



THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM TO THE
LORD'S SUPPER

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For the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns of the
Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches.
August, 1983.

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INTRODUCTION:

The topic that was assigned to me was stated in the form of a question: Do only baptized believers receive communion? This question requires a description. As I understand the purpose of my task, though, it is not to describe the practice(s) of the Mennonite Brethren church. Instead, it is to attempt to answer a more fundamental question: Is Christian baptism a pre-requisite to participation in the Lord's Supper? In my response to this question I will attempt to describe the relationship of Christian baptism to the Lord's Supper.

Any reference to baptism raises numerous related questions. In this essay I will not deal with issues relating to the form of baptism, or issues relating to infant versus adult baptism, or adult versus believers' baptism. I will simply refer to baptism as it is referred to in the Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, namely Christian baptism.¹

For the sake of clarity and consistency regarding the communion service, I have chosen to refer to it as the Lord's Supper rather than communion or the Eucharist. This again is consistent with the usage in the Confession of Faith.²

For my purposes, the question regarding the relationship of Christian baptism to the Lord's Supper must be focussed even more sharply. If that question can be answered satisfactorily,

then the question becomes one of what ought to be the practice of individuals and churches. If we can establish what ought to be then we must deal with the matter of implementing that which ought to be. Then, if we can agree on how to implement the ought we must deal with the matter of controls and dealing with those who dissent.

The purpose of this essay is primarily to attempt to clarify the relationship between Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper. My thesis is that Christian baptism is a pre-requisite to participation in the Lord's Supper. In terms of what ought to be, I will take the position that only those who have been served with Christian baptism ought to participate in the Lord's Supper. This position is consistent with my thesis. In the text that follows, I will attempt to support my thesis and defend my position on the basis of three arguments. These arguments are taken from the Scriptures, from tradition, and from nature.

Definitions

For the sake of clarity I will define the major concepts that will be used in this essay, namely, ordinances, Christian baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership.

1. Ordinances

An ordinance in the church is "...a symbolic rite which sets forth the central truths of the Christian faith, and which is of universal and perpetual obligation."³ A rite as it is used here, is a "symbol which is employed with regularity and sacred intent."⁴ Although this definition was written many years ago, it seems to represent fairly the way in which the

term is used in the Mennonite Brethren church. Some writers use the term "sacrament" in place of ordinance. In a technical sense this may be acceptable. The difficulty with using "sacrament" in place of ordinance is that it has in it the connotation of a physical means by which grace is conferred. This goes well beyond the Mennonite Brethren understanding of either Christian baptism or the Lord's Supper.

Participation in the ordinances of the church is more than a setting forth of the central truths of the Christian faith. It is the sign of a covenant between the participant and God. In this sense it is a sacrament. (The sacramentum was the oath taken by the Roman soldiers to obey their commander even unto death).⁵ It is also a sign of communion. This is more obvious in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper than it is in the ordinance of Christian baptism. At the time of the institution of the Lord's Supper, the disciples drank from a common cup and ate from a broken loaf of bread, thus making it a shared experience. Baptism too, in a limited sense, is a shared experience. The one baptizes the other. Whatever the truth and the covenant that is symbolized in the ordinances, those who participate in them share a common faith and a common commitment.

2. Christian Baptism

Baptism is one of the ordinances observed by the Christian church. Mennonite Brethren have been strongly influenced by the Baptists in their understanding of baptism. A.H. Strong's definition of baptism has received wide acceptance.

Christian Baptism is the immersion of a believer in water, in token of his previous entrance into the communion of Christ's death and resurrection - or, in other words, in token of his regeneration through union with Christ.⁶

The 1976 edition of the Mennonite Brethren confession of Faith differs with Strong on several counts. In it the mode of baptism is stated as a practice and is not a part of the formal definition. In it also, baptism is referred to as a symbol of the reception of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, in it baptism is viewed as a public commitment to discipleship. And finally, in it, the believer enters into the full fellowship of the church through the ordinance of baptism.⁷ Strong and the Mennonite Brethren Confession appear to agree that in terms of order, baptism belongs to the beginning of the Christian's experience. In this sense it is a sign of entry.⁸

3. The Lord's Supper

The Mennonite Brethren confessional statement pertaining to the Lord's Supper is a description of the ordinance rather than a definition.⁹ Strong has attempted to write a definition of this ordinance. It does not appear to be in conflict with the Mennonite Brethren confessional statement. It is as follows.

The Lord's Supper is that outward rite in which the assembled Church eats bread broken and drinks wine poured forth by the appointed representative, in token of its constant dependence on the once crucified, now risen Savior, a source of its spiritual life; or, in other words, in token of that abiding communion of Christ's death and resurrection through which the life begun in regeneration is sustained and perfected.¹⁰

The Mennonite Brethren confessional statement identifies three pre-requisites to participating in the Lord's Supper.

First, participants must have peace with God; second, participants must live in peace with their fellowmen; and third, participants must have been baptized. The reference to baptism assumes Christian baptism.

Both Strong in his definition, and Mennonite Brethren in their description appear to agree that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance that is not a sign of entry, but rather a sign of an on-going faith and covenant relationship.

4. Church Membership

While the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith does not have a separate article dealing with church membership, it nonetheless makes at least two important references to it. In Article VI, "The Church of Christ," the following statement is made.

We believe that the church is one body, the bride of Christ, established through God's redemptive work in history. Believers from all nations, races, and social classes, regenerated by His blood, are baptized by His members of this body, whose head is Christ.¹¹

A statement in Article IX, "Christian Baptism" says:

At baptism the believer enters into the full fellowship and work of the church.¹²

Judging by the foregoing statements, it seems as though Mennonite Brethren make a distinction between the body of Christ and the church. It appears that they believe that entrance into the body of Christ is based on belief and the baptism of the Holy Spirit; and admission to the church is based on commitment and Christian baptism. At least in part, the confusion in the

Mennonite Brethren church over who may participate in the Lord's Supper must be traced to this understanding of church membership.

The Arguments

Assuming that the definitions that I have given represent fairly the Mennonite Brethren understanding of the terms, I will proceed to show why I believe that only those who have been served with Christian baptism ought to participate in the Lord's Supper.

1. The Argument from the Scriptures

The first argument that supports my view is an argument from the Scriptures. I will highlight three sets of Scriptures.

A. The Words of Institution

The ordinances of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper were both instituted by Christ while He was still on earth. With regards to Christian baptism, the words of institution are recorded in Matthew 28:18-20.

And Jesus came up and spoke to them saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I command you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

It is important to note that in these words of institution the imperative to baptize is directed to the ones who are going to make disciples and not to the new convert. It is also important to note that here baptism is related to discipleship rather than to belief (if the two can be separated).

Mark also records words of institution in 16:14-16.

And afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.

In this text baptism is clearly related to belief.

Indeed, it appears to be essential to salvation. Unbelief alone however, is sufficient grounds for condemnation.

Mennonite Brethren churches seem to be caught in a bind. They seem to hold that belief is the basis for admission to the body of Christ, but church membership requires the commitment of a disciple. While they tend to be suspicious of language that suggests a process of coming into the kingdom, in practice they nonetheless do expect a process in which the first step is belief which brings the individual into the body of Christ; and the second step is commitment which allows the individual to enter the church. These are the issues that create the confusion over the proper time to be baptized. Is Christian baptism related to belief or to discipleship? We may be helped if we would read Mark's gospel as the oldest available manuscripts render it. They omit the entire section from verse nine through verse twenty. If we were left with the words of institution of Matthew alone, then baptism would more clearly be related to a commitment to discipleship. If there is an order in Matthew's words of institution it seems to be as follows:

- i) a personal commitment to discipleship;
- ii) Christian baptism;
- and iii) instruction with the goal of obedience based on right belief.

The words of institution pertaining to the Lord's Supper are recorded in Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:14-23; and I Corinthians 11:11-28. None of these texts are very helpful in helping us discern who may participate in the Lord's Supper. Nor do they address the issue of the relationship of Christian baptism to the Lord's Supper. The evangelists note that the disciples (including Judas) participated in the original observance. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying the following in relation to the cup. "Drink from it, all of you." This seems like an open invitation to each of the twelve declared disciples. Not even Judas was barred from the observance.

Paul cautions people against participating in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. He does not suggest that the issue of Christian baptism is implied; nor does he make any reference to Judas the traitor.

It is important to note that the words of institution make it clear that the Lord's Supper was to be an event that would be repeated. The frequency is not indicated. But it should be done "until He comes," or in perpetuity.

The words of institution are not helpful in determining who may participate in the Lord's Supper. The immediate impression is that all may drink. But it must be noted that Jesus was speaking to a closed group of declared disciples. The words of institution were not spoken in an open, public setting.

B. A Pauline Injunction

While the words of institution seem to imply an open invitation to those present to participate in the Lord's Supper, the Pauline injunction in I Corinthians 10:14-22 indicates a specific stricture. The cup of blessing is a sharing in the blood of Christ, and the bread is a sharing in the body of Christ. "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (I Cor. 10:21). Only those who have ceased sacrificing to demons, and instead have identified with the blood and body of Christ shall participate in the Lord's Supper.

In Romans 6:1-11 Paul deals specifically with the matter of identification with Christ. The imagery that he uses is that of baptism. He uses the following expressions that denote identification or relationship: "baptized into Christ... baptized into His death..buried with Him through baptism into death...united with Him in the likeness of His death... crucified with Him...died with Him...live with Him."

In a question to the ambitious disciples Jesus combined the imagery of baptism and the cup when He asked, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mk. 10:38). Here Jesus was clearly asking His disciples if they were prepared to identify with Him in His suffering. This identification seemed somehow to be related to sharing in the responsibilities and privileges of being next to Jesus. This is in harmony with Paul's concern in I Corinthians 10.

Paul's injunction can be summarized as follows. No, the invitation to the Lord's Supper is not an open invitation. Only those are welcome who clearly and consistently identify with the sufferings of Christ. This identification is symbolized in the image of baptism. Water baptism rather than a spiritual baptism is implied in the use of the image.

C. The Church Precident

In Acts 2 Luke records the first gospel sermon that was preached following the disciples' reception of the Holy Spirit. In response to the sermon Peter and the rest of the apostles were asked, "What shall we do?" (Ac. 2:37). Peter's reply was, "Repent and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ..." (Ac. 2:38). Later, according to Luke, "Those who received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Ac. 2:41,42).

In this context baptism is related to the initial response of repentance and the receiving of the word. Learning, fellowshiping, breaking bread, and praying followed baptism. We cannot be certain that the reference to "breaking bread" is a direct reference to the Lord's Supper. It may refer to the Agape feast which was also observed by the early church. Either way, it is easy to speculate that at these occasions they reminded each other of their identification with the death of Christ. What is clear is that full participation in the

activities of the church followed baptism.

D. Summary

The argument from Scriptures that supports the view that only those who have been served with Christian baptism ought to participate in the Lord's Supper can be summarized as follows. While the ordinances of Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper are rites that point to the same event, namely the death of Christ, baptism is specifically related to the believer's commitment to being a disciple of Jesus. In effect, it is a declaration of commitment. It is also a sign of identification. In a sense, it is the ordinance of initiation. It is a sign of entry. The Lord's Supper was instituted in the privacy of the declared disciples. It was for them. Among the declared disciples it was to be a perpetual observance in which these disciples would ritualize their on-going identification with the death of Christ. In the biblical order, the sign of entry precedes the sign of perpetuity, even though both Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs of identification.

2. The Argument from Tradition

The second argument that supports my position that Christian baptism ought to precede participation in the Lord's Supper is the argument from tradition. While this argument must not be given the same authority as the argument from the Scriptures, we must nonetheless assume that it is instructive. In this section I will identify four traditions, each of which supports my point of view. These are taken from the Essene cultic meal, the Didache, the Schleithelm Confession, and the formal position

of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

A. The Essene Cultic Meal

Both Josephus and the Qumran texts describe a strictly organized monastic community that existed in Palestine from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 70.¹³ Also both Josephus and the Qumran texts describe a cultic meal that was observed by the order. Josephus reports on the cultic meal as follows.

After the purification, they assemble in a special room which none of the uninitiated is permitted to enter; pure now themselves, they repair to the refectory to some sacred shrine. When they have seated themselves in silence, the baker serves the loaves in order, and the cook sets before each, one plate with a single course. Before the meal, the priest gives a blessing, and it is unlawful to partake before the prayer. The meal ended, he offers a further prayer; thus at the beginning and at the close they do homage to God as the bountiful giver of life.¹⁴

The following is the report on the community meal of the Qumran Community as found in 1 QS vi, 1-6.

In these (regulations) they shall walk in all their sojournings. Everyone finding himself together with his fellow, the lesser shall hear the greater, with regard to the work and the mammon. And in common they shall eat and in common they shall pray and in common they shall take counsel. And at every place where there are ten men of the Council of the community there shall also be a priest, and each is to sit before him according to his own rank and in this way are they to ask for counsel with regard to every matter. And when the table is prepared for eating or wine for drinking, the priest shall first raise his hand so that the first portion of the bread and of the wine be blessed.¹⁵

There are enough similarities between the Essene cultic meal and the Lord's Supper that it has been suggested that if the Lord's Supper has an antecedent, it is more likely to be

this meal than the Jewish Passover meal.¹⁶ For the purpose of this essay, the only point of comparison that needs to be made is that none of the uninitiated were permitted to enter the room in which the cultic meal was being served. If the Essen cultic meal was in fact the antecedent to the Lord's Supper, then we can conclude that the Lord's Supper was inaccessible to the uninitiated. If Christian baptism is the ordinance of initiation into the church, then we can conclude that only those who have submitted to it ought to participate in the Lord's Supper.

B. The Didache or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles

The Didache dates back to the second half of the second century. It makes the following statement about the "eucharistic thanksgiving" of the Lord's Supper.

"But as touching the eucharistic thanksgiving give ye thanks thus. First, as regards the cup. We give Thee thanks, Our Father, for the holy wine of Thy Son David, which Thou madest known to us through Thy Son Jesus; Thine is the glory for ever and ever. Then as regards the broken bread: We give Thee thanks, O our Father, for the life and knowledge which Thou didst make known unto us through Thy Son Jesus; Thine is the glory for ever and ever. As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains and being gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom; for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever and ever. But let no one eat or drink of this eucharistic thanksgiving, but they that have been baptized into the name of the Lord; for concerning this also the Lord hath said: Give not that which is holy to the dogs."¹⁷

This statement very explicitly denies those who are not baptized the privilege of participating in the Lord's Supper.

Because this tradition is relatively close in time to the gospel tradition, we can infer that the church was still attempting to adhere to the traditions established in the early church.

C. The Schleitheim Confession

The Schleithem Confession dates back to A.D. 1527. It was prepared by Michael Sattler, one of the spokesmen within the Anabaptist wing of the reformation. It is one of the earliest Anabaptist confessional statements. The text that deals with the Lord's Supper is as follows.

Michael Sattler, Schleithem Confession, 1527, Legacy, 37

Concerning the breaking of bread, we have become one and agree thus: all those who desire to break the one bread in remembrance of the broken body of Christ and all those who wish to drink of one drink in remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, they must beforehand be united in the one body of Christ, that is the congregation of God, whose head is Christ, and that by baptism. For as Paul indicates, we cannot be partakers at the same time of the table of the Lord and the table of the devils. Nor can we at the same time partake and drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. That is: all those who have fellowship with the dead works of darkness have no part in the light. Thus all who follow the devil and the world, have no part with those who have been called out of the world unto God. All those who lie in evil have no part in the good. So it shall and must be, that whoever does not share the calling of the one God to one faith, to one baptism, to one spirit, to one body together with all the children of God, may not be made one loaf together with them, as must be true if one wishes truly to break bread according to the command of Christ.¹⁸

Since this is a confessional statement, it must not be viewed as bearing the authoritative force of the Scriptures. However, it is important to note that the Schleithem Confession

has had a profound influence on later Mennonite confessions. In that sense, it also belongs to the Mennonite Brethren tradition. This statement emphasizes the unity of the body and recognizes that its members are united to the body by baptism. According to this confession, those who are united in the one body of Christ by baptism may participate in the Lord's Supper. Those who are not baptized are effectively excluded.

D. The Mennonite Brethren Position

The most recent resolution adopted by the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches is dated 1921. It reads as follows.

That a minister may serve the Lord's Supper only to believers that were baptized upon confession of their faith.¹⁹

In a 1936 resolution the related issue of the mode of baptism as a pre-requisite for participation in the Lord's Supper was addressed. But the principle position has not been formally altered.

Once again it must be noted that conference resolutions are not sacred. They can be challenged and changed. But in a brotherhood, when there is a consensus in the conference regarding an issue, and it is stated in the form of a resolution, it becomes the responsibility of member churches to accept the decision of the conference. Those who dissent may ask to keep the issue alive and continue the debate. As it stands now, the official position of the Mennonite Brethren conference is that only those who have been served with Christian

baptism may participate in the Lord's Supper.

E. Summary

The argument from tradition that supports the view that baptism is a pre-requisite to participation in the Lord's Supper can be summarized as follows. Each of the traditions to which I have referred has had a significant influence in shaping the doctrines and policies of the church. Because of the landmark positions that they hold in our own tradition, they should be taken seriously. Furthermore, since they are not only in agreement with each other, but also appear to be in agreement with the teachings of the Scriptures, they support the view that only those who have been served with Christian baptism ought to participate in the Lord's Supper.

3. The Argument from Nature

The argument from nature that Christian baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper is twofold. First, nature teaches that birth precedes relationships; conception precedes growth. If it is a correct understanding that Christian baptism is a symbol of the beginning of new life in Christ (i.e. regeneration, new birth); and if it is a correct understanding of the Lord's Supper that it is a symbol of an on-going, abiding relationship with Christ (i.e. fellowship, sanctification), then the natural order instructs us that Christian baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper, for conception precedes growth, and birth precedes relationships.

Second, nature teaches us that the head and the various parts of the body belong together. Indeed, they are one. It may be argued that Christian baptism is the rite of entry into the local church while the Lord's Supper is the rite of union with Christ. The two statements in the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith to which I have referred earlier, seem to suggest that Mennonite Brethren tend to hold this view. There may be those who do not wish to join the local church, but they want to bear witness of their relationship with Christ. Consequently they may wish to participate in the Lord's Supper without having been served with Christian baptism. The argument from nature is that this represents a logical fallacy. It is inconsistent with the laws of nature. The head may be over the body, but it is nonetheless not separate from it.²⁰

While nature is not the final authority on matters of belief and practice in the church, it nevertheless supports the view that Christian baptism is a pre-requisite to participation in the Lord's Supper.

Conclusion

In this essay I have taken a specific position on the issue of the relationship of Christian baptism to the Lord's Supper. I have attempted to show that, while both ordinances are symbolic means through which believers declare their identification with the sufferings of Christ, because Christian

baptism is a right of entry, and the Lord's Supper is a right of perpetuity, only those who have been served with Christian baptism ought to participate in the Lord's Supper.

Several issues are still left unresolved. First, who decides on the "ought to"? Second, having made that decision, how will access to the Lord's Supper be controlled? And third, what shall be done with the long gap that we frequently observe between the two emphasis in our evangelistic endeavors, namely, conversion and Christian baptism?

With regards to the first question, I would like to suggest that we again seek a consensus and make a declaration of that position. This position should form the basis for our teaching and should be reflected in the invitation to the Lord's Supper. With regards to the second question, I would like to suggest that the church should not formalize controls. It should be consistent in its teaching and invitation. But it should not have a binding influence on those who may not understand or may not be in agreement with the consensus. The control should be left to the individual. And, with regards to the third question, I would like to suggest that we commission a study paper that will deal with issues related to the "gap" in time that we frequently observe between what we tend to recognize as conversion and Christian baptism. If we could resolve that issue, the one addressed in this essay may become obsolete.

ENDNOTES

¹ Confession of Faith. Published by the Board of Christian Literature. 1976 Edition. p. 17.

² Ibid., p. 18.

³ Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1947), p. 930.

⁴ Ibid. p. 930.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 931.

⁷ Confession of Faith, p. 17.

⁸ Appendix 1.

⁹ Appendix 2.

¹⁰ Strong, p. 959.

¹¹ Confession of Faith, p. 14.

¹² Ibid., p. 17.

¹³ Krister Stendahl, ed. The Scrolls and the New Testament (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), p. 65.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 84-85.

¹⁷ J.B. Lightfoot, The Apostolic Fathers (Grand Rapids: Baher Book House, 1956), p. 126.

¹⁸ Walter Klassen, ed. Anabaptism in Outline (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1981), p. 195.

¹⁹ A.E. Janzen and Herbert Giesbrecht, comp. We Recommend (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1978), p. 82.

²⁰ It is also theologically impossible to be united with the Head without being a member of the body. See Ephesians 1:22, 23; I Corinthians 12:13.

Appendix 1

Christian Baptism

We believe that Christians should obey their Lord's command to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To qualify for baptism, one must repent of sin and trust Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord. We practice water baptism of the believer by immersion.

Baptism symbolizes death to sin and resurrection to the new life in Christ and the receipt of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a public commitment to discipleship. At baptism the believer enters into the full fellowship and work of the church. Local congregations may receive into fellowship those who have been baptized by another mode on their confession of faith.

Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:2-6; Col. 2:12-13; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 1 Pet. 3:21.

Appendix 2

The Lord's Supper

Members of the church observe the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ. The elements, the bread and the fruit of the vine, symbolize Christ's broken body and shed blood. They remind us of His suffering and death for our salvation and our unity in Him.

In preparation for the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, every believer is to examine himself and partake of the elements in a worthy manner. Those who have peace with God, live in peace with their fellowmen, and have been baptized are invited to partake of the Lord's Supper, thereby testifying to His death until He comes.

The Lord's Supper expresses the fellowship and unity of believers with Christ. It is a supper of remembrance, celebration and praise which strengthens believers for true discipleship and service.

Mt. 16:24; 26:26-30; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-32; 14:26; Rev. 3:20.

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