

ARTICLE 9

Lord's Supper

Meaning

The church observes the Lord's Supper, as instituted by Christ. The Supper points to Christ, whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed to assure salvation for believers and to establish the new covenant. In the Supper, the church identifies with the life of Christ given for the redemption of humanity and proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. The Supper expresses the fellowship and unity of all believers with Christ. It is a supper of remembrance, celebration, and praise which strengthens believers for true discipleship and service.

Practice

In preparation for the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, all believers examine themselves. All those who understand its meaning, confess Jesus Christ as Lord in word and life, are accountable to their congregation, and are living in right relationship with God and others are invited to participate in the Lord's Supper. The normal pattern in the New Testament was that baptism preceded participation in the Lord's Supper.

Matthew 26:26-30; Acts 2:41-42; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-32.

ARTICLE 9

Lord's Supper

COMMENTARY

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

Major Themes

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

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

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

Additional Themes

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

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

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

Covenantal Implications

In addition to the interpretations of the Lord's Supper within the four narratives of the Supper, Paul outlines two interpretations of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:27-34. Both interpretations centre on the covenant theme. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is combating the problem of idolatry. He reverses the order of the Supper; the cup precedes the bread in the interpretation. The sacrificial element is connected more explicitly to the covenant theme. The sacrificial death of Jesus is for the establishment of a covenant, a covenant of oneness, a body, a partnership of being. Because Christ is one, the body of Christ or the covenant community is one. The Supper produces an intimate relationship among those who participate. The oneness with Christ and each other precludes a covenant or partnership with the gods behind the idols.

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

Observance

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

Meaning

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

ARTICLE 9

Lord's Supper

PASTORAL APPLICATION

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

Setting the Stage

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

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

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

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

The Need for a Pastoral Application

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

The Importance of Teaching its Meaning

We can no longer assume that all who attend our congregations understand the Lord's Supper in the same way. It is important that we clearly teach what

we understand the Bible to say about this commemorative meal. Three issues will need to be addressed.

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

The Anabaptist position is that the Supper is an ordinance and not a sacrament. Grace, pardon, forgiveness, and new covenant are not effected through participation in the Supper, but rather participation in the Supper represents the fact that grace has been accepted and people have entered a new covenant relationship and community. In the Supper, we eat and drink to the reality that we are the redeemed people of God. In participating, we acknowledge the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf, our incorporation into the new covenant people of God, and celebrate our union with Christ in the church.

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

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

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

The Administration of the Lord's Supper

Many questions are voiced regarding the matter of who may administer the elements of the Lord's Supper. Must a pastor be present? Who may

distribute/serve the elements? May a family have a legitimate Lord's Supper in the home? Can it be practiced at youth retreats, camp weekends, and other such gatherings away from the home congregations? May shut-ins have the Lord's Supper privately in homes and hospital rooms?

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

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

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

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

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

Participation in the Lord's Supper

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

First, it is imperative that it be the *Lord's* table. He is the convener, the one who invites us to participate. The participants are those who have heeded the invitation to become the people of God, the bride, the church.

There is a very intentional exclusiveness to this invitation. Only those who have made a deliberate personal choice to believe in Jesus as Saviour, have repented of their sins, and have received forgiveness of sin and eternal life are invited to the Lord's Table.

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

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

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

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

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

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