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Study Conf

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THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE CHURCH

The focus of this paper is on the issue of church membership and participation in the Lord's Supper. Who may participate legitimately in the the Lord's Supper celebrated in the Christian church? Stated more pointedly: is it acceptable practise in MB churches for non-baptized non-members of the church to take part in the Lord's Supper?

The MB Confession of Faith states rather unequivocally in Article X: "Members of the church observe the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ." "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." It has also been the traditional practise of the MB church that only baptized members of the church participate in communion. This position has been challenge both in debate and in practise in our churches. The real issue at hand, however, is whether the statements of our Confession square with the teaching of Scripture. Is the requirement of baptism and church membership as a prerequisite for participating in the Lord's Supper biblically warranted? This is the matter we wish to explore and discuss.

It is of course a well-known fact that no NT text expressly states that one must be a baptized member of the church to partake of communion. This complicates the matter somewhat. Rather than appealing to specific texts for a solution we will have to look more broadly to the theology of the church and the Lord's Supper as found in the NT for direction. That is, the biblically-based meaning of the church and the Lord's Supper may shed significant light on the matter in the absence of an indisputable 'proof-text.' In addition, the NT gives us some indication of the practise of the early church which also helps to clarify the issue.

A. The practise of the early church.

Acts 2:37-47 provides us with the clearest example of the early church's practise. Verses 41-42 are particularly significant: "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (NIV) The outcome of the evangelistic thrust at Pentecost was the conversion of 3000 people. Those who repented and accepted the message were baptized, added to a recognizable number of believers (cf. v 47), and participated, among other things, in "the breaking of bread" (communion, I assume; cf. v 46). They gave evidence of a high level of commitment to Christ and his body, the church, through their devotion to apostolic teaching, fellowship and prayer and their sacrificial caring for one another. In terms of the Pentecost event and what followed shortly thereafter it seems clear that the following sequence was observed in the church's practise: conversion, baptism, addition to an identifiable body of believers (church membership), and participation in the Lord's Supper along with several other spiritual disciplines. This appears to be a very obvious and natural sequence and lends significant support to the stated practise of the MB church. There are, however, several qualifying observations that warrant careful consideration and discussion.

First, we should be cautious in raising a natural practise of the church into a doctrinal requirement. It is certainly essential to expect that those who partake in communion be converted to Christ, and it is normal to expect that they be willing participants in the life of the church. But, if we insist (as a doctrinal prerequisite) that only baptized church members may take communion, then on the basis of the text (Acts 2:41-42) we should also insist that only baptized members of the church may legitimately devote themselves to the

apostolic teaching, fellowship and prayer, for these activities are just as much part of the sequence as the Lord's Supper. Or, to look at it from another angle, only baptized members who devote themselves to the apostolic teaching and fellowship may take the Lord's Supper as a prerequisite to prayer. I doubt whether we wish to press the point in this manner. It is, of course, eminently important that converts should be baptized, become members of a local church body, devote themselves to biblical teaching and fellowship, and participate in the Lord's Supper and prayer. My question to this study conference is: do the Scriptures intend for us to absolutize this list of church practises into a fixed chronological sequence or do they allow for legitimate variations and overlap in the order?

Secondly, the church's practise after the Pentecost event does not address all the issues we face now. For example, the issue of believing children growing up in Christian homes is not in view in Acts 2:37-47. Nor is the question of an apparent adult conversion in an age of 'easy-believism' or for social convenience particularly in focus in this passage. It appears to me that the traditional MB practise of delaying the outward sign of baptism and official church membership until a believing child has reach sufficient maturity and understanding of the faith, or until an adult convert shows evidence of genuine commitment to Christ is practical and wise. But during this time of development we nevertheless gladly give such people all the benefits of church life, instruction, fellowship, communal support and shared prayer; items that stand in the list, along with the Lord's Supper, after the statement on baptism and membership. On what grounds then do we deny the blessing of the Lord's Supper to these 'spiritual apprentices'? Their participation will not 'defile' the communion for the Lord's Supper is not a sacrament reserved for those with an established holiness, but an ordinance of the Lord to be obediently received by the sincere of heart who mourn their own unworthiness but appreciate the righteousness they have in the Lord. It may be that they have not yet followed the Lord in baptism nor joined the church but that is not necessarily an indication of wilful disobedience; it may only indicate

their level of spiritual development. Can we therefore leave the decision to participate in the Lord's Supper to the conscience of the Christians we are discipling toward baptism and church membership in the same way as we do to baptized members of the church?

Thirdly, the table of the Lord must be properly guarded. How that is done best is an important matter. The evidence from Acts indicates that initially Christians observed the Lord's Supper daily (Acts 2:46), and later on a weekly basis as part of the worship service on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). No doubt as the decades passed there were believing non-members (eg. children of believers, etc.) in these services. We are not told whether they partook of the Lord's Supper or not. Perhaps though there is some helpful evidence in the biblical statements as to who may not participate in the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians Paul denies access to the table to 'believers' (duly baptized and accepted into the church; cf. 1 Cor.5:11) who are immoral (1 Cor.5:¹¹~~6-9~~), idolatrous and disobedient (1 Cor.10:1-22) and divisive (1 Cor.11:17-34). To my knowledge the NT nowhere actually states that the unbaptized or non-members are barred from the table of the Lord by a similar restriction. Admittedly, this is an argument from silence and therefore not certain, although it favors the participation of non-members as much as it prevents it. Paul at least is more concerned about protecting the table from baptized church members who sin wilfully against the body than from sincere believers who may still lack the official signs of baptism and membership. It is obvious in the Scriptures that unbelievers are not invited to the table and blatantly disobedient members of the church are denied access to the fellowship of communion; other than that no clear restriction is placed on participation in the Lord's Supper apart from careful self-examination (1 Cor. 11:27-32).

My point at this stage is not to argue aggressively for the wholesale acceptance of all recognizably converted non-members to the Lord's table. Rather, it is to point out two things in particular: (1) that the MB practise of expecting baptism and membership before communion appears to be consistent with what we know of the general practise of the early

church, but (2) that baptism and membership are not clearly established as the fixed prerequisite to participating in the Lord's Supper in every case. The biblical accuracy of these observations needs to be tested and discussed.

B. The meaning of the Church and the Lord's Supper

My purpose here is to comment on the theological significance of the church and the Lord's Supper as it relates to the issue of participation in communion. It is impossible and unnecessary to attempt a comprehensive analysis in this paper of limited scope. My focus will rest primarily on several passages in 1 Corinthians.

First, the entire church is the body of Christ and lives by union with Christ. Notwithstanding the many members of the body and their great diversity there is only one body of Christ. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ." (1 Cor.12:12). The idea of isolated Christians living acceptably before the Lord with no connection or commitment to the church is foreign to the teaching of the NT. By definition, every genuine believer is de facto part of Christ's body, the church. The reality of this bondedness in a covenant community comes to particular expression in the life of the local church. Therefore, it is important to emphasize active 'membership' in the church upon all believers.

Secondly, membership in the body is effected through being baptized into it by the Spirit. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." (1 Cor.12:13). Water baptism and acceptance into church membership are of course taught and commanded in the Scriptures, but their function is to recognize, not effect, actual membership in Christ. They symbolize or represent the baptism into the body of Christ by the Spirit; or as Romans 6 puts it, our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. The biblically-ordained ceremonies

and rites of the church are important but they must not be allowed to preempt the underlying and originative work of God through the Spirit. Every person born anew by the Spirit into the body of Christ is a proper candidate for water baptism, church membership and participation in the Lord's Supper. The question is: must these be observed rigidly in this sequence? The Scriptures do not openly insist on it even though the sequence makes good theological and logical sense. The problem is that this sequence does not cope with all the practical realities the church faces.

Thirdly, the Lord's Supper signifies an actual sharing in the shed blood and broken body of Christ. "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." (1 Cor.10: 16-17). Without wishing to slip into a literalistic sacramentalism it is nevertheless true that the Lord's Supper is much more than having lunch together. When the Christian body receives the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper there is a genuine and real sharing together in the benefits of Christ's death by faith. Jesus makes this point particularly clear in John 6 when he says that eating his flesh and drinking his blood (a plain reference to the Lord's Supper) is achieved by coming to him and appropriating his work by faith (John 6:29-69). It would appear both logically and biblically sound to argue that all who are baptized into the body by the Spirit (1 Cor.12: 12-13) also have the calling and privilege of partaking of the one loaf in the Lord's Supper. It also makes good sense that such believers be baptized and join the church, but these are not the biblically stated prerequisites for participating in the Lord's Supper, membership in the body by faith is.

The Lord's Supper then is a divinely-ordained rite that belongs to the entire church (body) in her fellowship and participation with Christ. Everyone who is in the body through the Spirit is also invited to the table of the Lord. The same must be said for water baptism and church membership. Everyone in the body is called to obedience in

water baptism and a 'membership' commitment to a localized group of believers. Baptism, membership in a covenant community and participation in the Lord's Supper are very important for every believer who seeks to live a faithful life of discipleship to the Lord. The issue that remains, however, is whether these outward rites must always be observed in the most natural or obvious sequence? I am suggesting flexibility in the sequence. On this basis, how might these matters be worked out at the practical level of congregational life?

C. Suggestions toward a practical 'Solution'

What I propose now for consideration and discussion are some practical suggestions that I trust are biblically sound and perhaps even reflect some wisdom. We must strive very hard to treat the Scriptures with integrity and the people of the Christian flock with the gentleness and love of the Lord. While Christian leaders must always beware of opening doors to sin for the flock in their care, they must be equally cautious not to rob the flock of legitimate blessings. We do not want to encourage participation in the Lord's Supper against the Lord's instructions, but neither do we wish to erect barriers he does not raise.

First, we must maintain and intensify our regular teaching on the meaning and importance of water baptism, church membership and participation in the Lord's Supper as key matters of Christian discipleship. They are all important and not an indifferent matter of individual choice or preference. The Lord expects every believer to obey him in all of these 'rites' of the church. We must advocate all three positively as a harmonious trio rather than cast them in a negative or restrictive light. In view of the sequence observable in Acts 2 it seems wise to maintain and teach our current polity of baptism and membership as natural steps of obedience to participation in the body and the Lord's Supper. However, since the Scriptures (at least to my insight) do not make an absolute

requirement of this sequence we should allow for reasonable exceptions. We must beware of a rigid legalism in this matter. Where the Scriptures allow freedom, we do well to practise freedom.

Secondly, we could benefit greatly as a church by using the Lord's Supper as a teaching and discipling (not disciplining) instrument for those growing up in the church. For example, many young people are true believers but struggle with the immediate public commitment of baptism and church membership. Are they better served in the development of their faith and commitment by denying them access to the Lord's table, or by inviting them to the blessings of the Lord's Supper and encouraging them to follow the Lord in baptism and the responsibilities of church membership? I am inclined to think that Scriptural teaching favors the flexibility of the latter alternative. I am suggesting this only for those cases where there is an observable sincerity and desire to follow the Lord and to be involved in the church. On the other hand, a 'believer' who adamantly refuses to be baptized and join the church after much instruction and encouragement may be denied access to the Lord's table quite legitimately because of his deliberate disobedience. In this way the Lord's table can be appropriately 'guarded'.

We must remember that the Lord's Supper is holy and sacred but it is not magical. It has spiritual benefit for us not because we have fulfilled the requirement of receiving water baptism and becoming church members but because we have been baptized into the body by the Spirit. Its blessings are blocked by wilful disobedience and sin, not by developing commitment or immature faith. This is not intended to belittle the importance of baptism and church membership but to underscore the actual biblical basis for taking the Lord's Supper. I would suggest that the Lord's Supper should be understood as a source of fellowship, growth, blessing and encouragement for all true believers, irrespective of their level of maturity or obedience. Most certainly the believer should be moving toward obedience in receiving baptism and official church membership through the instructional

help of the church, but it is not certain on biblical grounds that these rites are fixed requirements for partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Thirdly, we are perhaps wisest in issuing an open invitation to the Lord's Supper and leaving the decision to participate to the conscience of the individual before God and the church. We have indicated earlier that Paul denied access to the table to members who sinned deliberately and wilfully. On the other hand though, in writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor.11:17-34), whose celebration of the Lord's Supper was in disarray because of divisiveness, he nevertheless encouraged them to participate in the Supper with appropriate warnings. Each person must: (1) take care not to participate in an unworthy manner (v 27); (2) examine himself first, and then participate (v 28); (3) discern the impact of his decision on the body (vv 29-30); (4) judge himself rather than others before the Lord (vv 31-32); and (5) participate in loving consideration of others (v 33). The church must be careful not to establish artificial barriers to communion. Rather, she must instruct and warn adequately and then leave the matter to the conscience of the participants. The Synoptic Gospels record that when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper he did not expel Judas from participation (see especially Luke 22:14-23) but left the matter to his own conscience. Jesus' disciples who participated in the Last Supper, at which time he instituted the Lord's Supper, were not baptized and Scripture does not indicate that they ever received water baptism. The thief on the cross entered paradise on faith without water baptism for which there was no opportunity. The eschatological meal, "the wedding supper of the Lamb" (Rev.19:9) to which the Lord's Supper points (Mark 14:25; 1 Cor.11:26) is open to all Christians irrespective of their baptismal or church-membership status. Therefore, we ought to hesitate laying down restrictions that are more confining than Scripture itself.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this brief paper is to open up issues and raise them for open and charitable discussion. It appears from my investigation that the Scriptures do not lay down an absolute requirement of baptism and church membership as a prerequisite for participating in the Lord's Supper, although there are considerable reasons to commend such a practise generally. I have pointed therefore in the direction of more flexibility in our practise, particularly in those cases where developing response to discipling is taking place. The task of this Conference, as I see it, is to weigh the merits of the case briefly presented here and to suggest action accordingly. I commend these ideas for evaluation by my brothers and sisters in the Spirit of Christ.

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