: rows, queue toward a table, circles around tables, common cup, individual cups? When and how often is it best celebrated? How has Mennonite practice of it evolved? How experimental might the celebration be? What varied biblical texts or themes might be used to enhance the practice? Finally, what should we call it: Communion (from the KJV's translation of *koinonia*, "partnership," in 1 Cor. 10:16), the Eucharist ("thanksgiving," from 1 Cor. 11:24, as historically in the Roman Catholic tradition and increasingly in Protestant circles), the Lord's Supper (or "banquet," from 1 Cor. 11:20), the Agapé ("love feast," in Jude 12)?

This issue of *Vision* addresses a number, although not all, of these persistent questions. In fact, some of the articles don't so much provide final answers as seek to provoke discussion and dialogue.

Thank you to those among our readers who have offered response of various kinds. As this new journal project gets underway, we welcome your reactions and suggestions on topics and types of contributions.

The next issue, to be released in fall 2001, will focus on the theme of personal transformation, and will be edited by Daniel Schipani of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

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.

My thesis is that the Lord's Supper is our most profound and formative symbol. How we practice it reveals more of what we believe about grace, the church, and mission than any other 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.

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

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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 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.

For the Anabaptists, 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.

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 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."

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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 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

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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 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.

In the classical era the forms of worship 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.

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 cathechisms 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 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.

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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

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.

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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 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.

Our practice of the Lord's Supper enacts the competing claims at work in our midst—between grace and sanctity, boundary and inclusion. 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.

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.

Communion as storytime

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Our communion services look back to a cluster of specific time-bound events, Jesus' many ministry meals with his friends, with the poor, with the rich. But in particular they evoke one meal, Jesus' Passover season meal in the Upper Room. We retell the stories of the many meals and commemorate that one meal. All these meal stories shape our hospitality and our mission. The many meals help us engage with friends and neighbors and children in new ways. But that one meal, that last supper of Jesus with his disciples, evokes in us a grave gratitude, a somber joy and devoted commitment to our Lord and one another. Even more, at the Lord's table, in the company of others, we receive by a mystery beyond our grasp a holy grace of forgiveness and fellowship with the Lord himself.

That one meal evokes in us a grave gratitude, a somber joy and devoted commitment to our Lord and one another. Even more, at the Lord's table, in the company of others, we receive by a mystery beyond our grasp a holy grace of forgiveness and fellowship with the Lord himself.

But how can retelling Jesus' table stories connect with our communion services today? How does this communal ceremonial blessing and sharing of food effect a nurture for our lives which we crave beyond our understanding? Is there a special kind of memory-keeping at work here? I contend that there is. Celebrating communion is a form of remembrance that is similar to ordinary storytelling but transcends it.

All religions tell stories, and many of them look back to a golden age, a mythical time of origins. Religious observances evoke mysterious transport to that out-of-time. But our faith doesn't involve us in time travel to Eden or a psychic journey back to the Upper Room. We live and worship squarely in our own time. However, the words and actions in the Upper Room

link directly to us and can affect our daily living. Biblical worship isn't nostalgic. It isn't mysteriously mythic. Referring faithfully to its origin stories, but rooted in the here and now, our communion directs our way forward into the future. This involves a complex interplay of time past, the here and now, and the future before us.

Signs of salvation

The late James McClendon, who has taught me much, discusses this interplay with a helpful framework, which he calls the signs of salvation.[1] These signs constitute the language by which God communicates with humanity, and by which we respond to God. Though he calls this a "rough and ready" scheme, because we can't unfailingly categorize our communication with God, McClendon proposes three types of signs.

The first type, the great historic signs, comprises the crucial events in the great history of redemption: Creation; Exodus and Sinai; the entry into Canaan-land; the birth of prophecy; exile and partial return; the Messiah's birth, redemptive life and death and resurrection; Pentecost; the mission to the gentiles.

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Associated with the historic signs are lesser signs, such as, for example, the burning bush which is a part of the Exodus story, the empty tomb which points to the resurrection of Jesus, or speaking in tongues which accompanies the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. God has "spoken" preeminently through the great historic signs.

The second type, the remembering signs, includes signs that are related to the historic signs, but not in historical time. These are the repeatable signs, which God uses with us in making contemporary connections with the once-only events of the redemption story. These remembering signs include baptism, preaching, and communion. In our baptism we recall the baptism of Jesus, his death and resurrection. In submersion we recall his overwhelming suffering, death, and burial. In affusion we recall the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost. Preaching that retells the redemptive story is a remembering sign. In Eucharist the church

gives thanks for the poured-out life and the broken body of Jesus, and remembers his table fellowship during his ministry and after his resurrection.

The remembering signs are set in communities of faith. We act through these remembering signs, and God acts, too, to make these signs effectual. The great historic signs were for all people, but the remembering signs are more particular. They are applications of the historic signs to specific believers and faith communities now.

Though we are constrained by time, by means of the story-signs we can reach back and reach forward into God's greater time frame. So this language of story-signs pushes us beyond our human constraints of time.

Providential signs are McClendon's third type. These are instances of God's guidance and care in each Christian's life as that person finds vocation and purpose in the kingdom of God. God-given providential signs reveal Christ's footsteps, which confirm fellowship of the Spirit, and which are congruent with the qualities of discipleship as seen, for example, in the Beatitudes or the fruit of the Spirit.

This, then, is McClendon's pattern of signs, the language of interactive communication that God has provided. In order to communicate with God, we learn to speak this language of story-signs. Though constrained by time, by means of the story-signs we can reach back and reach forward into God's greater time frame. So this language of story-signs pushes us beyond our human constraints of time.

Stories shaping lives

But how does this actually work? How can stories from the past shape our lives today? Some families pass on stories and skills from one generation to the next. Children can learn their identity and devise dreams for their futures through imaginatively entering into the repeated family tales. Sometimes it happens within the larger community as well. Recently in our town Charles Nelms, a Vice President of Indiana University, delivered an inspiring speech at an NAACP-sponsored public event that marked the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The audience listened to stories that revealed King's character—his vision, his plan, his perseverance, his focus, and his passion. In each case, Nelms admonished us to remember and to act out these vital qualities from King's life.

When we do, Nelms urged, we can prove that King did not live in vain. The way King lived can inspire and point the way ahead for others who follow.

This same function of the old stories is embedded in the Bible. Celebrative narratives of the great historic signs form the core of worship in the Old Testament, from Miriam and Moses' song and dance on the far shore of the Red Sea, to family Passover seders, to the intertwining of tragic tale and joyful song in the historical psalms. Why did they tell the old stories? So the children "should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep [God's] commandments" (Ps. 78:7). Children learned who they were, whom to trust, and how to dream their future by hearing over and over again the "things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us" (Ps. 78:3).

Telling the old stories of God with Israel reminded the people what God was like. And that shaped a way to live. God listened to the cries of enslaved Israelites and liberated them. God was merciful and strict, compassionate and severe, demanding but just in his dealings with them. But it wasn't enough to recount the events. Many times the motive clause rings through the narratives: "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this" (Deut. 24:17–8). Jesus taught in the same vein: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). And listen to Paul: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 4:32–5:1). The Bible's witness is that to tell the stories of God is to form our actions and affections, to show us how to live our lives.

Does this work with us today? Through rehearsing the stories of God's people, do we remember who we are and to whom we are connected? The answer is yes. We form our individual and corporate character on the character of the God whom we adore.[2] Perhaps today this biblical willingness to learn from the past seems passé. Rear-view mirrors are clouded over. People want only the latest; people read only the newest. Was Henry Ford

right when he said, "History is bunk"? Let's dispute with Ford and show a better way. Let's learn God's sign language with fluency and put those biblical motive clauses to work.

What does this all this have to do with our communion services? A great deal. Our faith consists not in fine ideals or polished philosophies. We hold to the great redemptive acts of God, and we recount and celebrate them at communion. All the story-signs—historic, remembering, and providential—play important parts at the Lord's table.

Historic signs

The events of salvation history form the frame. Through the ages the church has stubbornly insisted that the great prayer of thanksgiving at the breaking of bread must retell and give thanks for the whole sweep of God's story with us, from Creation onwards through the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. Retracing this prayer along what McClendon calls a "vector" through time, we say yes to God anew.[3] We remember God's faithfulness and mercy, God's all-embracing love and right judgments. Through our grateful prayers we pledge ourselves to become more and more like the God we praise, like Jesus in whose face we see God's face. The character of God shapes the character of God's people.

Through the ages the church has stubbornly insisted that the great prayer of thanksgiving at the breaking of bread must retell and give thanks for the whole sweep of God's story with us. This should be a prayer to span the ages, to encompass all of creation.

Consider ways to strengthen the communion table prayers. Sometimes they are temporally anemic, with a sense only of the moment at hand. Mennonites at worship seem to have difficulty staying in the mode of praise and thanksgiving. Our reflexes (humble? self-deprecating? servant-like?) make it all too easy to slip off into confession and petition. On the contrary, this should be a great prayer of blessing God, a prayer to span the ages, to encompass all of creation. We wonder anew at the marvels of the great historic signs of our God. We take the time and make the effort to do this well.

Remembering signs

McClendon marked out the classic remembering signs of baptism, preaching, and communion. These constitute a sign language for the faith community to use in remembering and realigning ourselves with the great ongoing story of God. These three should continually intertwine. Even if we don't actually do baptisms at every eucharistic service, baptismal realities underlie the profound sharing at the table, the renewed and renewing commitment to God's presence and reign. Preaching forms a channel for the Spirit to enliven Scripture and fire the conscience. In the communion service—blessing, breaking, and sharing the loaves within the forgiven and redeemed community—we receive God's gracious gifts of unity and communion with Christ and with each other. Flowing from that will be a refreshed life of service and love, reflecting the love and mercy of God in the world around us.

In our desire to avoid a morbid eucharistic piety, we are tempted to emphasize other legitimate themes of the Lord's table, while soft-pedaling their source, the mysterious efficacy of Jesus' death. But God's transforming power was unleashed at the cross. God's redeeming love is wild in our world.

The remembering sign of communion draws us to the centrality of Christ's redeeming death on the cross. Are we Mennonites wary of the subject of Christ's suffering and death? "Yes, it's that, of course," we say, and quickly move on. In our desire to avoid a morbid eucharistic piety, we are tempted to emphasize other legitimate themes of the Lord's table, such as fellowship, reconciliation, and forgiveness, while soft-pedaling their source, the mysterious efficacy of Jesus' death. But God's world-historical transforming power was unleashed at the cross. This is a power not to be tamed. God's redeeming love is wild in our world.

Listen to James MacMillan, contemporary Scottish Catholic composer, meditating on the cross and his desire to probe its meanings through his music.

> *Music can be seen as a calculus of the very face of God…. We circle around the very moments when God made his deepest interaction with human history. That is why I am drawn back obsessively to these three days*

[which climax in Easter Day]. I can't help it. I know that the answer might be there. With this form of musical calculus there is an attempt to open doors and encounter the face of God.... The face of God would be an awesome sight, if we could ever see it with human eyes. The way of finding access to that awe and fear is to experience God through the death and resurrection of his Son.[4]

A cross often hangs front and center in our meeting rooms. It is not a decoration. It evokes the central story of our faith. To be true to God's missionary story, we must keep the story of the cross central. We "proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23) and we proclaim Christ raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15:12). This proclamation is visual as we contemplate the empty cross hanging on the wall above us. It is verbal in the impassioned presentation and application of the meaning of the cross in believers' lives in the world. It is sacramental through the prophetic word and in the cup and bread of the Lord's table. And it is demonstrated communally as the Spirit enlivens and empowers Christ's gathered people. The church weaves together all the parts of the stories of redemption, and does so in the sure hope of Christ's return. The cross determines the shape of every part of the story.

How can we appreciate and mediate so great a mystery? Words can help. Over the centuries, Christians in the communion service have used cryptic acclamations or poetic hymns based on Scripture to express the mysterious kernel of our faith. I show a brief acclamation and then the same ideas in more extended form:

Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

Dying you destroyed our death;
rising you restored our life.
Lord Jesus, come in glory.

Here is an ancient assemblage of Pauline texts known liturgically as the Easter anthems (1 Cor. 5:7; 15:22; Rom. 6.9–11).

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us
so let us celebrate the feast,
not with the old leaven of corruption and wickedness
but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Christ once raised from the dead dies no more;
death has no more domain over him.
In dying he died to sin once for all;
in living he lives to God.

See yourselves therefore as dead to sin
and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who sleep.

For as by man came death,
by man has come also the resurrection of the dead.
For as in Adam all die,
even so in Christ shall all be made alive.[5]

Teach and memorize these ancient poetic and creedal acclamations, and incorporate them, perhaps with appropriate gestures, into your communion services. It's best to "line out" the acclamations, and so avoid the distraction of printed paper. Consider singing the Easter anthems. One setting is by Mennonite pastor Andrew Kreider, who has combined the verses with this refrain, to create a spirited sending song for the close of a communion service:

We will stand up for Jesus, stand up in his Name.
And he will hold us in the power of his Spirit.
We will walk in his way.[6]

Include baptismal hymns and texts in communion services. The close connection between baptism and communion has been essential in our tradition. Too easily we give up the link in favor of a soft inclusiveness, perhaps evoking Jesus' ministry meals with doubters, sinners, and the marginalized. It is important to keep the tension we see in Jesus' ministry between open fellowship and

the discipline of his covenanted circle of disciples. What these have in common is that they are closely related types of kingdom meals, and as such require careful reflection. Can we do both at once? Maybe so, maybe not. Perhaps more frequent and more diverse types of Lord's Supper observances would be a way forward.[7]

Providential signs

We can be sure that God has been at work in the lives of congregation members, has protected and provided for them, healed and inspired them. God is alive! These are the providential signs, God's loving communication. We experience God not only through the prophetic word, and through bread and cup. We do it through the stories we recount of God's faithful and active presence. In rehearsing the providential signs, we make connections between today's faith stories and the great narratives of our faith.

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People can learn to do this by hearing others do it. For example, just as believers saved Paul's life by lowering the basket over the city wall, so someone helps save an endangered life today. Just as God provided water in wilderness, so God meets someone's desperate local need. Just as Peter sank in the waters except when he kept his eyes on the Lord, so someone testifies to failure of heart and renewed faith, in something that happened at work. Too often such life happenings are told, stripped down, as interesting anecdotes over the coffee cups. But our stories are enriched through theological, faith-building reflection.

Telling providential sign-stories could find its way into the heart of our communion worship as a thanksgiving prayer-form. Consider making an open time at the communion service to hear one another's testimonies, however simple or mundane, of God's providential signs. It would be good to hear many voices giving thanks for the Spirit's movement now, this week, today. Sitting in

rows makes this difficult. It can happen so much more easily when the people cluster around the table.

Use song and hymn responses within the communion prayers and actions. Choose and memorize particular hymns or songs. So that people don't have to handle books during the communion service, song leaders could learn to line out the hymn, unobtrusively guiding people easily through the words. Each congregation would have distinctive choices for communion hymns, ones that reflect God's providential ways with them, e.g., ones that celebrate God's faithfulness, themes of unity, forgiveness, or healing.

Communal emphases in communion

Making testimony and praying through the language of providential signs keep us firmly earthed. Today we learn how to weave our common life and worship together just as Christians of the earliest centuries had to learn to do it. They conjoined the elements of reconciled unity, prayer, and Eucharist as mainsprings of their communal life. They nurtured and disciplined these qualities at the eucharistic table which they closely monitored for access. They dismissed catechumens preparing for baptism not only before the bread and cup ceremonies, but even before the congregation's prayers and the kiss of peace, which they understood as belonging to the prayers. To participate was only for the baptized. The kiss of peace made and marked harmony both in personal relationships and in prayer. Unity in fellowship and in prayer were as much a part of the "sacrifice" of the service as was partaking of the elements of bread and cup. Coherence in these elements of reconciliation, prayer, and Eucharist can profoundly shape the whole community just as much for us now as for Christians two millennia ago.

Christians of the earliest centuries dismissed catechumens not only before the bread and cup ceremonies, but even before the congregation's prayers and the kiss of peace. Unity in fellowship and prayer were as much a part of the "sacrifice" of the service as was partaking of the elements.

A strength of our Anabaptist tradition has been to assert that we can't deal with spirituality without dealing with economics.

They are interconnected. We have maintained the strong theme of mutual aid, of pledging to one another tough solidarity, everyday help and sustenance. A beautiful historical case exists in Balthasar Hubmaier's Pledge of Love, which exemplifies mutual, self-giving love in the context of the communion service.[8] As John Rempel has perceptively noted, for Hubmaier "the supper is not a devotional contemplation of the crucifixion of Christ. It is an ethical summons to imitate Jesus' surpassing act of self-giving. Just as Jesus offered himself for me, I offer myself for others."[9]

Christ is present in the Spirit among his people gathered at the table. Through the loving energy of the Spirit we renew our promises to love one another, to reach out to the stranger and to the enemy. In preparing for a communion service, draw on Hubmaier's Pledge of Love, or use the insights of Hans de Ries, a seventeenth-century Mennonite, in a communion service prepared by John Rempel.[10]

Time to come

The Lord's Supper is about many things: giving thanks, forgiveness, and solidarity with Christ and one another. But there is more. The supper is sometimes called the banquet of the kingdom, a foretaste of the great feast. At the Lord's Supper we celebrate God's future breaking into our time.

In the Gospels, the passion narratives, of which the Last Supper is a significant part, are woven through with Jesus' teachings about last things. Notice how the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13 is followed by the Last Supper account. The final crisis, the last judgment, and the Last Supper are parts of one meaningful whole. The church's supper looks back to Passover, to the Upper Room, but it also looks forward. In Mark this emphasis is especially strong. God's reign is breaking into now. The future is already here. The Lord's (church's) Supper is the supper of the kingdom. To conclude a communion service, sing a hymn on the theme of the coming reign of God such as "You are salt for the earth, O people" (*Hymnal: A Worship Book,* #226).

In the Lord's Supper we have the richest form of worship. Where else in a church's life is there anything so amazing? In a hymn-sing, or a lecture hour, in Sunday school or coffee time? So why do we settle for such infrequent observance of the Lord's

Supper? We probably have lots of good reasons: missional sensitivities, relational concerns, the complexity of our communion ceremonies. Perhaps the kind of eucharistic fellowship we crave is simply impossible in big buildings and large congregations. Size is a significant factor. The Christian faith is best lived out with the daily support of brothers and sisters; with a face-to-face group who know our stories and whose stories we know; with full-bodied eucharistic worship that sings, whispers, weeps, and shouts in God's sign language of reconciling love. It may be that smaller numbers are better, in order for a congregation to exercise the fullest eucharistic fellowship.

I am convinced that we find no greater, deeper, richer vein of spiritual nurture than at the Lord's table. The Lord invites us to his table, so let us respond; let us come often to his table. And as we turn outward from the table we will discover that others are waiting. They are longing for time-transcending worship, for deep-dish spiritual nurture, for the sustaining joy and faithful solidarity of Jesus' own people living by the story we tell.

Notes

[1] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1994), 374–416.

[2] This is the overarching theme of Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997).

[3] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 376. A dictionary definition of vector: a directed quantity, as a straight line in space, involving both direction and magnitude.

[4] James MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," *New Blackfriars* 81 (January 2000): 22; also to appear in Alan Kreider and Stephen Darlington, eds., *Composing Music for Worship in the Third Christian Millennium* (forthcoming).

[5] *The Alternative Service Book 1980* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1980), 74–5.

[6] Musical setting available from Andrew Kreider, 1726 Roys Avenue, Elkhart IN 46516 USA. Copyright © 1988.

[7] See Kreider, "A Community of Many Tables," chap. 15 in *Communion Shapes Character*, 189–95.

[8] See "A Form for Christ's Supper" (1527) in *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 5, trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1989), 393–408. A form of the Pledge of Love prepared for congregational use appears in Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 278–81.

[9] John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 33 (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1993), 48.

[10] This service, prepared by John D. Rempel, appears in Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 282–5.

Eucharistic theology
Some untapped resources

Thomas Finger
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Aeons ago, when I attended seminary in Massachusetts, Boston-area theological schools announced one of their first cooperative courses. How exciting, I thought, to study with Episcopalians, Catholics, Orthodox, and others! But then I learned that the subject was the Eucharist. How sad, I sighed, that they didn't select something important! I didn't take the course.

Though I was not Mennonite then, my attitude was like many Mennonites'. I simply couldn't imagine how important the Lord's Supper was in some traditions. Years later, when I first took Catholic eucharistic theology seriously, I was shocked. All that Catholics have written on the subject might fill a library. In contrast, only one scholarly book on the Lord's Supper in Anabaptism even exists.[1]

Mennonite attitudes

Why have Mennonites reflected so little on the supper's theology? Perhaps because, until recently, they paid little attention to the supper's practice. In a sense, this is fitting. Theology normally arises from a desire to articulate and examine what is already occurring in the church's life. But many Mennonite suppers offer little to examine. Many are still tacked on, at infrequent regular or irregular intervals, to services disconnected from them—and held at all because, well, Jesus commanded it.

What Catholics have written on eucharistic theology might fill a library. In contrast, only one scholarly book on the Lord's Supper in Anabaptism exists.

Mennonites may also have avoided eucharistic theology because it has engendered endless speculation and conflict. Its major question, at least in the West, has been: how is Christ present in the supper? Answers have been of three main types, or combinations thereof:

in the elements (bread and wine), in the verbal formulas of institution, in the recipient's faith. The first answer tends to construe this presence as a metaphysical substance. The second emphasizes correct ritual form. The third answer analyzes the relationship between the individual communicant's subjective faith and the ceremony's objective essence. For some theologies, this essence is not metaphysical but Jesus' historical crucifixion. It is often said that such a "memorial" view was the chief Anabaptist understanding. All three approaches profess that Christ's presence is dynamic and transforming. Yet each renders it fairly fixed and static, usually in abstruse language. It is hardly surprising that Mennonites, who emphasize the active life of concrete obedience, have shown little interest in eucharistic theology.

Ironically, however, Mennonite neglect of the supper's theology and practice has often rendered our own observances of it rather static. Many congregations "celebrate" it in routine, unthinking fashion, with no real rationale (other than "Jesus commanded it, so we've always done it"). Though Mennonites rightly stress the gospel's ethical dimensions, they sometimes minimize its other aspects and reduce their faith to little else.

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Recently, however, many Mennonites have been finding their worship life shallow. Their growing desire for richer celebration corresponds with greater emphasis on the aesthetic and emotional aspects of worship, and indeed of life in general. Moreover, concern for more meaningful experience of the supper is connected with the rising interest in spirituality. It is no accident that this second issue of *Vision* follows an inaugural issue on spirituality. I will propose that in the Lord's Supper a major, though largely untapped, source of spiritual nourishment already exists among us.

To elucidate this, I will first consider some insights from sixteenth-century Anabaptism. I will then show how similar notions have been given helpful contemporary expression—perhaps surprisingly—in Catholicism. I will close with suggestions for our communion practice.

Anabaptist memorialism?

It is often said or implied that sixteenth-century Anabaptists understood the Lord's Supper chiefly as a memorial of Jesus' crucifixion.[2] To be sure, they did regard this dimension as important. Further, they all rejected the Catholic notion of transubstantiation, the belief that the substances of the bread and wine actually change into the substances of Christ's body and blood. Anabaptists often insisted that the bread is simply bread, the wine simply wine, and reverence for the elements simply idolatry. Since Christ's presence had been conceived for centuries in terms of transubstantiation, it is often supposed that in rejecting this theory, Anabaptists rejected his presence in communion altogether, or greatly minimized it.

Anabaptists often insisted that the bread is simply bread, the wine simply wine, and reverence for the elements simply idolatry.

The memorial emphasis was indeed strong among Swiss Anabaptists, especially in the thought of Balthasar Hubmaier, who often insisted that because Jesus' risen body is in heaven, it could not possibly be in the supper.[3] Even here, though, I find the most pronounced and distinctly Anabaptist emphasis to be not memorial but communal. Hubmaier movingly portrayed how, when Christians remember together how Jesus gave his body and blood for them, they are also pledging to give themselves—body and blood, if need be—for each other.

Nonetheless, when we turn from Switzerland to Anabaptism's other main branches (South German/Austrian and Dutch), we find stress not only on the memorial and communal dimensions, but also on the living presence of the risen Jesus. Melchior Hoffman, for instance, affirmed that Christ

> *takes bread (just as a bridegroom takes a ring or a piece of gold) and gives himself to his bride with the bread (just as the bridegroom gives himself to his bride with the ring)…so that just as the bride eats a physical bread in her mouth and drinks the wine, so also through belief in the Lord Jesus Christ she has physically received and eaten the noble Bridegroom with his blood in such a way that the Bridegroom and the outpouring of his blood is [one]*

with hers…. She [is] in him and, again, he is in her, and they together are thus one body, one flesh, one spirit, and one passion.[4]

However one interprets this complex passage, the communicant clearly is not simply remembering Jesus' death, but is also experiencing intense personal union with him.

Yet while virtually all Anabaptists outside Switzerland affirmed Christ's presence in some way, in their reaction against the doctrine of transubstantiation they described this presence as spiritual. Even the Dutch (including Melchior Hoffman), who mentioned partaking Christ's body and blood, understood these as "heavenly flesh," so spiritualized that it rendered dubious any connection with physical reality.

John Rempel, in *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, argues that nearly all Anabaptists assumed, on the conceptual level, that an "ontological barrier" separated spirit from matter. This made it virtually impossible to conceive, intellectually, how spiritual communion with Christ could have any close connection with the supper's physical actions and elements. I will ask later how true this conceptual separation was to actual Anabaptist experience of the supper, and indeed of Christian life as a whole.

In any case, over the next generations Anabaptism's heirs continued to stress the supper's communal dimension. Yet their awareness of God's Spirit, in the supper and elsewhere, faded. And since they generally continued to assume the spirit-matter disjunction, Jesus, whose body was in heaven, could vanish from the supper. It became increasingly possible to regard not Christ, but the church itself, through its active remembrance and its sharing, as the supper's main agent, and even its primary sacramental reality. Hubmaier, in fact, had already sketched such an understanding, affirming that the supper had to do "completely and exclusively with fraternal love."[5] North American Mennonites were most deeply influenced by the Swiss perspective, articulated by Hubmiaer.

Pilgram Marpeck

Assuming the spirit-matter tension, Hubmaier resolved it one-sidedly, by effectively reducing the Lord's Supper to a physical,

communal-ethical event. An opposite resolution was possible: if spiritual reality is far removed from matter, why bother with physical ceremonies at all? Yet Anabaptists rejected this. They insisted on water baptism at the risk of their lives. And they considered proper celebration of the supper essential to restoring a true church, however much their heirs minimized this. Nonetheless, when asked *why* these sacraments were so crucial, Anabaptists seldom said more than "because Jesus commanded them."

Pilgram Marpeck, however, probed for a deeper rationale. Unlike most theologians of his day, he emphasized that baptism and the supper are *activities*. He stressed "not the element…but the activity, …not water, bread, and wine…but baptism and the Supper."[6] Marpeck also insisted that God communicates the Spirit through matter, and wills that inner reality be expressed through outward actions. In other words, he rejected any ontological barrier, and elaborated this intertwining more comprehensively than any other Anabaptist.

In the Lord's Supper God draws a body of people into the continuing reality of Jesus' concrete suffering and humanity. Materiality is so basic to this reality that the physical actions and elements that draw us into it actually become part of it.

Marpeck not only affirmed, with all Anabaptists, that true faith expresses itself in concrete actions. He also pointed out that God's character and salvation were revealed only through Jesus' physical teachings and activities. Further, the church, for Marpeck, forms an extension of Jesus' physical humanity. This means that inner, spiritual reality continues to flow through its outward, material actions—including its sacraments.

Marpeck found other religious groups upholding one of these without the other. For him, Catholic and Protestant ceremonies—infant baptism, above all—were outer forms devoid of inner reality. Yet Spiritualists, who eliminated sacraments altogether, were seeking inner experience apart from outward expressions. Marpeck protested that authentic sacraments must include both physical activities and spiritual appropriation.

He did not simply mean, as some Protestant theologians stressed, that the individual communicant's subjectivity must be

connected with some ceremonial object. For this event involves not simply the response of individuals, but that of the whole congregation. Further, this response is not merely human. It is energized by God, working within the communicants as Holy Spirit. Moreover, since the ceremonial actions are expressions of Jesus' continuing humanity, God, who is working inwardly as Spirit, is simultaneously working outwardly as Son. In other words, the Lord's Supper (like baptism), for Marpeck, is basically a Trinitarian operation. Spiritual reality is channeled, as it had been in Jesus' history, through material actions and objects. It then draws participants into the transforming divine energy flowing among Father, Son, and Spirit.[7]

The Lord's Supper, for many Anabaptists, was not simply a communal experience or a memorial of Jesus' death—though it surely involved both. The risen Christ was experienced as actively present, not by bypassing material reality and community relationships but precisely through these.

Marpeck soared beyond static theologies of the supper, concerned with elements, formulas, and subjectivity, to portray it as dynamic *co-witness*.[8] God as Spirit co-witnesses with God as Son. The congregation's actions co-witness with these divine activities. The communicants' movements co-witness with their experiences, and each communicant's movements and experiences with the others'. Finally, the material elements themselves co-witness with the spiritual dynamism.

In fact, Marpeck asserted, when bread and wine function in this context, they are no longer simply signs, but "essence."[9] Such a statement went well beyond memorialism, and even beyond ordinary Anabaptist affirmations of Christ's spiritual presence. Yet Marpeck did insist that this presence is spiritual; the elements could not actually be Christ's body and blood. Marpeck, however, was trying to affirm that when Christ—indeed, the entire Trinity—acts in an authentic supper, its material components cannot be merely secondary or disposable. For the supper not only *symbolizes* but itself *is* an occasion when Spirit takes up matter as an indispensable means of conveying spiritual reality.

To be sure, God's Spirit is and can be present in many ways. Yet the Lord's Supper marks a special kind of presence. Here God

draws a body of people into the continuing reality of Jesus' concrete suffering and humanity. Materiality is so basic to this reality that the physical actions and elements that draw us into it actually become part of it. Though they are not transubstantiated into something else, they form aspects of the supper's "essence," without which it could not be what it truly is. Any ontological barrier between matter and spirit is bridged, as it was in Jesus' earthly life.

Contemporary Catholicism

I have maintained that the Lord's Supper, for many Anabaptists, was not simply a communal experience or a memorial of Jesus' death—though it surely involved both. In the supper the risen Christ was experienced as actively present, not by bypassing material reality and community relationships but precisely through these.

I believe that when it is properly practiced and understood, the supper can help satisfy the spiritual longings of many Mennonites today. Yet Mennonites seldom reflect on this. Is it possible, then, that another tradition might help? What about the one whose eucharistic reflection has been most extensive: Roman Catholicism? Are there resources for Mennonites in this tradition, even though Anabaptists criticized it sharply? Perhaps surprisingly, Mennonite World Conference is now engaged in official dialogue with the Vatican. So let us see.

Since Vatican II, Catholic theology has stressed that the congregation, not the priest, is the supper's primary celebrant.[10] Priests formerly officiated with their backs to communicants, but now they face the congregation. Priests usually presided at a raised altar, but now often at a table around which all can gather and share Christ's peace. Practices like these envision Christ more fully present amid the congregation.

Today's Catholic theology also affirms Jesus' presence throughout the service, not only at the table but also in the liturgy of the Word which precedes it.[11] And at the table, Jesus does not wait to emerge suddenly at the formula of consecration ("this is my body").

Current Catholic theologians also insist, sounding uncannily like Marpeck, that "*the sacraments are actions, not things*."[12] "The

original eucharistic symbols" are not bread and wine, but "*breaking the bread and sharing the cup*."[13] Consequently, many such theologians are critical of the doctrine of transubstantiation. They find it, at best, "a good answer to a bad question."[14] The broad question was, how is Christ present? But specifically, that meant, in what *things* (bread and wine) is Christ present, and through what changes in them?

Current Catholic theologians insist that "the sacraments are actions, not things." They find the doctrine of transubstantiation, at best, "a good answer to a bad question."

As mentioned above, Christ's presence has been the foremost topic in western eucharistic theology. Mennonites have shied away from this theology, at least in part because its theories seemed abstruse and irrelevant. But what if these theories arose largely from asking the wrong questions, from seeking Christ's presence in the elements or formulas or subjectivity? Might other ways of expressing this presence emerge if the supper is first understood as a *communal activity?* And might these aid those Mennonites who desire more profound experiences of the supper, and indeed of spiritual reality?

I think so, and here again I think Catholic reflection can help. The issue of Christ's presence perhaps arises most vividly when we consider the words that often accompany the elements: "This is the body of Christ." "This is the blood of Christ." If "is" resounds as bread and wine are presented, might it not seem possible that these things themselves are Christ? And if one wonders how this could be, might one not plausibly scrutinize these things, and search for some alteration in their substance? In contrast, if we focus on the overall eucharistic *actions*, we can think of objects changing in another way. They can be said to change when their *function* alters greatly—particularly when they begin to *signify* something quite different. That is, the change in the elements might be not trans-substantiation, but trans-signification.

To explain this, some Catholics draw on the illustration Melchior Hoffman used: a wedding ring. When a ring sits in a jeweler's shop, it is merely a circular object. But when it is offered in the context of engagement and marriage, it becomes a special token of a person's love and commitment, even of that entire person. As years pass, many additional events and commitments

become associated with the ring. Some people find that their wedding ring conjures up multiple impressions of their spouse, and can even make the spouse seem present.[15]

The same is true of other objects given to express special feelings or mark significant events. For many of us, a picture, a poem, a vase given by someone close calls that person to mind. Even years after we last saw them, even after they have died, such objects can bring back to us the whole relationship, and perhaps seem to bring that person back into our presence. In the physical sense, these objects do not really change. But after we have come to associate many profound experiences with them, can we really say that they have not changed in any way? Is a ring, at one's golden anniversary, the same in every respect as it was at the wedding? Has it not altered in the way it functions? In the meanings it conveys? In what it signifies?

Similarly, when bread and wine function to make Christ and his suffering present, and to draw whole communities into this presence, they are signifying something different from their usual signification. They change markedly, not in their substance but it what they do. They are taken up into a series of actions that connect them so intrinsically with this particular manner of Christ's presence that they help form, in Marpeck's words, the supper's "essence," without literally being Christ. Isn't this a change in what they, at the most important level, actually *are*?[16] As Jesus becomes present to his community, and the elements become so inseparably involved in this process, might we say that each one "is" him? Not because they change into him, but because they convey him? Because they are so directly connected with his coming that when they come, he comes?

In any case, while not all Catholics endorse the idea of transignification, it helps me understand how Jesus can be present in the supper, and so closely associated with its actions and elements that each element "is" him in some significant sense. This results, of course, not from any property of the elements, but because the risen Jesus is choosing to use them this way.

Worship implications

I am proposing, in short, that the Lord's Supper can provide profound occasions for encounter with and transformation by the

risen Christ. The supper need not be reduced to historical commemoration or communal solidarity, though it certainly includes these. I propose that theological reflection on Christ's presence in the supper, if it highlights activity and community, can enrich this encounter and transformation.

This implies, first, that Mennonites who search for a deeper spirituality already have one source of it close at hand. We should indeed explore the spiritual resources of other traditions. But we should not forget that the Lord's Supper is already ours. It has already been given to us (along with all Christians), as have rich Anabaptist insights, however little we remember them. Let us give much greater attention to what we—perhaps unthinkingly—already celebrate. Let us explore the many dimensions of this seemingly simple rite.

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Second, since the risen Christ desires to be present among us throughout our worship, let us avoid tacking on the supper at the end. In all likelihood, the supper cannot become the focus of every service that includes it, especially if we begin observing it more often. But since the supper has many dimensions, we can briefly connect various features of any service with it. Even if a service's major theme lies elsewhere, we can design the whole to point in some way toward, and anticipate, this special kind of communion with our Lord and each other.

Third, in the theology I am sketching, Spirit is normally conveyed through matter and transforms it. This means that many more colors, shapes, sounds, movements, gestures, and objects than Mennonites have usually included can find a place in worship. While simplicity is a biblical value, plainness is not. (Mennonite worship in general stems chiefly from Swiss influence, which was quite plain.) Our world with all its beautiful, colorful variety was created to be the theater of God's glory. Though physical beauty can turn us from God, it was designed, and we can redesign it, to lead us back to God. The supper, as here sketched, promotes tasteful aesthetic worship.

This implies that the Anabaptists' conceptual barrier between spirit and matter conflicted with their experience and practice. Arnold Snyder argues that all Anabaptists insisted, in one way or another, that inner, spiritual reality must be expressed through outer, physical objects and actions—though they often elevated one over the other in theory and practice. I concur, and regard their intent to balance these as basic to Anabaptism, and to truly Anabaptist celebration of and reflection on the Lord's Supper.[17]

Fourth, Christ's communal presence suggests active congregational participation. In fact, since Christ is present in the way the elements *function*, "this" in "this is my body" probably indicates *sharing* the bread more than it indicates the bread itself.[18] Such active, corporate participation seems inconsistent with communicants simply receiving the elements from some presider(s). It seems more appropriate to pass and receive at least one element among themselves. "Laity" can, and perhaps should, participate in presiding functions, but only with careful preparation, consistent with the ceremony's dignity.

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Sharing the elements should be complemented by sharing mutual commitments, concerns, and Christ's peace. If some of these occur elsewhere in the service, they should be explicitly linked to the supper. However, despite this strong "horizontal" dimension, the supper's main agent is not the congregation (contra Hubmaier) but the risen Jesus. However meaningfully communicants interact with each other, the service should stress that all flows ultimately from him.

Fifth, though I am stressing Christ's presence, it should never be disconnected from remembering his cross. We do encounter the risen Jesus, but not as one distant from struggle and suffering, and we participate in the continuing reality of his crucifixion.

Further, as narrative theology shows, remembrance of a crucial event often brings the overarching story to mind. The cross, that is, can recall Jesus' life and teachings, and what brought about his death. We can visualize Jesus as a victim of the military government and religious establishment, as one who threatened

them by giving the downtrodden hope. Though such a remembrance resonates with Anabaptism, I have not found this articulated by Mennonites but by Catholics.[19]

While not all suppers will give priority to this concrete historical dimension, I advocate always repeating—not loosely paraphrasing—the words of institution, to establish significant connection with that history. And even if bread and wine have little significance in our culture, using them (and not, say, donuts and coffee) will remind us of the very different historical setting where our celebration originated.

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Finally, should we announce: "This *is* Christ's body and blood"? If many communicants would understand this in a crude, literal, or quasi-magical sense, I would not. However, to say that the elements symbolize or remember Jesus or his cross often distances him from us. To be sure, Jesus was and is distinct from his community, both historically and at the Father's "right hand," as all Anabaptists affirmed. Even if the community is an extension of his humanity, he cannot simply be equated with it (nor did Marpeck do so).

Nonetheless, for those who often assume, even if subconsciously, that Jesus is distant, "This *is*" can be an invitation to expect him to be present, more fully, specifically, and joyously than they might begin to imagine. "This *is*" can invite people to open themselves fully to the Christ who wants to be more and more present in our lives, to transform us—individually and corporately—more and more. Yet "This is" should lead communicants simply to be open, not to expect some particular experience. For Christ comes in many ways. Yet we can be prepared to hope, to expect, to long to meet God in a ceremony that we already practice.

Notes

[1] John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 33 (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1993).

[2] See, for example, C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener: Pandora Pr., 1995), 85–6; but note that Snyder does add the communal dimension (see p. 374). Despite my disagreement on this point, I largely concur with and greatly value Snyder's work.
[3] While virtually all Anabaptists agreed that Christ's body is in heaven, Hubmaier, following Zwingli, most sharply contrasted this with his being in the Eucharist. For many other Anabaptists, the two were not wholly opposed. For Hubmaier, God's Spirit could be in the supper, and since Christ's deity is omnipresent, it also could be in the supper, though Hubmaier scarcely mentioned this. While he found the risen Christ active in the preached Word, he otherwise stressed that Christ would remain in heaven until his Parousia.
[4] "The Ordinance of God," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers,* ed. George Hunston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster Pr., 1957), 193–4. I cannot substantiate here the pervasiveness of the theme of Christ's presence in Dutch and South German/Austrian Anabaptism, but am doing so in my *A Contemporary Theology in Anabaptist Perspective* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Pr., forthcoming).
[5] "A Form for Christ's Supper" (1527) in *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 5, trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottdale and Kitchener: Herald Pr., 1989). See Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 48–9, 64–5.
[6] Johann Loserth, ed., *Pilgram Marbecks Antwort auf Kaspar Schwenckfelds Beurteilung des Buches der Bundesbezeugung von 1542* (Vienna: Carl Fromm, 1929), 137, cf. 453–6, 465. Cf. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, trans. and ed., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck,* Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 2 (Kitchener and Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1978), 170–1, 269, 277, 283.
[7] Klassen and Klaassen, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck,* 175–6, 184. Marpeck's Trinitarian expressions were not always consistent. For example, the Father working inwardly as Spirit and outwardly as Son (195–7) could be construed as modalism (cf. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism,* 158–61). Yet Marpeck intended to express an orthodox view of the Trinity, despite his variations (cf. Finger, *A Contemporary Theology in Anabaptist Perspective*, chap. 7).
[8] Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism,* 120–8, 135–8, 150–2.
[9] Klassen and Klaassen, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck,* 195, cf. 196, 197; Loserth, *Pilgram Marbecks Antwort,* 114, 121, 124, 127, 456, 458.
[10] In liturgy, "full and active participation by all the people is the primary aim to be considered before all else" (Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* [New York: Guild Pr., 1966], 144). Some Catholic theologians, not unlike Hubmaier, take this to mean that "any liturgical celebration is in its total thrust horizontal" (Tad W. Guzie, *Jesus and the Eucharist* [New York: Paulist Pr., 1974], 155). "The church assembled to celebrate *is* Christ. The real mystery is that we ourselves are sacred" (Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics* [New York: Paulist Pr., 1981], 62). Officially, however, the priesthoods of the laity and of the priests still "differ…in essence and not only in degree" (Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II,* 27).
[11] Joseph M. Powers, *Eucharistic Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 96–9.
[12] Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics,* 31(Guzie's italics).
[13] Ibid., 34 (Guzie's italics).
[14] Ibid., 35.
[15] Powers, *Eucharistic Theology,* 166–7; cf. Hoffman: "a perky little bride, when she receives her engagement ring from her bridegroom, could speak to her childhood playmates and friends, showing it to them: Look here, I have my bridegroom Jack,

Nick, or Peter. Now those who hear such words and see the ring understand very well how the bride intends this kind of language, namely, that she does not mean that the ring is physically the bridegroom himself or that the bridegroom is physically contained in the ring but that she has with all her heart, spirit, and emotion received a bridegroom by virtue of his will, word, spirit, and intention" ("The Ordinance of God," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. Williams and Mergal, 194–5).

[16] John Howard Yoder, who brilliantly discerned ethical implications almost everywhere, would apparently have disagreed. He claimed that Jesus, at the Last Supper, did not even introduce a ceremony, but simply made his followers' "*ordinary* partaking together of food" his memorial (*Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* [Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992], 16).

[17] Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 134–8, 317–8, 346–7, 361–3, 372. Rempel, who stresses the "ontological barrier" in Anabaptist thinking, does not really disagree with Snyder, for Rempel often notes the inconsistency between this and more holistic Anabaptist intuitions.

[18] See Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 2 (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1989), 339–42. Guzie concurs (*The Book of Sacramental Basics*, 34). See also Vernard Eller, *In Place of Sacraments: A Study of Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 87–90, 106–9 (though I cannot concur with Eller's pejorative definition of sacraments).

[19] David Noel Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), 304–16; Bernard J. Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, Conn: 23rd Pubns., 1983), 168–212; and Bernard J. Cooke, *The Future of the Eucharist: How a New Self-Awareness among Catholics Is Changing the Way They Believe and Worship* (New York: Paulist Pr., 1997), 26.

In search of something more
A sacramental approach to life and worship

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In our congregation, people are confused, ambivalent, and even angry about communion and baptism. Many remember their baptism, if they remember it at all, as traumatic or as a matter of some grievance. Several years ago when seven dedicated youth were baptized, some prominent members responded with apathy to this important moment in our church life. Some young adults do not want to be baptized but dearly want to participate in communion and keenly resent their "exclusion."

Our congregation's experience represents a wider Mennonite ambivalence. Sixteenth-century Anabaptist suspicion about sacraments now blends with a modern rationalist mentality: "Under the influence of a scientific worldview in the nineteenth century, the Lord's Supper came more and more to be seen as a rational act of human memory, almost a 'real absence' of Christ."[1] Many Mennonite churches practice communion infrequently; this echo of pre-Reformation understandings of exclusionary holiness is a point of frustration for some communicants. Another source of ambivalence about communion is its connection in Mennonite history with enforcing discipline and conformity.[2] Some older members still expect me to deny communion to parishioners they deem unworthy. Yet another factor may be a Mennonite tendency to over-emphasize communion as a memorial of Jesus' suffering and death. Mary Oyer says that in her childhood, communion "always seemed like a funeral."[3] Little surprise that people are not eager to celebrate it often! Our ambivalence about baptism is evident

Even as we disdain symbols, they bombard us. Advertising's ubiquitous images seduce us. We allow the media's symbols to convert and convince us but hesitate to use symbols to deepen our faith.

in these extremes: some of us press youths to be baptized by a certain age (in effect, postponing infant baptism by a few years), while others de-emphasize baptism and fail to encourage people to choose it.

When John Rempel began his landmark study of the supper, he made a startling discovery: Anabaptists had written little on the subject.[4] What does this paucity show? Is communion not important enough to merit serious sustained reflection? The practice of communion predates the New Testament: "It…trained and sanctified apostles and martyrs and scores of thousands of unknown saints for more than a century before the New Testament was collected and canonized as authoritative 'scripture.'"[5] Scriptures were interpreted through the supper.[6] The Scriptures in turn reinforce the significance of the supper as "a central act of worship."[7]

Signs or symbols?

Our language is impoverished. We often speak of baptism and communion as "ordinances," i.e., commands. This can move us toward empty legalism (as distinct from "empty rituals," for which we criticize others). If we are not sure what—if anything—happens when we observe ordinances, the only reason to do so is that Jesus commanded it. In our day, when suspicion of authority is almost automatic, ordinances have as much chance of being taken seriously as do parents when they rebuke a child with "Just because I say so."

Such is the power of gesture and action. No matter how good our sound system, words do not speak loudly enough.

The new Mennonite confession of faith uses the richer language of "signs." Sign language has biblical roots but is not strong enough. It tempts one to think that signs are merely representational and do not accomplish anything. Yet the confession says, "As Christians eat the bread and drink the cup, they experience Christ's presence in their midst. The Lord's Supper both represents Christ and is a way in which Christ is present again ('re-present') in the body of believers."[8]

Signs have a clear one-to-one meaning; they do not participate in the reality they portray but point to it. A stop sign is a clear signal, internationally understood, that drivers should stop. It is

not the act of stopping. Symbols, in contrast, have multiple meanings and are part of what they represent. Baptismal water means many things (cleansing, birth, death and resurrection) and is intrinsic to the act. One cannot have a baptism without water. "Signs" is too limited a term for our central rites. "Symbols" is more suggestive of their full, complex reality.

I presided at the funeral of a senior. His elderly sister-in-law wanted to comfort the widow, but words, by telephone or letter, were not enough. She made the trip from Texas, citing the cliché, "Actions speak louder than words." And she was right. The moment she arrived at the funeral home, the nearly catatonic widow began to speak! Such is the power of gesture and action. The same applies to worship: no matter how good our sound system, words do not speak loudly enough.

> *[Those who downplay symbol] should also avoid poetry, concerts and the theater, language, loving another person, and most…attempts at communicating with one's kind. Symbol is reality at its most intense degree of being expressed. One resorts to symbol when reality swamps all other forms of discourse. This happens regularly when one approaches God with others, as in…liturgy. Symbol is…as native to liturgy as metaphor is to language. One learns to live with symbol and metaphor or gives up the ability to speak or to worship communally.*[9]

Relationships often have much to do with how they symbolize other relationships; thus the intensity of projection, transference, and counter-transference. There is more to reality than what we experience on the surface. Those who devalue symbols may stress words, but even words themselves are "merely" symbols.

Even as we disdain symbols, they bombard us. Advertising's ubiquitous images seduce us. An Orthodox Christian notes: "In a world replete with the images that shower down upon us from billboards, pour from the television screen, adorn our cities and public parks, and inhabit our entire interior landscape, the religious image has little power of itself to claim its own dominion over the imagination."[10] We allow the media's symbols to convert and convince us but hesitate to use symbols to deepen our faith.

Margaret Loewen Reimer calls for a more sacramental approach to life and worship, reminding us that there is "something more."[11] A good word for "something more" is "sacrament," which Church Fathers used as a substitute for the New Testament *mysterion,* "mystery." "Mystery" means there is more meaning than we can comprehend. This is an affront to the modern mentality of control: "Mysteries never yield to solutions or fixes—and when we pretend that they do, life not only becomes more banal but more hopeless, because the fixes never work."[12]

May we have sacraments?

Mennonite suspicion of sacraments goes back to the sixteenth century. Baptism and communion were seen as automatic, mechanistic, even magical transmitters of God's grace and salvation regardless of the heart of the worshiper.[13] Anabaptists were concerned that God's sovereignty be honored: God cannot be manipulated.

Does anything happen in baptism or communion? Our confession certainly says so. And Rempel describes baptism as "an outward, visible sign of an inner, spiritual transformation made possible through the resurrected Christ."[14] This resembles Augustine's definition of sacrament: "visible form of an invisible grace." Anabaptists can recognize that actual "transformation… occurs in communion [but it] is that of people and not objects."[15] Communion "is not a sacred object in which Christ is contained; it is a sacred *event*."[16] It is not "mere memorial." Something actually happens. "When the church gathers in faith and love, open to the power of the Spirit, Christ is made present in the sharing of bread and wine."[17] We can add the testimony of pastoral experience. This is more than just rote rite. Transformations occur. I observe it in virtually every baptism or communion: people are affected. The Spirit's presence and movement are often palpable.

Our approach contains mixed messages. We give more performative power to wedding rites than to communion or baptism. We believe that when we perform a wedding, the couple has actually been married, whether or not their hearts were in the ceremony, whether or not they fully understood or meant their

vows. John Rempel remembers that his preparation for baptism put emphasis on what baptism and communion were not, yet at his baptism he remembers thinking, *"There is more going on here than they told us, more than what I have words for."* He observes, "Many Mennonites are taught early on that they better be serious about these ordinances or not participate in them."[18] If they are "mere" symbols, rituals, or ordinances, why do we fuss about who participates? Why their potent connection to church discipline and ethics?

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There are other traces of "more going on here." Infrequent communion goes back to pre-Reformation abstinence, from a context in which the Eucharist was seen as so holy that lay people rarely received it.[19] Some Russian Mennonites hold the bread in white handkerchiefs, not touching it with bare hands. This may also go back to pre-Reformation Catholicism, when "the actual presence of Christ in the bread and wine was a basic belief."[20] "Something more" is seen among the Swiss Mennonites who only observed it if a bishop presided, and the service was preceded by a service of inquiry, confession, and preparation. "Something more" is reflected in our tables designated for communion and given a prominent position, and in special dishes set aside for communion and baptism and displayed in places of honor. While we do not tolerate vestments on clergy (only on the choir!), most would be offended if a minister served communion or celebrated a baptism in shorts and tee shirt.

Early Anabaptists and sacraments

Early Anabaptists reacted against rites that set apart some people and things: sanctified bread and a special cup, offered by sacred persons in sanctuaries.[21] They opposed a privileged and exclusive "fencing in" and limiting of things sacred. They argued for using regular bread and ordinary cups, celebrating the supper in homes, with plain dress for those serving. They pushed for a deeper sacramental sense of all of creation. They reminded people to look for God in the ordinary.

A modern Roman Catholic criticizes his own tradition: "It is ironic that the so-called 'high churches'…are thought to have a strong sense of 'the sacred' as it is encountered in ritual and symbol…because…the true nature of the liturgy does not lie in its being a 'sacred act of worship' radically distinct from our ordinary human activities. Rather, in the liturgy we recall the entrance of God in history. God incarnate abides with us in the most insignificant and mundane, even homely, circumstances. In Jesus Christ God embraced all of creation as a suitable abode for the divine."[22]

This taps into sacramental awareness about daily life that can be found throughout church history. St. Benedict in the sixth century commanded that monks "regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar."[23] According to the seventeenth-century Carmelite Brother Lawrence, "The time of business…does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."[24] Anglican priest and mystical poet George Herbert (1593–1633) wrote:

> *Teach me, my God and King,*
> *In all things thee to see*
> *And what I do in anything*
> *To do it as to thee.*[25]

Liturgy is a place for the "transformation of all profane existence into the dwelling place of God."[26] It calls us to see the world differently and to transform it, as suggested by John Howard Yoder in "Sacrament As Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture."[27] Sacraments help us find the sacred in all of life or recognize where it is denied or demeaned: "Our engagement with the liturgical symbols and rituals, themselves drawn from daily life, break[s] open our daily lives and reveal[s] both the hidden possibilities for communion that can be found there and the obstacles that impede the life of communion."[28] Sacrament restores "the creation to its proper use in the service of God by offering it to God in a sacrifice of love and praise."[29]

Unfortunately, earlier Anabaptist reaction against misdirected sacramental approaches now plays into a secular misconception that nothing is sacred, which was not a danger in the Reformation. The Anabaptist point was not that nothing is sacred but that Catholic sacramentalism was too narrow. Anabaptists pushed for expansion: all words, objects, places, people, and days are called to reflect God's purposes and to be sacred. Thus to say Balthasar Hubmaier "was not a sacramentalist may be downright misleading—we might better say he rejected the current prevailing *theory* of the sacraments."[30] Similarly, Mennonites today can claim to be sacramental without embracing all theories of the sacraments.

The Anabaptist point was not that nothing is sacred but that Catholic sacramentalism was too narrow: all words, objects, places, people, and days are called to reflect God's purposes.

Early Anabaptists were not afraid of the idea of sacraments. "Unlike Zwingli, they did not refer to water, bread, and wine as 'mere' symbols; they called them signs or even…sacraments."[31] Menno Simons used the language of sacrament as well as institution, sign, ordinance, command, emblem.[32] He had a high view of the supper: "Oh, delightful assembly and Christian marriage feast…where the hungry consciences are fed with the heavenly bread of the divine Word, with the wine of the Holy Ghost, and where the peaceful, joyous souls sing and play before the Lord."[33] Dutch Anabaptists saw the supper as more than a remembrance: "In order to grow, this new creature [in Christ]…was nourished in the Supper, where Christ was really present when the faithful were gathered in unity and love, and where He was spiritually eaten by the believer as he received the material bread and wine."[34]

Neither Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, nor Dirk Philips viewed baptism or the supper as merely a "rational act of remembrance and humanly willed remaking of covenant."[35] Marpeck was concerned about the spiritualist dismissal of ceremonies and argued that ceremonies "are powerful and efficacious *vehicles* which lead others to the divine reality, and which lead believers to deeper lives of love, yieldedness, and obedience."[36] He believed that the "Great Physician's medicine" comes in "outward worship, in ceremonies and ordinances."[37] He "moved the Anabaptist discussion back again towards the

Catholic sacramental insight: the physical ordinances and ceremonies commanded by Christ and celebrated by Christians in communal worship are necessary means of grace, physical windows and doors that participate in and open the way to the divine, and without which the way to the divine will not be known."[38]

"According to Marpeck, God uses matter to communicate spirit. It is not the objects (bread and wine) that become Christ but the event that connects us with Christ. The symbol is not merely a symbol; it participates in the reality it symbolizes."[39]

Covenants are not one-way. Biblical covenants begin with God's gift, grace, and initiative. Our pledges are responses. Emphasizing *believers* baptism, we can easily overlook God's initiative. Like covenants, sacraments involve God's actions, which come first, and ours.

Mennonite use of sacramental language did not disappear overnight. In the nineteenth century, North American Mennonites of Swiss background had two kinds of worship services, "preaching services" and "sacramental meetings."[40]

Anabaptists were appropriately concerned about over-inflated views of the mechanical efficacy of sacraments. In reaction, some radically devalued sacraments and argued that the outward and visible forms had virtually no worth. Some even abandoned baptism and communion. Rejection of sacraments may derive "from incipient Gnosticism" or be "based upon an absolute separation between matter and spirit after the manner of Origen. The first is a denial of the goodness of creation. The second is in a sense a denial of the possibility of the Incarnation, that is, of the material being a vehicle for the communication of the spiritual."[41]

We need no longer react against the sixteenth-century misunderstandings. We may explore and articulate an Anabaptist approach, without falling into either the mechanistic/magical or the disconnected, disincarnate, spiritualistic extreme of the past.

To recover the early Anabaptist sense of universal sacredness, Mennonites must become more sacramental. When we call church buildings "meetinghouses," we can interpret the term functionally: a meetinghouse is a place where people gather. But

we can also understand it sacramentally, as in the Original Testament the "tent of meeting" was a place to meet God. Similarly when we name churches after streets or cities, we may be acting prosaically, or we may also be expressing a claim that God is at work in this very location. An Anabaptist sacramental approach could insist that "everyday experiences of life have been windows that shed light on the presence of God in us and in our world."[42]

Mennonites are growing more sacramental. Marlene Kropf argues that communion can be a place where we experience healing.[43] She notes that Mennonites are celebrating communion more often, and attributes this both to an increased interest in ritual and to our awareness that the early church and many early Anabaptists celebrated communion frequently.[44]

Toward a Mennonite theology of sacraments

In its origins, "sacrament" derives from Roman practices of swearing oaths or pledges of loyalty or commitment, often in the military. Tertullian saw sacraments as two-way: "From God's side, the sacraments are the pledges of God, who wills salvation; from the faithful's side, sacraments are the occasion for the complete response of confidence and commitment to God in Christ."[45]

Anabaptist Reformers followed this usage. Hubmaier wrote that a sacrament is "a commitment by oath and a pledge…which the one baptized makes to Christ, our invincible Prince and Head, that he is willing to fight bravely unto the death in Christian faith under his flag and banner."[46] Marpeck also used the term in this way.[47]

A sacrament commits our allegiance to God's reign and God's means, not the world's. Because sacraments involve commitment they must be entered into freely and with conviction and are not extended automatically to all (e.g., to children and others who have not yet publicly made a faith commitment). To be baptized is to join God's reign. Communion renews kingdom loyalties first expressed in baptism. Both celebrate God's rule and our commitment to it and strengthen us to live into God's future. "A valid sacrament…always leaves the situation different from what it was before. By means of the natural needs and actions of [people], it effects a communication of the Wholly Other…; and

it is a fundamental part of worship, because it is an acknowledgment of the presence and priority of the divine, and is directed towards the sanctification of life."[48]

Sacraments are intended for sanctification. Sacrament is "like any other coinage, it may and often does become debased: yet still it is representative of the spiritual gold."[49] Sacraments should change and challenge us. "Fruitful sacraments always have one practical and visible result: people's lives are profoundly changed because God's purposes for life and time are gradually being appropriated."[50] Hence the saying: "The water of baptism is not embalming fluid."

In Jewish worship, one remembers by reliving the past and bringing it into the present. Sacraments re-enact and re-present salvation history, making it real in the believer's life. They commit us to God's future and draw us into deeper commitment and involvement.

Many Mennonites say "little…about God's action in the event: Jesus in his earthly ministry is invoked…but nothing is said of his presence."[51] We emphasize our side of the pledge, but fail to recognize God's. Yet pledges and oaths are two-way. Communion and baptism parallel covenanting.[52] Covenants are not one-way. Biblical covenants begin with God's gift, grace, and initiative. Our pledges are responses. Emphasizing *believers* baptism, we can easily overlook God's initiative. Like covenants, sacraments involve God's actions, which come first, and ours. A Christian sacrament is "an action of God together with the people of God, ritually performed to celebrate freedom and to hasten the liberation of the whole world."[53]

Summarizing Gordon Kaufman, Bernhard Lang suggests that the "the sacramental act has the same advantage a kiss has over a mere word of love; the advantage of touch, immediacy, and completeness."[54] Lang uses the term "transignification" rather than "transubstantiation"[55] to stress Christ's presence in the event, rather than emphasizing the elements. He gives an analogy:

> *Imagine being welcomed by a housewife who offers you a cup of tea and a biscuit. The tea…is nothing but tea and the biscuit does not change on being offered to you. Yet, they are different, redefined by the situation. Given the situation, they incarnate the woman's welcome. If we*

> *take a closer look, gifts serve as means of communication, and what is communicated is nothing else than the very person. The welcoming woman communicates as it were herself; she embodies herself in the tea offered. The gifts serve as an extension of herself. The woman might…have expressed her welcome in words only, but she feels that things cannot stop there.*[56]

Receiving a meal from someone is different from purchasing a meal in a restaurant; gifts "are an extension of the giver, even of a physically absent giver."[57] Such approaches can help us move toward sacramental theology.

The sacrament of remembering

Sacraments emphasize remembering. In the supper, we quote Jesus: "Do this in remembrance of me," "Do this as a reminder of me." Mennonites work the memorial aspect of the supper hard, focusing on Jesus' death. One effect, as noted above, is that we observe it infrequently. Second, we tend to think that it has little importance, that nothing happens. But remembering can be transformative. It re-presents events, and we re-live them; remembering does affect us. That is why we mark anniversaries, and why one spouse gets upset when the other forgets. For the same reason, we celebrate birthdays.

Even rote remembering can touch, transform, and heal. I know many people who felt unable to pray in crises but were able to do so, and to experience comfort and healing, through repeating prayers memorized in church. Remembrance is powerful.

Remembering has active implications. When our country memorializes war on Remembrance Day, Mennonites say: "To remember is to work for peace." There are different ways of remembering. Remembrance that does not change us and our relationship to the world is inadequate. The real thing affects how we live.

When I attend or perform a wedding, I recall, relive, and re-witness my own wedding. As I witness the marriage of others, I examine my commitments and my fidelity. In a wedding, I often hear God's call to me to be more deeply attentive and faithful to my marriage and family. Remembering works deeply within us.

Remembering is important to Christians who value God's work in history. We do not remember simply because we enjoy stories or genealogies. Rather "remembering is constitutive of faith itself and not a mere elaboration of beliefs already held."[58] Remembering creates faith. Abraham Joshua Heschel noted: "Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word: Remember."[59] In Jewish worship, one remembers by reliving the past and bringing it into the present. Sacraments re-enact and re-present salvation history, making it real in the believer's life. They commit us to God's future and draw us into deeper commitment and involvement.

Remembering can connect us to people. "When you remember me, it means that you have carried something of who I am with you, that I have left some mark of who I am on who you are. It means that you can summon me back to your mind although countless years and miles may stand between us. It means that if we meet again, you will know me. It means that even after I die, you can still see my face and hear my voice and speak to me in your heart."[60] When we remember Jesus and act in remembrance of him, we carry him with us, are marked by him and changed by him.

Strengthening sacramental senses

Careful teaching, preaching, education, and preparation can expand vocabulary and terminology. The language of ordinances and signs has merit. More unfamiliar terms, "sacrament" and "eucharist," also have merit. But more important than using these words is celebrating in sacramental ways.

Some suggestions:

First, celebrate with care and attention. Do not race through or perform perfunctorily. At a Mennonite conference with thousands of delegates, I saw communion celebrated in ten minutes. Sacramental fast food, MacCommunion, detracts from sacramental appreciation.

Second, celebrate communion more often, as our confession of faith urges. I have never encountered anyone who moved to more frequent communion who then found it less meaningful. One person rebuts the fear that "familiarity breeds contempt" with this tongue-in-cheek analogy: "Don't make love to your spouse too

often, he cautions, or it won't be 'special' anymore. Four times a year, tops."[61]

Third, expand the ceremonies. Use preparation or inquiry services in connection with communion, or have regular anointings. We have several stages in our congregation, as people prepare for baptism. Early on, we introduce candidates and bless them, and the congregation promises to pray for them. Later, candidates and sponsors share testimonies. Because of this preparation, when the baptism happens, its meaning is deepened.

One caution is in order. Rituals are deepened by repetition. Beware of too much creativity.

Fourth, put more emphasis on baptism by recalling anniversaries. Our church publishes a monthly calendar with birthdays, but we should celebrate baptismal anniversaries. Truth to tell, many of us do not remember the date of our baptism. *The Mennonite* publishes births, deaths, marriages, and minister and service worker transitions, but it does not list baptisms. This seems bizarre for Anabaptists.

Fifth, expand supper themes. New Testament terminology has four aspects: resurrection, death memorial, community celebration *(koinonia)*, and thanksgiving *(eucharist)*.[62] Eleanor Kreider adds a fifth, "reconciling and making peace," and makes connections with the kiss of peace.[63] Other associated biblical themes include manna from heaven, inclusiveness, Beatitudes (Luke 6:21, Matt. 5:6), Jesus at table, the Lord's Prayer,[64] Passover, and messianic banquet.[65] Kreider discusses themes for church life (forgiving and restoring, healing, Christ's sacrifice and ours, making covenant, discipline, Christ's offering and ours) as well as mission themes (Christ the conqueror, following Jesus, serving one another and the world, making justice).[66]

One caution is in order. Rituals are deepened by repetition. Beware of too much creativity. "The congregation's attention is focused on the novelty, and the congregation might seem satisfied for a time, but the new quickly grows old, the entertainment subsides, and the central point is missed."[67] An elementary rule of liturgy is this:

> *Repetition and rhythm in the liturgy are to be fostered. No rule is more frequently violated by the highly educated*

> *and well-meaning, who seem to think that never having to repeat anything is a mark of effective communication. Yet rhythm, which organizes repetition, makes things memorable, as in music, poetry, rhetoric, architecture, and the plastic arts no less than in liturgical worship. Rhythm constantly insinuates, as propagandists know. It constantly reasserts, as good teachers know. It constantly forms individuals into units, as demagogues and cheerleaders know. It both shrouds and bares meaning which escapes mere words, as poets know. It fuses people to their values as Cato, Churchill, and Martin Luther King knew. It frees from sound and offers vision for those who yearn for it, as the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount knew. Liturgical ministers who are irreparably arrhythmic should be restrained from ministering in the liturgy.*[68]

Our observance of sacraments need not—should not—accentuate creativity and innovation.

Conclusion

"Sacramental Mennonite" is not an oxymoron. We need a more sacramental approach. Some Anabaptist writings display antipathy to sacraments but some also reveal important sacramental themes. All that remains is for sacramentally-inclined leaders to work with patience, love, and conviction. Perhaps we can overcome the anger and ambivalence. Joy and renewal might be the fruit.

Notes

[1] John D. Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Newton and Winnipeg: Faith & Life Pr.; Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1998), 61–2.
[2] Alvin J. Beachy, *Worship As Celebration of Covenant and Incarnation* (Newton: Faith & Life Pr., 1968), 44.
[3] Quoted in Gordon Houser, "Conversations around the Lord's Table," *The Mennonite* (February 28, 1995): 4.
[4] John D. Rempel, "Toward an Anabaptist Theology of the Lord's Supper," in *The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives*, ed. Dale R. Stoffer (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997), 243–4.
[5] Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Seabury Pr., 1982), 3.
[6] Don E. Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (Akron, Ohio: Order of St. Luke Pubns., 1996), 61.
[7] Walter Klaassen, *Biblical and Theological Bases for Worship in the Believers' Church*

(Newton: Faith & Life Pr., 1978), 9.
[8] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1995), 50–3.
[9] Aidan Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co., 1982), 103.
[10] Anthony Ugolnik, *The Illuminating Icon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 57.
[11] Margaret Loewen Reimer, *Mennonites and the Artistic Imagination* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1998), 48–9.
[12] Parker J. Palmer, "All the Way Down: Depression and the Spiritual Journey," *Weavings* 13, no. 5 (September-October 1998): 33.
[13] John D. Rempel, "Ordinances," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1990), 5:658. Rempel notes that Mennonites have sometimes practiced "mechanical sacramentalism," e.g., baptizing automatically, "to bring people into the church without a response of personal faith" (ibid., 660).
[14] Rempel, *Minister's Manual*, 39. This is quickly qualified with the note: "Baptism is not itself a salvific act, but witnesses to the saving activity of God in the believer."
[15] Ibid., 60.
[16] Ibid., 62. Italics added.
[17] Ibid.
[18] John Rempel, "Mennonite Churches," in *The Sacred Actions of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pubs., Inc., 1993), 6:32.
[19] At the post-Reformation Council of Trent, Catholics mandated that the faithful take communion at least once a year, on Easter. Frequent communion is not "Catholic." Catholics only began receiving communion weekly in the last century. According to John D. Rempel's article on communion in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 5:171, "By the 17th c. it had become usual for Mennonites in northern Europe to celebrate communion twice a year while Mennonites in south Germany and Switzerland celebrated it once a year (Mast, *Letters*, 69). There is no extant rationale for the establishment of this practice. The following is an interpretive hypothesis: added to the undercurrent of fear of unworthy communion and obligatory confession beforehand, common through much of Christian history, was the Mennonite stipulation that believers had to be reconciled not only to God but to fellow Christians before they could commune. As communion for Anabaptists was a celebration of the church as the body of Christ, it could be observed only when the whole community was together and of one mind. As persecuted believers went into hiding and differing factions solidified, there could hardly be communion."
[20] Cornelius Krahn, "Communion," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1955), 1:653.
[21] Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad Pr., 1973), 13.
[22] Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community, and Liturgy in a Technological Culture* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000), 111.
[23] Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980:The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes and Thematic Index* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1981), 229.
[24] Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God: Being Conversations and Letters of Nicholas Herman of Lorraine, Brother Lawrence* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1958), 29.
[25] John N. Wall, Jr., introduction to *The Country Parson; The Temple*, by George Herbert (New York: Paulist Pr., 1981), xv.
[26] Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days*, 113.
[27] In *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G.

Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 359–73.
[28] Gaillardetz, *Transforming Our Days*, 120.
[29] Frank C. Senn, *New Creation: A Liturgical World View* (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 2000), 64.
[30] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., "Balthasar Hubmaier, Catholic Anabaptist," in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 73.
[31] Klaassen, *Biblical and Theological Bases for Worship*, 12.
[32] Leonard Verduin, trans., and J. C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1956), 513–6.
[33] Ibid., 148.
[34] Beachy, *Worship As Celebration*, 47.
[35] John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 33 (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1993), 201.
[36] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener: Pandora Pr., 1995), 395.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 361.
[39] Gordon Houser, "Conversations around the Lord's Table," *The Mennonite* (February 28, 1995): 6.
[40] Urie A. Bender, *Four Earthen Vessels: Biographical Profiles of Oscar Burkholder, Samuel F. Coffman, Clayton F. Derstine, and Jesse B. Martin* (Kitchener and Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1982), 114.
[41] Beachy, *Worship As Celebration*, 46.
[42] Dwight W. Vogel and Linda J. Vogel, "Sacramental Living: A Distinctive Spirituality," *Liturgical Ministry* 9 (fall 2000): 219.
[43] Marlene Kropf, "There Is a Balm in Gilead: Communion As a Place for Healing," *The Mennonite* (February 28, 1995): 12.
[44] Marlene Kropf, "Come to the Lord's Table," *The Mennonite* (March 24, 1998): 10.
[45] Theresa F. Koernke, "Sacred Actions in the Early Church," in *Sacred Actions*, 6:82.
[46] H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, trans. and ed., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottdale and Kitchener: Herald Pr., 1989), 391.
[47] Rempel, "Ordinances," 658.
[48] Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), 43.
[49] Underhill, *Worship*, 44.
[50] Regis A. Duffy, *An American Emmaus: Faith and Sacrament in the American Culture* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), 105.
[51] John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 225.
[52] Millard Lind, *Biblical Foundations for Christian Worship* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1973), 52.
[53] Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites That Transform Our Lives and Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 207.
[54] Bernhard Lang, *Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1997), 354–5.
[55] Ibid., 329–30.
[56] Ibid., 329.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Saliers, *Worship and Spirituality*, 8.
[59] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York:

Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951), 162.
[60] Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Anthologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 100.
[61] Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Pr., 1987), 39.
[62] Robert Webber, *Worship Is a Verb: Eight Principles for a Highly Participatory Worship* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Pubs., Inc., 1992), 76ff. See also Marlin Jeschke, "Making the Lord's Supper Meaningful," in *The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives,* ed. Dale R. Stoffer (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997), 140–53.
[63] Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997), chapter 8.
[64] Ibid., 144–7.
[65] In Houser, "Conversations around the Lord's Table," 4. The article goes on to describe sample services with each theme. See also Kropf, "Come to the Lord's Table."
[66] Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character,* chapters 10 and 11.
[67] Bob Creslak, "An Introduction to Ritual in Worship," in *Sacred Actions*, 6:66.
[68] Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite,* 28.

A vision of global communion

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During the closing communion service of India 1997, the thirteenth world assembly of Mennonite World Conference, Jonathan Larson sat near the back of the worship *shamiana*, deeply moved by what he saw. Directly in front of him sat two young women, one from Zambia and the other possibly from Taiwan. The two had obviously found a deep friendship during their days together in Calcutta. As the service proceeded, as the bread and wine were passed, Jonathan noticed the Zambian woman begin to weep openly. Tears trickled down her face, perhaps from sadness that the week together would soon end. Then he realized that the young Taiwanese woman was also weeping. Both partook of the elements, then turned to one other and tearfully embraced in a wonderful expression of the communion that the Lord's table represents. This moment left the strongest impression that Jonathan took home from Calcutta: the bonds of *koinonia* now make the Zambians kin to the Taiwanese. And Argentineans are now kin to Russians. And Koreans are now kin of Guatemalan Mayans. Communion is a thing of exquisite beauty indeed!

Mennonite World Conference member churches experience equality and feel like this body belongs to them. In it they feel neither superior nor inferior. It is a space where Anabaptist-Mennonite family members from all over the world feel at home.

More than a conference

For more than 28 years, since I first attended a Mennonite World Conference assembly (as an AMBS student), I have been observing the worldwide family of faith with great interest. And I have come to believe that MWC is the only truly global Anabaptist-Mennonite church body. In this body, the member churches experience equality and feel like they own the

organization. This body belongs to them. In it they feel neither superior nor inferior. It is a space where Anabaptist-Mennonite family members from all over the world feel at home. They have the freedom to express their feelings and beliefs with dignity. The only problem is that many people still believe that the primary task of MWC is to prepare the next general assembly.

As the unique international church body of the global faith family, Mennonite World Conference should not only be an organization that provides for a carefully planned conference every six years. The expectations of the churches in the global South are not the same as they were—and perhaps still are—for many churches in the North. I have a vision for more than a conference. And I can best introduce this vision through two examples, one from southern Africa and the other from Indonesia.

The first is a story about the practice of sharing among the SAN (Bushmen) people of the Kalahari. An anthropologist who visited the SAN forty or fifty years ago recorded an interesting phenomenon after the men had killed a giraffe. There was, of course, a highly developed protocol establishing which hunter had priority when the meat was divided. But what interested the anthropologist most was the pattern of intense giving and receiving when the meat was carried into the settlement. She was able to track some 240 separate transactions of meat sharing. On receiving a share of meat, a family would subdivide its share and carry a portion to someone else. At the same time, others were appearing at the family's shelter, leaving other portions of meat. In the process, the meat was passed multiple times in small portions among the members of the clan. The anthropologist's conclusion: in the harsh setting of the desert, reliable community is all that stands between a clan and obliteration. The passing of the gift portions of meat was a way for each of them to affirm their life-sustaining mutual bonds.

Among the SAN people of the Kalahari, after the men had killed a giraffe, an anthropologist was able to track some 240 separate transactions of meat sharing. In the harsh setting of the desert, reliable community is all that stands between a clan and obliteration.

The second example is the Javanese cultural practice of *selametan*. This word comes from *selamat* which means "to save" or

"shalom." S*elametan* is basically a religious practice. But it has social and cultural consequences. *Selametan* is a practice and symbol of solidarity. In *selametan* all members of the group are treated the same. All sit on the *pandan* leaf mat, which is spread across the floor. Regardless of rank, all—from the mayor to the bum—eat the same simple meal. In *selametan* each one is aware that every other one is part of the group. This condition can be achieved only when the participants in *selametan* understand that the sense of community must surpass individual differences. And it is this sense of solidarity, as the outcome of *selametan*, which leads to the spirit of helping each other and working together interdependently.

This kind of interdependence is not dependent on physical closeness. Proximity can produce group conformity and narcissistic manipulation in which one person uses another out of anxiety and self-defense. Enforced living together may increase real isolation under the guise of getting along with one another. Such relationships inevitably appear phony to the sensitive observer, particularly the young. Living together interdependently produces not an aggregate, but a collectivity, in which each member of the community feels the need for each other member.[1]

Communion in the body of Christ

The concept of interdependence in the church is supported by several biblical images. The most profound is that of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–31). And the main point of this image is the mutual concern, the solidarity and, most of all, the communion of all members of the body.

Overcoming dependency

In Corinth, two groups were fighting over inferior and superior spiritual gifts. The church had apparently emphasized the more spectacular, such as healing and tongues, thus making the members who did not have these gifts feel inferior. Some churches in Asia today—offspring of western mission work—are left feeling inferior, unable to meet the standards set by their "parents," and subject to leadership crises. In addition, many have inherited the bad Protestant inclination to split, and thus suffer division. Under these conditions, the churches feel they do not have anything

worthy to contribute. They develop a sense of dependency and the ongoing expectation that what is coming from the West is always right. What is local is never considered worthy. Consequently, local initiative and creativity are hindered.

Dependency is fundamentally tragic. Empirically, the relationship of dependency is wrong because it builds on negative feelings, namely, feeling threatened and feeling helpless in facing the present condition. Theologically speaking, a relationship of dependency is totally wrong also because the orientation is to self: self-existence, self-survival, self-prestige.

Humility comes when we realize that no one is perfect. It removes arrogance. We become less concerned about *who* is right and more concerned about *what* is right.

Paul stresses the sovereign purpose of God in diversifying the parts of the body (1 Cor. 12:14–20). He is saying by implication that God has arranged different Christians in the body of Christ so that they can exercise different gifts. God's method employs diversity to create unity. God creates communion to overcome dependency and a sense of inferiority in the body.

Overcoming independency

While some members of the church in Corinth apparently felt inferior and dependent, others must have thought themselves to be superior and independent (1 Cor. 12:21–26). Those who feel their gifts are superior are not aware that they need other people. They see other people as a reflection of themselves, as objects and as resources to get done what they want to get done. They won't listen because they feel they don't need to hear other people's opinions. Arrogance is the better term for this attitude, I would say.

With this kind of outlook, people tend to see success in terms of independent achievement. Perhaps this mind-set is true to a certain extent, if one is dealing with things. But the church is not a thing. When we are dealing with people, we are dealing with living, breathing human beings who have their uniqueness, culture, emotions, feelings, ideas, minds, and other resources.

When we are dealing with the church, we are dealing with a body. For a healthy functioning of the body, we need to overcome

dependency with interdependency. We need to overcome magnifying some gifts by finding communion in all gifts.

Coming over to communion

The fundamental principle of relationship that Paul advocates (1 Cor. 12:21) is the interdependence of the parts of the body. As members of Christ's body, churches and Christians are mutually dependent, or interdependent, even as they exercise their distinctive functions.

As the body of Christ, we have to start by showing our empathy to one another, and empathy also means respect. In order to obtain that kind of character, we first have to listen, seeking to understand one another's point of view, and then to be understood. For many of us, however, communication is first and foremost seeking to be understood.[2]

No one individual has all the gifts, all the talents, all the ideas, or the capacity to perform all the functions of the whole body. What is vital for the quality of life of the body is the ability to work together, learn from each other, and help one another grow.

As members of the body, we must take the initiative to find ways for all members to cease competing with one another so they can cooperate with each other (Phil. 2:3–4). Humility comes when we realize that no one is perfect. It removes arrogance. We become less concerned about *who* is right and more concerned about *what* is right. I think that is the image of the healthy body of Christ.

The fact is that members of the body are better together than they are alone. No one individual has all the gifts, all the talents, all the ideas, or the capacity to perform all the functions of the whole body. What is vital for the quality of life of the body is the ability to work together, learn from each other, and help one another grow.

As the body of Christ, we are called to value the other members, not because of what they have, but because of who they are. What Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians is that all members of the body have value. And the value is even greater when they pool their gifts and cooperate with one another for the benefit of the whole body.

All of this can be done by loving-kindness. By definition, to love is to become interdependent. Love is not love until one gives

it away. It involves relationships with others and belonging to one another. It means reciprocity. "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

A vision of global Anabaptist-Mennonite communion

I have a vision for worldwide *koinonia* in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family of faith. I have a vision that Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and related churches around the world will one day form a global communion whose members are not judged according to race, ethnic group, wealth, or whether they are the result of missionary work from the North. All churches will be accepted on the basis of their commitment to Jesus Christ and to Anabaptist beliefs—and on the basis of the unique contribution they can make to the church universal.

Global communion in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family can be achieved by placing the trilogy of natural church development at the center of our vision.[3]

- *Faith*—understood as holding basic biblical and Christian convictions in Anabaptist perspective. When Christians from different races and cultures have the same purpose because of common faith in Jesus Christ, they live in communion. MWC should provide information about the uniqueness of Anabaptist beliefs.
- *Fellowship*—which is the expression of our solidarity and commitment to work together, pooling resources for the kingdom. This is more than simply networking or exchanging information and resources. It is the heartfelt communion of spirit that comes from an acknowledged and shared experience of Christ. MWC should provide space so that churches can develop intimate relationships with one another and thus be able to work together interdependently.
- *Service*—defined as caring for and helping one another for the glory of God's kingdom (Mark 10:42–45). Communion cannot be achieved only by agreement on difficult theological issues. Communion is more than sentimental fellowship. Communion implies the willingness to forget traditional differences, denominational boundaries, successful investments, and material wealth. It assumes confessing that

division is a sin and that it is as wrong to be at war with one another as it is to be at war with another country. Communion includes the willingness to talk face-to-face about spiritual concerns, with frankness at all times. Communion comes when we know each other well enough to trust each other with our innermost thoughts and then look for common ground on which to serve one another. So MWC should provide channels for mutual service.

Frankly, I do not have a blueprint for the new pattern of relationships in the global communion. But I do know that they will not be based on human wisdom and strength, on human structure and organization. The relationships will grow up naturally (Mark 4:26–29). Only through creative communication with the Spirit of God can there be communion through which each church can affiliate with others in genuine community.

The blessing of this community is not just the outstretched hands or the kindly smile, or the joy of companionship. It is the spiritual inspiration that comes when you discover that someone believes in you and is willing to trust you with their communion.

I have a vision that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches around the world will one day form a global communion in which all will be accepted on the basis of their commitment to Jesus Christ and to Anabaptist beliefs—and on the basis of the unique contribution they can make to the church universal.

Such community is characterized by authentic involvement and by the warmth and openness of the people who compose it. As Paul said to the Galatians, "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:26-29). Paul is saying that in Christ there is no East nor West, no North nor South. There is no Mennonite Church or General Conference or Mennonite Brethren or Evangelical Mennonite Conference or Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference or even Brethren in Christ.

The idea of community, in its scriptural tradition, implies a place or a space and a relationship where people have the freedom to love, to share, and to fellowship. Community is a place or a space and a relationship where love removes barriers of denominationalism, ethnicity, and social status, and in doing so creates both communication and communion. Can we perceive MWC as the space for exercising this spirit of communion?

The miracle of partnership in communion

Communion implies and provides the context for partnership. And this is the place where we need to work hard. But when we do, we can see the miracle of partnership in communion.

Working in partnership is not easy because it involves power and money. But partnership within the context of communion can be different and synergistic. It is not necessary to hide power or feelings of loss even though some have more than others. We do not need to bargain or compromise. We simply invest what we already have and see what happens. We pool our resources and power, then watch them grow in surprising ways!

This was the approach Jesus took when he faced a multitude of 5,000 hungry people (Mark 6:30–44). The first thing that came to the disciples' minds in this situation was money or the power of money: how much money was needed to purchase the food to feed the multitude. And because they did not have enough money, the mission to feed the 5,000 immediately got stuck. But Jesus did the opposite. He started with people, with relationships. He started by creating fellowship in small groups (Mark 6:39). He started by providing a space where the people could relate with one another more intimately, more compassionately, and with more understanding. In that setting, the sharing of wealth and belongings was not a problem at all. When people get together in one accord, they have the same vision, the same mission, and deep spiritual understanding of their relationships. All know their functions in relation to the group. Nothing is impossible to accomplish.

If your hearts are in communion with one another, the rest will follow. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

That is the miracle of partnership in the context of communion. When the multitude experienced fellowship, they

sensed the same problems and the same needs and began to share. The people started with five loaves of bread and two fish—and finished with twelve baskets of leftovers. They were synergistic, not bargaining or compromising. They were able to contribute what they had and to do so with dignity. They achieved mutual understanding and maintained a sense of solidarity that made equal interdependency possible.

If your hearts are in communion with one another, the rest will follow. "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21).

Note

[1] Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1978), 26.
[2] Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 123.
[3] Christian A. Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking* (Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999).

The great feast

Texts: Isa. 25:6–9, Matt. 8:11
Sue C. Steiner, Pastor
Waterloo North Mennonite Church, Waterloo, Ont.

A sermon preached at an Eternity Sunday communion service, November 21, 1999, from behind the communion table.

What a magnificent supper this is!
This is no ordinary eating and drinking!
When we celebrate the Lord's Supper on Eternity Sunday,
the distance between heaven and earth thins out,
and the great divide grows porous.

This is an appetizer from the heavenly banquet table.
It whets our appetite for what is to come.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper on Eternity Sunday,
we anticipate the meal which those who have gone before us
in the faith share in all its fullness,
that feast to which "many shall come from east and west,
and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God."

It's no wonder, then, that while awaiting his death
German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,
"Come, thou greatest of feasts! Come, thou greatest of feasts!"

But this connection of a feast
with the fullness of God's salvation—
where does it come from, anyway?

It goes back at least as far
as God providing that strange substance manna
for some desperate runaway slaves in the wilderness.

It's there in the assurance of Psalm 23:
"You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies,"
a festive meal to celebrate God's generous care,
even in the very face of danger.

And in the book of Isaiah,
the idea of a messianic banquet comes to the fore:
a lavish feast that takes place
in some unimaginable time in the future
when the Messiah will have come.

And again, the word is given to people
who are in desperate straits,
whose city, Jerusalem, is falling into enemy hands.
They must leave this place,
and their very identity as a people
seems in serious danger.

Right then Isaiah announces a time when people from everywhere
will stream to Jerusalem for a feast beyond all comparison,
a fat banquet, a wine banquet,
a banquet of juice marrow, of good wine,
beyond anything the winery restaurants
of the Niagara Peninsula have to offer.

It will be said on that day,
"Lo, this is our God;
we have waited for him that he might save us."

Isaiah imagines a royal invitation extended to all peoples.
It's held on Mt. Zion so they can have an audience
with Yahweh, Lord of Hosts.
At this banquet, God will announce a great royal deed.
The shroud, the shadow of death
that has plagued the land and all its peoples,
is going to be removed, lifted, swallowed up.
And death will be replaced with life, sorrow with joy.

Jesus alluded to the messianic banquet
when he said that many will come
from east and west, from north and south,
and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
in the kingdom of God.

But he did much more than that.
He brought the banquet into the here and now
when he fed 5000 people with a little boy's lunch,
when in a parable he invited the poor, the crippled,
the blind, and the lame to a banquet where all is ready now,
and when he took common bread and common wine,
and made of them a feast
both of remembrance and of anticipation.

But what about us?
Where are we in all this?

That time has not yet fully come when death shall be no more.
We long for death to be swallowed up, for we have here today
a whole vase full of flowers of remembrance for loved ones—
parents, grandparents, siblings, children, friends, mentors.
We long for all sadness and pain to be no more.

We long for God's justice and shalom to be established,
for nations to stop lifting up swords
and guns and missiles against nations,
for people to find food and warmth and home.

We live in an in-between time of groaning and longing.
In fact, the whole creation is in labor,
eagerly awaiting its redemption.
And sometimes all we can do is rely on God's Spirit
to intercede for us and for our world
with sighs too deep for words.

And yet at the same time—at the very same time
when all this groaning and longing is going on—
we are invited to a banquet.

We are invited to the banquet *now*—
for Christians have always had their feet in two worlds at once.

We believe that in Jesus' coming to us,
in his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection,
God's future time has already begun.
We believe that in his person Jesus has conquered death,
being raised to new life by God the Father.
And we see little signs of this new life everywhere,
if we're looking.
Miracles of all sorts happen in our midst.

And so, we live in overlapping time.
We live in the ordinary time of now,
with its combination of joys and sorrows,
with its injustices, its unanswered questions, its pain.
But in this feast we also live in the time
when God's reign is fully realized.

Feasting in the kingdom
has always been one meaning of communion.
This meal of the church is a foreshadowing of the great banquet
when people of all nations will eat and drink with joy
in the presence of God.

It is indeed an appetizer.
Christ is truly present at this meal,
and yet at the same time we await his coming.
At every communion, we are given a taste of the future,
and the prayer for Christ to return is partially fulfilled.

In this meal, we are also brought near
to those who have gone on before us in the Lord,
those who are beyond the appetizers.
There's traffic across the bridge that connects heaven and earth.
There's a communion of saints
that slides between the now
and what is to come.

For this meal reminds us that we're all invited
to the greatest of all wedding parties,
the marriage supper of the Lamb,
in which the whole redeemed community
will be united with Christ
in a way we can scarcely comprehend.

In the meantime, we live in hope.
We live in overlapping time.
We accept the invitation to this feast now,
even as we anticipate the feast that is to come.

Even so, Lord, quickly come.

Pass-over, morsel, or the real meal deal?
Seeking a place at the table for the church's children

Eleanor Snyder
Director of Children's Education for the Mennonite Church

Every so often our church periodicals publish articles favouring the inclusion of children in celebrating communion. For some congregations, the idea of involving children is offensive and seems inappropriate, for theological reasons and because of tradition. In other congregations, leaders are looking for ways to involve children but do not know what are theologically correct practices. People want to know how other congregations deal with the "problem" of children and communion.

When debated, this issue can become emotionally charged and create havoc in a congregation. One congregation suspended its communion services for an extended time because its members could not agree on children's participation. Even after a careful study process, they did not resolve the matter. As times change and denominational lines become more blurred, Mennonite congregations are being forced to reflect on the theology and the practice of communion.

Is there a place for unbaptized children at the Lord's table? According to normative Mennonite theology, the answer is "no." However, present practice reveals that children are participating in communion to varying degrees.

Is there a place for unbaptized children at the Lord's table? According to normative Mennonite theology, in our written confessional statements, the answer is "no." Only baptized believers are invited to the table, and we do not baptize children. However, present practice reveals that children are participating in communion to varying degrees.

Present practices

A few years ago, I conducted a limited survey among General Conference Mennonite leaders on communion practices in their

congregations. The 35 responses, along with informal conversations with pastors and church leaders, helped me identify five ways congregations deal with the involvement of children in communion services.

Total exclusion. Children are not present for the communion service. In some cases, the service is planned for a Sunday evening and children stay at home; in others, children are sent out of the sanctuary during communion, for children's church or to practice singing. This is closed communion. One pastor, who was beginning to think that children could not be present during the communion service without feeling rejected because they cannot take part, wrote: "After all, it is an adult or believers meeting."

Participation by observation. When servers distribute the elements, the bread and juice are passed over or around the children. Children do not take part except by being present in the service. Sometimes someone gives them an explanation beforehand about the meaning of communion and about what they can anticipate when they are older.

Partial participation. Children receive something: a blessing, a cracker, a grape. One congregation assembles the children at the front of the church while the elements are being distributed to the baptized adults. Leaders give each child a blessing and a cracker. In other congregations, children come forward with family members and receive a blessing and a grape. Another church invites all to the communion table to share the bread, but they reserve the cup for those who are baptized. Sometimes children are given leftover bread after the service.

Participation by special invitation. Children are invited to participate because the theme and mood of communion allow for it. For example, in one church children can join fully in a Maundy Thursday service where bread and grapes or juice are freely shared. They can be full participants in love feasts or agape meals. One congregation included the children in a festive communion service with breads and sparkling grape juice that celebrated the coming fulfillment of Christ's reign.[1] Usually children are excluded from the Good Friday communion service because of its somber mood of remembrance of Jesus' suffering and death.

Full inclusion. Finally, some congregations invite children's full participation. Here the decision about children coming to the

table has been left to them and/or their parents. One congregation bases participation on "desire and relationship to Jesus Christ," which is determined solely by the individual, regardless of age.

When I asked on the survey, "Can children and youth, who have been baptized as infants in another denomination and now are part of your congregation, participate in the communion service?," I got mixed responses: Some leaders placed no restrictions on baptized children taking communion; others treated them like unbaptized children and excluded them. Some had not thought about the issue and had set no policy; still others said it was up to the parents or child to decide. One leader commented, "This isn't a written or spoken issue. My sense is that parents usually 'read' the setting and advise their children about what to do. We don't have anyone keeping track (at least not openly)!"

Although the practice of excluding children from communion likely has theological underpinnings, we often understand it more as a cultural norm of the congregation.

What do we do when a tension exists between our congregation's practices and the church's normative theology? I can think of at least three possibilities. First, we can hold fast to "right" theology, to the teachings of the church that have served us reasonably well for five centuries. Second, we can articulate a theology that fits our present practices in order to give them theological legitimacy. Third, we can entertain the notion that it may be time for another radical reformation, in which the Mennonite church reformulates a theology of communion that is more inclusive of children. We would be forced again to defend an unpopular position in direct opposition to both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies, which insist that communion is for only the baptized. As in our Anabaptist beginnings, we could easily become embroiled in a heated controversy with voiceless children at its centre.

Factors that influence our decisions

Several key factors affect how a congregation thinks about its children and their place in the church community. I name a few that have an impact on how we treat our children during the communion service.

Culture. Mennonites are living in a new sociological reality that has changed tremendously over the last several generations. A sense of community and belonging no longer comes from living and working side by side during the week and gathering together for worship on Sunday. Yet in our mobile society, Mennonite Christians still value and seek that sense of community. Gerald Gerbrandt observes that some congregations grasp at communion as one way of letting children know that God loves them and they belong within a faith community.[2] By inviting children to participate in the Lord's Supper, we give them a strong message of belonging to God's household of faith. One must ask if this is reason enough to include children at the table. Are there not other ways to show our children that they have a secure, loving place in our midst?

If tradition is our measuring stick, let's base our decisions about children's participation in communion on traditions that are Christian, not cultural.

Tradition. The role of tradition also factors into the debate about children. I suspect that most often it is cultural tradition that governs whether children are included. One older person was upset when she witnessed children taking communion because "it just didn't look right." Although the practice of excluding children likely has theological underpinnings, we often understand it more as a cultural norm of the congregation. When an eight-year-old child asks, "Why can't I have bread and juice? I love Jesus and want to follow him," how do we respond theologically? It is not enough to tell her, "We've never included children and that's just the way it is." For a practice to remain meaningful, each generation of believers must own and embrace it theologically. If tradition is our measuring stick, let's base our decisions about children's participation in communion on traditions that are Christian, not cultural.

Decision-makers. A third factor that influences how we treat children in communion has to do with those in power. Who decides? When children participate, the decision is often left to parents or the children themselves. What message are church leaders giving when they allow individuals to decide, or insist that they do? On what basis should an individual make that decision? Without careful teaching and congregational process, such

decisions may be based simply on whether the child is hungry that day. This practice tends to minimize the sacramental or symbolic meanings of communion for children and adults. Sometimes the minister determines whether children are in or out. Then the congregation must adapt to the particular theology of its leader, and communion practices vary as leaders come and go. Giving sole responsibility to an individual—parent, child, or minister—undermines corporate decision-making around an important communal faith issue.

Theology. How does theology factor into our attempts to include children? Take, for example, the increasingly common practice of distributing a cracker or a grape to the children during communion. Article 12 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* ([Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Press, 1995], 51) suggests that the bread and cup are "signs" that represent Christ's body, the new covenant, and unity among believers. If such ordinary food as bread and the juice are signs that point to a communal, covenantal relationship with God, what do the grape and cracker represent or point toward? Do we have a theology of the grape or cracker? If not, should we identify and articulate such a theology so children can participate at least in a limited way in our communion practices?

When children participate, the decision is often left to parents or the children themselves. Such decisions may be based simply on whether the child is hungry. Giving sole responsibility to an individual—parent, child, or minister—undermines corporate decision-making around an important communal faith issue.

In our theology, communion is a sacred act that expresses our relationship with God and each other. How communion is enacted and with whom can be contentious issues. If this "sacrament" is to provide meaning for our life together in this place and time, congregations will do well to risk examining closely the way we celebrate communion. "What is strong will be stronger for being examined. What is less important may be altered to create better coherence or communication."[3] As practices change with each generation of Mennonite Christians, the shape we give them should be a result of careful theological reflection.[4] To begin the conversation I offer some tentative thoughts on finding a theological basis for welcoming children at the Lord's table.

Toward a theology of the open table

To advocate welcoming and including children at the Lord's table is to call for radical inclusiveness that has the potential to transform both our theology and our practice of communion. As we try to figure out what a "transformed" Mennonite Church looks like, perhaps we need to embrace a transformed Mennonite theology that gives children a legitimate place at the Lord's table. Is now the time to articulate a theology of children that pays attention to children's spirituality and re-examines some of our traditional theological assumptions about children?

What the Bible tells us. Like our Anabaptist faith-parents, we turn to the Scriptures as our guidebook for living faithfully as God's people. What do the Scriptures tell us about children and communion when we scrutinize them from the lens of twenty-first century Christian faith? We will find that it is difficult to justify including children in communion or excluding children from communion on the basis of Scripture alone. Church tradition, not biblical tradition, has denied children a place at the Lord's table.

In the Hebrew community, children were an integral part of religious life. They were present at the festivals and feast days. They participated in the Passover meal, asking the key questions that led to the ritual story-telling and sharing of food. We will not find a warrant for excluding children from the Lord's Supper in its connection with the celebration of Passover.

In the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, we know that Jesus gathered with his disciples for the Passover meal. People assume that no children were present at this supper, and that therefore children do not belong at communion services. When we read about Jesus' interactions with children, we learn that his attitude toward them, and toward other members of society with no status and no voice, was so radical that even the disciples could not grasp it. Hans-Ruedi Weber has suggested that the way Jesus spoke to children and sought physical contact with them far surpassed what was expected, and exemplified the gift of God's unreasonable love.[5] For Weber, this is the heart of the gospel. Can we, like Jesus, practice a radical inclusiveness that welcomes and invites children to come to the table to encounter the God who offers unreasonable love to all God's children, regardless of age? As Mennonites, we have taken seriously both the words and life of

Jesus as a model for our daily living. Are we to take seriously his instruction to welcome the child as a sign of welcoming him (see Mark 9:36–37)?

The nature of children. How we understand the nature of children affects how we view them theologically. Texts such as Genesis 1 and Psalm 139 suggest that humanity right from birth is God's good creation, and that God desires a loving relationship with humanity.[6] Jesus demonstrated an exceptional love for children. Against the writings of Augustine and against their Roman Catholic and Protestant contemporaries, early Anabaptists argued that children are created in innocence, and do not enter the world as depraved sinners in immediate need of redemption through baptism.[7]

Religious educators who work with children are convinced that children come into the world already in relationship with their Creator God. When we pay close attention to our children, we get a glimpse of a joyful, trusting, and mystical relationship they have with One for whom they may not even have a name. Sofia Cavalletti suggests that the plea of the young child is "Help me to come closer to God by myself."[8] In our child dedication services, parents promise to nurture the relationship that is already there and bring the child into a covenantal relationship with the church community. Believers baptism is not the beginning of the journey with God, but an emphatic "yes" that takes personal ownership in the relationship with God that began even before birth; it is also a willing accountability with a specific faith community.

When we read about Jesus' interactions with children, we learn that his attitude toward them, and toward other members of society with no status and no voice, was so radical that even the disciples could not grasp it.

The question of membership. Mennonite theology binds together believers baptism, church membership, and participation in the Lord's Supper. This linkage is a Christian tradition, not a biblical one. Is it possible for us to imagine a theology that allows for a covenantal membership assumed in the child dedication or consecration service, and an adult baptismal membership that comes with baptism? As a privilege of covenantal membership children would participate in congregational life as they are able

and would be fully or partially included in our communion services.

Whose table is it, anyway? Our Anabaptist fore-parents insisted on closed communion: only the baptized (adult) believers could partake and then only after careful examination by self and community. People who did not practice right living were excommunicated; they were refused a place at the table. Participation in communion was a measure of one's faithfulness to God and the church. Five centuries later, many congregations have relaxed their hold on who participates and who is refused communion. Most often, participation is a personal or individual decision, except when it comes to the children.

Our Anabaptist fore-parents insisted on closed communion. Five centuries later, many congregations have relaxed their hold on who participates and who is refused communion. Most often, participation is an individual decision, except when it comes to children.

I'd like to think that it is God who invites us to commune together at God's table. This is a banquet table at which all can feast, all who love Jesus and try to follow him. By participating in communion, we are accepting Jesus' gift of new, resurrected living that nourishes us as we re-enact the story of God's unreasonable love. The bread is a sign that we accept God's sustenance and are willing to live in community with others; the cup is a sign of God's covenant of new life in God's realm. When communion symbolizes our eschatalogical hope, our living in the "already but not yet," we can invite children to participate in God's banquet of covenant and promise.

Head or heart theology. We Mennonites have a tendency to worship primarily with our heads. We like to explain and rationalize our faith rather than experience it. We seem reluctant to use all our senses—seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, and feeling—to experience God in worship. Our practices of communion have strongly encouraged us to *think about* our relationships with God and each other and make sure we are in "right relationship" on both counts. I am rarely invited to encounter God as mystery, or to feel the awe of being invited to join God at God's table in celebration and joy! Perhaps this is what children can teach us: to enjoy God, to revel in the mystery

of the bread and cup, to be in awe of God's divine yet intimate presence and to willingly receive God's unreasonable love and grace.

I believe that communion liturgy is meant to engage us at the heart level in a way that reminds us of whose we are, of how we are loved and celebrated by God. The table has been prepared for all God's children, regardless of age. It is a place where all are invited to "come with joy to meet our Lord." Our communion practices can welcome children as spiritual beings who are capable of significant encounters with the Holy One. If we pay attention, our children can even teach us how to worship and feast with God.

Educating for change

For congregations that want to include children in their communion practices at one or more levels, a careful process of education is needed. What follows is one possible approach to theological reflection at the congregational level.[9]

1. Engage the entire congregation in the conversation right from the beginning. Invite all ages to share their childhood experiences of communion. Note similarities and differences, themes and moods that dominated communion services, emotions that surface in these memories. Talk about what has changed over the years, and how people have experienced that change.
2. Consider the traditions or habits of your congregation regarding children's participation. How did the present practice evolve? Who made the decisions? What is the theology of your practices? How do you feel about present communion practices?
3. Study the various meanings of communion, its themes, biblical bases, and the Christian tradition. Eleanor Kreider has written an excellent chapter on the debate about children.[10] This resource gives ample food for thought and reflection.
4. Integrate what you heard in the previous sessions. How do past experience, present practice, the Christian tradition, the Mennonite tradition, and other factors fit together? Pose questions such as, "What are you thinking now about children

and communion?" "What further thinking or reflection is needed so we can practice communion with theological integrity?"

5. Act. What are the options? How will the decisions regarding children be made? How will you educate the congregation?

Here are a few ways to work at it: Find creative ways to teach children and parents about the meanings and practices of communion. What are their questions? What is it important for them to know? In my experience, many children and their parents have little understanding of the practices and meaning of communion beyond "This is the way we do it here." They deserve more.

Perhaps this is what children can teach us: to enjoy God, to revel in the mystery of the bread and cup, to be in awe of God's divine yet intimate presence, and to willingly receive God's unreasonable love and grace.

Prepare a booklet, share and/or read communion stories, visit other churches, and share observations and reflections.

Vary your communion practices to help people of all ages experience God and each other in surprising and mysterious ways.

Reflect together on these experiments. Engage the entire congregation in the process of decision-making. Prepare a statement of your theology of communion, including the role of the children, for newcomers.

Keep the lines of communication open at all times. Take time to listen to people's anxieties. Invite the children to share their insights.

A plea for radical inclusiveness

Eleanor Kreider writes that advocates for an open invitation to God's table, including English Baptist pastor Michael Forster, believe that "radical inclusiveness...should be the hallmark of the Christian community. The church's table is the proper place to act out that inclusiveness. This position calls for an abrupt break in church tradition. Forster believes that a positive function of tradition is to put the brakes on change until issues have been fully explored. But when church traditions counter the Spirit of Jesus and the gospel, then, Forster insists, they must no longer be allowed to be obstacles to change."[11]

Is the Spirit of Jesus inviting the Mennonite church to participate in another radical reformation that practices radical inclusiveness at the Lord's table of all God's children, regardless of age? I think so. How about you?

Notes

[1] For a detailed description of this festive communion service, refer to *Hymnal Subscription Series* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1999), 1:23–5.
[2] See Gerald Gerbrandt, "Church Membership, Circumcision, and Children," in *Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership* (Winnipeg: Resources Commission, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 67.
[3] Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997), 151.
[4] Gerbrandt, "Church Membership," 65, refers to a careful process his congregation used to decide to limit communion to the baptized.
[5] Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979), 19.
[6] Pivotal biblical texts that refer to children's relationship with God are examined in Eleanor Snyder, "Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration" (D.Min. thesis, Toronto School of Theology, 1999), chapter 5.
[7] Apparently, Anabaptists were accused of Pelagianism because they disputed Augustine's views on original sin. Pelagius, a contemporary of Augustine, believed in the essential goodness of humanity. The theological debate over the essential nature of humanity has continued throughout the centuries. J. Philip Newell, a Celtic Christian scholar, suggests that we take a serious look at how Pelagius's theology might inform our thinking today (*Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* [New York: Paulist Pr., 1997], 8–22).
[8] Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: Experiencing Scripture and Liturgy with Young Children,* trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Pubns., 1992), 45.
[9] This outline is based on Thomas H. Groome's "shared praxis" approach to religious education. See Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* ([San Francisco]: Harper San Francisco, 1991).
[10] See "An Open Table?" chap. 14 in *Communion Shapes Character*.
[11] Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character,* 177.

Children and the Jesus Supper
Some anecdotal and theological reflections

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My eight-year old daughter, Silvie, is hooked on the Jesus Supper, as our family calls the feast. No, she doesn't participate—directly—with adult believers in our local Mennonite congregation. But she is enthralled with this communal ritual, and longs intensely to join in more fully as an expression of her devotion to Jesus and his way.

My eight-year-old daughter, Silvie, is hooked on the Jesus Supper. She is enthralled with this communal ritual, and longs intensely to join in more fully as an expression of her devotion to Jesus and his way.

Several experiences have whetted her appetite. Besides observing the rite in church, she has learned about it in Sunday school through the Jubilee curriculum's fine treatment,[1] which we have also used for nurture at home and even as the text for an adult service. But most significant is her memory of the high drama of monthly coconut communion when our family was in the Philippines with Mennonite Central Committee. There the United Church of Christ in the Philippines congregation welcomed her to participate along with adults. After the congregation rehearsed the life-sustaining properties of the coconut for Filipino society, the liturgy came to a high point. Holding up the coconut, the presider recited, "The body of Christ which is broken for us," and then with a couple loud whacks of a bolo knife cracked it open (a feat requiring considerable skill). After letting the juice flow into a bowl, the liturgist raised the bowl and proclaimed, "The blood of Christ which is shed for us." The stillness was filled with an awe that was palpable each time. The gathered congregation, children and adults together, then came forward and joyfully partook of coconut meat dipped in coconut milk.

We found it difficult to explain to Silvie why she would not be participating in communion on our return to Winnipeg. Having tasted the medicine of immortality—as Ignatius (ca. 110 C.E.) described the elements in more sacramental terms[2]—she didn't want to be weaned from it. "What do you mean, children can't follow Jesus like adults?" Because so much was different, the explanation that seemed to work best at the time was: "Well, we just practice things differently here."

Silvie still closely observes what the adults are doing in communion, and she's developing an awareness of communal solidarity inherent in the ritual. Last year for the Maundy Thursday service, usually an adult-only event in our church, the liturgist asked her to help in a candle ceremony in preparation for sharing bread and cup around a table. Participants were invited to the table in groups. After serving each other, they ate and drank in concert. Just before I was to go to the table with the next group, Silvie leaned over and whispered, "Can you bring some back for me?" I did sneak a little extra morsel of the bread and brought it back to her. I wondered if she might eat it right away, but instead from the back row she intently watched as the next group served each other at the table, carefully holding her piece of bread. And then simultaneously with the group of adults around the centre table, she solemnly ate her piece.

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So, in our family we've come up with a compromise: our children do not go directly to the table, or take directly from the tray passed around. But if they ask, we break a small piece off our own piece, or save an extra drop in our individual communion cups, so that our children can partake along with the baptised communicants. I am thus reminded of my role as primary nurturer and mediator of the faith at this stage in their lives, and they experience some sense of participation, while realising that this ritual is especially for baptised believers.

At the same time, Silvie is becoming a self-conscious Anabaptist. Last Christmas Eve, our family attended the Anglican

church where my brother-in-law, Peter John Hobbs, is the priest, and where Silvie's cousins participate regularly in the Eucharist. It started to look awkward, to say the least, when the three cousins received the host and the cup as is customary for them. Eventually, Peter John could not keep from serving the non-baptised cousins, though this is not his usual practice. It must have been the look of disappointment on their faces.[3] After the service my wife, Wendy, overheard a conversation between Silvie and her cousin, who seemed bewildered: "So, why aren't you baptised, Silvie?" Almost pontificating to her slightly younger cousin, Silvie replied, "Well, in the Mennonite church, I have to wait till I'm a teenager. Let's see," she mused, counting on her fingers, "that's at least five more years for me. I still have a lot more to learn." Her cousin, still incredulous, burst out, "But Silvie, you already know the whole Christmas story!" referring to her recitation of Luke 2:1–20, which Peter John had dubbed the sermon that evening. Later, bounding into the house, my six-year-old son, Micah, couldn't hold in his excitement and announced to those who had been absent, "I got to be in the Jesus Supper!" To which his grandfather remarked, "I wonder how much he really understood of it."

I was surprised that Silvie had explained the Mennonite delay in baptism and communion in connection with learning or understanding. Wendy and I thought we had carefully avoided that line of explanation, emphasising instead the matter of adult choices and responsibilities. But from Silvie's point of view, adult choice and responsibility are apparently about needing to learn more.

I

It is the notion of requisite understanding that has until recently been the main barrier to welcoming children in communion in western churches that practice infant baptism. Responding to the common conviction "that the Eucharist must be rationally understood before it can be rightly received," Laurence Stookey, writing from a Methodist perspective, raises the following questions: "Do we indeed believe that the Eucharist is a means that facilitates the growth of faith rather than a reward for faith

achieved? Do we indeed believe that persons of all ages can know (even if in different ways and to various degrees) the presence of the risen Christ? Do we also believe that the Eucharist is more to be experienced than explained? And how do the barriers we have placed around the table concerning the age of communicants stand up against our answers to these questions?"[4]

Orthodox churches, without this legacy of emphasis on the rationality of faith, have always included infants and children in communion. At any rate, beginning in the 1970s, this barrier has been crumbling as increasing numbers of western churches practising infant baptism are welcoming young children and infants at the table.[5] As Peter John puts it, if the Eucharist is the celebration of membership, and baptism is the rite of entry, how can the Eucharist be denied any baptised person, infant included?[6]

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Mennonite congregations have not remained unaffected. Both through an ecumenical awareness of expanded participation by children in other churches, and through dynamics internal to Mennonite churches, increasing numbers of Mennonites are welcoming children in communion. A 1996 survey on church membership, baptism, and communion, conducted by the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (now Mennonite Church Canada), yielded the following results. Approximately 300 surveys were sent out; more than 100 churches responded. Twenty-three percent of the responses affirmed the somewhat ambiguous statement that "the practice of communion in our congregation is open to unbaptized youth and children." While 59 percent affirmed the general statement that "our congregation seeks to include children (13 & under) in the celebration of communion," 30 percent affirmed that they did not. But 86 percent of all respondents affirmed that they seek to include children "by having them present but not partaking," while 25 percent affirmed that they seek to include children "by partaking in communion with the parent's discretion."[7] This discrepancy suggests that 14 percent of the

congregations were fully welcoming to children, while an additional 9 percent preferred that children not participate, but did not bar those whose parents encouraged it.

Anabaptists are now in a new situation, relative to infant-baptising counterparts. In the past, emphasis on maturity and proper understanding as a prerequisite for participation in communion in infant-baptising churches has been used by Mennonites and others in the believers' church tradition to add weight to the argument against infant baptism, and concomitantly against participation in communion by unbaptised children.[8]

Now, ironically, as infant-baptising churches are increasingly rejoining infant baptism and infant communion, Anabaptists are beginning to consider a separation of the sacraments from the other end (baptism for adults, communion for children).

Formerly, infant-baptising churches (other than the Orthodox) severed baptism and communion, beginning in the medieval period, and continuing with mainline reformers such as Calvin. This is so even though the earliest explicit reference to the practice of infant baptism (Tertullian, ca. 200–206, who opposed it) coincides roughly with the earliest explicit reference to infant communion (Cyprian, ca. 252–53, who promoted it). At first, infant-baptising churches naturally admitted infants to the Eucharist as soon as the practice of infant baptism started.[9] And now, ironically, as infant-baptising churches are increasingly rejoining infant baptism and infant communion (reaching back to a practice beginning in the third century), Anabaptists are beginning to consider a separation of the sacraments from the other end (baptism for adults, communion for children).

II

The question for Mennonites, then, is whether baptism and communion are necessarily tied together in relation to covenant membership in the church. The first explicit correlation between the two occurs in the *Didache*, a manual of church instruction and practice from the early part of the second century. There, baptism is articulated as the prerequisite for participation in the Eucharist

(9.5): "But let no one eat or drink of your Eucharist, except those who have been baptised in the Lord's name." In the earliest literature of the New Testament, the writings of Paul (ca. 50–56 C.E.), however, the close link between the two is already assumed. Accordingly, New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks, in his book *The First Urban Christians*, explicates baptism as "the ritual of initiation" and the Lord's Supper as "the ritual of solidarity."[10] The tie between the two is clearest in 1 Cor. 10:1–4. There baptism and communion are presented as the main experiences of believers, in analogy to the Israelites going through the sea and eating manna: they "ate the same spiritual food and…drank the same spiritual drink [as Christians do]," that is, they ate and drank "from Christ." (Here, Paul's language is most explicitly sacramental.) And 1 Cor. 10:17, 11:18, and 11:29 assume communion to be a ritual of the "one body," the "gathered assembly."

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But the questions might yet properly be raised: what was the age of baptisands and communicants in the earliest period of the church, and were there exceptions to the usual tie between baptism and communion? The argument that even infants were baptised and thus included in communion from the earliest period is sometimes made on the basis of the analogy of Jewish proselyte baptism, the background for early Christian baptism. When a Gentile proselyte was admitted to the Jewish people, not only was that person baptised but also her or his family members, including dependants, children, and infants. Indeed, the New Testament gives evidence of household baptisms along these lines (Acts 10:44–48; 16:15, 32–34; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15). But the analogy breaks down, and does not provide sure evidence. Christian baptism was for both Jews and Gentiles, not exclusively for Gentiles as in Judaism; and babies later born to proselytes were not baptised, but were considered to be born "in holiness" as all Jewish children. In addition, Jewish proselyte baptism of children and infants was apparently less absolutely decisive for membership: baptised children of proselytes were not considered to have left the faith as apostates if they rejected the Jewish faith

as adults.[11] One can make an inference about the conceptual framework for baptising infants from the practice of baptism for the dead, a practice which Paul seems to have condoned (see 1 Cor. 15:29). The latter practice was apparently some kind of proxy baptism, with a rough parallel in later centuries in the requirement that infants to be baptised have a sponsor, while they themselves were passive in the process.

But Paul's language elsewhere seems to preclude the practice of baptism for infants and small children, although not explicitly. In Gal. 3:23–4:9, Paul presents a period of childhood immaturity and ignorance, when one is under the law and a guardian, in contrast to the time of "the coming of faith," when one is "baptised into Christ," a time of taking on adult responsibilities and privileges. While this imagery refers to the history of humankind, it also recapitulates the experience of individual believers, Gentiles in particular. In addition, Paul's Jewish framework would suggest that for him entry into the covenant community was formally not for infants or young children, but for those at a youthful age. Full membership in the covenant community at age 12 or 13 was associated with becoming a *bar mitzvah*, a fully responsible "son of the commandment." This rite of passage, not circumcision, properly constitutes the Jewish counterpart to Christian baptism.

Yet it is not clear how young children were when they were baptised in the earliest period of the church. The evidence from Justin Martyr (Rome, ca. 150–55 C.E.) is that some older believers attested to having become "disciples in early youth," implying early participation in baptism and the Lord's Supper, even as Justin makes it clear that baptism must be preceded by repentance and active faith.[12] In addition, Roman art of the third and later centuries, in catacombs and sarcophagi, usually depicts the baptismal candidate as a child (though in this period the church was also baptising infants).[13]

The further question is: how rigidly was baptism taken as a precondition to participation in communion? In my opinion, it is probable that this link was not adhered to in a rigid way in the earliest period of the church, for instance in the Pauline churches, for which we have the most (though meagre) evidence. The following arguments could be adduced. (1) The meals of ritual

participation with Messiah Jesus were likely not univocal in theme or framework, or in name;[14] the evidence of the New Testament is for multiple symbolism surrounding the supper. That is, while the supper functioned *primarily* as a ritual of solidarity, that imagery was not the only one. (2) The ritual meal was not separated from but was an integral part of a community meal hosted in households, at which adults, children, and infants were present.[15] (3) In the Jewish Passover, the most immediate parallel and framework for the Pauline practice of the supper, the community fully welcomed children, even a child who had not yet become a *bar mitzvah*. (4) Children in Paul's churches are addressed as morally responsible beings (Col. 3:20), which suggests that they were assumed to be part of the community in some significant way. (5) In continuity with his past before meeting Messiah Jesus, Paul considers children of believers (even those of only one believing parent) to be "holy" by virtue of their parent's faith (1 Cor. 7:14); Paul otherwise associates this term with full membership in the covenant community. (6) Paul's exclusionary language in reference to the supper applies only to activities (namely, pagan feasts in a temple [1 Cor. 8:10; 10:1–22]) incompatible with "partnering with the blood and body of Jesus," not to people who should be excluded from the supper.

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Elsewhere the scriptural imagery of inclusiveness in the meal is most poignant in all four Gospel accounts of the Last Supper. There Jesus serves Judas with the explicit knowledge that he will become the betrayer. Furthermore, in 1 Cor. 11:27–29, Paul's comments about eating in an "unworthy manner" and about self-examination do not seek to clarify who can be included, or imply that the supper is only for the worthy. These comments, in fact, highlight the inclusive character of the meal ("discerning the body"), in contrast to the usual, socially divisive way Corinthian patrons hosted meals. Typically, patrons wined and dined their business associates and other social equals, while relegating those of inferior status

(women, slaves, children) to the back rooms where the food was of lower quality and lesser quantity.[16] To be sure, there is no hard evidence, pro or con, that unbaptised children were included in the ritual supper celebrations of the earliest church. What we have, essentially, is silence.

III

What paths, then, might Mennonites take in the new millennium? One path would maintain the traditional practice, reaffirmed by the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, of tying baptism and communion closely to formal church membership and its adult responsibilities, and refraining from serving communion to unbaptised children and youth. The strength of this option is that baptism and communion continue to be closely linked, as expressions of formal church membership, with baptism usually taking place as a rite of passage into adult faith commitment. (I write in a context where baptism usually takes place around the time of high school graduation; among Mennonite groups this is probably at the upper end of the age spectrum for typical baptism of youth.) The weakness of this option is that baptism and communion are detached from the emergence of active faith, which often happens in much younger children.

A second path would be to baptise believers and welcome them to communion at a much younger age. The strengths and weaknesses are the reverse of those in the former path. The strength is that baptism and communion are linked to the emergence of active faith, while the weakness is the possible separation of both from formal church membership and responsibilities, usually articulated in terms of adult choices (historically including matters of life and death) and obligations (e.g., financial matters).

A third path would be to maintain a close link between baptism and formal, adult church membership, but to associate participation in communion with active or emerging faith, even for unbaptised children and youth. This would entail a careful rethinking of the meaning of communion, not reserving it for the worthy and the committed, but understanding it overtly as an

invitation of grace, a meal of welcome, mission, and hospitality. The weakness of this path is that the historical connection between baptism and communion is severed. The strength is that one church sacrament (communion) would acknowledge the emergence of faith and direction of choice, while the other (baptism) would be reserved for the rite of passage into formal, adult membership. This position assumes that communion need not bear the weight of Mennonite ecclesiology, but might foster a sense of mission and invitation.

A fourth path would be to let things go fuzzy: congregations would increasingly invite unbaptised children and youth to participate in communion without giving careful thought to the issues and the consequences. I cannot see any advantages to this alley. In this scenario, Mennonite ecclesiology—our understanding of the church as the visible body of those committed to Messiah Jesus—would collapse.

Silvie is content to wait for full participation in communion until she is baptised. But I will also welcome her participation in communion if she is invited to join in in ecumenical contexts, or if our church (or another Mennonite church) hosts a supper (say, as an occasional exception) that deliberately and plainly focuses on the inclusive imagery of the rite. For me the bottom line is that she grow to appreciate the meaning of faithful discipleship to Jesus in the context of a believing community and a world in need.

Notes

[1] "Supper with Jesus," in *Jesus, Our Helper*, Jubilee Bible Story Book, Cycle A (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1994), 6–7; "Supper with Jesus," in *Jesus, Our Teacher*, Jubilee Bible Story Book, Cycle B (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1995), 28–9.

[2] Ignatius *Letter to the Ephesians* 20.2.

[3] Peter John Hobbs remarked to me earlier (e-mail correspondence, 23 November 2000): "My children do not know what it is not to receive communion. In fact, as I watch children come to communion week in and week out they do so with a sense of mystery, joy, wonder, and faith that I seldom see in adults."

[4] Laurence H. Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ's Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1993), 135.

[5] E.g., Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, ed., *—And Do Not Hinder Them: An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist*, Faith and Order Paper 109 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982); Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*, vol. 5, Faith and Order Paper 143 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1988).

[6] Peter John is also gravely aware, however, of the need for the continued nurture of faith and discipleship among the infants and children who take communion. For him

and other Anglicans, the Eucharist is not simply a sacramental feeding trough.

[7] *Naming the Sheep: Understanding Church Membership* (Winnipeg: Resources Commission, Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997), 102–3.

[8] E.g., Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 42–3, 193–207.

[9] Explanations for why this changed in the medieval period point to (a) an increased interest in the rational components of faith adherence, thus the requirement of confirmation after catechetical instruction; and (b) a fear, based on a theology of transubstantiation, that infants and small children might crumble the host or slobber the blood. See Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 195.

[10] Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1983), 150–62.

[11] See Jewett, *Infant Baptism*, 63–5.

[12] Justin Martyr *First Apology* 61, 65.

[13] Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 151.

[14] The term "the Lord's supper" occurs only once in Paul's letters (1 Cor. 11:20), not so much as the title to the ritual, but as a clarification of the particular character of this church meal; see below. Paul also refers to the "table of the Lord" (1 Cor. 10:21), also not so much to give it a title, but to explicate its character, in contrast to rituals around pagan altars. On the diversity of early Christian practice, see Hans-Josef Klauck, "Lord's Supper," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:362–72 .

[15] E.g. Klauck, "Lord's Supper," 365; Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 157–61.

[16] On this background to Paul's remarks, see Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 159.