

CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY

COMMUNION MATTERS:
TOWARD A MISSIONAL THEOLOGY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER FOR THE
MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

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ABSTRACT

As the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church faces the challenge of mission in North America in the twenty-first century, the relationship between mission and worship has posed significant challenges and questions. It has been affirmed by missiologists and theologians that mission cannot exist without worship, and worship cannot be disconnected from the life of the world. As one of the central aspects of worship, the MB theology and practice of the Lord's Supper will have a direct bearing on how the MB church understands and engages in mission.

At the heart of the Christian message is the good news of the coming kingdom of God, which found its clearest expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This message is proclaimed in word and action each time the church celebrates Communion. The MB theology and practice of the Lord's Supper is, therefore, intimately connected to the message and mission of the church. *This thesis argues that in order to bring mission and the Lord's Supper into a cohesive whole, the MB church can draw on sacramental insights that influenced early Anabaptist thought and ecclesial practice. In order to develop a more robust theology of Communion, this thesis will rely on three primary theological building blocks: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology.*

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INTRODUCTION

Communion Matters: Toward a Missional Theology of the Lord's Supper for the Mennonite Brethren Church

1. Introduction

The Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church in North America finds itself situated in a new world. Over the past century there has been a growing awareness among Christians in the West that the world is changing, and these changes have had significant consequences for the church. Upon reflection, these changes in the Western world have been described as the death of Christendom and the beginning of a new post-Christendom era.¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon artfully pinpoint the end of Christendom to a Sunday evening in 1963 when “in Greenville, South Carolina, in defiance of the state’s time-honored blue laws, the Fox Theater opened on Sunday.”² Fox’s decision to open their doors on a Sunday marked an end to the assumption that church and state are twin pillars of a sacral society.³

The demise of Christendom, while lamented by many, has also been seen as a positive development for the church. Hauerwas and Willimon argue that this change has freed the church “to embrace our roots... [to be] a faith community that does not ask the world to do what it can only do for itself.”⁴ Craig Carter, in *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, echoes this sentiment, arguing that Christendom

¹ Loren B. Mead notes that there is a remarkable consensus among scholars, across the spectrum of denominations, that there has been a shift in paradigms over the course of the past century. He refers to the following scholars: Hans Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*, 1995; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1993; Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 1989; Robert Nash, *An 8-Track Church in a CD World*, 1997; Alan Klass, *In Search of the Unchurched*, 1996. Loren B. Mead, “The Three Ages of the Church,” *Once and Future Church, Study Series*, session 1. Co-produced by Beth Ann Gaede and Dennis Powell (Alban Institute Video, 2001) VHS.

² Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 15.

³ Craig Carter states that Christendom was built on the concept of civilization as having “a religious arm (the church) and a secular arm (civil government), both of which are united in their adherence to Christian faith.” Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 14. See also, Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001), 111.

⁴ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 18.

was detrimental to true Christian faith.⁵ As the church enters a new post-Christendom era, it is left with many questions. Loren B. Mead states that as a result of the shift from one era to the next, “some very basic things have changed in the way the church understands itself.”⁶ The church is struggling with the fact that “the structures of our church have trained us to be good in Christendom [but] we all of a sudden discover that we’re living in a different world and our structures do not respond to [post-Christendom] and we personally do not respond to it.”⁷ In response to this dilemma many churches, particularly newer churches, are starting to experiment with what it ‘looks like’ to be the church in a post-Christendom era.⁸ As a result, the larger church community has witnessed a variety of innovations in church structure including: seeker sensitive churches and ‘attractional’ churches, missional church, and more recently the somewhat ambiguous ‘emergent’ church.

Over the past 150 years, the MB church has been shaped by many external factors: migration, acculturation, modernization, religious influences, and the Christendom mindset. While Anabaptists have historically critiqued the relationship between church and state, the assumptions of Christendom have inevitably shaped MB thought and practice. The challenges of the post-Christendom era are the challenges that currently face the MB church.

1.1 Mission & Worship in Post-Christendom

The study of post-Christendom and its impact on the structures of the church is not the focus of this thesis. Post-Christendom does, however, provide the foundation from which this thesis has sprung. As the church begins to think differently about how it relates to society, it has begun to think differently

⁵ Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 17.

⁶ Loren B. Mead, “The Three Ages of the Church,” *Once and Future Church, Study Series*, session 1, co-produced by Beth Ann Gaede and Dennis D. Powell (Alban Institute Video, 2001), VHS.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ At the church planting conference, Renovate in 2009 in Calgary, AB, the issue of structure was a prevalent theme. In order to be missional, the plenary speakers urged church planters to see the work of the church occurring outside the doors of the church. In one workshop Mike Frost described his own experience with a church plant in his hometown. He said that the main question for his small church was “how do we create a space of belonging without structuring around a meeting?”

about mission and worship. Over the past couple of decades, worship and mission have received considerable attention and have undergone experimentation as the church has struggled to answer the challenges of a new era.⁹ While theologians, pastors and church members have made great strides in the area of mission and worship – particularly in discussing what mission looks like in North America in the 21st century – the relationship between mission and worship seems to be increasingly ambiguous. Are the two connected, and if so, how? Seeker sensitive and attractional model churches have provided one answer: structure the church service in such a way that ‘unchurched’ people will start attending. If the church can do this successfully, it can carry out its mission. More recently, the *missional church* movement has provided a different set of answers. Proponents of missional church, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, have argued that the church needs to be structured in light of the *missio dei* (the mission of God).¹⁰ They argue that Christian spirituality “needs to move from primarily a passive/receptive mode, to an *actional* mode.”¹¹ They give further clarity to this statement arguing that instead of seeing the Sunday morning service as a primary witnessing tool, Christians need to see witness as a combination of proclamation and action. They propose that “the church needs to be able to find more innate meaning and purpose in its actions as God’s people [in the world] if we are to become truly missional.”¹²

The attractional and missional church models provide very different answers as to how the church should be structured. Within each of these structures the relationship between mission and worship will

⁹ The worship wars of the previous decade are a prime example of this reality. There are numerous books written on this subject in the 1990’s. These books indicate the fact that as the church has sought to remain culturally relevant; the worship of the church has come under the spotlight. See: Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for These Urgent Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Dawn *How Shall We Worship?: Biblical Guidelines for the Worship Wars* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House, 2003); Robert E. Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998); Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001).

¹⁰ The term *mission dei* is used to refer to the overarching story of God’s mission to restore a fallen creation. The *mission dei* refers to the metanarrative of God’s redemptive plan, which began in the Garden of Eden and will come to completion with Christ’s final judgment and the establishment of God’s kingdom.

¹¹ Alan Frost and Michael Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things To Come*, 135.

¹² Ibid.

look quite different. This difference leaves the church with a fundamental question that needs to be explored: what *is* the *relationship* between worship and mission?

1.2 The Relationship Between Mission and the Lord's Supper

It is easy to view mission and worship as two complementary, yet distinct tasks of the church. Mission is viewed as engagement with the world for the sake of the Gospel, while worship is viewed as corporate and individual adoration of God. Where the correlation between mission and worship is acknowledged, it can be difficult for the church to find a balance between the two, and one often receives priority over the other. In her dissertation, "A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics," Irma Fast Dueck establishes that it can be difficult to find a proper balance between the worship and work of the church.¹³ On the one hand, the church is in danger of emphasizing Christian discipleship to the extent that discipleship becomes the focus of worship. She argues that for Mennonites "the strong focus on service and the prominent place of discipleship ethics in Mennonite Christology and ecclesiology and the virtual absence of an explicit Mennonite worship theology reflects a potentially one-sided emphasis on human action not tempered with the action of God. What emerges is an instrumental understanding of worship."¹⁴ On the other hand, if the balance shifts toward worship, "the danger is to begin to separate worship from the rest of life."¹⁵

The Lord's Supper is one of the central aspects of worship. Each time the church gathers to celebrate Communion, the good news of God's kingdom, which found its clearest expression in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, is proclaimed in word and action. Communion is the heartbeat of both worship and mission. It is the Lord's Supper that forms and sustains a community that witnesses to, and participates in, the mission of God. As such, it is imperative to understand the relationship between Communion and mission. This thesis cannot address the larger topic of the relationship between mission

¹³ Irma Fast Dueck, "A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics: A Praxis Approach" (DofTh diss., Toronto School of Theology, University of Toronto, 2006), 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

and worship, but would argue that understanding the connection between Communion and mission is the starting place for further discussion.

How the Lord's Supper is practiced in the MB church will have a significant impact on how the church understands the relationship between mission and Communion. The most recent MB *Confession of Faith* states that the "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."¹⁶ This confession helpfully reflects the prior action of God and the response of the community. However, the language of memory and symbol, which is prevalent in MB Communion practice, is easily coopted by the modern and post-modern assumptions that congregants walk into church with on a Sunday morning. Alan J. Roxburgh argues that symbolism and memory have been robbed of their theological significance in the context of modernity:

The church exists as a church so long as it lives in the story about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.... This understanding of its life is only available through the present, lived remembering of the story. This is why at the center of Christian worship is the Eucharist.... The way the Eucharist is practiced makes clear the depth of the church's captivity to modernity. Denominations birthed in modernity limit the Lord's Supper to a memorial – a modern remembering of a past event. This truncated, reductionistic expression of the meal reveals how far we are from the understanding of memory present in Scripture.¹⁷

To avoid this reductionistic tendency, the symbols that are used by the MB church need to be filled with a missional theology that is rooted in incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology.

1.3 Thesis

As the MB church faces the question of what it means to be the church in a Post-Christendom era, the structures of the church will begin to change. At the vocational core of the church's life is mission and worship. As the structures of the church change, so will the approach to mission and worship. Amidst this changing context, the MB church needs to address the fundamental question: what is the relationship

¹⁶ Board of Faith and Life, *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2000), 100.

¹⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What it is, Why it Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 44.

between mission and worship? At the heart of the Christian message is the good news of the coming kingdom of God, which found its clearest expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This message is proclaimed in word and action each time the church celebrates Communion. As one of the central aspects of worship, the MB theology and practice of the Lord's Supper will have a direct bearing on how the MB church understands and engages in mission. In light of this reality, the MB church will need to examine their Communion theology and practice in light of mission in the 21st century. *This thesis will argue that the sacramental insights that influenced early Anabaptist thought and ecclesial practice can provide important resources to the contemporary Mennonite Brethren church, enabling mission and the Lord's Supper to be brought together into a cohesive whole. In order to develop a missional theology of Communion, this thesis will rely on three primary theological pillars: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology.*

Drawing on sacramental resources can help the MB church address the unique challenges of the post-Christendom era. The resources from sacramental theology can also assist the MB church as it seeks to understand the relationship between mission and Communion. MB's have tended to stress the importance of the human response of faith when coming to the Lord's Table; sacramental theology can provide a helpful balance to this perspective, as it highlights God's self-giving presence at the table. An MB theology of the Lord's Supper and mission needs to find a balance between God's grace and human response, in order for Communion to remain connected to life in the world, and so that mission does not become an end in itself.

This is a difficult balance for the church to achieve. That is why a theology of the Lord's Supper must be built on three theological pillars: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology. Each theological pillar helps to balance the other two. The incarnation provides the basis for understanding that God acts tangibly and concretely in history. The incarnation made God's grace a physical reality. Thus, the incarnation emphasizes God's activity at the table. The ecclesiological pillar of Communion underscores human response and action. Through the power of the Spirit, the church becomes the body and blood of Christ that is broken and spilled out for the life of the world. The final pillar, eschatology, propels the

church toward the final goal of Communion: the coming kingdom of God. An eschatological vision of Communion is essential for helping the church to keep the purpose and end goal of mission and worship in sight.

2. Methodology

This thesis will be written using a praxis methodology, as praxis is at the core of practical theology. Dueck states that “a contemporary Christian praxis approach keeps foremost the question: ‘What kind of church are we trying to build’ or ‘what kind of a world shall we make together?’”¹⁸ This approach, according to Dueck, is in keeping with Anabaptist theology, as it reflects the Anabaptist vision of the church as the “body of Christ” and the Anabaptist concern to embody this reality in their community. The MB *Confession of Faith* articulates this vision: “The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class. The head of this body is Christ. The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world.”¹⁹ The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is intimately connected with the life and witness of the church. The theology and practice of the Supper will give shape to how MB’s answer questions such as: “What kind of church?” and, “What kind of world?”

In order to reflect on the deeper theological issues that underlie the relationship between mission and Communion, this thesis will use an open-ended model of theological reflection to guide its structure and content. An open-ended model is based on four basic components that are common to all models of theological reflection.²⁰ The first component of a theological reflection describes a situation or event that opens a door for theological discussion and reflection. The second component of a theological reflection seeks to identify the underlying theological issues that are at play. This includes an attempt to name any theological beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that bear weight on the current situation. After describing and analysing a situation, a theological reflection will work at understanding and interpreting the given

¹⁸ Dueck, “A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics,” 11.

¹⁹ *Confession of Faith*, 66.

²⁰ Taken from class notes from Dr. Irma Fast Dueck, BTS 5900 “Models for Theological Reflection,” Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba, January 2009.

situation from a theological viewpoint. A key part of this third component is drawing on biblical and theological resources in order to challenge preconceived ideas and to move towards a deeper understanding of the current event or situation. The final component of a theological reflection responds to the first three components; by judging and evaluating the situation from a theological viewpoint, one hopes to have gained further clarity into the situation, which in turn sheds light on the possibility for improved action or practice.

In keeping with the basic structure of a theological reflection, this thesis will be divided into three chapters, following a pattern of analysis, critical reflection, and response. The analysis will attempt to describe and understand the underlying issues that have affected the relationship between mission and Communion in the MB church. The next chapter will offer critical reflection on MB Communion theology by drawing on sacramental resources outside of the MB tradition, in order to deepen and enliven current MB Communion theology and practice. The final chapter will respond to the findings of chapters one and two by providing examples of how the categories of incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology can find expression in MB Communion practices.

3. Definitions

3.1 Lord's Supper, Communion & Eucharist

Historically, the church has used many different terms to refer to the act of breaking bread and sharing the cup that was instituted by Christ with his disciples during their last meal together before Christ's crucifixion. The MB church generally uses the terms "Lord's Supper" or, "Lord's Table," when referring to this ordinance of the church. The *Confession of Faith* explains that "the Supper is called 'the Lord's Supper' or 'Lord's Table' because Christ established it and invites believers to participate in the Supper."²¹ As much as possible, this thesis will call the Supper the "Lord's Supper," in keeping with the MB tradition. However, the *Confession of Faith* also refers to the Lord's Supper as "communion" and "eucharist." The *Confession* states that the Supper is called communion because "it represents and effects

²¹ Ibid., 100.

community.”²² It also explains that “the Supper is called ‘eucharist,’ which means ‘thanksgiving,’ because it celebrates God’s salvation and covenant through Christ and looks forward to the eschatological fulfillment of Christ’s kingdom.”²³ As each of these terms is used in the MB *Confession of Faith*, I will use these terms somewhat interchangeably throughout this thesis as the situation suits. The MB church is not comfortable with referring to the Supper as a sacrament. This is a discussion that will be saved for chapter two of this thesis.

3.2 Worship

The parameters of this thesis have been confined to a discussion of the relationship between the Lord’s Supper and mission. The Lord’s Supper is a vital part of the corporate worship of the church and this conversation naturally extends to all elements of the worship service. In light of this reality, the relationship of mission and worship will be brought into this conversation from time to time, but is broader than the main topic of discussion.

Worship can be described in both simple and complex terms. For the purpose of this thesis, worship will be defined as the meeting between God and humanity, made possible by God’s initiative of redemption. Worship is an action that reorders Christian lives, forming a community that is marked by a different set of priorities from the kingdom of this world; a community defined by the kingdom of God. Worship encompasses the acts of praise, sacrifice, thanksgiving, contrition, wonder, adoration, lament, petition, redemption, restoration, and transformation. While God initiates worship, he calls Christians to respond by offering their bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). In this sense, the corporate worship of the church can be called “liturgy,” literally, “the work of the people,” as the people of God respond to God’s grace through the giving of themselves in worship. Worship is also transformational, as it defines humanity by providing a narrative that shapes our understanding of our nature and purpose. In this sense, worship allows us to discover our true humanity, because in worship we are being reconciled to God and

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

his purposes for creation.

3.3 Mission

Mission can be narrowly defined as an activity or program of the church. This thesis will use the term mission in a broad sense, referring first and foremost to the mission of God to redeem, reconcile and restore humanity and creation to Himself. The mission of the church is understood in light of the *missio dei*. It is the *missio dei*, which is expressed most clearly through the gospel of Christ, which compels and enables the church to be a light to the nations. The church engages in mission by following the example of Christ and participating as co-workers with God, through the power of the Spirit, in fulfilling God's mission. The goal of God's mission is to restore Shalom, for humanity and creation to be in right relationship with God and with each other, and for God to dwell among his people. As mission is concerned with the relationship of humanity to each other and creation, the work and ethics of the community plays an integral role in the mission of the church.

3.4 Missional Church

There has been some confusion about the term "missional church," due in large part to the newness of the term, but also in part to the various usages it has received by different authors. A network (organization, body, etc.) called "The Gospel and Our Culture Network" was among the first to use the term missional church. Lois Barrett, an Anabaptist theologian and one of the authors who wrote the Networks' original book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, describes missional church as being "shaped by participating in God's mission which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and restore it to what God has always intended for the world."²⁴ For lack of a better term to describe the church's participation in God's mission for the world, this thesis will continue to use the terms missional and missional church. For the purpose of this thesis, missional church will be defined as follows: a missional church recognizes that mission is not one of the many programs of the church, but is rather a defining aspect of the church's identity and purpose. The "church

²⁴ Lois Barrett ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), x.

of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness.”²⁵

4. Outline of Structure and Content

Chapter one will provide an analysis of the MB theology and practice of Communion and trace the historical development of this theology and practice over the past 150 years. In order to understand the changes that have taken place in MB Communion theology and practice, this chapter will explore the external influences of individualism, rationalism, pietism and Evangelicalism. This chapter will argue that these influences have weakened the connection between mission and the Lord’s Supper in the MB church.

Chapter two will consist of a critical reflection on the theology of the Lord’s Supper, with the purpose of articulating the relationship between mission and Communion. This chapter will be dedicated to the task of developing a theology of the Lord’s Supper that remains consistent with the MB confessions of faith. In order to achieve these goals, this chapter will draw on sacramental resources, looking at sacrament from historical, anthropological and theological perspectives, which can enrich the MB theology of the Lord’s Supper. This section will rely on three theological pillars: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology.

In response to the findings of the first two chapters, chapter three will explore how the insights drawn from the sacramental tradition can lead to transformative Communion practices in the MB church. This final chapter will discuss how theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper merge together in the life of the MB church; forming a community that participates in the mission of God through the power of the Spirit. This final chapter will draw on the critical reflection done in chapter two in order to gain a better understanding of the intricate relationship between the practice of Communion and the mission of the church.

²⁵ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 5.

CHAPTER 1

Mission and Communion – Understanding the Gap

This thesis argues that the connection between mission and the Lord's Supper, in the North American Mennonite Brethren (MB) church, is unclear. This first chapter is dedicated to analyzing the underlying issues that have contributed to this ambiguous relationship. In order to understand how mission and Communion are related, the nature of mission must first be explored. This relation is an important starting point because the way the church in North America understands mission and missional vocation is undergoing change. With this starting point, section two will examine the relationship of Communion to mission in the MB church by tracing the development of MB Communion theology and practice over the past 150 years. In order to understand the changes that have taken place over the course of these 150 years, this chapter will then explore the external influences of individualism, rationalism, Pietism and Evangelicalism in sections three and four. The analysis provided in the last two sections will reveal that these external influences on the MB denomination have played a significant role in weakening the connection between mission and the Lord's Supper in the MB church.

1. The Redefining of Church and Mission

Over the past half-century there has been a paradigmatic shift in the way we think about how the church should engage in mission. Christians in the West have had to grapple with the reality that the era of Christendom is past, which has resulted in the marginalization of the church in a secular post-Christian society. In essence, North America has become a mission field. Lesslie Newbigin, a missionary bishop and ecumenical statesman, identified this new mission field with great clarity. In his own words, Newbigin articulates this new frontier:

[Ours is not,] as we once imagined, a secular society. It is a pagan society and its paganism, having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.²⁶

²⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 20.

Newbigin's analysis raises an important question for the church in North America, namely: "What does mission look like?" It has become evident over the past few decades that the question is not only, "What does mission look like?" but, "What is the nature and purpose of the church in light of mission?"

Newbigin brings to the forefront critical challenges that face the church as it is propelled to redefine, rethink and revisit its fundamental assertions about church and mission. He asks:

What kind of churchmanship will enable us so to preach the gospel...? How, in particular, are we to do this, we who are sent not to one of the ancient world religions but to a society nourished in its deepest roots by a Christian tradition but governed in its explicit assumptions by a pagan ideology? And how can we be missionaries to this modern world, we who are ourselves part of this modern world?²⁷

Answers to these questions have been percolating among many scholars. Christopher Wright, in his book *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, argues persuasively that a missiological framework should guide Christian hermeneutics.²⁸ It is with a note of caution that Wright urges Christians to read the Bible through the lens of mission. He states that a biblical understanding of mission cannot be narrowly defined as human activity; rather the Bible "renders and reveals to us the God whose creative and redemptive work is permeated from beginning to end with God's own great mission, his purposeful, sovereign intentionality."²⁹ According to Wright, God is a God of mission and the church has been called to participate in this mission. If the church reads the metanarrative of the Bible in terms of mission, then it must understand its own purpose in light of this overarching story.

In *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*,³⁰ Darrell Guder et al., begins to pave a path for understanding the role of the church in light of God's mission. It is Guder's

²⁷ Ibid., 133.

²⁸ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 531.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ This book is the product of a study that has been done by the Gospel and Our Culture Network. The Gospel and Our Culture Network "brings together 'Christian leaders from a wide array of churches and organizations who are working together on the frontier of the missionary encounter of the gospel with North American assumptions and perspectives, preferences and practices.'" Guder ed., *Missional Church*, 7.

thesis that the crisis in the North American church “has to do with who we are and what we are for. The real issues in the current crisis of the Christian church are spiritual and theological.”³¹ The general conclusion of the study done by the Gospel and Our Culture Network is that there is a need to redefine both mission and church. The Guder group state that “we have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness. God’s mission embraces all of creation.”³² A theological and biblical foundation is laid, which leads to a new concept—”missional church.” Barrett, in a follow up book to the Network’s original publication, *Missional Church*, describes the missional church as being “shaped by participating in God’s mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and restore it to what God has always intended for the world.”³³ Fundamentally, the missional church proclaims and embodies the gospel.³⁴

If the Mennonite Brethren reframe their ecclesiology in light of the mission of God, they will inevitably run into questions about what this means for their corporate worship practices. If the purpose of the church is to be the instrument and witness of the *missio dei*, how does MB worship engage in this mission?³⁵ In particular, what is the relationship between MB Communion theology and practice and the *missio dei*?

These are important questions, as the relationship between mission and the Lord’s Supper has not

³¹Ibid., 3.

³²Ibid., 5.

³³Barrett et al. *Treasure in Clay Jars*, x.

³⁴ Ibid., 150.

³⁵This question has been answered in an increasing variety of ways. In fact, “missional church” literature offers somewhat divergent answers to this question. Alan Hirsh and Mike Frost’s missional ecclesiology, for example, necessarily leads to flexible and loosely defined patterns of worship. In *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* they state: “The missional church is *incarnational*, not *attractional*, in its ecclesiology. By incarnational we mean it does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel. Rather, the missional church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of a society in order to be Christ to those who don’t yet know him.” Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 12. The authors of *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, on the other hand, challenge the notion that traditional forms of worship are not coherent with a missional ecclesiology. Schattauer, ed., *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*.

been made clear, either implicitly or explicitly, for the MB church. Mennonite Brethren would not deny that there is a link between the two, but this link has not been articulated in their current theology and practice. This lack of connection is due, in large part, to the historic particularities of the MB as a denomination and to the overarching North American cultural context that has influenced belief and practice. The remainder of chapter one will be dedicated to understanding, from a historical and cultural perspective, the current disconnect between mission and Communion in the MB church.

2. Development of Mennonite Brethren Communion Theology

MB Communion theology has experienced some changes over the past 150 years. This shift has had a direct impact on how MB's understand the relationship between mission and Communion. The first Mennonite Brethren in 1860 articulated a clear connection between ethics and Communion, while the most recent *Confession of Faith* has very little about the ethical and missional nature of Communion. This section will describe the development of MB Communion theology and discuss the changes that have taken place by examining the MB confessions of faith.

2.1 Mennonite Brethren Origins

On January 6, 1860, a small group of Russian Mennonites gathered to draft a secession document; it was a decisive act that resulted in the birth of the Mennonite Brethren. This document charged the larger Mennonite community with “abuses they saw in baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, pastoral leadership and lifestyle.”³⁶ A primary concern for this small group was the increasing gap between the stated beliefs and practices of the larger Mennonite colony. Connie Faber and Lynn Jost

³⁶Connie Faber and Lynn Jost, *Family Matters* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2002), 14. It should be noted, however, that the sources of conflict that led to the MB “Document of Secession” were varied and the sources of renewal were not all necessarily rooted in religious belief and practice. John B. Toews suggests that several conditions led to the eventual birth of the MB church. These conditions included: the centralization of power in the mid-nineteenth century, intellectual and spiritual disintegration, and the geographic situation, which led to an increasing gap between landless poor and the landed gentry, and outside religious influences. Toews notes that another prominent issue in the Mennonite colonies was a lack of churches. He states, “On January 1, 1856, only ten churches served the 48 villages comprising the settlement.... Could ten churches adequately serve the needs of 17,516 people?” Many Mennonites had to travel quite a distance to reach one of these ten churches. The result was that many Mennonites only attended church once a month. John B. Toews, “The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren: Some Observations,” in *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History*, ed. Paul Toews (Fresno: The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1977), 92-95.

state that this group was essentially “concerned that the [Mennonite] church accepted members and leaders who gave no evidence of a redeemed and disciplined life as participants in the ordinances.”³⁷

Doug Heidebrecht points out that “their concern as a revival movement was not with the Mennonite faith statement, but with how people lived out their faith in daily life.”³⁸ The attention given to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Ban in the “Document of Secession” highlights their concern for Christian integrity, faithful practice and witness.³⁹

For a variety of reasons there was an increasing spiritual laxity in the Mennonite Church in Russia leading up to the 1860’s. David Ewert argues that a lack of spiritual fervour and a formalization of church practice had contributed to a breakdown of ethical practices within the larger Mennonite community.⁴⁰ The gap between belief and practice was most identifiable for the Mennonite Brethren as they observed the practice of the Lord’s Supper in their mother church. Ewert states that these “spiritually awakened members began to feel uncomfortable when they found themselves partaking of the Lord’s Supper with people who had been drunk on Saturday night.”⁴¹ The Lord’s Supper became a central issue for the first group of Mennonite Brethren, who felt they could no longer observe the Lord’s Supper alongside unregenerate church members.⁴²

The first group of Mennonite Brethren believed that participation in the Lord’s Supper was intrinsically related to the fruit of a regenerated life. Their decision to hold a private Communion service was a demonstration of their desire for spiritual renewal – both within the life of the church and the life of

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Doug Heidebrecht, “Confessing Our Faith: The Significance of the Confession of Faith in the Life of the Church,” delivered July 13, 2010 at Renewing Identity & Mission: A Mennonite Brethren Consultation, ACTS Seminaries, Langley, BC, 2.

³⁹Mennonite Brethren Church. “Document of Secession (Mennonite Brethren Church, 1860).” Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. 1860. Web. 15 November 2010. http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/document_of_secession_mennonite_brethren_church_1860.

⁴⁰David Ewert, “The Lord’s Supper in the Mennonite Brethren Church,” in *The Lord’s Supper Believers Church Perspectives*, ed. Dale Stoffer (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997), 263.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Katie Funk-Wiebe, *Who Are the Mennonite Brethren?* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1984), 44.

the individual. The “Document of Secession” highlights this concern, as it discusses the breakdown between belief and practice in its opening paragraph, stating, “It is tragic to behold...when in the market places before the very eyes of their neighbors, our Mennonite brethren live satanic lives; and even the ministers go about and see it, yea even at the celebrations, sit quietly by, see and hear how people serve the devil!”⁴³

The decision of the first Mennonite Brethren to observe a private Communion was an event that had consequences for the larger Mennonite community. John B. Toews states that the “private act of piety by a few, the commemoration of the Lord’s Supper, precipitated a struggle which ultimately eroded the power of the landed Mennonite gentry, civil and religious.”⁴⁴ At the very inception of the MB church, one can see that their theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper was intrinsically ethical. In celebrating a private Communion, the Mennonite Brethren risked separation from the larger Mennonite colony in order to retain integrity between their beliefs and practices.

2.2 Mennonite Brethren Confessional Statements

In order to understand the development of the MB theology of the Lord’s Supper it is helpful to examine the confessions of faith that have been presented and ratified by the MB denomination. This section will look at the “Document of Secession” (1860), the first Mennonite Brethren “Confession of Faith” (1902), the second “Confession of Faith” (1975), and the most recent *Confession of Faith* (2000), in order to understand this development and provide observations on how these documents have shaped current MB practice and theology.

2.2.1 The “Document of Secession” (1860)

The “Document of Secession” of 1860 provides important insight into the theology of the Lord’s Supper that was held by the early MB. From the outset the Mennonite Brethren were particularly

⁴³Mennonite Brethren Church. “Document of Secession (Mennonite Brethren Church, 1860) Article A,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1860. Web. 3 June 2010.
http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/document_of_secession_mennonite_brethren_church_1860.

⁴⁴Toews, “The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren,” 100.

concerned with personal conversion, the ethical demands of the gospel, and understanding the practical implications of what it meant to be a church “without spot or wrinkle.” Their statement on the Lord’s Supper in the “Document of Secession” clearly emphasizes this concern for personal conversion and morality. The article states:

Regarding holy communion we confess that it serves to strengthen the faith of true believers, for they are reminded of their mighty salvation through the death of the Lord Jesus...Furthermore it serves as a sign of the covenant and fellowship of believers [1 Corinthians 10:17], and not as a sign of the fellowship of believers and unbelievers with one another, as it is presently practiced...Unfortunately, there are many covetous, drunkards and blasphemers with whom one shares the Lord’s Supper...those who walk in the flesh cannot glorify God in the communion, because they do not know Him, but as usual they serve the devil herewith, for no man can serve two masters...2 Corinthians 6 states that believers shall have no fellowship with unbelievers, but shall come out from among them, and be separate.⁴⁵

In this article one can see a strong correlation between the act of partaking in Communion with personal morality and Christian fellowship. Their care in articulating the relationship between personal morality and partaking in Communion reveals one of their main criticisms of the larger Mennonite church in the 1860’s – a lack of integrity in the lifestyle choices of its church members.⁴⁶

2.2.2 “Confession of Faith” (1902)

The 1902 MB “Confession of Faith” includes a lengthy article on the Lord’s Supper. This article shows a significant shift away from the early concerns of a group seeking to establish itself over and against the existing Mennonite church to a church that is seeking to positively articulate its shared faith. The 1902 confession begins by stating that the Lord’s Supper “is a holy, visible, evangelical practice and ordinance (institution) of Christ.”⁴⁷ Like the “Document of Secession,” the 1902 confession recognizes the public nature of the Lord’s Supper and links it (although not as explicitly) to the ethical requirements of the gospel for church members. The document states further on that the Lord’s Supper “becomes a

⁴⁵“Document of Secession (Mennonite Brethren Church, 1860) Article F.”

⁴⁶Unfortunately, according to John B. Toews, their concern for the ethical demands of the gospel led them to be “severe and uncompromising in their condemnation of what they considered to be the besetting sins of the community.” John B. Toews, “The Mennonite Brethren in Russia During the 1890’s,” *Direction* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 141.

⁴⁷“Confession of Faith (1902) - Article 5.” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1902. Web. 15 November 2010. http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C6654.html/c6654_5.

supper strengthening the believer for ready service and true following of Christ in patiently bearing His cross and for growth in true love in all things into Him, which is the head.”⁴⁸

The 1902 confession takes on a slightly more individualistic tone with its emphasis on personal examination. The article states that the Supper “is partaken of by such as believe and have been baptized according to the ordinance of Christ, and that have examined and judged themselves.”⁴⁹ Further on it states, “Only the gracious enlightenment and fellowship of the Holy Spirit can enable the believer to rightfully examine himself, and prepare him to partake of this holy supper in a worthy manner and teach the hidden meaning of the same.”⁵⁰ The emphasis on personal examination reflects not only the MB biblical interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11, but also their continued commitment to personal morality.

The language surrounding the Lord’s Supper in the 1902 “Confession of Faith” also implies the MB commitment to be separate from the world. John B. Toews states that the Mennonite Brethren held a fervent belief “that the people of God are to be separate from ‘the world’ in belief and lifestyle,” and argues that this belief lay at the heart of the formation of the denomination.⁵¹ The stress on personal integrity as a prerequisite for partaking in the Lord’s Supper would suggest that church members were to be separate from the world in belief and practice. Their commitment to communal fellowship and holiness also stresses their belief in a separate church. The 1902 “Confession of Faith” articulates the communal implications of the Lord’s Supper, stating: “This supper of holy communion of the believers with Christ, their head, is at the same time the expression of holy communion among themselves and it binds them together in love, peace, and unity according to the words of the Scriptures.”⁵² David Warkentin notes that

⁴⁸Ibid., Article 5.55.

⁴⁹Ibid., Article 5. 52. It should be noted, however, that in emphasizing that the Lord’s Supper is for baptized Christians, this confession holds together the individual and communal aspects of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

⁵⁰Ibid., Article 5. 54.

⁵¹John B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1993), 69.

⁵²“Confession of Faith (1902),” Article 5. 56.

the MB commitment to the separate nature of the church necessarily required holy living of individual church members, and suggests that “the identity of the church as separate... depended upon individuals displaying separateness in their own lives.”⁵³ This ecclesiology underlies their emphasis on personal examination as a prerequisite for participation in the Lord’s Supper.

2.2.3 “Confession of Faith” (1975)

One of the most notable changes between the 1902 and 1975 Confessions of Faith is the brevity of the latter document. Heidebrecht notes that the “primary motivation underlying this revision was the desire to use contemporary language, which would be readable and understandable for youth.”⁵⁴ The statement on the Lord’s Supper is, therefore, greatly reduced, consisting of two short paragraphs. In this document the following ideas are highlighted: the Lord’s Supper is symbolic in nature; every baptized believer is to examine him or herself and partake in a worthy manner; the Lord’s Supper expresses the unity of believers with Christ; and it strengthens believers for true discipleship and service.⁵⁵

Even though this document is brief, it is a testament to the continued MB commitment to the communal and ethical implications of the Lord’s Supper. This document retains the statement that only baptized members are allowed to partake of the elements. This is an issue that would garner debate in the following decades. However, in 1975, the MB commitment to allowing only baptized members to partake of the elements demonstrates their belief that the Lord’s Supper is intimately connected to a life of discipleship and accountability to the church community.

2.2.4 Confession of Faith (2000)

In the period between 1975 and 2000 a debate ensued regarding the relationship of baptism and church membership to the Lord’s Supper. Up until 1975 only baptized believers were invited to

⁵³David Warkentin, “Correcting Mennonite Brethren Individualism: The Pertinence of Stanley Hauerwas’s Theology” (M.of C.S., thesis, Regent College, 2009), 68.

⁵⁴Heidebrecht, “Confessing Our Faith,” 3.

⁵⁵Mennonite Brethren Church. “Confession of Faith (Mennonite Brethren, 1975).” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1975. Web. 15 November 2010.
<http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C6655.html>.

participate in Communion. The confession states, “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.”⁵⁶ There is a notable change in the language regarding baptism in the 2000 *Confession of Faith*, which states:

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.⁵⁷

The shift in language acknowledges the reality that many congregations were questioning whether or not Christians needed to be baptized members of the church in order to receive Communion. Faber and Jost note that in the “1980s and 1990s, many MB congregations began offering communion to anyone who confessed Jesus as Savior.”⁵⁸

The change in language in the 2000 *Confession of Faith* signals some important theological discussions that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Marvin Hein and Erwin Penner each presented papers to the Board of Reference and Counsel for the General Conference of MB Churches on the question of baptism and membership in relation to the Lord’s Supper.

Hein argued for a more traditional understanding of the Lord’s Supper in relation to baptism and church membership, although he concluded his paper with the statement, “While preferring the practice of baptized believers only participating in the Lord’s Supper, the writer is less adamant at this point.”⁵⁹ Hein argued, somewhat tentatively, for retaining the 1975 “Confession of Faith” stance on the Lord’s Supper for several reasons. One of his primary theological arguments comes from his understanding of the Lord’s Supper and baptism as a mark of the new covenant; the new covenant not only joins Christians in

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Board of Faith and Life, *Confession of Faith*, 97.

⁵⁸Faber and Jost, *Family Matters*, 40. However, in a study paper presented to the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches by Roland Marsch, it was discovered that in 1986 “two-thirds of 95 responding pastors believed the Bible teaches that only those baptized should receive the Lord’s Supper. Almost 90% stated that baptism and church membership should go together.” Marvin Hein, “Church Membership Issues,” presented to the Board of Reference Counsel of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches 1988, Study papers collection, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, 3.

⁵⁹Hein, “Church Membership Issues,” 11.

fellowship with Christ but with other believers. Hein notes that the Early Anabaptists “saw the Supper as a way of expressing the reality of the new community of love and peace and truth.”⁶⁰ He then asks, “Can that sense of oneness, for which the Supper is at least partially created, come to fruition without the participants ‘belonging’ to one another? That belongingness may well come through the baptismal pledge.”⁶¹ A second theological reason he gives for retaining a close relationship between baptism, membership and the Lord’s Supper is the issue of church discipline. Hein argues:

It is clear that in the Early Church one of the disciplinary strategies with erring members was disqualification from the Lord’s Supper...If we suggest that those not yet having committed themselves to the ‘body’ through membership should participate in the Lord’s Supper, we remove the possibility of this facet of NT discipline...The Reformation, in a real sense, was the rediscovery of the discipline of the Lord’s Supper in the life of the Church.⁶²

Hein’s comments highlight the unique relationship between the Lord’s Supper, unity of believers and church discipline.

Erwin Penner’s paper, prepared for the General Conference of MB Churches study conference in 1989, builds a case for allowing unbaptized Christians to participate in Communion. His main argument is that scripture does not offer a prescribed order for baptism, membership, and Communion. While he agrees that it is wise and beneficial for the church to encourage individuals to be baptized and become members before participating in the Lord’s Supper, he argues that MB’s must beware of legalistic tendencies and rigid structures, suggesting that “where the Scriptures allow for freedom, we do well to practice freedom.”⁶³ Penner offers a two-fold recommendation for the MB churches. First, he states that the church could use the Lord’s Supper as “a teaching and discipling (not disciplining) instrument for

⁶⁰ Ibid., 10

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Erwin Penner, “The Lord’s Supper and the Church,” presented to the Board of Reference Counsel of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches 1989, Study papers collection, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg (Box 21, folder F, No. 6), 8. See also, Erwin Penner and John Wall, “The Lord’s Supper and the Church,” *Direction Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 33-43.

those growing up in the church.”⁶⁴ Second, he suggests that the wisest course of action for the church is to issue an open invitation to the Lord’s Supper. He states that the church should leave “the decision to participate to the conscience of the individual before God and the church... [The Church] must instruct and warn adequately and then leave the matter to the conscience of the participants.”⁶⁵

The 2000 *Confession of Faith* seems to have sought a middle ground between the two views presented by Hein and Penner. It attempts to retain an emphasis on the importance of baptism while allowing churches to invite all those who confess Jesus as Lord, and are in right relationship with God and others, to participate in Communion. Unfortunately, this decision implies that it is up to the individual to decide whether or not they will participate in Communion; a decision which has moved the MB denomination towards a more individualistic theology of Communion. Because the Lord’s Supper is the practice of a *missional community*, the question of whether boundaries are necessary at the table is a matter of mission and not merely individual spirituality. The move to separate the Lord’s Supper from baptism is a shift away from traditional Anabaptist ecclesiological assumptions about the nature and vocation of the church.

3. The Impact of Assimilation

The changes that occurred in Communion theology over the past 150 years, which were described in the previous section, were due in large part to the pressures of acculturation. This can be seen in particular by an increasing emphasis on the individual over and above the community. This section will argue that MB assimilation into North American culture greatly impacted the way that MBs think about and understand the Lord’s Supper.

3.1 Assimilation into the Modern World

Upon moving to North America, the Mennonite Brethren were no longer isolated by life in a colony. Increased contact with North American culture and society eventually left its mark on the MB

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

church. In his thesis, “Correcting Mennonite Brethren Individualism: The Pertinence of Stanley Hauerwas’s Theology,” Warkentin traces the process of MB assimilation into North American culture. Warkentin argues that at “the most general level, assimilation involved Mennonite Brethren modernization, a process which has contributed greatly to a shift in their identity.”⁶⁶ He describes aspects of urbanization, a shift in ethnicity, the move towards denominationalism, and integration into North American religious culture as key factors contributing to the assimilation of the Mennonite Brethren into modern North American culture. This section is particularly interested in the aspects of modernization that have affected current theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper, namely: the autonomous self, as constructed by Enlightenment thinkers and enhanced in modern society, and the impact of rationalism.

3.2 Individualism

The concept of the autonomous self, a product of Enlightenment philosophy, has greatly shaped North American culture, institutions and structures. Enlightenment thinkers, in an effort to free individuals from the power structures of medieval Europe, formulated a philosophical framework for individual identity and personal freedom.⁶⁷ A product of Enlightenment philosophy was the autonomous self, “the self-contained individual capable of discerning truth and constructing knowledge.”⁶⁸ *Habits of the Heart*, a work published by Robert Bellah and his associates, has contributed greatly to an understanding of the subsequent development and impact of individualism in America. Bellah stresses just how prevalent individualism has become in North America, stating, “Individualism lies at the very core of American culture.”⁶⁹ In order to understand the underlying assumptions that people bring with them to the Lord’s Supper, one must give serious attention to the impact of modern individualism on

⁶⁶Warkentin, “Correcting Mennonite Brethren Individualism,” 71. Warkentin describes modernization as “the process in which the Mennonite Brethren became integrated into the distinct characteristics of modernity in North American culture, in which economic, technological, scientific, and social developments are central in defining culture.”

⁶⁷Guder ed., *Missional Church*, 23.

⁶⁸Ibid. Guder et al. discuss the modern self as the product of both rationalism, which placed final authority inside the mind, and empiricism, which saw the mind as a “blank slate on which human experience was written.”

⁶⁹Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142.

North American culture, which also extends to the church.

Bellah describes four different types of individualism that shape the modern American landscape: biblical, civic, utilitarian and expressive.⁷⁰ Biblical and civic individualism each uphold the dignity and autonomy of the individual, yet each tradition views the individual in relation to the larger community. In contrast, utilitarian and expressive individualism, which Bellah describes as facets of modern individualism, give sole priority to the individual. Utilitarian individualism sees the individual as being prior to society, coming “into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest.”⁷¹ Expressive individualism, on the other hand, “grows out of the personal desires and sentiments of individuals who seek whatever serves their self-interest and personal wishes at the moment.”⁷²

Bellah offers some helpful critiques of modern individualism. He questions whether modern individualism – which views the self as the main form of reality – can be maintained, suggesting that only biblical and civic individualism are capable of sustaining genuine individuality.⁷³ He provides a helpful assessment of the problems inherent in a conception of the individual that has been unhinged from community or tradition:

The irony of present-day middle-class American individualism derives from the fact that while a high degree of personal initiative, competence, and rationality are still demanded from individuals, the autonomy of the successful individual and even the meaning of ‘success’ are increasingly in doubt. It is as though the stress on the rationality of means and the importance of individual wants, the primary emphases of utilitarian and expressive individualism, have come loose from an understanding of the ends and purposes of life, in the past largely derived from the biblical and republican traditions.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Ibid., 142-163.

⁷¹Ibid., 143. Utilitarian individualism is largely rooted in the philosophy of John Locke, which according to Bellah is almost an ontological individualism.

⁷²J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1991), 94.

⁷³Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 143.

⁷⁴Ibid., 150.

In American society, individuals dislodged from community and traditions are no longer able to articulate personal or communal values, goals or purpose. Bellah describes the modern individual as the “empty self,” whose primary emphasis is on self-reliance, undetermined choice, and freedom from tradition, obligation and commitment. He argues that the empty self only makes sense in an institutional context that values rationality, competition and upward mobility. According to Bellah, it is only in the context of true community, including all of its encumbrances – tradition, memory, and commitment – that individuals can be endowed with identity, purpose and values.

The question remains as to how MB’s have been affected by modern individualism and its assumptions about the individual in relation to the church community. In his thesis, “Correcting Mennonite Brethren Individualism,” Warkentin argues that Mennonite Brethren, despite their Anabaptist heritage, which emphasized community-oriented faith, have a history that “reveals a tendency towards individualism and away from the emphasis of their ancestors.”⁷⁵ Warkentin states that roots of individualism can be found in the early MB community in Russia, where a stress on personal conversion and morality laid a foundation for the movement’s later tendency towards individualism.⁷⁶ Warkentin concludes that it was the eventual assimilation of the Mennonite Brethren into North American society that has contributed most significantly to the shift in emphasis from the community to the individual.⁷⁷

The shift in emphasis from the community to the individual has led to a gap between MB theology and practice: MB theology endorses a balance between the individual and community, while current practice stresses the individual experience of faith over and above the community.⁷⁸ A survey completed by J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger reveals that 49% of Mennonite Brethren agreed that

⁷⁵Warkentin, “Correcting Mennonite Brethren Individualism,” 2.

⁷⁶Ibid., 65.

⁷⁷Ibid., 72. Warkentin notes that the task is to identify where individualism is a challenge to Mennonite Brethren identity and ethics, “without rejecting individual emphases in the Mennonite Brethren faith altogether.”

⁷⁸Ibid., 82.

faith “is a private matter for each to decide and practice for oneself.”⁷⁹ On the flip side, a large majority of the respondents saw their faith in relationship to the larger church community.⁸⁰ These somewhat contradictory results reflect an inherent tension in MB ecclesiology which emphasizes the importance of the community on one hand and voluntarism on the other.

The Mennonite Brethren have tended to balance the individual and community with their theology of baptism; through the rite of baptism the individual is integrated into, and submits him or herself to, the church community. Warkentin argues that the problem with MB ecclesiology is that while it stresses that the “human response to God’s grace must be followed by integration into a covenant community, the realization of this integration in their North American context reveals a shift in how people actually understand their personal commitment to the church.”⁸¹ The problem is that most North Americans view their commitment to the church as secondary to their own personal experience of faith, a thoroughly modern concept often called the “privatization of faith.”⁸²

The MB observance of the Lord’s Supper has not escaped the impact of modern individualism. MB Communion celebrations tend to focus on the relationship between the individual and God.⁸³ *New Life in Christ: A Manual for Membership Classes in Mennonite Brethren Churches* reflects this tendency towards individualism in the MB practice of the Lord’s Supper. In answer to the question about what the Lord’s Supper means for Mennonite Brethren, Herb Kopp states “it is a time of reflection and self-examination...It is a time of looking inward and of giving thanks to God for ‘his unspeakable gift.’”⁸⁴ The

⁷⁹Kauffman and Driedger, *Mennonite Mosaic*, 97.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Warkentin, 84.

⁸²Ibid. 85.

⁸³In a MB Herald article, Dora Dueck, echoes this observation. She states “I wish we could find ways to better express the communal nature of the Lord’s Supper. Have we missed, because we are seated in orderly rows and partake in silence, the opportunity Communion affords us to demonstrate how radical Christian love is?” Dora Dueck, “Communion – A Joyous or Sombre event?” *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 11 November 1994, 30.

⁸⁴Herb Kopp, *New Life in Christ: A Manual for Membership Classes in Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1995), 63. While this is not the only meaning that Kopp gives, it is interesting that he lists the personal nature of the Lord’s Supper first, before discussing Christ’s presence at the table or the

way MB churches currently celebrate Communion is a reflection of this emphasis on personal reflection: congregants remain in their seats, which are typically in rows, sitting in silent meditation barely looking at the people who are sitting around them. With the privatization of faith, it is not surprising that many Christians, including Mennonite Brethren, view the Lord's Table as an extension of their personal faith experience. Even though MB theology expresses a clear connection between the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the unity of believers, their practices belie an underlying commitment to the individual.

Modern individualism has contributed to the increasing gap between the MB theology and practice of Communion. The result is that the Lord's Supper has become a practice where individuals reflect on their own relationship to Christ, while the communal and ethical implications of the table have been diminished. Warkentin notes that the Mennonite Brethren emphasis on personal morality, which is reflected in their stress on self-examination at the Lord's Table, "leads to an unbalanced ethical practice that neglects the social nature of the Christian life."⁸⁵ In the sociological analysis done by Kauffman and Driedger they note that while Mennonite Brethren demonstrated high concern for personal morality, social matters rated far less concern.⁸⁶ If MB churches are to recapture the relationship between the Lord's Table and the missional vocation of the church they must first recognize that their practices emphasize the individual and do not fully reflect their theology.

3.3 Rationalism

A second major contribution of the Enlightenment, one that is closely entwined with individualism, is the development of the rational method as the predominant way of obtaining truth. Unlike medieval assumptions about knowledge and truth, wherein truth is passed down by revelation and tradition, Enlightenment thinkers sought to discover truth by means of scientific method, empirical observation, and logic. Two schools of thought, rationalism (as exemplified by René Descartes and Francis Bacon) and empiricism (exemplified by John Locke), were based on the shared assumption that

eschatological significance of the table.

⁸⁵Warkentin, 88.

⁸⁶Kauffman and Driedger, *Mennonite Mosaic*, 177, 224-25.

rational means could be used to discover truth. Guder provides a helpful critique of the rational method, arguing that Enlightenment thinkers “reduced the truth that they sought to illuminate in at least three ways.”⁸⁷ First, truth was viewed as instrumental: privilege was given to that which could be experienced. Second, scientific discovery became the only way of discovering sure truth. Third, facts are privileged over values. It will be argued below that the limitations of rationalism have impacted the way Mennonite Brethren understand and engage with God in worship.

The theology of Huldrych Zwingli, one of the fathers of the Reformation, greatly influenced the development of Free Church worship. William Willimon states that while “most later Protestants rejected Zwingli’s theology, his ideas on worship, particularly his minimalist view of the sacraments, affected, to some degree, all non-Roman Western churches.”⁸⁸ Zwingli’s impact on the Free Church tradition is important because his worship reforms were influenced by Enlightenment ideas of rationalism. Willimon argues that Zwingli was a child of the Enlightenment and his worship reforms reflected this emerging culture. He adds: “For Zwingli, the main response of the congregation was the response of faith – faith which was defined in increasingly rational, subjective, passive terms.”⁸⁹ According to Willimon, rationalism’s influence on Zwingli can be seen in the priority Zwingli placed on the Word and rational response to the Word, as well as in Zwingli’s view of the sacraments as mere visual aids for remembrance and understanding.⁹⁰ In most MB churches Zwingli’s rationalist legacy lives on: one can see this legacy in the priority given to the sermon and in the symbolic understanding of the Lord’s Supper.

In *The Great Giveaway*, David Fitch describes the impact of rationalism on evangelical churches as the “Lecture Hall” style of worship.⁹¹ He states that traditional evangelical churches are akin to lecture

⁸⁷Guder ed., *Missional Church*, 22.

⁸⁸William Willimon, *Word, Water, Wine and Bread: How Worship Has Changed Over the Years* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1980), 68.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 69.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*

⁹¹David Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books,

halls because they orient their worship services around the sermon and instruction. This emphasis on sound teaching can be observed in most evangelical churches where it is normal to see several church members enter the sanctuary with notepad and pencil in hand ready to jot down notes on the sermon. This rational approach to worship has been influenced by individualism and the assumption that the rational individual is capable of discovering and discerning truth. This assumption has led to the belief that “truth can just as easily be delivered via a lecture hall, books, or sound and video recordings as it can in the sanctuary. With such confidence in the autonomous mind to arrive at truth, traditional evangelicals make the intellectual presentation and application of the scriptural truth the vortex of worship by which Christians grow and orient themselves toward God.”⁹²

The combined effect of individualism and rationalism raises serious problems for the church, as it attempts to engage people living in a post-modern, post-Christian context. The first challenge is that post-moderns are sceptical of the rational method. They want more than intellectual truth claims; they want to experience truth first-hand.⁹³ The second challenge that faces the church in a post-Christian culture is an environment that is hostile toward the church’s business of forming individuals into Christ-followers.

Fitch articulates the problem well, and it is worth citing him at length:

With the cultural powers now turned hostile toward Christianity, the lecture hall of traditional evangelical worship has increasingly become an island unto itself, explicating truth in disembodied words. Parishioners listen passively to sermons in church, while their minds and character are being shaped by other cultures they can see, feel, and participate in... while parishioners sitting in the pews are agreeing with the doctrines intellectually, their so-called autonomous minds are being compromised before they even come to church. They can no longer hear the preacher’s words alone apart from the ways of seeing that have formed their imaginations elsewhere.⁹⁴

Fitch’s critique can shed light on the present disconnect between Communion theology and practice. In evangelical churches, whose practices have been steeped in the ideals of rationalism, their practices no longer connect with the theology of the Lord’s Supper, which is steeped in the mystery of Christ’s salvific

2005), 97-101. The relationship between evangelicalism and the Mennonite Brethren will be discussed below.

⁹²Ibid., 99.

⁹³Ibid., 100.

⁹⁴Ibid.

work.

Fitch's critique can be applied to the MB denomination. The rationalistic impulse among MB's can be seen in their commitment to biblical study and interpretation. Faber and Jost note that the "Mennonite Brethren have always been known as 'people of the Book.'"⁹⁵ From their inception, MB's have placed a strong emphasis on the communal study of scripture. However, such a strong emphasis on correctly interpreting the Word needs to be balanced with communal discernment on how the Word is applied in worship and practice. In "New Wineskins for Old Wine," Delbert Wiens notes:

It is all too easy for us to obey all the explicit rules ... [sic] and still be unable to discern right from wrong in a new situation.... 'Yes,' said a layman some months ago, 'we have to admit that the _____ (naming another church) are more ethical than we are.... But at least one thing is noteworthy among us. Our ministers preach the Gospel.'⁹⁶

Wiens' criticism reflects Guder's observation on the limitations of rationalism. The rationalistic impulse places priority on facts over values, a limitation which can be seen where Mennonite Brethren value correct preaching of the Word over and above the practices that will help them to live according to the Word.

The challenge facing the MB church today is not strictly a matter of theology or doctrine, but is largely a challenge of practice. If MB theology does not translate into practice it will not be able to communicate the truth to a post-modern world. Moreover, if MB worship remains entrenched in Enlightenment notions of rationalism and individualism, it cannot focus on the task of forming believers into a counter-cultural community which witnesses to the truth of the kingdom of God. In light of these challenges, one can see that the way Mennonite Brethren practice the Lord's Supper will play an integral role in community formation. MB churches must recognize that participation in the Lord's Supper is more than an intellectual or personal exercise if it is to play a central role in transforming the church for mission.

⁹⁵Faber and Jost, *Family Matters*, 25.

⁹⁶Delbert Wiens, *New Wineskins for Old Wine: A Study of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1965), 10.

4. Religious Influences

MB Communion theology has also been significantly influenced by the polygenetic nature of the MB movement. The historical and theological influences on the MB denomination have been varied and complex. Unlike Harold S. Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision," which relies on a monogenesis model to describe and define an Anabaptist identity, several social-cultural historians have more recently argued that a polygenesis model is required to understand the complexity of Anabaptist origins. Bruce L. Guenther provides a helpful summary of Arnold Snyder's polygenesis model which highlights the doctrinal beliefs that Anabaptists share with a variety of Christian groups.⁹⁷ Snyder suggests that Anabaptists shared the following views with Evangelical/Protestant groups: the rejection of sacramentalism, anti-clericalism, a belief in salvation by grace through faith, and a belief in the authority of scripture.⁹⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the multiple origins of the MB church, it will be helpful to consider Evangelical and Pietistic influences, as they have played a primary role in shaping MB Communion theology and practice.

4.1 Pietism

There is little debate that Pietism has played a significant role in the formation of MB theology and practice. An overview of MB origins will typically mention the role that Eduard Wuest, a Lutheran Pietist, played in the spiritual revival of the Mennonite Brethren.⁹⁹ In his thesis, Warkentin describes the monumental role that Wuest's ministry had on the early Mennonite Brethren, which led many people in a personal conversion experience. Warkentin describes how "Wuest highlighted the individual experience of faith in a way that not only challenged the decadence of the colony churches, but also inspired people to re-engage the tenets of the Anabaptist heritage."¹⁰⁰ Warkentin goes on to state that "Wuest's work was

⁹⁷Bruce L. Guenther, "Rediscovering the Value of History and Tradition," in *Out of the Strange Silence: the Challenge of Being Christian in the 21st Century*, ed. Brad Thiessen (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2005), 194.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Connie Faber and Lynn Jost, Katie Funk-Wiebe, and David Ewert all mention Eduard Wuest as a prominent influence on the origins of the Mennonite Brethren.

¹⁰⁰Warkentin, "Correcting Mennonite Brethren Individualism," 60.

so influential that he has been referred to as the ‘second reformer’ of the Mennonite Brethren alongside Menno Simons....In this manner, the Mennonite Brethren were ‘born of Anabaptism and Pietism.’”¹⁰¹

John B. Toews contends that Pietism can be traced even further back in MB history, stating that MBs were pious decades before they were introduced to Eduard Wuest.¹⁰² In order to understand the theological evolution of the Brethren, Toews argues that one must see Wuest’s influence against the backdrop of the widespread religious ferment in Southern Russia in the early-to-mid 1800’s. He refers to other Pietist influences on the Brethren during this time, which included the Gnadenfeld Temperance Union, Bernhard Fast and the work of Tobias Voth.¹⁰³

Pietism can be described positively as holy living, or a movement that stresses personal religious experience with an emphasis on spiritual growth through the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁴ Pietism, however, has also taken on negative connotations over the past century, and has been associated with self-righteousness and hypocrisy. In his work *Christian Spirituality*, Pannenberg discusses the more problematic aspects of Protestant piety, particularly as it has evolved in Western Christianity. Pannenberg describes Protestant piety as being encumbered by guilt consciousness. He writes, “Pietism, especially in its late revivalist forms, made meditation on guilt and sinfulness the basic and permanent condition for communion with God.”¹⁰⁵ This guilt consciousness does not adequately address the questions being asked by a post-modern culture. According to Pannenberg, a change in anthropology over the intervening years has made divine law less threatening, which means that Protestant piety has become preoccupied with producing a guilt consciousness that does not normally arise in today’s culture.¹⁰⁶ The result is that “the

¹⁰¹Ibid., 61.

¹⁰²John B. Toews, “The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren,” 94.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴Faber and Jost, *Family Matters*, 27.

¹⁰⁵Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality*, 20.

¹⁰⁶Mennonite Brethren have attested to the fact that guilt consciousness is an underlying facet of MB spirituality. A survey done by Al Dueck, J. B. Toews and Abram G. Konrad in 1982 reports that 94 percent of Mennonite Brethren have an awareness of being a sinner, 74 percent were conscious of being tempted by the devil, and approximately half doubted their salvation. Al Dueck, J.B. Toews, Abram G. Konrad, “Mennonite Brethren

message of Christian freedom was obscured by the increasing strain of reforging the consciousness of sin by violent blows with the hammer of divine law.”¹⁰⁷ Protestant piety has thus taken on a self-righteous flavour based on the individual’s ability to keep the consciousness of sin ‘at a boil’ and managing one’s ‘emotional household.’¹⁰⁸

While guilt consciousness does not relate to today’s culture, the Pietist emphasis on personal faith experience is well suited to a culture dominated by individualism. Unfortunately, the combined influences of Pietism and individualism on MB practice and MB theology of Communion has reduced the Supper to an expression of individual faith and personal confession of sin. Pannenberg argues while the Eucharist should be central to the life of the church, the influence of penitential piety has obscured and weakened the Protestant understanding of Eucharistic symbolism.¹⁰⁹ When Christians view the Lord’s Supper through the lens of individualism and penitential piety, they miss the communal implications of the Supper. Pannenberg argues that the apostle Paul “was not concerned with the intrinsic moral condition of the individual... but rather with a lack of appreciation for the communal implications in the celebration of the Eucharist.”¹¹⁰

It can be argued that the combination of individualism and penitential piety has inadvertently hindered the ability of Mennonite Brethren to fully appreciate the communal implications of the Lord’s Supper.¹¹¹ In a culture that is enmeshed in individualistic thinking, MB churches will need to start envisaging the Lord’s Supper as a practice of the community. Communion practices that are dominated by individualistic, penitential piety, cannot sustain a missional community.

Church Membership Profile, 1972-1982, Chapter 2,” *Direction* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 19-20.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 40. Pannenberg argues that “the unique significance of the Eucharist in the life of the church is indeed intimately connected with its ecclesial symbolism.”

¹¹⁰Ibid., 41. The communal implications of the Eucharist will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

¹¹¹Although individual and penitential piety has obscured the communal implications of the Table, particularly in the way that MB’s currently practice the Lord’s Supper, a strong MB ecclesiology can provide a necessary corrective. This will be explored further in Part II.

4.2 Evangelicalism

American Evangelicalism has also played a significant role in shaping current MB Communion practices. The MB denomination has been involved with the Evangelical Fellowship Denomination since it was founded in 1964, and subsequently joined the Fellowship in the early 1970's. However, it has been noted that the relationship between Mennonite Brethren and Evangelicalism is ambivalent at best. Richard Kyle remarks that MB attitudes toward Evangelicalism range from a sense of strong kinship on one hand, to near contempt on the other.¹¹² Despite this tentative relationship, Katie Funk-Wiebe states that a substantial segment of the Mennonite Brethren have a strong affinity with mainstream evangelicalism. Funk-Wiebe notes, "[They] think of themselves more like Baptists under a different name and wear the label 'Mennonite Brethren' a trifle reluctantly, convinced it smacks of ethnicity."¹¹³

Despite their ambivalent attitude towards evangelicalism, the Mennonite Brethren can be considered evangelical in the broadest sense of the word because they emphasize the proclamation of the *euangelion*, the good news. However, Kyle cautions that it is more difficult to describe the MB relationship to American Evangelicalism because American Evangelicalism is a large and diverse movement.¹¹⁴

While it is evident that the Mennonite Brethren cannot be in doctrinal agreement with each group that falls under the umbrella of Evangelicalism, there are points of commonality that MB's share with most Evangelicals. In his article on the relationship between the Mennonite Brethren and American

¹¹²Richard Kyle, "The Mennonite Brethren and American Evangelicalism: An Ambivalent Relationship," *Direction* 20, no.1 (Spring 1991): 26.

¹¹³Funk-Wiebe, *Who Are the Mennonite Brethren*, 4. On the other hand, a large segment of the Mennonite Brethren identify more closely with their Anabaptist roots, emphasizing its distinct doctrines including adult believer's baptism, radical discipleship, and the peace witness. Funk-Wiebe, *Who Are the Mennonite Brethren*, 4.

¹¹⁴Kyle argues that Evangelicalism should be considered a movement 'in the sense that it cuts across specific denominations and embraces all people who have had the 'born again' experience and who seek to convert sinners to Christ. American Evangelicalism thus maintains a unity only in a very broad sense." Kyle narrows the definition of Evangelicalism in his article to American Evangelicalism for the reason that Evangelicalism "has had its greatest force and vitality in North America. Thus, it may be understood as a religiocultural phenomenon distinctly related to North America." Kyle, "The Mennonite Brethren and American Evangelicalism," 27-28.

Evangelicalism, Kyle notes the following affinities between the two:¹¹⁵ first, like most Evangelicals, the Mennonite Brethren are committed to orthodoxy and are conservative in their theology. Second, they are both rooted in the conversionist tradition and emphasize the “born again” experience. Third, an important aspect of spirituality for both Evangelicals and Mennonite Brethren is the commitment to rigorous personal morality. Finally, like popular Evangelicalism, the Mennonite Brethren are rapidly becoming assimilated into North American culture. Kyle notes that “many Mennonite Brethren have bought into values so prevalent in contemporary Evangelicalism: subjectivity, personal feelings, self-improvement, pragmatism, materialism, and rampant individualism.”¹¹⁶

The cultural assimilation of Evangelicals has had a significant impact on their worship practices. Fitch offers a critique of the current worship practices of Evangelicals in his work *The Great Giveaway*. He argues that Evangelical worship allows the dominant culture to form the minds and imaginations of the community instead of the gospel. Fitch observes:

[Evangelicals] rarely take the forming of emotions, experience, and imagination seriously. In modernist fashion, we assume these to be givens. So we structure the worship service around listening to a forty-five-minute preaching lecture that appeals to the individual mind, not one’s imagination. Or we structure the worship service around singing praise and worship choruses for extended periods of time, appealing to one’s stirred up emotions, not a reordering of one’s emotions toward God. In either case, the worship service can only reinforce what we already believe or feel. It cannot reshape us out of pagan experiences and emotions into the glory of God.¹¹⁷

The problem is that while Evangelicals may cling to orthodox doctrine, their actual practices capitulate to the powerful formative forces of North American culture. This problem is exacerbated by the underlying cultural assumptions of most evangelical Christians who believe that truth is subjective and that faith is personal.

Because the church has not taken these formative assumptions seriously, Fitch argues that Evangelical churches have little opportunity to form people into an alternative community. He adds:

¹¹⁵Ibid., 33-34.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁷Fitch, *The Great Giveaway*, 96.

“Evangelicals go to church on Sunday yet are unaffected because we either sit passively in a lecture hall...or we indulge in a rock concert/pep rally that titillates our emotions but leaves little to order ourselves into the glory of God.”¹¹⁸ At the heart of Fitch’s argument is the claim that Evangelical churches, including many MB churches, need to recover worship practices that remove the self from the center of worship. He offers the following conclusion, which is of critical importance for MB churches today:

If there is no art, no images faithful to Christ, no eucharistic rituals to submit our bodies to, no communal discourse to enter into, or hymns rich in substantive doctrine, the ‘subjectivity’ of the self is driven inward, and the emotional formation that is already enclosed is what will be expressed and reinforced...If orientation is to occur, we need worship that is constitutive of the worshiper’s experience and emotions, not merely the product of the emotions we walked in with.¹¹⁹

Fitch’s critique should be applied to Communion. Monthly celebrations of the Lord’s Supper that reinforce individual spirituality cannot hope to challenge the formative assumptions of North American culture. The MB church needs to regularly gather around the Lord’s Table as a *community* in order to be reoriented towards God’s mission for the world.

Even though Mennonite Brethren may have an ambivalent relationship with Evangelicalism, they share in the same difficulties that Fitch has pinpointed here. In a recent article in the *MB Herald*, Christine Longhurst interviewed more than 40 long-time members and leaders in the MB church and asked them to reflect on changes in worship over the past 50 years.¹²⁰ This article reveals that, like the Evangelicals Fitch described, Mennonite Brethren seek to engage God at an emotional level in worship.¹²¹ As Fitch has pointed out, the problem with pursuing emotional engagement in worship is that MB worship practices will not be able to compete with the secular world and will lose its formative place in the lives of church members.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 107.

¹²⁰Christine Longhurst, “From Education to Encounter: A 50-Year Evolution of MB Worship Styles,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 49 no. 11 (November 2010): 8-10.

¹²¹Ibid., 9.

Longhurst has identified how Evangelicalism and individualism has affected MB worship. Longhurst articulates how “it’s easy to begin to evaluate worship based on our own personal likes and dislikes...Should it concern us that many of us choose churches like we choose our shoes?”¹²² If MB worship, including Communion, is to transform the community, it must challenge the cultural assumptions that are brought to the table. In particular, Evangelicals – including MBs – need to remove the self from the center of their Communion practices so that the focal point of the celebration becomes Christ and his active presence among the community.

5. Summary

This chapter was primarily concerned with analyzing the issues that have contributed to the ambivalent relationship that currently exists between mission and Communion in the MB church. This analysis was executed by tracing the historical development of Mennonite Brethren theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper from the birth of the denomination in the 1860s up until the present. In order to understand the changes in MB theology over the past 150 years this chapter also described the external influences that have shaped the MB theology and practice of Communion. This chapter argued that the philosophical developments of individualism and rationalism during the Enlightenment, and subsequently in North America, have made a significant impact on current MB theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper. This chapter finished by discussing how the unique contributions of Pietism and Evangelicalism have also given shape to MB Communion theology and practice.

If the MB theology of Communion continues to drift further away from an emphasis on community, discipleship, and ethical living, it will become increasingly difficult to articulate a relationship between mission and Communion. The Mennonite Brethren’s most recent move in allowing unbaptized Christians to participate in Communion could be perceived as an attempt to make the celebration more missional in nature, as it allows individuals to encounter Christ at the Table. However, in the current cultural context, this move could serve to further elevate the individual – and individual choice

¹²²Ibid., 10.

- over and above the body of Christ. A major concern that surfaced in this analysis was the influence that individualism has had on the practice of Communion in the MB church. This influence needs to be addressed in order for the practice of Communion to become more missional in nature and to reflect more accurately the MB theology of the Lord's Supper.

CHAPTER 2

Towards a Fuller Mennonite Brethren Theology of the Lord's Supper

In a culture where the church has been marginalized, where the individual is given priority, and personal happiness is the measurement of success, what do the worship practices of the church have to do with mission? This thesis has maintained that mission and Communion go hand-in-hand. The church's theology of the Lord's Supper inevitably contributes to the way the church understands its mission in the world. The question for the church is: does this theology adequately reflect *God's mission* for the world? This chapter will argue that the sacramental resources that influenced Anabaptist reformers provide unique insights that can help the MB church to develop a distinctly missional theology of the Lord's Supper. In order to appreciate the various ways that sacramental theology can enrich the current MB theology of Communion, this chapter will look at sacramental theology from a historical, theological and anthropological perspective. This argument will rest on three theological pillars: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology.

The first section of this chapter will look at the Lord's Supper from a historical standpoint in order to understand the relationship Mennonite Brethren have with sacramental theology. Section two will be devoted to the task of describing points of convergence between sacramental theology and the MB understanding of Communion from a theological perspective. This middle section will look at the Lord's Supper through three different lenses: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology, in order to develop a well-rounded understanding of the relationship between mission and the Lord's Supper. The final section will discuss Communion from an anthropological viewpoint in order to understand how the sacramental insights, developed in section two, can enrich the symbols of the Lord's Supper with missional theology.

1. A Historical Overview: Sacramental Theology and the Mennonite Brethren

During the Reformation, Anabaptist leaders rejected the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church. However, Anabaptist reformers, such as Pilgram Marpeck, Balthasar Hubmaier, and

Dirk Philips articulated and defended a thoughtful theology of the Lord's Supper that drew on the sacramental resources of their day. Because their theology of the Lord's Supper was intimately connected with the life of the church community and love for one's neighbour, their insights are invaluable for the current discussion on the relationship between mission and Communion. How Christians think about and practice the Lord's Supper has always been a reflection of what they think about Christ, the church, salvation, creation, mission, and eschatology. This first section will describe the developments of sacramental theology leading up to the Reformation period and the subsequent response of Anabaptist reformers who attempted to articulate a theology of the Lord's Supper that was consistent with their beliefs about Christ, the Church, salvation and ethics.

1.1 Tracing the Theological Development of Sacramental Theology

The origin of the word sacrament comes from the Greek word *musterion*, translated as either *mysterium* or *sacramentum* in Latin. This term occurs twenty-eight times in the New Testament and is principally used to describe the apostles as “the recipients of the revelation of the ‘mystery’ of God in the world in the person of Jesus Christ.”¹²³ This mystery of God, as it is revealed through the person of Christ, is a public proclamation. The apostles’ task of proclamation linked the mystery of Christ to the body of the Church.¹²⁴ Linking the term *musterion* to the person of Christ and the body of the Church opened the door to a broader usage of the term so that it eventually encompassed “the mediations through which the mystery is proclaimed by the Church, principally Baptism and the Eucharist.”¹²⁵ The term *musterion* provides the starting point for understanding the evolution of sacramental theology.

Originally the term *musterion* was applied to the Scriptures as the source of God's revelation of Jesus – not to ritual or cultic activities. It was not until the fourth century, when the church began to adopt pagan symbols and metaphors, that *mysterium* or *sacramentum* was used to designate the Christian cult as

¹²³Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, Vol. 3 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1408.

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Ibid.

well as the Scriptures. It was in this context that *mysterion* was officially translated into the Latin term *sacramentum*. Consequently, this word accrued legal connotations, for the Latin term *sacramentum* had been used to describe “a surety deposited in the temple by each of two parties to a trial and the oath accompanying this deposit.”¹²⁶ This linguistic development, made official by Tertullian, added to the confusion later on, as the Lord’s Supper in the Roman Church began to emerge as the work of the people or the priest, rather than God’s gift of grace.

Augustine made two lasting contributions to the development of sacramental theology. The first was his understanding of the relationship between word and sacrament. He wrote: “The word comes to the element; and so there is a sacrament, that is, a sort of visible word,” indicating that the Christian ceremonies are forms of God’s word of promise.¹²⁷ His second contribution to sacramental theology was a result of his controversy with the Donatists.¹²⁸ In response to their claims, Augustine argued for the objective nature of the elements, stating that the efficacy of the sacraments did not depend on the minister or recipients. However, Augustine did argue that the *fruitfulness* of the gift of the sacrament depended on the faithfulness of the recipient. Augustine’s argument would eventually be coined in the phrase *ex opere operato*, meaning that the sacraments are effective through the operation of the rite itself. Augustine’s thought would have a continuing influence on the theology of the sacraments right up to the Reformation.

The early Middle Ages introduced some important developments to sacramental theology. In the 7th century, Isidore of Seville had defined the nature of the sacrament as a mystery hidden under the veil (*tegumentum*). The term *tegumentum* would lead Paschasius Radbertus and Ratramnus, two 9th century monks of Orbis, into the first controversy in history over the nature of Christ’s presence in the

¹²⁶Ibid., 1409.

¹²⁷Carter Lindberg, “Sacraments,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation Vol. 3*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 463.

¹²⁸Ibid. The Donatists were a North African church renewal movement claiming that if the sacraments were administered by unworthy priests, they were rendered invalid. This was part of the larger debate over the visible/invisible nature of the church: the Donatists arguing for a visible, pure church.

Eucharist.¹²⁹ Radbertus, who initiated the discussion, presented a position that was very similar to the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation that would be enunciated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.¹³⁰ Radbertus argued that the body and blood of Christ are truly created by the consecration of the sacraments. He stated: “Therefore, if it is truly food, it is true flesh, and if it is truly drink it is true blood.”¹³¹ In response to Radbertus, Ratramnus argued that the elements retained their visible character of bread and wine, though they are symbols of the body and blood of Christ. Ratramnus responded that “the bread which through the ministry of the priest comes to be Christ’s body exhibits one thing outwardly to human sense, and it proclaims another thing inwardly to the minds of the faithful.”¹³² According to Ratramnus, outwardly the bread remains bread; it looks, tastes, and feels like bread. Inwardly, Christ’s body is revealed to the believing soul. Controversy over the way in which Christ is present in the sacraments, articulated by Radbertus and Ratramnus, would be a major point of contention among the Reformers.

By the late Middle Ages popular piety had begun to contribute to the development of liturgical practices, which influenced sacramental theology. Carter Lindberg notes that adoration of the Host had become so popular that the laity feared to take Communion for dread of spilling God’s blood.¹³³ In response to the laity’s concern, the doctrine of concomitance was developed – which legitimated the laity only taking Communion in one kind (the bread) – at the Council of Constance in 1415.¹³⁴ Adoration of

¹²⁹Lacoste, 1410.

¹³⁰James F. McCue, “The Doctrine of Transubstantiation From Brenegar Through Trent: The Point at Issue,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968), 393.

¹³¹Paschasium Radbertus, “The Lord’s Body and Blood,” *Readings in the History of Christian Thought*, ed. Robert Ferm (Toronto: Holt, Rinehard and Winston Inc., 1964), 458. Radbertus argued “as it is the true flesh of Christ which was crucified and buried, truly it is the sacrament of his flesh, which is divinely consecrated through the Holy Spirit on the altar by the agency of the priest in Christ’s word,” 459.

¹³²Ratramnus, “Christ’s Body and Blood,” *Readings in the History of Christian Thought*, ed. Robert Ferm (Toronto: Holt, Rinehard and Winston Inc., 1964), 461.

¹³³Lindberg, “Sacraments,” 465.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

the sacraments also led to veneration of the Host; the laity would bring their petitions to it and saw the elevation of the Host as a reenactment of the Passion wherein the priest offered the host as a sacrifice to God. Observing this situation first hand, Thomas Cranmer described the actions of the laity as running about from one altar to another in order to “see and worship God in the Host.”¹³⁵ The piety of the laity sparked some of the Reformers’ most severe criticism. The Reformers argued that the adoration of the Host was a superstitious action that led the laity into acts of idolatry. The doctrine of concomitance was also condemned by the Reformers as a doctrine made by humans that had no basis in Scripture.¹³⁶

Jaroslav Pelikan has described the 14th and 15th centuries as a time of doctrinal pluralism. A central topic of debate during the centuries leading up to the Reformation pertained to the doctrines concerning the communication of grace. Pelikan states, “To no area of Christian doctrine had the medieval development added more than it did to the communication of grace through the saints... and through the sacraments.”¹³⁷ Not only was the definition of the term ‘sacrament’ in flux during this time, but the prominence of the Eucharist, as the primary sacrament, took shape as well. Pelikan notes:

It was in keeping with the theological development of the Middle Ages that among the sacraments the Eucharist continued to hold the primary position, giving meaning and definition to all the others.... For if the body of Christ were not present in the Eucharist, none of the other sacraments would count for anything and all devotion in the church would cease to exist.¹³⁸

Pelikan’s statement reveals an observation about how closely the worship and piety of the medieval Church was bound to sacramental theology. It is clear that the question of salvation was intimately connected with sacramental theology by the time of the Reformation.

1.2 Real Presence versus Memorial Meal

Martin Luther’s response to the imperial court at the Diet of Worms (1521), where he was asked

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Jan Hus (d. 1415) first protested against this practice when it was first accepted by the Council of Constance. Hus, as a result of his willingness to question church dogma and his concentration on the Bible over and above church authority, was burned at the stake for his “heretical views.” Noll, *Turning Points*, 185.

¹³⁷Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma*, 38.

¹³⁸Ibid., 52.

to recant his writings, set the stage for the Reformation that would sweep through much of Europe. In his concluding statement to the court, Luther offered his famous response: “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason... I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”¹³⁹ His response effectively placed both the authority of Scripture and individual conscience above the authority of the Church and its councils, and made room for the theologians of the Reformation to question and debate church dogma. The elevation of Scripture and conscience over church authority provided the necessary framework for the sacramental debate, which became a point of division during the Reformation.

Luther provides an important starting place for understanding subsequent Anabaptist perspectives on the Lord’s Supper. One of Luther’s early writings, most likely on the table for retraction at the Diet of Worms, was *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520). This treatise provided a searing critique of the Roman sacramental system. He specifically attacked the Roman Church for its doctrine of transubstantiation, withholding the cup from the laity, and teaching that the mass is a good work and sacrifice. Eleanor Kreider remarks that *The Babylonian Captivity* was “‘an intellectual revolution,’ a foundational document not only for Lutherans but for all subsequent Protestant worship.”¹⁴⁰ John Rempel remarks that “Martin Luther’s sacramental writings established for the Reformation the overthrow of the Lord’s Supper as a sacrifice and as an *ex opere operato* Communion with the body and blood of Christ.”¹⁴¹ Luther’s polemical writings against the Roman Church opened the door for sacramental debate during the Reformation.

Luther’s *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528) was the product of his debates with the Swiss Reformers, principally Huldrych Zwingli, over the mode of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. In

¹³⁹Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points in History: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 154

¹⁴⁰Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997), 67.

¹⁴¹John D. Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1993), 29.

response to Zwingli's memorial view, Luther affirmed Christ's presence within the material elements of wine and bread. Luther held to a radically incarnational perspective, arguing *finitum est capax infiniti* – the finite is capable of the infinite. Commenting on Luther's incarnational perspective, Kurt K. Hendel observes that "Luther formulated a theology of creation and incarnation which affirms matter as God's good creation, which emphasizes God's immanent presence in all created things and which maintains that God accomplishes God's saving work precisely through material means."¹⁴² Furthermore, Luther argued that Christ was present in the sacraments in both his human and divine natures. In his defense against Zwingli, Luther argued that Christ's two natures could not be divided:

Christ is God and man, and his humanity has become one person with God, and is thus wholly and completely drawn into God above all creatures, so that he remains perfectly united with him. How is it possible, then, for God to be somewhere where Christ as man is not? How can it happen, without dividing the person, that God may be here without the humanity and there with the humanity?¹⁴³

Luther's question challenged the Anabaptist reformers who argued for a spiritual understanding of Christ's presence in the elements of the Supper. If the divine and human nature of Christ is divided, how does one avoid the adoption of a dualistic view of the resurrected Christ? Luther's sacramental theology was intimately tied to his Christology, which included his understanding of the incarnated and resurrected Christ, and his theology of creation.

The Swiss Reformers, such as Zwingli and Andreas von Karlstadt, challenged Luther's theology of the real presence of Christ in the sacraments. Karlstadt, a colleague, friend and eventual opponent of Luther, provided an extensive statement on the symbolic view of Communion.¹⁴⁴ Karlstadt's *Dialogue or a Discussion Booklet on the Horrible and Idolatrous Misuse of the Most Holy Sacrament of Jesus Christ* (1524) was "the first public statement of a purely symbolic understanding of communion, oriented by a

¹⁴²Kurt K. Hendel, "Finitum capax infiniti: Luther's Radical Incarnational Perspective," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35 no., 6 (Dec 2008), 430.

¹⁴³Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper – From Part I," *Martin Luther's Basic Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 272.

¹⁴⁴I refer here to Karlstadt rather than Zwingli, not only because of his relationship with Luther, but because John Rempel has noted that Karlstadt had a significant influence on various Anabaptist leaders, including Dirk Philips, Pilgram Marpeck, and Balthasar Hubmaier. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 30-32.

radically spiritualistic concept of faith.”¹⁴⁵

Karlstadt’s symbolic view of Communion, which he articulates in the *Dialogue*, addresses the two main theological concerns Karlstadt had with sacramental theology.¹⁴⁶ Karlstadt’s first desire was to eliminate the externalization of religion, which he saw as fundamentally idolatrous. He argued that external signs do not produce faith or salvation:

If you could take to heart how divine love together with faith, hope, and trust in God is cut off and wastes away through the misuse of all external, well-intended signs, and comes to nothing... that through the false use of the sacrament the love of God is extinguished, faith hindered, and consciences imprisoned in horrible error... that they fall into the error of holding the opinion that Christ has suffered for our sins in the host.¹⁴⁷

Worse than being ineffectual, Karlstadt argued that veneration of the host had led people to worship the bread rather than the Lord. Karlstadt’s second interest sprung from his concern that the centrality of Christ’s work on the cross had been obscured by the sacramental view of Christ’s presence (and continued sacrifice) in the Eucharist. He went as far as to say that “what we ascribe to the external bread we take away from the death of Christ.”¹⁴⁸ Karlstadt argued that a sacramental view of the wine and bread was detrimental because one cannot perceive in them the death and resurrection of Christ.

Karlstadt’s rejection of external forms of religion, his emphasis on the cross as the locus of Christ’s salvific work, and his acceptance of Augustinian distinctions between the inner and outer, all

¹⁴⁵Hans J. Hillerbrand, “Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt, Prodigal Reformer,” *Church History* 35 no. 4 (D. 1966), 393.

¹⁴⁶The *Dialogue* received criticism and even ridicule from other Reformers because of Karlstadt’s exegesis of Luke 22:19, wherein he attempted to demonstrate that Christ referred to himself and not to the bread. Karlstadt based his argument on the fact that *touto* (this) is neuter, while *artos* (bread) is masculine in the words of institution. Karlstadt argued “I have always considered it this way: that Christ pointed to his body and thus said, ‘This is my body which will be given for you.’ For Christ did not point to the bread, nor did he say, ‘The bread is my body which will be given for you.’” “Karlstadt’s *Dialogue* on the Lord’s Supper,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 53 no. 1 (1979), 40. Despite the criticism that Karlstadt received for his *Dialogue*, Hillerbrand notes that this was the first public statement of a purely symbolic understanding of the Eucharist. Hillerbrand states that Karlstadt’s pamphlets on the Lord’s Supper were “a theological sensation, evoking responses from both Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli, and precipitating the communion controversy which engaged the attention of Protestantism for the remainder of the decade.” Hillerbrand, “Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt,” 390.

¹⁴⁷Carter Lindberg ed., trans., “Karlstadt’s *Dialogue* on the Lord’s Supper,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 53 no. 1 (1979), 40.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 55.

provided the basis for his memorial and symbolic theology. According to Carter Lindberg, it was Karlstadt's emphasis on the cross that led him to reject "both transubstantiation and the 'new papalism' of Wittenberg whose affirmation of the real presence led to neglect of the historical cross of Christ. The sacrament is not a means of grace because forgiveness may be found only in the cross of Christ."¹⁴⁹ This emphasis on the cross also provided a sharp distinction between Luther and Karlstadt. Hillerbrand notes:

Luther was able to see the Cross as the ground of the promise of forgiveness in the sacrament. Carlstadt denied that there was in the sacrament a divine promise, for such a promise was only in the Cross. There was no secondary means of grace; Luther's "and-and" was replaced by Carlstadt's categorical "either-or."¹⁵⁰

Lindberg notes that Karlstadt's horror of idolatry and images rose from his concern that salvation was endangered by a misplaced love in created things rather than in the creator.¹⁵¹ For Karlstadt, the cross was the sole means of grace; nothing else was necessary.

Karlstadt's theology of the Lord's Supper would have an influence on Anabaptist theologians. Rempel argues that Karlstadt influenced Anabaptist theologians in three specific ways.¹⁵² First, Karlstadt's appropriation of Augustine's sacramental and spiritualist theory - the reduction of the reality of a sign to an outer material entity - would shape Anabaptist theology. Second, Karlstadt's Christology of the ascended Christ was carried over into Anabaptism as "they emphasized the ascension almost as proof of the fact that Christ could not be present in the sacrament."¹⁵³ Finally, Karlstadt's awkward exegesis of Luke 22:19 was later appropriated by Anabaptists. Rempel notes that Karlstadt's "reading of the demonstrative pronoun plays a part in the evolution of Anabaptist exegesis of the accounts of the last

¹⁴⁹Carter Lindberg, *The Third Reformation? Charismatic Movements and the Lutheran Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), 72.

¹⁵⁰Hillerbrand, "Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt," 391.

¹⁵¹Lindberg, *The Third Reformation?* 67.

¹⁵²Rempel is mainly interested here with the ways that Karlstadt's theology influenced Pilgram Marpeck, Dirk Philips and Balthasar Hubmaier, as they were the subjects of his study in *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*. Karlstadt's influence on these theologians is taken from pages 30-32.

¹⁵³Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 32.

Supper.”¹⁵⁴ Karlstadt’s symbolic understanding of the Lord’s Supper provided Anabaptist Reformers with a new theological framework that they used to challenge Roman Catholic sacramentalism.

1.3 Anabaptist Reformers & The Lord’s Supper

The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century rejected both the Roman Catholic Church’s doctrine of transubstantiation and Luther’s theology of the real presence; however, it is difficult to describe a singular Anabaptist theology of the Lord’s Supper that emerged during the Reformation. Rempel argues, “It is no longer plausible to assert, as many do, that all Anabaptist eucharistic teaching is derived from Zwingli and that its exclusive original setting is the Zurich reformation.”¹⁵⁵ Comparing Menno Simons’ symbolic view with Pilgram Marpeck’s more sacramental view will demonstrate the validity of Rempel’s argument.

While the theology of the Lord’s Supper differed significantly among Anabaptist reformers, there are commonalities that demonstrate their commitment to Anabaptist distinctives. Rempel argues that among the Anabaptist reformers, Dirk Philips, Balthasar Hubmaier and Pilgram Marpeck provided the most sustained and systematic treatment on the Lord’s Supper.¹⁵⁶ These three men each allowed their ecclesiology and Christology to inform their theology of the Supper. They each held the view that the church was the prolongation of Jesus’ humanity on earth as his presence continued in and through the community of believers.¹⁵⁷ This meant that when the community gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Christ was truly present in the body of the church. Remarking on this ecclesiology, Dueck states that “liturgically, Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology might best be described as ‘the church as sacrament.’”¹⁵⁸ Their shared Christological assumptions centered on the belief that the ascended Christ continued to be present in the church through the power of the Spirit.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 31.

¹⁵⁵Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, 33.

¹⁵⁶John D. Rempel, “Toward an Anabaptist Theology of the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Lord’s Supper: Believers Church Perspectives*, ed. Dale R. Stoffer (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1997), 244.

¹⁵⁷Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, 22.

¹⁵⁸Dueck, 58.

1.3.1 Menno Simons' Symbolic View

Menno Simons played a significant role in shaping MB theology of the Lord's Supper. When the first Mennonite Brethren started gathering they had few resources available to them, but were committed to studying the Bible and the writings of the early Anabaptists.¹⁵⁹ It is likely that they were influenced primarily by the writings of Menno Simons and in particular by Simons' *Foundations of Christian Doctrine*.¹⁶⁰ A brief overview of Simons' theology of the Lord's Supper is important, then, for understanding the core issues at stake in early Mennonite theology.

Joel Schmidt provides an excellent overview of Simons' symbolic view of the Lord's Supper in an article entitled, "The challenge of Menno Simons' Symbolic View of the Lord's Supper." In this article, Schmidt draws on Simons' 1558 *Foundations of Christian Doctrine* and Simons' 1554 "Reply to Gellius Faber" in order to outline Simons' negative reaction to late medieval Eucharistic piety, as well as the unique contributions Simons made to the symbolic view of the Supper.¹⁶¹

Like other Anabaptist reformers, Simons refuted the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation and the notion that the mass was a sacrifice. Simons' rejected the idea that one could find forgiveness or healing in the Eucharist. Schmidt notes that "Simons told his readers they should seek the help of 'the experienced heavenly Surgeon and Physician, Jesus Christ,' whose healing salve is not the Eucharist but 'His powerful Word with which to instruct, and His crimson blood to make atonement.'"¹⁶² Simons argued that God's grace was found in the cross of Christ and the Word of God, not in the sacraments.

Simons' emphasis on the efficacy of the Word would influence Mennonite Brethren theology. The

¹⁵⁹Jost, *Family Matters*, 12.

¹⁶⁰John B. Toews comments that a major characteristic of the Mennonite setting in Russia was "wide-spread intellectual-religious attrition." Their intellectual poverty was partly evidenced by their lack of literary performance. Toews notes that: "Until the mid-nineteenth century they had succeeded only in reprinting a songbook and a confession of faith. Other material included a polemical tract in favor of the *Kleine Gemeinde* and the purchase from Prussia of an 1834 edition of Menno Simons' *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*." Toews, "The Russian Origins of the Mennonite Brethren: Some Observations," 92.

¹⁶¹Joel Schmidt, "The Challenge of Menno Simons' Symbolic View of the Lord's Supper," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no.3 (Autumn 2006): 6-26.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 9.

Mennonite Brethren *Confession of Faith* (2000) states that the “Holy Spirit continues to make God known to individuals and the church; this revelation is always consistent with the Scriptures.”¹⁶³ Like Simons, Mennonite Brethren continue to think of the Word as the predominant means through which the church is confronted by the revelation of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁴

Another significant contribution that Simons made to the Anabaptist symbolic view of the Supper was his teaching on what the Supper signified. Schmidt argues that Simons’ theology was particularly distinct in the way that he united the Supper with the transformed life of believers. Schmidt observes, “The truly distinctive contributions of Simons’ theology here develop out of how it is impacted by a concern for the believer’s new life in Christ.”¹⁶⁵ Regarding the relationship between the Lord’s Supper and the new life of the believer, Simons argued that “the Scriptures on every hand require of us true repentance, and the sacramental signs, such as baptism and the Holy Supper, signify, represent, and teach to all true Christian believers a penitent, unblamable life.”¹⁶⁶ According to Simons, the Supper signified new life in Christ, a view which Simon’s equated with the transformed life of believers.

Since, according to Simons, the Supper signified the transformed life of believers, it also functioned to preserve the purity of the church. It is evident that Simons’ theology of the church “without spot or wrinkle” came to bear on his theology of the Supper. Schmidt notes that for Simons, “having rejected any connection between the forgiveness of sins and the Eucharist, making the Lord’s Supper a communion of the truly redeemed (as judged by their outward behavior) meant that maintaining the

¹⁶³*Confession of Faith*, 23.

¹⁶⁴The Mennonite Brethren confession of faith points to Christ as the supreme revelation of God. Revelation is defined as “the act or process by which God makes Himself known to human beings,” *Confession of Faith*, 24. The confession states that “The witnesses to this final revelation in Christ were the apostles, whom Jesus had chosen to be the depositories of his words and works [...] Their writings are the foundation documents of the new people of God, the church, and they remain authoritative for Christian believers for all time,” 25.

¹⁶⁵Schmidt, “Menno Simons’ Symbolic View,” 12.

¹⁶⁶John C. Wenger, ed., and Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956), 632.

church's purity by means of the ban constituted a major purpose of the Supper."¹⁶⁷ Schmidt argues that Simons' theology effectively made the Supper a kind of spiritual reward for those who demonstrated a holy lifestyle. Simons' priority on holy living resulted in an emphasis on the outward behaviour of church members. Thus, the practice of self-examination became an important part of the Communion observance.

The practice of the ban in conjunction with the Lord's Supper is not a common practice in the Mennonite Brethren church today. The practice of self-examination, on the other hand, has continued among MB's to this day as an important component of the Lord's Supper. The most current *Confession of Faith* states, "In preparation for the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, all believers examine themselves."¹⁶⁸ The pastoral application of the *Confession* states that when examination results in the need for confession or restoration, it should be done immediately. This application of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 seems to reflect Simons' theology more than it does a biblical interpretation of Paul's concern for the social stratification that was occurring in Corinth.

Simons' theology of the Lord's Supper provides positive and negative contributions to current MB discussions on Communion. Positively, his connection between the Lord's Supper and the transformed life of believers suggests that the Supper requires ethical and missional engagement on the part of communicants. Simons teaches:

Without penitence, neither water, bread, nor wine, or ceremony, avail in Christ...Before Him avail a new creature, a converted, changed, and broken heart, a sincere fear and love of God, unfeigned love of one's neighbors...Where there is such a new being, there indeed is true baptism and the true Supper.¹⁶⁹

Simons' theology of the Supper is intrinsically connected to a transformed life that not only looks inward, but looks outward to the neighbour. This emphasis leads to the potentially negative impact of Simons' theology: it can lead Christians to place personal piety over and above the grace of God. Christians cannot

¹⁶⁷Schmidt, 13.

¹⁶⁸*Confession of Faith*, 97.

¹⁶⁹Simons, *Complete Writings*, 719.

earn the right to participate in Communion; it is a gift of grace. Schmidt articulates the potential pitfall of linking the Supper with holy living:

Insofar as believers' new, penitent lives are made a central signified of the Supper on par with Jesus' atonement, a conflation of the consciousness and ethical achievements of the community with Christ is always a possibility...a serious danger in Mennonite circles seems to be substituting the life of the community for God.¹⁷⁰

Schmidt reminds MBs that ethical living can never replace the salvific work of Christ. It is here that sacramental theology can help MB's to find a faithful balance between human response and God's grace in their Communion theology.

1.3.2 Pilgram Marpeck's Incarnational Perspective

Pilgram Marpeck's theology of the Lord's Supper leans more toward sacramentalism and provides a helpful corrective to Simons' symbolic view. Rempel has described Marpeck's theology as

an attempt to join together Protestant principle and Catholic substance. The Catholic substance was the teaching of the incarnation as the rock from which all sacramental reality had to be hewn. The Protestant principle, especially in its radicalized form in Anabaptism, was the claim that faith was the *sine qua non* of the church and of each Christian's life.¹⁷¹

Rempel's definition would seem to imply that Marpeck's theology was more sacramental than his Anabaptist contemporaries. However, Marpeck's understanding of sacrament was different from the traditional Roman doctrine. His sacramental theology distinguished itself from Catholicism in the way it connected the body of Christ (the church) to the work of the Trinity. For Marpeck, the term 'sacrament' encompassed all the activities of the church, not just baptism and the Supper, because Christ's presence on earth was continued in the body of believers through the work of the Spirit.

Marpeck's writings are an important resource for the MB church for several reasons. Of the Anabaptist reformers, Pilgram Marpeck offers the most comprehensive writings on the subject of the Lord's Supper. Rempel notes, "Marpeck is the only Anabaptist theologian whose circumstances and scope

¹⁷⁰Schmidt, "Menno Simons' Symbolic View," 21.

¹⁷¹Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 146.

of thought brought the Lord's Supper to the center of his theology."¹⁷²

Second, Marpeck's theology of the Lord's Supper was forged, in large part, as a response to the spiritualist wing of the Radical Reformation in Strasbourg.¹⁷³ Rempel argues that it was Marpeck's debate with the spiritualists in Strasbourg that led Marpeck to use the incarnation as a foundation for his theology of the Lord's Supper:

Marpeck was convinced that, unless the spiritual impulse was balanced by the sacramental one, the gospel would be reduced to biblical, ahistorical, nonchurchly, individualized piety. He judged spiritualism to be a movement that cut off the limb it was sitting on. He turned to a theology of the incarnation as the source of the outwardness of the Christian life in general, and of the church and its ceremonies in particular.¹⁷⁴

Marpeck's concerns could be applied to the North American brand of individual spirituality that has come to dominate Evangelical churches today. Marpeck's incarnational perspective can continue to serve as an important corrective for individual, spiritualistic piety.

Finally, Marpeck's theology helps to provide a balance between divine initiative and human response in the mystery of the Lord's Supper. It has been noted that the Mennonite preoccupation with the human response of faith can overshadow God's gift of grace through Christ. This can lead, as John Roth has noted, to a tendency for Mennonites to believe "that the lived actions of the congregation are a substitute for the more formal practices of baptism and communion."¹⁷⁵ Marpeck's incarnational perspective enabled him to maintain a balance between faith and grace, while still emphasizing the ethical and missional implications of the Supper.

Marpeck's theology of the Lord's Supper was rooted in the idea that the church is the prolongation of Christ's body in the world. Neal Blough observes that Marpeck linked the term 'ceremonies' to Christ's humanity. To Marpeck, the ceremonies encompassed more than just baptism and

¹⁷²Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 162.

¹⁷³Neal Blough, *Christ in Our Midst: Incarnation, Church and Discipleship in the Theology of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 26.

¹⁷⁴John D. Rempel, "Toward an Anabaptist Theology of the Lord's Supper", 244.

¹⁷⁵John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2009), 200.

the Lord's Supper, but everything that Christ and the Apostles had commanded. Blough observes, "The ceremonies and the entire 'outer life' of the church are a prolongation of the humanity of Christ – not just baptism and the eucharist, but everything that the Christian community accomplished in a public and physical way."¹⁷⁶ Marpeck was able to view the common life of the church as a sacramental reality because of his distinction between the glorified and unglorified body of Christ. Blough summarizes Marpeck's theology, stating, "Christ, who is now glorified, continues to act upon earth by the means of his unglorified body, namely the church."¹⁷⁷ For Marpeck, Christ was not only present in the sacraments, but in the entire life of the church.

The sacramental nature of the church was closely linked to the Lord's Supper in Marpeck's thought. In a recent paper, Andrea Dalton argues that for Marpeck, the "primary significance of the Lord's Supper is its work in forming the church as the body of Christ."¹⁷⁸ Consequently, love is an important element for Marpeck; it is the love that believers have for each other that makes Christ tangibly present in Communion. Marpeck states, "Although it can be considered a supper without love, it would not be a Christian communion.... The Lord's Supper cannot be eaten without love, which is a requirement for communion. And this true love grows out of a true faith."¹⁷⁹ Marpeck's theology urges MBs to remember that the Lord's Supper is closely connected to Christian fellowship.

Marpeck's emphasis on the sacramental nature of the church and Christian love as a foundation for Christian Communion is closely related to his Trinitarian understanding of the sacrament. Marpeck's *Admonition* of 1542 articulates a Trinitarian foundation of the ceremonies:

¹⁷⁶Neal Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78, no. 1 (Jan 2004), 34.

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷⁸Andrea M. Dalton, "A Sacramental Believers Church: Pilgram Marpeck and the (Un)mediated Presence of God," in *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, Karl Koop, eds. (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 224.

¹⁷⁹William Klassen & Walter Klassen trans., ed., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press 1978) 266.

Thus the children of the Spirit and nature of Christ also do that which the Father, through the Spirit, performs in the inner man; they also perform externally as members of the body of Christ in baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Father loves the Son, and has committed all things into His hands; as the Father works as Spirit inwardly, the Son of Man works externally.¹⁸⁰

Marpeck goes on to argue that without external things, such as the Lord's Supper, the Son of Man has been denied. John Rempel offers further clarity on the connection between Marpeck's theology of the Trinity and Communion:

In [Marpeck's] conflation of two and sometimes even three members of the Trinity, he is saying that to have communion with the body and blood of Christ is to participate in love, which is to participate in God. Love, in all its concreteness and not as an abstract inward reality, makes the Lord's Supper a communion unto eternal life.¹⁸¹

Marpeck's Trinitarian view of the Lord's Supper provides an important connection between mission and the Lord's Supper--it is the love of the Triune God for the world that continues to find expression in the act of Communion.

Of the Anabaptist reformers, Marpeck offers the strongest connection between the Lord's Supper and the Trinitarian nature of the incarnation. Blough comments that "Marpeck insisted on the foundational significance of God's having become flesh in Christ. Against the Spiritualists, Marpeck argued that since God was fully present in Jesus of Nazareth...the visible and material realms of our existence...cannot be dismissed, despised or relativized as means for knowing God."¹⁸² It is the Trinitarian dynamic of love flowing out to the church through external ceremonies that provides a basis for the ethical/missional imperative of the Supper.

1.4 Summary

The MB denomination has historically maintained a memorial view of the Lord's Supper, as it was developed by Menno Simons, and they continue to echo Simon's theology by emphasizing personal faith as a prerequisite for participation at the Table. This theology can lead MB congregations into dangerous territory considering the North American cultural values of individualism and autonomy. The

¹⁸⁰Klassen and Klassen, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 195.

¹⁸¹Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 134.

¹⁸²Blough, *Christ In Our Midst*, 225.

weaknesses of Simon's theology, which can lead Christians to place personal piety over and above the grace of God, needs to be taken seriously by the MB church. Chapter three will discuss how a missional theology of the Lord's Supper, which draws on sacramental resources, can help the MB church to disciple Christians who are able to resist the cultural conditioning of individualism. Before the MB church is able to consider its role in God's mission in light of the Table, it must consider what it means to be the recipient of God's grace at the Lord's Supper.

This historical overview also delved into some of the rich resources that are available to the MB church today as it considers the relationship between mission and Communion. Adopting insights from sacramental theology is not a giant leap from the current Mennonite Brethren theology of the Lord's Supper. The 2000 *Confession of Faith* states, "We interpret the Lord's Supper as less than sacrament but more than symbol.... Believers are reunited with Christ in the event and with each other."¹⁸³ Thus, the current confession acknowledges that Christ is in some way present in the act of breaking bread.

The current *Confession of Faith*, however, places more emphasis on the response of the participants than on the role of the Spirit or the preventive grace of God. The confession states, "Grace, forgiveness and new covenant are not affected through participation in the Supper."¹⁸⁴ Marpeck's Trinitarian theology of the incarnation challenges this statement, as it calls MB's to consider how the Triune God continues to extend grace, incarnationally, through the body of Christ.

2. Toward a Theology of Sacrament & Mission

Christians are often tempted to think of worship and mission as two separate, yet compatible, spheres in the life of the church. Worship is generally relegated to the corporate act of gathering on Sunday morning and private communion with God. Mission is the public act of the church, which propels individuals from the safety of the church into active engagement with the world for the sake of the gospel. It is both dangerous and unnecessary to place worship and mission into separate arenas. In his book *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness*, John D. Roth argues that distinctions between worship and

¹⁸³*Confession of Faith*, 100.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 102.

witness “almost always have the effect of reducing worship to a technique or exercise designed to produce a specific outcome – usually to make us feel happy or peaceful or energized for the week ahead.”¹⁸⁵ The separation of witness from worship can lead individuals to works of social activism that are divorced from the mission of the church and our participation in the body of Christ.

This thesis has asserted that the Lord’s Supper and mission cannot be separated. Roth has argued that witness *and* worship are the inevitable result when human beings are in right relationship with their creator. Worship, therefore, “is always a public activity that transforms our actions; and our actions are always a public witness to the God whom we worship.”¹⁸⁶ With this assertion firmly in mind, this section will endeavour to articulate a missional theology of the Lord’s Supper by drawing on current and historical sacramental resources that remain consistent with the MB Anabaptist heritage and Evangelical ethos.

2.1 Incarnation: The Foundation for Mission & Sacrament

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-2; 14).

Of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John is the only one that does not include a narrative of the Last Supper. It is interesting that theologians have so frequently used John’s Gospel, particularly John 6, to describe the mystery of Communion. The Anabaptist reformers who wrote most extensively on the Lord’s Supper, Hubmaier, Marpeck and Philips, were each attracted to the fourth Gospel and used it to develop their Christology.¹⁸⁷ The Gospel of John offers a rich description of the incarnation of Christ. John 1 provides the basis not only for our understanding of the divinity of Christ, but also the humanity of

¹⁸⁵Roth, *Practices*, 24. Roth encompasses the embodied and public actions of Christians in his term witness. I will continue to use the word mission instead of witness in order to reinforce the idea that the witness of the church is caught up into the mission of God in and for the world.

¹⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸⁷Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, 22. Rempel notes that “Hubmaier’s exegetical engagement was undertaken from the vantage point of a Johannine Christology”: Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, 85. Of Marpeck, Rempel states, “the most pervasive evidence for the Johannine character of Marpeck’s writings is the centrality of a theologically explicit understanding of the incarnation”; *Ibid.*, 105. Finally, Rempel states that Philip’s Christology emerges from “his analysis of the Fourth Gospel in relation to the Lord’s Supper”; *Ibid.*, 169.

Christ. It is through the outward means of human flesh that God becomes known to humanity. This is a theme that Marpeck developed in his writings against the Spiritualists. John's first chapter also attests to the missional nature of the incarnation. Christ entered into human history; he dwelt with us so that we might become children of God. The themes of incarnation and Trinity that are developed by Marpeck, based on John's Gospel, provide an important basis for a missional understanding of the Lord's Supper.¹⁸⁸

A Trinitarian theology of the incarnation is the starting point for understanding the missional nature of Communion. Blough helpfully restates the Trinitarian concepts that were 'hammered out' at the council of Nicaea in a way that highlights the missional nature of the incarnation: "1) In Jesus, God was fully and definitively present within time and space, 2) in the Spirit, God continues to work within the world and history, and 3) that the 'Jesus-project' of a non-violent reconciliation of the universe is at the very heart of God's being and essence."¹⁸⁹ The next section will return to Marpeck's theology to gain further insight into the missional nature of the Lord's Supper as it flows from a Trinitarian Christology.

2.1.1 Marpeck's Incarnational Perspective

Marpeck's theology of the Lord's Supper rested on his understanding of Trinity, Christology and the incarnation. Rempel highlights three main characteristics of Marpeck's Christology, which provide a foundation for the relationship between the Supper and the life of the church:

First, his sacramental beliefs, especially those concerning the Supper, are deduced directly from the activity of God as Trinity in the world. Second, Marpeck's doctrine of the Lord's Supper develops out of his Christology, and in turn his Christology is worked out for the purpose of defending what he believes about the Eucharist. Third, for Marpeck, the sacramental and ethical are inseparable.¹⁹⁰

Marpeck's Trinitarian Christology provided an important point of connection between the Lord's Supper and the mission of the church.

¹⁸⁸While the Gospel of John does not use Trinitarian language, John provides some of the strongest images of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. Rempel notes that "it has often been assumed that John is the direct source of the Trinitarian formulations set in place at the (First) Council of Nicaea (325) and the christological claims of the Council of Chalcedon (451)": Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 105.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 237.

¹⁹⁰Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 158.

The ontological nature of the Trinity provided Marpeck with a foundation for his Eucharistic theology. God is love, and that love is expressed through the self-giving relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. According to Rempel, Marpeck viewed God and love as one concept. Rempel restates Marpeck's argument in the following way:

[Marpeck] introduces an equation of utmost significance for his eucharistic doctrine: love and God are one; the two concepts are used interchangeably. Love issues from love. This is what the Eucharist incarnates. What more could one want in the breaking of bread, he asks, than to have love and the Holy Spirit, that is, God and Jesus Christ?¹⁹¹

Love becomes the centerpiece of Communion; for Marpeck, to partake of the body and blood of Christ is to participate in the divine love of the Trinity. Rempel adds, "In [the Lord's Supper] love is remembered, given thanks for, received, and given."¹⁹² The love of God, expressed most fully to humanity through the self-giving of Jesus on the cross, enables believers to love others sacrificially.

Marpeck's Trinitarian theology of the Lord's Supper helped Marpeck to develop his doctrine of the humanity of Christ. In response to the Spiritualists, who rejected the external rites and ceremonies of the Church, Marpeck affirmed the necessity of the material world in making God known to humanity. For Marpeck, "the incarnation defined for him how God meets humanity. Spiritual reality takes material form."¹⁹³ Marpeck's theology of the incarnation was closely connected to the ceremonies of the church, which included the Lord's Supper. Marpeck stated, "Whoever presumes to discover the secrets of God...without the outward, that is, the exterior or visible, casts away...the very means by which he could be taught, could learn, or discover the divine secrets, for it is precisely the humanity of Christ which is our mediator before the Godhead."¹⁹⁴ To reject the ceremonies of the church was, in Marpeck's view, as good as rejecting the incarnation as the means of accomplishing salvation.

It is the ceremonies of the church which tie the incarnation and ethical life of the church together.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 134.

¹⁹²Ibid.

¹⁹³Ibid., 94.

¹⁹⁴Klassen and Klassen, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 82.

According to Marpeck, it is through the ceremonies of the church that Christ is present in the world. Through the ceremonies God is able to act tangibly and concretely in history, and through them God continues to serve humanity “in the same way as did Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁹⁵ The ethical and missional application of Marpeck’s theology of ceremonies is that the church actually *becomes* Christ’s self-giving presence for the world through the concrete forms of liturgy and ritual. Rempel proclaims: “The glory of the church is that it shares the humiliation of God. The church is that community whose suffering is the means by which God is revealed and by which he saves people.”¹⁹⁶ It is through material means, such as water, bread, wine, written and spoken word, that Christ becomes known to the world.

Because Marpeck’s theology of the Lord’s Supper was birthed out of controversy with the Spiritualists, it is particularly helpful for the MB church as it seeks to articulate its theology in a culture that overemphasizes individual spirituality. Rempel posits that Marpeck’s interaction with the Spiritualists “led him on a theological journey that still awaits most believers’ churches.”¹⁹⁷ According to Rempel, this is true for Anabaptists, who have given free rein to spiritualist impulses because of their emphasis on faith as the foundation of the Christian life.¹⁹⁸ If, in their practice of the Lord’s Supper, Mennonite Brethren continue to emphasize introspection and personal faith, there is little hope that the church will recognize the Supper as a concrete reality through which Christ is made known to the world.

2.1.2 Why the Incarnation Matters: A Contemporary Perspective

Contemporary theologians have also used the incarnation as the foundation for sacramental theology. James White, in his book *Sacraments As God’s Self Giving*, describes the incarnation as God’s visible expression of self-giving. Just as Marpeck emphasized love as the foundation for the Lord’s Supper, White states that self-giving is the true expression of *agape* love, which is “the unselfish pouring

¹⁹⁵Blough, *Christ in Our Midst*, 37.

¹⁹⁶Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, 147.

¹⁹⁷Rempel, “Toward an Anabaptist Theology of the Lord’s Supper,” 244.

¹⁹⁸*Ibid.*

out of self for the benefit of another, without thought of return.”¹⁹⁹ White argues that without the incarnation, humanity would not be able to perceive God’s self-giving reconciliation and redemption.

According to White, the sacraments are the means through which God’s self-giving continues to take visible and audible expression.²⁰⁰ White describes the act of self-giving as requiring a person capable of giving, a recipient, and the means of giving. It is the means of giving that concerns sacramental theology. In order for humans to express self-giving to one another, they rely on physical means of expression; whether it be a spoken word or a gesture. White emphasizes, “Without some means of expression, [a] relationship never becomes perceptible. Love must be expressed to be recognized by another.”²⁰¹ The incarnation was the most concrete expression of God’s self-giving love. This is why scholars speak of Christ as the primary sacrament. White states, “As the primordial sacrament, Christ is the source of all individual sacraments that carry on what he initiated.”²⁰² As a continuation of the incarnation, the sacraments continue to manifest God’s love for humanity through words and gestures.

The incarnation is the foundation of sacramental theology. It suggests that the sacraments are a continuation of Christ’s work of expressing God’s intention for creation. Dueck connects the incarnation to the missional nature of the sacraments: “In the incarnation God is revealed, then, in time and space; this becomes the foundation for understanding symbolic realities and the sacraments. ‘The Word became flesh’ reminds us that all of creation, not only our souls, will be redeemed.”²⁰³ Drawing on the insights of Marpeck, Rempel reiterates the importance of the incarnation for Communion theology:

¹⁹⁹White, *Sacraments As God’s Self Giving*, 14. White points to Jesus who spoke of *Agape* love in John 15:13: “Greater love [*agape*] has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 16.

²⁰² Ibid., 22. See also, VanderZee, who describes Christ as the quintessential sacrament: *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 45-51.

²⁰³ Dueck, “A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics: A Praxis Approach,” 78.

Marpeck grasped the truth that life in the Spirit is not a flight beyond the created order. To try to live beyond our flesh is to act as if we were God. It is a denial of our creatureliness, and as importantly, it is a denial of grace, of the incarnation.... The incarnation establishes the sacramentality of life in the Spirit: tangible things become doors to intangible reality. The source and goal of this reality is Christ, as he was revealed in the flesh. The explicit, concentrated form of this revelation is the Bible, the church, and its self-expression through sacraments.²⁰⁴

To accept the incarnation as theological pillar for a theology of Communion is necessary, as it reminds believers that God has chosen to accomplish his mission within the bounds of the created order.

2.1.3 Implications of the Incarnation for Mission

Viewing the Lord's Supper through the lens of the incarnation has implications for the mission and ethical life of the church. The first is that both flesh and spirit matter. The Zwinglian view of the Lord's Supper, carried forward by Menno Simons, elevated the spiritual over the material; the effect is that most Protestants, including Mennonite Brethren, tend to neglect humanity's need for the visible and tangible in worship. White comments on Zwingli's symbolic view, stating his "muted value for actions reflects a distorted view of what it is to be human, as if we give ourselves only through words."²⁰⁵

Grounding the Supper in the incarnation brings together the spirit and flesh in our corporate worship. It connects our love of God with our love for our neighbour in a concrete and tangible way. Rempel articulates the relationship between Communion and ethics well--if worship was rooted in the incarnation it

would make love of neighbor a sacrament, the twin of the Lord's Supper...Because our gathering to praise him and our scattering to love our neighbors are inseparable parts of worship. Sacramental living is both the concentrated moment when the cup of salvation is held and drunk and the dispersed moment when it is poured out for the world.²⁰⁶

The first Mennonite Brethren recognized that participation in the Lord's Supper required ethical living on the part of the participants. However, ethical living cannot be separated from love for our neighbour. The

²⁰⁴John Rempel, "Christian Worship: Surely the Lord Is in This Place," *Conrad Grebel Review* 6, 1 (Winter, 1988): 112.

²⁰⁵White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving*, 26. This distortion has led Christians to view mission as a purely spiritual matter and neglects the holistic nature of the incarnation. Jesus' mission was to proclaim good news to the poor, liberate the prisoners, recover the sight of the blind, free us from oppression and proclaim jubilee (Luke 4:17-19).

²⁰⁶Rempel, "Christian Worship: Surely the Lord Is in This Place," 117.

Lord's Supper has to be more than an introspective moment once a month when believers make sure that they have paid their taxes, been good to their spouses, and abstained from drinking and smoking. It has to be a moment that leads to action when participation in Christ leads to self-giving for others.

The second implication for mission is that Christ's incarnation continues in the world today through the church. Marpeck's theology expressed how the Trinitarian nature of the incarnation has implications on the relationship between the ceremonies of the church and the mission of the church. Blough observes that "Marpeck's Christology is profoundly Trinitarian and reflects a dynamic of *sentness*. With the incarnation, the Word was *sent* into the world. At Pentecost, the Spirit was *sent*, a Spirit which then indwells the community which in turn is *sent* into the world."²⁰⁷ According to Marpeck, it is through the ceremonies of the church that Christ's humanity is prolonged in history. The church, as the prolongation of Christ's humanity, is profoundly missional and ethical, as it is called to be broken and poured out for the life of the world. The next section will look more closely at the church as the body of Christ in relation to the Lord's Supper.

2.2 Ecclesiology: The Church as Sacrament

The Reformation debates over the Lord's Supper were as much concerned with ecclesiology as they were with Christology. The Radical Reformers shifted the emphasis in Communion from God's grace to the response of faith. The Anabaptists rejected *ex opera operato* as a "magical" understanding of the sacraments, which they believed separated the reception of grace from the transformed life of believers.²⁰⁸ This shift led the Anabaptists to move the locus of God's grace and activity in the world from the physical elements of water, bread and wine, to the body of the church. In effect, the church itself became a sacrament.

The early Anabaptists saw the church as a community of disciples in the process of regeneration.

²⁰⁷Blough, *Christ in Our Midst*, 226.

²⁰⁸Roth notes that the Anabaptists could not reconcile the efficacy of the sacraments as being distinct from the life of the priests, who were engaged in drunkenness and sexual immorality, and the laity, who showed no evidence of a transformed life: Roth, *Practices*, 197.

Dueck states, “This gathering of the regenerated was itself to be a sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace.”²⁰⁹ These Anabaptists believed that as the community experienced regeneration, it would be able to live and act as the body of Christ. Snyder articulates their belief this way:

Individuals were members (unavoidably, bodily members) of Christ Himself because of their heavenly rebirth, regeneration, and incorporation into the Body of Christ on earth. Therefore, just as Christ was persecuted, so His Body on earth would be persecuted. Just as Christ forgave, rendered unto Caesar, refused to judge or take the sword, so His Body would also do. The Body of Christ on earth, the true church, would incarnate in a visible way, the mind and the spirit of Christ by lives that conformed to His life.²¹⁰

The process of regeneration was intimately tied to the mission of the church, as it enabled the church to become a vehicle of revelation for God’s grace.

Like the early Anabaptists, the first Mennonite Brethren maintained that participation in the Lord’s Supper could not be separated from the transformed lives of individual believers. The first Mennonite Brethren were “concerned about the spiritual laxity in the church [and] felt they couldn’t partake of the Lord’s Supper in a setting which included unregenerated church members.”²¹¹ Michelle Ferguson argues that this Anabaptist ecclesiology is unique because it speaks of “a community of brothers and sisters in faith who have voluntarily committed themselves to a radical life of discipleship.”²¹² For the early MBs, the actions of the community became as important as the action of God in the Lord’s Supper, as transformation was evidence that God was present in the community.

Anabaptist ecclesiology provides a lens through which one can see the ethical implications of the Table more clearly. However, John Roth has noted two dangers in Anabaptist sacramental theology that flow from their ecclesiology. First, emphasizing the righteous behaviour and ethical practices of the community can lead to legalism and division. Roth states, “In this quest for moral holiness, Mennonites

²⁰⁹Dueck, “A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics: A Praxis Approach,” 63. What is unfortunate, according to Dueck, is that the church as a community of people in the process of regeneration was replaced by the concept of a church without spot or wrinkle.

²¹⁰C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1997), 224.

²¹¹Funk -Wiebe, *Who Are the Mennonite Brethren?*, 44.

²¹²Michelle Ferguson, “Anabaptist Liturgy” An Oxymoron?” *Direction* 36 (Spring 2007): 9.

have taken Paul's warning to the church at Corinth...quite seriously, often turning the Lord's Supper into a tool of discipline and exclusion."²¹³ This folly can result when the efficacy of personal faith is not viewed in proper proportion to God's grace and the activity of the Spirit in the rites of the church. The second danger, which has developed more recently, is the tendency to view the ethical actions of the church as a substitute for the rites of the church. Roth argues that this tendency "can easily lead to a form of self-worship that is ultimately disconnected from an encounter with the living God."²¹⁴

It is with these dangers in mind that this section will examine the Lord's Supper from an ecclesiological perspective. It will look first at Marpeck's theology of the church as the prolongation of Christ's humanity. Marpeck's understanding of the church as sacrament is important for Mennonite Brethren, as it is grounded in his incarnational Trinitarianism, which brings together spirit and flesh. Second, this section will look at two contemporary theologians from differing denominational perspectives, John H. Yoder and William Cavanaugh, as they both offer significant contributions to understanding the social and ethical implications of the church as sacrament.

2.2.1 Pilgram Marpeck: The Prolongation of Christ's Humanity

Marpeck's theology of the "humanity of Christ" provided the basis for his theology of the church as the prolongation of Christ's body on earth. His *Clear Instruction* (1531) was an objection to Hans B nderlin and Christian Entfelder who argued that the essence of the Christian life was inward, spiritual and invisible. As a result, B nderlin and Entfelder advocated for the cessation of the external practices of the church. Marpeck's response was that the humanity of Christ brought together spiritual and material reality. According to Marpeck, "the secrets of God lie hidden under the outward speech, words, deeds and ceremonies of the humanity of Christ."²¹⁵ For Marpeck, the entire "outer life" of the church, including

²¹³Roth, *Practices*, 200.

²¹⁴Ibid., 201.

²¹⁵"A Clear and Useful Instruction," Klassen and Klassen, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 81-82.

baptism and the Eucharist, was a prolongation of Christ's humanity.²¹⁶

Marpeck's theology of the humanity of Christ depended on two essential claims. First his Trinitarian perspective provided the basis for the ongoing work of Christ in history through the power of the Spirit. Blough notes that Marpeck's Trinitarian perspective

was fundamental to Marpeck's thinking that the Incarnation made a real difference in history – that it happened at a particular point of time, followed by the sending of the Spirit, who then established the church. Without the sending of the Spirit and its presence in the life of the Church, there can be no sacramental extension of the Incarnation.²¹⁷

Marpeck's Trinitarian perspective challenged Bänderlin and Entfelder's claim that the Christian life is inward and Spiritual; a notion that was disjointed from the way God had worked in human history through Christ and the Spirit.

The second building block for Marpeck's theology of the humanity of Christ was the product of his debates with Caspar Schwenckfeld over the nature of Christ's divinity. Schwenckfeld argued that Christ's flesh was divine in nature and that salvation was the progressive divination of human flesh. Blough enunciates the issue that was at stake for Marpeck: "In Marpeck's eyes, Schwenckfeld...spoke only of Christ's glory and majesty and not of the cross and tribulation that he bore before his ascension and glorification. Instead, insisted Marpeck, Christ brought about salvation in his body, within history, through humiliation and the cross. The church is called to follow the same path."²¹⁸ In response to Schwenckfeld, Marpeck developed a theology of the "unglorified" Christ, who took on human flesh at a specific time in history and subsequently suffered and died on the cross. Marpeck wrote that the work of Christ's unglorified body included "teaching, baptism, Lord's Supper, admonition, ban, discipline, evidence of love and service for the common good [etc.].... This outward work is brought about in and

²¹⁶Neal Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (January 2004): 34.

²¹⁷Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 35.

²¹⁸Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 36.

through the church by the reigning, glorified Christ with his and the Father's Holy Spirit."²¹⁹ According to Marpeck, Christ's unglorified body continued to be at work through the Church in the power of the Spirit.

Marpeck's view of the prolongation of the humanity of Christ through the ceremonies of the church was closely connected with the mission of the church. The ceremonies, including the Lord's Supper, were forms that Christ himself had instituted and were essential as a witness for the world.²²⁰

Marpeck proclaimed, "For all ignorant, unbelieving men have to be addressed, taught, and directed through the outward witness of others before they will be brought to knowledge and understanding."²²¹ Snyder summarizes Marpeck's thought well:

For Marpeck, a central reason for the church's being was proclamation of good news and a showing forth to the world of the way of God. Christian worship was crucial for evangelization, and also for the spiritual development of believers, for it was through the church that believers were to be challenged and helped in the process of growing into the nature of Christ.²²²

Just as Christ used outward, physical means to bring about salvation for humanity, the church is called to continue Christ's work through outward, physical means. Marpeck's theology of the church as sacrament provides a middle way between two polarities: the spiritualists who see worship as disconnected from mission on one side, and activists who substitute the worship of the church for charitable works, on the other. Mission and worship, according to Marpeck's ecclesiology, cannot be divided.

A final aspect of Marpeck's Eucharistic theology was the function of the Supper in forming a community. Rempel observes that the Lord's Supper, according to Marpeck, was a "*leiblich* (corporeal) and *lieblich* (loving) gathering."²²³ For Marpeck, love was the defining character of the Lord's Supper; it was the function of the meal, but also a requirement of the meal. Drawing on John's gospel, Marpeck places the Lord's Supper within the context of Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13). Rempel states

²¹⁹"Pilgram Marpeck's Response," *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck*, 85, quoted in, Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 37.

²²⁰Dalton, "A Sacramental Believers Church," 226-229.

²²¹Klassen and Klassen, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 88.

²²²Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 261.

²²³Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 128.

that in the act of foot-washing, Jesus showed the extent of his love for his disciples.²²⁴ For Marpeck, love represents the ethos of the meal: “If love is missing, then Christ’s example is completely counterfeited, and the communion cannot be referred to as the Supper of the Lord.”²²⁵

Marpeck’s insistence on love as the defining character of the meal provided an important framework for the ethics of the Table. In the *Admonition*, Marpeck used Paul’s rebuke to the church in Corinth to underscore that Christian love is worked out through actions. Marpeck argued that the problem with the church in Corinth was that they had forgotten love: “Their assembly did not remain rich in love for long, they scorned one another, and the rich filled their bellies and let the poor suffer hunger.”²²⁶ The reason for Paul’s harsh rebuke to the church in Corinth was the belief that when the church participates in the Lord’s Supper, they participate in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). Marpeck maintained that this participation “represents a lasting bond of love among Christians, a fact which is articulated and witnessed clearly enough in the words of Christ and Paul.”²²⁷ Marpeck brought together the sacramental nature of the church with the ethical demands of the Table in the following words:

Just as one loaf is made of many kernels ground together so as to become mixed with one another and become one loaf, so do they, who eat this loaf and drink this cup with one another in the Lord’s Supper, become one with the body of Christ in love and obedience of the faith. They submit to one another and serve one another *in patience, and not in conflict of the sword of steel; rather, they are willing and ready to do good to friends and enemies*. Just as one member of the body works for another and *is dependent on the others, so also in love we are all members of one body*.²²⁸

Marpeck’s words highlight the sacramental and ethical nature of Communion. According to Marpeck, Christians are united with Christ and each other in love as they participate in Communion. It is through this participation that the church is able to extend Christ’s love into the world.

²²⁴Ibid.

²²⁵Ibid., 129.

²²⁶Klassen and Klassen, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 266.

²²⁷Ibid.

²²⁸Ibid., 267. Italics indicate the insertions that Marpeck made to Bernhard Rothmann’s original work *Confession of Both Sacraments*. While large portions of this book were taken from Rothmann’s work, Klassen and Klassen note that “Marpeck and his colleagues saw it as their work and stood passionately behind it”: Ibid., 159.

Marpeck's theology of the church as the prolongation of Christ's unglorified body – what could be called the church as sacrament – is vital for making the connection between the Lord's Supper and mission. The theology of the church as sacrament affirms that Christ's grace continues to be made visible and accessible to the world through the actions and worship of the church. Blough articulates it as follows: "The church is in the world for a reason: it is 'sent' into the world in the same way that the Messiah was sent into the world... Understanding the church as sign or sacrament means that all of Christian life is to be a reflection of God's project for the world."²²⁹ Church as sacrament challenges the individualistic impulses that have shaped the current practices of the Lord's Supper. It contends that all of the activities of the church are for the life of the world, and not merely for the spiritual benefit of individuals.

2.2.2 Making the Body Visible

William Cavanaugh has developed the social and ethical implications of the church as sacrament in his book *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*. In this book, Cavanaugh offers a critique of the Roman Catholic Church in Chile during the terror of the Pinochet regime. According to Cavanaugh, the separation of church and state in Chile "resulted in the abandonment of social space to the state."²³⁰ The tactics of terror used by the state led to increasing fragmentation and isolation in civil society, which eliminated all social bodies that would rival the state. Walter Brueggemann summarizes the problem in Chile as follows: "The intentionality of Pinochet's torture and terror is that it was designed to make human community impossible, to eliminate any chance of human dissent or human alternative, and so to assure the absolutism of the state."²³¹

Cavanaugh goes on to describe how the Roman Catholic Church eventually came to the realization that the Eucharist was church's counter-politics to torture and the breakdown of social bodies. The Eucharist, as a practice that forms the visible body of Christ, was the vehicle that formed a social

²²⁹Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 48.

²³⁰Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 123.

²³¹Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xviii.

body capable of resisting the state. Cavanaugh states:

I want to explore nothing less than the actual and potential impact of the Eucharist on dictatorship. For Catholic Christianity there is nothing more real than the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Eucharist makes real the presence of Christ both in the elements and in the body of believers. The church becomes the very body of Christ.... [The church] must realize its true nature as a locus of social practices, the true body of Christ capable of resisting the discipline of the state.²³²

Like Marpeck, Cavanaugh's statement affirms the actuality of Christ's continuing presence in the world through the church. Also like Marpeck, Cavanaugh's ecclesiology makes it possible to discern the relationship between the Lord's Supper and Christian activity in the world.

Unlike medieval Roman Catholicism, Cavanaugh describes the church, not the elements, as being *ex opere operato*. Through the Eucharist, Cavanaugh asserts that the church is "the sacrament of salvation, the visible sign of Christ's redemption; the church offers itself as the visible body of Christ for the feeding and reconciliation of the world."²³³ Rempel has described the sacramental nature of the church in a similar way, drawing on Augustine's dictum that Christians should 'become what they eat': "The literal change taking place in communion is not that of bread and wine but of people... The Holy Spirit comes upon the congregation so that it can become what it eats: the mystical manifests itself historically."²³⁴ According to Rempel, the church as sacrament is a return to how the early church understood Christ's continued presence among believers. It was not until the Middle Ages that the church began to describe the elements of the Lord's Supper as the locus of Christ's sacramental presence instead of the church community. Rempel argues that this "theological inversion was a watershed in the church's sacramental and missionary life. It led people to conclude that Christ's sacramental presence is found only on the altar and not in the community."²³⁵ Cavanaugh and Rempel's assertion that the church is

²³²Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 206. Cavanaugh's theology diverges at many points from Anabaptism; here it is seen in the presence of Christ both in the elements and in the church. However, his theology of the church as sacrament illuminates the way in which the Lord's Supper has real ethical and political consequences for the church and world.

²³³Ibid., 272.

²³⁴Rempel, "The Body of Christ, Mystical and Sacramental," 100.

²³⁵Ibid., 100.

sacramental, and not the elements, leads to a missional understanding of Communion.

Cavanaugh's work is critical for understanding the relationship between the Lord's Supper and the social activity of the church. According to Cavanaugh, "Christ's true body is enacted here by the incarnation of the church in the bodies of the poor. The true body of Christ is the suffering body, the destitute body, the body which is tortured and sacrificed."²³⁶ Brueggemann notes that it may be difficult for North Americans, so far removed from the horrors described in Cavanaugh's book, to appropriate the social and ethical implications of the Supper in their own context. He suggests that in our own context, the Eucharist is capable of forming a community that can resist the American imagination, which is defined by commodity satiation and individualism: "The fact is that we in American society too easily live 'inside this imagination' when prophetic imagination [and I would include Eucharistic imagination] is capable of enabling us to live inside God's imagination."²³⁷ According to Cavanaugh, God's imagination allows us to be caught up into "what is really real, the body of Christ."²³⁸ If the Eucharist makes Christ's presence real among the church community, then one should expect that the church will live as Christ lived, act as Christ acted, and proclaim the good news that Christ proclaimed.

2.2.3 Community Economics

Like Cavanaugh, John H. Yoder also describes the church as a social and political body. Yoder argues that the church is a political body as it makes its own decisions, has set boundaries, and carries out common tasks.²³⁹ What distinguishes the church as a social body from secular political structures is that its shared tasks are patterned after God's will for creation. In short, "The people of God are called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately."²⁴⁰ Yoder's understanding of the outward actions of the church resonates with Marpeck's sacramental understanding of the church. Michelle Ferguson contrasts

²³⁶Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 267.

²³⁷Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, xx.

²³⁸Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 279.

²³⁹Yoder, *Body Politics*, viii.

²⁴⁰Ibid., ix.

Marpeck and Yoder's thought, observing that Marpeck saw the Supper as sacramentally creating the body of Christ, whereas for Yoder, the "body of Christ is Christ's body...because it does what Christ did, namely, usher in the kingdom by establishing a new community."²⁴¹ Yoder states that the practices of the church (he refers here to the practices of admonition, baptism, Eucharist, gathering, and spiritual gifts) "are actions of God, in and with, through and under what men and women do. Where they are happening, the people of God are real in the world."²⁴² For Yoder, the Eucharist is a political act: it participates in the action of God to bring about his kingdom.

Yoder's theology of the Lord's Supper utilizes Luke's narrative in Acts to describe the Lord's Supper as a communal fellowship of believers. Luke's account describes the new community of believers as being distinguished by four activities: they "remained faithful to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers" (Acts 2:42). In Acts, the Lord's Supper appears to be closely connected with the sharing of food. Acts 2:46 reads: "they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." Yoder links the Lord's Supper to the act of sharing food:

What the New Testament is talking about wherever the theme is 'breaking bread' is that people actually were sharing with one another their ordinary day-to-day material sustenance...bread *is* daily sustenance. Bread eaten together *is* economic sharing. Not merely symbolically, but also in fact, eating together extends to a wider circle the economic solidarity normally obtained in the family.²⁴³

Based on his reading of Acts, Yoder argues that the Lord's Supper takes on economic implications for the reason that it was a shared meal among believers.

John Rempel recounts the story of Bartolome de las Casas, a 16th-century Roman Catholic missionary whose actions demonstrated Yoder's vision of the Lord's Supper as an economic activity. De las Casas put a moratorium on the Eucharist because he could not reconcile the observance of the Lord's Supper with the fact that the bread they used was the product of slave labour. De las Casas' concern was

²⁴¹Michelle Ferguson, "Anabaptist Liturgy" *Sacramental Theology*, *Direction* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 254.

²⁴²*Ibid.*, 73.

²⁴³Yoder, *Body Politics*, 20.

described as follows:

What he saw was the identity between the bread-product of everyday work, changed and exchanged, respected or stolen, and the bread of the altar. The bread contains the objectified life of the worker... [and] what was being done was taking this bread from him unjustly and offering it to God. For this bread to become the very 'body' of the lamb that was slain, it has to be... the bread of justice.²⁴⁴

De las Casas' actions demonstrate how the practice of Communion can, and should, be an act of economic justice.

Yoder's theology of the church is political and social. Through the actions of the Lord's Supper, this social body becomes the sacramental presence of Christ in the world. Yoder reminds MB's that economics, justice and the Lord's Supper cannot be separated from one another. To "do" the Lord's Supper is to "do" justice. By connecting the economics of the church to the Lord's Supper, Yoder highlights the sacramental nature of the church. As the church celebrates Communion it symbolically witnesses to the in-breaking of God's kingdom, but it also brings about that reality through the act of sharing bread. Communion is a sacramental activity of the church. Through the practice of breaking bread, the church makes God's grace visible in the world.

2.2.4 Ecclesiological Implications for Mission

The most recent MB *Confession of Faith* identifies the church with the presence of Christ in the world. It reads: "The church is one body of believers... The head of this body is Christ. The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world."²⁴⁵ This statement resonates with Marpeck's theology of the church as the prolongation of Christ's humanity in the world. The implication for the church is that all of its outward activities, including the Lord's Supper, become visible and tangible means through which God's grace is extended to the world. This means that the work, or mission, of the church is not only spiritual in nature but is also concerned for the physical, economic and social healing of the world.

²⁴⁴ Enrique Dussel, "The Bread of the Eucharist: Celebration as a Sign of Justice in the Human Community," in Mary Collins and David Power, eds., *Can We Always Celebrate the Eucharist?* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 61, quoted by John Rempel, "On False Distinctions: The Body of Christ, Mystical and Sacramental," *Conrad Grebel Review* 24, no. 3 (Aut 2006): 98-99.

²⁴⁵ *Confession of Faith*, 66.

Cavanaugh illustrates that the church as sacrament contains a social imperative for the church. As the practice of the Lord's Supper forms believers into Christ's actual body, the church becomes a social body that is able to resist the forces of this world that isolate, fragment, and dehumanize. The Supper makes real our commitment to this community, as it makes real our love for God and neighbour. This vision of the Lord's Supper stands in stark contrast to the individualistic impulses of today's culture. The challenge for Mennonite Brethren churches, then, is to shape their practices to reflect the communal reality of the Lord's Supper.

Yoder's work encourages MB's to reconcile their practice of the Lord's Supper with economic justice. If Christ is at work establishing God's kingdom through the practices of the church, then the Lord's Supper must reflect the reality of God's kingdom. Dueck comments, "In a sacramental church, the breaking of the bread is concrete and relational...Bread shared around the table informs the community's need to share bread with all who need it."²⁴⁶ If the celebration of the Lord's Supper becomes unhinged from its ethical moorings, it is in danger of becoming a dead ritual as it is disconnected from God's mission in the world.

2.3 Eschatology: A Foretaste of the Kingdom

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is exactly that: a celebration. Jesus' words to his disciples at the Last Supper clearly point toward the messianic banquet: "After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes'" (Luke 22:17-18). In a letter to the Church of Corinth, Paul reminds them: "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord's Supper is an eschatological meal; it is here that past, present and future meet. The eschatological nature of Communion places this practice within the context of the *missio dei*. When the church gathers at the Lord's Table it receives – and is – a foretaste of God's kingdom.

²⁴⁶Dueck, "A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics," 84.

2.3.1 The Messianic Banquet

Central to Jesus' ministry is the proclamation, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15, TNIV). Jesus' table ministry is a tangible demonstration of this proclamation. During his earthly ministry, Jesus fed the multitudes, ate with outcasts, and told stories of a coming messianic feast. Kreider argues that the shared meal was a powerful symbol of God's kingdom; through it "[Jesus] showed that the banquet was already being celebrated – the kingdom was 'at hand.'"²⁴⁷ Jesus' table ministry vividly reflected the eschatological reality of God's kingdom.

Immediately after Jesus' resurrection, table fellowship was reinforced as a symbol of God's reign. Jesus made himself known to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus through the breaking of bread. Luke 24:35 reads: "Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread." Commenting on Luke 24, Paul W. Hoon suggests that it is

through Christ's *action* in taking, blessing, breaking, and giving the bread, his *being* is known and his *life* is received... "they recognized him" – not in the bread, not in conversation before he broke the bread, not in the table bearing the bread, but '*in the breaking* of the bread' (Luke 24:30-32, 35 KJV). Divine 'being' is known in human "breaking."²⁴⁸

Luke's gospel emphasizes table fellowship and the breaking of bread as a chief symbol of God's coming kingdom of shalom.

The early Christians continued the table fellowship that had started with Jesus. The Lord's Supper was often set in the context of the *agape* meal, reflecting the eschatological overtones of Jesus' table ministry. Reflecting on this practice, Kreider states, "their meals were patterned on the conventional festive banquet which they adapted to suit their developing social and congregational needs. These meals, called 'breaking of bread,' were continuations of the resurrection feasts which the disciples had celebrated with Jesus. They were joyous messianic banquets."²⁴⁹ By placing the Lord's Supper within the context of

²⁴⁷Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 38-39.

²⁴⁸Paul Waitman Hoon, "Liturgical Action in Light of the Word," in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 239 as found in Sean Edward O'Leary, "Rediscovering the Eucharist in the Evangelical Churches," (M.of Theology thesis, Wycliffe College, 2003), 56.

²⁴⁹Kreider, 39.

the *agape* meal, the practice of the early church reflected that the eschatological reality of the Supper had economic implications. Generous sharing and redistribution, the breakdown of social barriers, and food for everyone was a reflection of the year of jubilee (Lev. 25; Lk. 4).

Celebrating the Lord's Supper as a foretaste of the messianic banquet highlights the sacramental nature of Communion. According to Rempel, "For Christians ritual is the agent of a realized eschatology, the appearance of the kingdom now, the future age at work in the one that is passing.... At its best, ritual reality is the spot on a pond from which ripples expand ever outward. The stone setting the ripples in motion is the eucharist."²⁵⁰ Through Communion, God's realized and approaching grace is revealed through the act of self-giving at the Table.

2.3.2 A Symbolic Witness of God's Reign

The church receives a foretaste of the messianic banquet each time it celebrates the Lord's Supper; the world receives this foretaste when the church in turn becomes the body of Christ broken for the world. In this way, the celebration of Communion is a symbolic witness to the coming kingdom. Roth argues that the corporate worship of the church "embodies the wholeness and unity that God intended for all humanity... Worship identifies people who have been called out to live in relationships of love, trust, vulnerability, and intimacy, living now as a foretaste of the restoration of all creation at the great wedding banquet of the Lamb."²⁵¹

The church gathered around the Table is not the fulfillment of God's redemption plan, but is a symbolic representation of what is to come. Pannenberg states that:

There is no reason for the existence of the church except to symbolize the future of the divine kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim. This explains in what specific sense worship is in the center of life of the church: The worship of the Christian community anticipates and symbolically celebrates the praise of God's glory that will be consummated in the eschatological renewal of all creation in the new Jerusalem.²⁵²

²⁵⁰Rempel, "The Body of Christ, Mystical and Sacramental," 102.

²⁵¹Roth, *Practices*, 77.

²⁵²Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality*, 36.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper therefore becomes a prototype of the new kingdom insofar as it is a reflection of Jesus' table ministry.

Christian sacraments cannot be separated from God's mission to restore shalom. When people of different rank, status, race, age, and health sit down together in the love of Christ, the future has broken in to the present. Cavanaugh describes how "the importance of symbolic meals to Jesus during his ministry is linked to the idea that in the future 'people from east and west, from north and south, will come and sit down at the feast in the kingdom of God' (Lk. 13:29; Mt. 8:11)."²⁵³ The celebration of the Supper is a symbol of the new reality that Christ has made possible.

2.3.3 Eschatological Implications for Mission

As an eschatological practice, the Lord's Supper places the final goal of God's mission at the forefront of the church's imagination. Cavanaugh stresses the importance of having an eschatological vision of the Lord's Supper for the mission of the church. He argues that whenever the church becomes at home in the world, it loses sight of the eschatological import of the Lord's Supper: "As the church made itself at home in the world's time, the urgent sense of pilgrimage through a temporary world toward an eternal end was muted. The eucharist became a sacrifice performed for the benefit of the church."²⁵⁴ Instead, he argues that the Eucharist should move the church into "messianic time" where the "future fulfillment of the past governs the present."²⁵⁵ God's gift, represented in the Eucharist, is not something that one can earn, it must be received. Cavanaugh continues:

Eucharistic time is marked by charity; the gratuitous and disruptive presence of the Kingdom of God... The Eucharist is our *daily* bread precisely in the sense that it is manna, a free gift of God which cannot be stored up for the next day. The Eucharist is not an available thing of which one can take possession. It is never simply here and now, but is always oriented by the past and straining towards the future.²⁵⁶

²⁵³Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 225.

²⁵⁴Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 222.

²⁵⁵Ibid., 228.

²⁵⁶Ibid.

It is an eschatological vision that enables the church to receive the Lord's Supper as a gift of God's grace.

As a community, MBs are called to live in "Eucharistic time," where the past, present and future meet. This means that whenever the church celebrates the Eucharist, it is celebrating reconciliation that has already occurred and will occur. The church gathered around the Table becomes a glimpse of what is to come. In this way the church receives – but also offers the world – a foretaste of the messianic banquet.

An eschatological vision of the Lord's Supper should propel the ethics and mission of the church. If the Lord's Supper is a foretaste of God's final reconciliation of creation, then the act of gathering should reflect this reality. The Lord's Table is a place where the social structures that isolate and divide have been eradicated; where Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, are one in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28). Driver has articulated the eschatological import of the Lord's Supper this way: "As leaven in a loaf signifies the rising of bread by bringing it about, so a true sacrament does not merely point toward the eventual consummation of God's realm but is part of the action that causes justice and peace to rise."²⁵⁷ As believers come together in peace and unity, the first fruits of God's kingdom are manifested.

Finally, an eschatological vision of the Lord's Supper gives the community hope. It is this hope that the church is able to offer to the world. Whenever the church gathers, despite the circumstances, believers are reminded that Christ's death has already conquered the power of sin. Rempel has stated this truth well: "It is surprisingly in worship that perplexity, sorrow and poverty are deprived of finality; it is here that Jesus' conquest of the powers is made manifest. Jesus makes himself known in the gathering of believers; in the preaching of the word and the breaking of bread his victory becomes concrete."²⁵⁸ It is this assurance and hope that the church holds out to the world, and it is this hope that strengthens the church to endure suffering as it pours itself out for the sake of the world.

2.4 Summary

This section was devoted to the task of uncovering points of convergence between sacramental

²⁵⁷Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 207.

²⁵⁸Rempel, "Christian Worship: Surely the Lord is in This Place," 102.

theology and the MB understanding of Communion. In order to develop a well-rounded missional theology of the Lord's Supper, this section looked at Communion through three lenses: incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology. This section relied heavily on the work of Anabaptist reformer, Pilgram Marpeck. It was shown that Marpeck's debates with the Spiritualists led him to articulate a theology of the Lord's Supper that challenged spiritual impulses that would reduce the practice of Communion to a biblical, ahistorical, nonchurchly, individualized piety.²⁵⁹ As the MB church seeks to be missional in a culture that values individual preference and spirituality, Marpeck's theology may be particularly helpful for the MB church today. Marpeck's theology challenges the notion that the Lord's Supper is a personal and spiritual exercise divorced from the lived experience of a community gathered together to break bread.

Looking at the Lord's Supper through the lens of the incarnation reminds believers that both flesh and spirit matter. The incarnation is the first theological pillar of an interrelated theology of mission and Communion, as it is foundational for understanding that God has chosen to accomplish his mission for humanity by intervening and becoming physically present within the created order. Marpeck highlighted the ongoing importance of the incarnation by arguing that Christ's humanity is prolonged in history through the ceremonies of the church. This is a profoundly missional concept, as Marpeck helps the church to see itself as the prolongation of Christ's physical body that is broken and poured out for the world.

This incarnational perspective led into a discussion on the ecclesiological significance of the Lord's Supper, and discussed how the church is sacramental in nature. The implication for the church is that all of its outward activities, including the Lord's Supper, become visible and tangible means through which God's grace is extended to the world. This means that the mission of the church is not only spiritual in nature but is also concerned for the physical, economic and social healing of the world.

The theological reflection was rounded out looking at the Lord's Supper through the lens of eschatology. This section argued that it is an eschatological vision of the Lord's Supper that propels the

²⁵⁹ See note 174.

worship and mission of the church. The Supper is a foretaste of God's final reconciliation of creation, breaking bread constitutes this reality. An eschatological vision of the Lord's Supper helps the church to understand its role in God's mission, but at the same time continually reminds the church of its need for the grace that Christ offers at the Table.

3. Looking at the Lord's Supper from an Anthropological Perspective

This final section will discuss Communion from an anthropological viewpoint in order to understand how the sacramental insights, which were developed in section two, infuse the symbols of the Lord's Supper with missional-mindedness. The Mennonite Brethren understanding of symbol and memory has further obscured the relationship between mission and Communion. Because Mennonite Brethren have avoided sacramental language, symbol and memory have been stripped of their power to shape the missional life of the church. John Roth argues that the most significant confusion Anabaptists have regarding the nature of the sacraments is the role of the Holy Spirit.²⁶⁰ The result is that Anabaptists have insisted that the Supper is merely a sign, devoid of spiritual power or presence. However, Roth argues that Christians

cannot help but seek the living presence of God in worship, and if Mennonites are told repeatedly that the Spirit is *not* present at the church's most fundamental rituals of baptism and communion – that water and bread are *merely* signs – then they will almost certainly seek the Spirit's presence in other ways...because they have a very low view of the sacraments, they have not tended to think of the Spirit's presence as being embodied in material or tangible ways. As a result, Mennonites drinking from the streams of these renewal movements have almost always adopted more individualistic forms of private devotion.²⁶¹

The result, according to Roth, is that personal experience of the Spirit is divided from the embodied work of the Spirit through the community. This divide between the spiritual and physical working of the Spirit explains why the connection between the Lord's Supper and mission is so evasive in MB churches today.

The sacramental insights from section two can help to develop the connection between mission and Communion by enhancing the way MB's understand symbol and memory. It is through human

²⁶⁰Roth states that this is due to their skepticism regarding claims to authority based on access to the Spirit's power, Roth, *Practices*, 199.

²⁶¹Ibid.

memory and symbol that the mystery of Christ is proclaimed and embodied in a community. In a culture where individualism and personal spirituality has stripped the Supper of its communal meanings, it is helpful to understand how symbols and memory work from an anthropological perspective. Looking at the Lord's Supper through the lens of anthropology illuminates how the Spirit works through human activity. Human methods of communication, such as symbol and memory, are the means through which God's grace is revealed and received by humanity.

3.1 A Symbolic Act

The theological pillars of ecclesiology and incarnation should inform the way the MB church understands the symbols of the Lord's Supper from an anthropological perspective. It is through the use of symbols that God has chosen to communicate and reveal his grace to humanity.

3.1.1 What is a Symbol?

Kreider has stated, "All humans 'talk symbol.'"²⁶² Humans rely on symbols to communicate with one another; from handshakes to traffic signs to wedding rings to verbal language, human society is built on symbolic communication. Clayton Schmit, in his book *Too Deep For Words*, delineates the difference between discursive and presentational symbolic language. Human discourse is built on verbal symbols or words, and provides society with discursive symbolism, which allows us to communicate verbally. Presentational symbols, on the other hand, simultaneously present constituent elements, "where all the elements work together at the same time to articulate some idea."²⁶³ The worship of the church is full of presentational symbols, as they have the ability to express complex ideas and meanings. Schmit states that the power of presentational symbols "is in their ability to address aspects of human reality that are too deep for ordinary language."²⁶⁴ The bread and wine of the Supper are presentational symbols; they express a reality that goes beyond the power of verbal expression.

²⁶²Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 116.

²⁶³Clayton J. Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 7.

²⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 132.

3.1.2 A Communal Symbol

The Lord's Supper is a complex array of symbols, including gestures, words, wine and bread. At the heart of these symbols is God's gift of reconciliation. Together, these symbols become a sign-act that bears important meaning for the worshiping community. According to James White, public worship "depends constantly on the use of [sign-acts] as means of expressing God's self-giving to us and our self-giving to God and to one another."²⁶⁵ White goes on to describe the sacraments as sign-acts where both God and humans are at work: "People perform them, but through them experience God's self-giving."²⁶⁶ What is unique about the symbols of wine, bread and water, is that God uses the participation of the community through word and action to convey God's own self-giving.

The communal nature of the Lord's Supper is important because the symbols of bread and wine are an expression of the shared values of the community. It is the community that fills an object with meaning, based on shared relationships and experiences. Kreider states that every friendship has its unique symbols that enrich the relationship.²⁶⁷ The Lord's Supper is unique to the Christian Community as "the whole work of redemption lies behind this bread and wine made sacrament – God's promise, gracious gifts, and our receiving of it."²⁶⁸ For the church, the symbols of bread and wine express the missional values of the community because they symbolize the whole of God's redemptive plan.

Since the first disciples, Christians have expressed their reconciliation with God and each other through their celebration of the Lord's Supper. Ben Witherington III states that "the Lord's Supper can be said to be a ceremony of *koinonia*, of active participation or sharing something in common with others."²⁶⁹ He goes on to argue that the Lord's Supper demonstrated the values of the early Christian

²⁶⁵White, *Sacraments As God's Self Giving*, 20.

²⁶⁶Ibid., 21.

²⁶⁷Kreider, 117.

²⁶⁸Ibid., 118.

²⁶⁹Ben Witherington III, "“Making a Meal of It”: The Lord's Supper in Its First-Century Social Setting," in *The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives*, 82.

community: *koinonia*, equality in Christ, reconciliation and unity, servant-hood, discernment of the body, and expectation of Christ's return.²⁷⁰

The question is whether or not the rites and symbols continue to express our common values and experiences today. Driver notes how "utterly individualistic" Communion services have become. The symbols of the bread and wine have become mystical, privatized and funereal: "In short, the communion with bread and wine has ceased to be the enactment of much of anything, becoming instead the symbol of someone else's sacrifice, the one made by Jesus long ago. This is suitable for encouraging the sheep to dwell quietly in the fold...but it does little to bring about revolutionary freedom in the world."²⁷¹ Driver underscores just how insidious the ideology of individualism is in the North American church. The values of individualism obscure the communal nature of redemption that lies at the heart of mission.

Because the symbolic nature of the Lord's Supper empowers and engages God's people for mission, the church needs to enliven these symbols and re-appropriate their communal nature. It is not just that symbols are the bearers of a community's values, truth, and purpose; they also convey the missional identity of the church. Uruguayan Jesuit Juan L. Segundo brings to light the critical relationship between the Lord's Supper and the mission of the church. He argues that the modern-day crisis in sacramentalism stems from the fact that Christians have failed to see the correspondence between what the sacraments signify and the reality of the Christian community in the world. According to Segundo, "The sacraments are made for the Church, not the Church for the sacraments."²⁷² As far as Segundo is concerned, the sacraments function to equip the church for its mission. He proclaims that the church's mission is "forming a community and leading it to its commitment in history. Outside of this function the

²⁷⁰Ibid., 83.

²⁷¹Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Live and Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 199-200.

²⁷²Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1974), 61f, as quoted in Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 204.

sacraments are devoid of meaning.”²⁷³ When the symbols of bread and wine are obscured by individual spirituality, the church cannot realize its identity as the body of Christ that is given for the world.

3.1.3 A Human Language

Through the symbols of the bread and wine God reveals his grace both physically and spiritually. Leonard VanderZee states that “we need the sacrament alongside the Word simply because we are human.... The sacrament aids our appropriation of God’s promises.”²⁷⁴ Symbols provide a way for humans to perceive a reality that is beyond their ability to articulate through words alone.

VanderZee draws on the work of philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff to describe how the symbols of the Supper are a speech-action that accomplishes what they say. According to Wolterstorff, speech-action can be defined in three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. He uses the following example to explain the distinctions between the three categories:

Suppose I relieve your anxiety by promising that I will buy new tires for your car and I do so by leaving a note for you on which I have inscribed the words, ‘I’ll buy new tires for your car this afternoon.’ In that case, my locutionary act is the act of *inscribing* the words; ‘I’ll buy new tires for the car this afternoon.’ My illocutionary act is the act of *promising* you that I will buy new tires for the car this afternoon; my act of inscribing those words *counts* as my act of making the promise. And my perlocutionary act is my act of *relieving your anxiety* by making that promise to you; my performance of this act adheres in the causal *effect* of my illocutionary action.²⁷⁵

VanderZee comments that it is not only words that are locutionary; pictures, gestures and other symbols can also become locutionary actions that convey a promise. VanderZee argues that the Lord’s Supper is a speech-action: it expresses the promise, it is the promise, and the promise relieves our anxiety.

VanderZee underscores the importance of understanding the Lord’s Supper as a speech-action. He writes, “It’s not merely that the sacrament aids our human *understanding* of God’s promises...It’s rather more that the sacrament aids our *appropriation* of God’s promises.”²⁷⁶ VanderZee’s conclusion is

²⁷³Ibid.

²⁷⁴VanderZee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 191.

²⁷⁵Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Not Presence, but Action: Calvin on Sacraments,” *Perspectives* 16 (March 1994): 18, as quoted in VanderZee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 189-190.

²⁷⁶VanderZee, 191.

particularly important for understanding the incarnational nature of symbols: “The sacrament offers us something the Word alone cannot; deep assurance that is exactly fitted by God to our human need and receptivity...The sacrament ‘incarnates’ the Word, in a way that is analogous to how Christ was the original incarnate Word...we need this liturgical and sacramental incarnation of the Word at the table to reach our hearts and awaken them to true faith in Christ.”²⁷⁷ The Lord’s Supper is unique. It is an action that enables Christians to appropriate, while not fully understanding, the mystery of God’s grace.

That God communicates his promise through physical as well as spiritual means is extremely important in the post-modern church. We live in a society that experiences the tension between the limitations of rationality on one hand, and a desire to overcome the limitations of our physical world on the other. The fact that Christ has offered the church assurance of his grace through the symbols of bread and wine allows the church to view creation and our own humanity as a God-given gift. It is a counter-cultural practice that forms the church into a community that bears witness to the reality that God is doing something new with his creation. Dueck states, “Material elements...function as heirophanies, revelatory of the sacred, of God in Christ through the Spirit. It invites Christians to look differently at the natural world in order to enter into another set of meanings than the utilitarian, technological, scientific meanings immediately proposed by the physical elements.”²⁷⁸ The gift of sacred symbols is an affirmation of our humanness, through which God continues to extend his promise of grace and reconciliation.

3.2 Memory: An Eschatological and Communal Activity

What does it mean to remember? What did Christ mean when he said, “Do this in remembrance of me?” (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). Was he prescribing a memorial meal, such as one might have for a loved one who has recently died? In light of the resurrection, this can hardly be the case. Kreider argues that the earliest Christians, who would have closely associated the Lord’s Supper with their memories of

²⁷⁷VanderZee, 193.

²⁷⁸Irma Fast Dueck, “Worship Made Strange.” In *The Church Made Strange for the Nations: Essays in Ecclesiology and Political Theology*. Edited by Karl Koop and Paul Doerksen. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, awaiting publication.

being at the table with Jesus before and after his death, were confident that the risen Christ was truly present in their midst.²⁷⁹ According to Kreider, “Jesus’ ‘Do this’ carried a simple invitation: ‘My disciples, continue to enjoy *eating together*, continue to *bless God* and *share your food*. And especially *remember me, your Master*’...With that message the disciples remembered Jesus’ promise to be with them ‘always, to the end of the age.’”²⁸⁰ In this way, Jesus’ injunction to remember him was set within the context of a community that experienced the presence of the *risen* Christ through its act of remembrance. Thus, it is the eschatological reality of the Lord’s Supper that makes memory possible. Without the resurrection, the Lord’s Supper loses all meaning.

3.2.1 “Doing” the Memory of Jesus

Both Luke and Paul record Jesus telling his disciples to “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). James White states that the Greek phrase “*eis ten emev anamnesin*” (1 Cor. 11:24) is particularly difficult to translate.²⁸¹ He suggests that “remembering,” a common interpretation of the word *anamnesis* is an inadequate rendering of the Greek term:

When we ‘do this,’ we are making present Christ and his work with all his power to save. It is not a matter of ‘recalling’ or ‘remembering’ someone once here but now gone; hence both those verbs are inadequate. It is a matter of knowing the living presence of the Savior himself as if we were witnesses to his presence in historical visibility.²⁸²

White has suggested that a phrase like “experience anew the presence of Christ,” would more adequately reflect the word *anamnesis*.²⁸³ White’s comments highlight an active side to remembering, something that has been lost in the English language.

Jesus words in Luke 22:19 suggest that remembering is more than just vividly recalling his gift to mind; remembering denotes action. The Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh argues that the word

²⁷⁹Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 22.

²⁸⁰Ibid.

²⁸¹White, *The Sacraments As God’s Self Giving* , 55.

²⁸²Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

anamnesis suggests a performative action on the part of the church. He states that while many Christians speak of “attending” the Eucharist, the ancient church tended to speak of “doing” the Eucharist.²⁸⁴ The active sense of remembering suggests that the church is literally re-membered as the body of Christ. Cavanaugh warns Christians, “The fact that the church is literally changed into Christ is not a cause for triumphalism, however, precisely because our assimilation to the body of Christ means that we then become food for the world, to be broken, given away, and consumed.”²⁸⁵ Re-membering Christ has missional implications. As the church re-members it becomes Christ’s body that is given for the world.

3.2.2 A Communal Memory

Cavanaugh’s observations on the Lord’s Supper highlight the fact that remembering is a communal activity. Harmon L. Smith states that the Eucharist is a necessity for Christians because it is an act that forms us into a particular community that finds its identity and self-understanding in being the people of God.²⁸⁶ Unlike modern society, which lacks shared traditions and symbols, the performance of the Lord’s Supper provides the church with a common tradition (or common memory). Smith states, “My suspicion is that...the public necessity of shared traditions and symbols has been progressively eroded because such a requirement conflicts with the concept of autonomous individuals who need to be free from every interference external to themselves in order to pursue their own private interests.”²⁸⁷ It is a common tradition that informs the church about its nature, purpose and ultimate end. According to Smith, it is this common identity that enables the church to agree on what is good, right, true and appropriate for us to do.²⁸⁸ In this way, Eucharistic liturgy stands in marked contrast to the modern values of autonomy and individualism as it requires Christians to have a shared tradition.

²⁸⁴Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 230.

²⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 232.

²⁸⁶Harmon L. Smith, *Where Two or Three are Gathered: Liturgy and the Moral Life* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), 66-68.

²⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸⁸*Ibid.*

A communal remembering of Christ's life, death, and resurrection assists believers in remembering who they are in relation to God, and reminds them of their need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Mennonite historian John Roth provides the following insight on the act of remembering, which stands in continuity with Cavanaugh and Smith: "Because we are inclined to worship ourselves or the things we create, we need the regular practice of the Lord's Supper... The Lord's Supper calls us to remember who we are in relation to God, and it re-members us as a community bearing witness to be the living body of Christ in the world."²⁸⁹ For the practice of Communion to align the life of the church with God's mission, the church needs to celebrate the Lord's Supper each time it gathers for worship.

Re-membering Christ is an eschatological and communal act. These two theological pillars can help the MB church appreciate more fully the importance of memory for mission. Without an eschatological memory of Jesus' death and resurrection, mission loses sense of direction and purpose. Without a community, Jesus cannot be re-membered in the world today. In short, mission cannot exist without an eschatological and communal re-membering of Christ's death and resurrection.

3.3 Summary

Through the meta-narrative of Scripture, one discovers that God continually reaches out to his creation, through the means of his creation, in order to restore *shalom*: this is the *missio dei*. Symbols and memory are part of this mission as they tangibly convey God's mission of peace and reconciliation. Roth states that a ritual of the church "captures the moment in worship when heaven and earth meet. They celebrate the reconciliation of humans with God. They are the rituals that give shape to the body of Christ. In short, they are foundational practices of the church, the point at which worship and witness join together."²⁹⁰ Through the symbols of bread and wine, God offers grace, which Christians receive by faith through the power of the Spirit. These symbols are unique in that they actually bring about what they signify: reconciliation between God and humanity and the creation of a new community.

The act of remembering, the words that are spoken, and the symbols that are used during the

²⁸⁹Roth, *Practices*, 209.

²⁹⁰Roth, *Practices*, 194.

Lord's Supper are all human modes of communication and community formation. Understanding the power of memory and symbol can help the MB church realize the missional significance of the Lord's Supper. Through these symbols, God graciously creates a redeemed community that witness to the coming kingdom of God.

4. Conclusion

This chapter was dedicated to the task of developing a theology of the Lord's Supper for the MB church that reflects the inherent relationship between mission and Communion. This critical reflection used three different lenses – history, theology and anthropology – to examine sacramental resources that the MB church can draw on in order to develop a missional theology of communion. The theological pillars of this discussion were incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology. Each of these three theological perspectives is needed in order to develop a holistic understanding of mission and Communion.

The theological reflection in section two relied heavily on the work of Anabaptist reformer Pilgram Marpeck. Marpeck argued that Christ's humanity is prolonged in history through the ceremonies of the church. The church, as the prolongation of Christ's humanity, is profoundly missional because the church is called to be Christ's body that is broken and poured out for the world. This incarnational perspective led into a discussion on the ecclesiological significance of the Lord's Supper, and described the "church as sacrament." The implication for the church is that all of its outward activities, including the Lord's Supper, become visible and tangible means through which God's grace is extended to the world. This means that the mission of the church is not only spiritual in nature but is also concerned for the physical, economic and social healing of the world. The theological reflection was rounded out by a discussion on the eschatological significance of the Lord's Supper. It is the eschatological vision of the Lord's Supper that propels the ethics and mission of the church. The Supper is a foretaste of God's final reconciliation of creation, breaking bread constitutes this reality.

The final section used the sacramental insights from section two to gain a better appreciation for how symbol and memory form a missional community. MB's have described the Lord's Supper as a symbolic ceremony or memorial. Drawing on sacramental insights can help the MB church move towards

a missional understanding of symbol and memory. It is the anthropological nature of Communion that provides a vital connection between mission and Communion for the church.

CHAPTER 3

Toward a Missional Practice of the Lord's Supper

Who is welcome at the Lord's Table? I was challenged by this question at a Communion celebration while visiting a church during my time at seminary. The church was a familiar Mennonite Brethren (MB) setting, so I was expecting business as usual. Instead, I was caught off guard. I had grown accustomed to the words, symbols, and people that accompany this celebration, so when I saw some unique faces among the servers, I was curious.

The members who served the elements on this particular Sunday were not your typical churchgoers. They were not well-respected members of society, nor were they particularly talented, wealthy, wise, or accomplished. As they walked to the front, it became clear that two of the servers were from a nearby home for community living for mentally challenged adults. These two men brought a sense of joy to the celebration that I had never witnessed before. As I watched these two men serve communion assisted by others, I was moved to tears. I had been confronted by the Host of the table: he revealed to me a brilliant picture of the true beauty of his church.

An articulated theology of mission and Communion must find expression in the practices of the church. I have shared this story because it offers a picture of what a missional theology of Communion might look like on a Sunday morning. It is an example of how the practice of Communion symbolizes God's mission for the world.

Chapter Two discussed how sacramental insights can enrich a symbolic understanding of the Lord's Supper. Symbols are filled with meanings that are given to them by the community. Meaning has been described as an attribute of symbolism: "Symbolism, including objects, acts, events, and utterances is defined by the context in which the symbol appears. The necessary condition for understanding the meaning of a symbol is to know something about the frame of reference or the context to which it is

related.”²⁹¹ The symbols of bread and wine are unique to the community of believers: they reveal God’s plan of redemption, which culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

MB’s need to re-fill their Communion symbols with a missional theology rooted in incarnation, ecclesiology, and eschatology. This refilling is not just a theological task, it is a practical task. The connection between mission and Communion will only be as strong as the practices of the community. If a church celebrates the Lord’s Supper by sitting in ordered rows in contemplative silence, does its practice express the unity of the body or does it reinforce the notion of individualistic spirituality? If a church uses pre-cut bread and pre-poured juice in individual cups, placed in silver trays, does its practice symbolically reveal a community that is sustained by the body and blood of Christ?²⁹² This final chapter will explore the various ways that the Communion practices of the MB church become a window into the mission of God and the church’s role in light of that mission.

1. Mission and Worship

Chapter two laid a theological framework for understanding the relationship between mission and Communion that was rooted in theological understandings of incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology. This section will discuss this relationship at a practical level in order to understand how the practices of the church can give expression to a missional theology of Communion.

1.1 Dismantling Christendom Approaches to Worship

The challenges that face the church in North America have largely been attributed to a larger cultural shift that has been described as the move from a modern, Christian society to a post-modern, post-Christian one. The underlying assumption of Christendom was that everyone within the empire was Christian. The structures of the church, including Sunday morning worship services, were built on

²⁹¹Leo Driedger, Raymond Currie, and Rick Linden, “Dualistic and Wholistic Views of God and the World: Consequences for Social Action,” *Review of Religious Research*, 24 no. 3 (March 1983): 226.

²⁹²Wally Kroeker discusses the issue of individualism versus unity in the Lord’s Supper in an article entitled “The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord’s Supper.” He states: “it is my observation that for today’s Mennonite Brethren the concept of unity is not an important part of the Lord’s Supper. In fact, the Lord’s Supper is commonly celebrated together but at the same time in private. *Individual* morsels, *individual* cups, a reminder to remember the shedding of Christ’s blood for *personal* salvation...” Wally Kroeker, “The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord’s Supper,” *Direction Journal*, 12 no. 3 (July 1983): 29.

Christendom assumptions, and the church is realizing that these structures no longer work in a post-Christendom society.

In a recent book, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch discuss three fundamental flaws in the Christendom approach to worship which have hindered the church from engaging in mission. They observe that the Christendom-mode church is attractional, dualistic, and hierarchical.²⁹³ The ideologies of attractionalism and dualism that have shaped the church have also obscured the relationship between mission and worship at a practical level.

1.1.1 Attractionalism

The attractional church can be described best by the phrase, “If we build it, they will come.”²⁹⁴ This concept of church assumes that all the church needs to do is plant itself within a particular community, provide a nice building, good programs and upbeat music, and people will naturally come and join it. The attractional church is built on two assumptions: first, all that is required of the church is to get its internal features right. This assumes that the church can poll the neighbourhood to discern the felt needs of the community and develop corresponding programs to fit these needs. This assumption is a market-driven approach to being church. The second assumption, which builds on the first, is that the church has “a place in our society and the people don’t join our churches because, though they want to be Christians, they’re unhappy with the product.”²⁹⁵ This demonstrates a belief that people will not join a church if they are dissatisfied with the worship service, the Sunday school programs, or the midweek activities. An underlying problem with the attractional model of church is that it mirrors the North American value of consumerism. It assumes that the church, and worship, is like any other service or product; it must be produced, marketed and sold.

²⁹³Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 18. While I am not in full agreement with Frost and Hirsch’s book, particularly in the way that their theology of mission intersects with their theology of worship, they do provide good insight into the problems that beset the church in North America today.

²⁹⁴Ibid., 19.

²⁹⁵Ibid.

Frost and Hirsch argue that the North American church needs to recognize that it no longer holds a place of honour in society; the church must go out into the community in order to be salt and light. The Christian community cannot build a church based on consumer ideology and expect to keep people for long, as consumers are self-interested – they are always looking for a better product and a better deal. In short, the attractional model of church, while at first glance may seem mission minded, does not actually form a community for mission. The attractional church allows individuals to leave the church much the same way they entered it, as individual consumers. As a result, this mode of church has not been able to form missional communities that demonstrate self-giving love, justice and *koinonia*.

1.1.2 Dualism

The second problem with the Christendom-mode church, argue Frost and Hirsch, is its tendency toward dualism. Dualism, at a general level, is the separation of the sacred from the profane. Frost and Hirsch maintain that “dualism has over 1,700 years created Christians that cannot relate their interior faith to their exterior practice, and this affects their ethics, their lifestyles, and their capacity to share their faith meaningfully with others.”²⁹⁶ Frost and Hirsch argue that dualistic theology has led to an “us” versus “them” type of mentality. The world is “out there” while the church is “in here.”

Dualistic theology is closely entwined with Anabaptist ecclesiology and presents a unique set of challenges for the MB church. The early Anabaptists understood the world as a duality. In an essay on Mennonite dualistic theology in relation to an ethic of creation, Calvin Redekop offers the following overview of Anabaptist dualism:

Friedmann argues that ‘we recognize in Anabaptist writings the acceptance of a fundamental New Testament dualism, that is, an uncompromising ontological dualism in which Christian values are held in sharp contrast to the values of the ‘world’ in its corrupt state.’ Just as the expression of the kingdom of God on earth is the church, visible and holy, so the expression of the world is that state with its use of force, deceit, evil, and its dependence on the satanic forces of self-will, self-serving and self-gratification.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶Ibid., 19.

²⁹⁷Calvin Redekop, “Toward a Mennonite Theology and Ethic of Creation,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60, no.3 (July 1986): 390.

Anabaptist dualism, which is also articulated as separatism or two-kingdom theology, is expressed at several levels: theologically, ecclesiologically and sociologically.²⁹⁸ Driedger, Currie and Linden argue that theologically, dualists view God as transcendent and the world as corrupt.²⁹⁹ Salvation is seen as a rescue from this world to a transcendent, supernatural world. Sociologically, Mennonites have formed “sub-systems that insulate, and sometimes isolate, individuals and groups so that two kingdoms or societies can be formed.”³⁰⁰ Instead of rejecting dualistic theology altogether, which rightly recognizes the reality of evil in the world and the unique vocation of the Church, Mennonite Brethren need to be aware that dualistic theology will have an effect on how the church engages in mission.³⁰¹

Mennonite Brethren need to be aware that a dualistic theology will inevitably influence the church’s level of involvement with social issues and processes. The study completed by Driedger, Currie and Linden tested whether dualists were in fact less concerned with social issues. They collected data from 1208 Canadian Mennonites, which included respondents from the Mennonite Brethren Conference. They concluded:

²⁹⁸Sociology has been closely connected with ecclesiology for the Mennonite Brethren church. Kyle describes the relationship between church and ethnicity for MB’s as follows: “the church throughout the larger Mennonite Brethren tradition, i.e., from its Anabaptist roots to the current North American scene, has worn several ecclesiastical faces...On some occasions, the Mennonite Brethren fellowship has appeared to be a sect. Conversely, on others, it has approximated Ernst Troeltsch’s classical church-type. Eventually, the fellowship took upon itself the characteristics of a denomination. Still, at times, the Mennonite Brethren can be best described as an ethnic group”: Richard G. Kyle, *From Sect to Denomination: Church Types and Their Implications for Mennonite Brethren History* (Hillsboro: Center For Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1985), 1. Kyle goes on to note that MB sectarianism, while arising from many sources, can be attributed to Anabaptist beliefs as well as its ethnic composition: Kyle, *From Sect to Denomination*, 5.

²⁹⁹Driedger, Currie, and Linden, “Dualistic and Wholistic Views of God and the World,” 228.

³⁰⁰Ibid.

³⁰¹This raises the question of how the church is to relate to culture. Richard Niebuhr’s general type “Christ against Culture,” which he attributed to Anabaptists in *Christ and Culture*, is not overly helpful for the church today, as Niebuhr’s work is based on the assumption that Christendom will continue to thrive. For a discussion on this topic see Craig Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006). Perhaps Gordon Kaufman’s concept of “bridge-building” between church and society is more helpful. Kauffman states “Mennonites have liked to think of themselves as ‘in’ but not ‘of’ this world. This formulation has, however, come to hide more of the truth from us than it has revealed. For it has suggested that the church’s ground and basis were other than and independent of the historical context in which the church found herself.” He goes on to argue that “an ethic of radical nonresistant discipleship...naturally leads us into the world rather than away from it.” Gordon D. Kaufman, *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and other Mennonite Essays* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 102.

The Mennonite dualists who show more other-worldly tendencies and are less involved in this-worldly processes are also more supportive of traditional personal morality and the ethnic community... Wuthnow's dualist and wholist perspectives seem to apply to religious Mennonite adherents, and the two views of God and the world result in very different social attitudes.³⁰²

In this study, dualists expressed greater concern for personal morality and social control than they did for issues of minority rights, welfare support, and the influence of elite power over society.³⁰³ When considering the church's mission in the world, Frost and Hirsch encourage Evangelicals to take a more holistic view of the relationship between the church and world. Gordon Kauffman has articulated this holistic theology from a Mennonite perspective: "Mennonites have always understood the Christian faith to call for a revolution in the whole of life, not to be simply an ordering of one dimension (the religious) in it."³⁰⁴

Mennonite Brethren should also be aware of the extremes of dualistic theology in the context of worship. Frost and Hirsch argue that dualism "tends to assume that the spiritual is the higher plane and the material world is devoid of meaning and is simply to be escaped by those seeking spiritual maturity."³⁰⁵ They argue that this division extends beyond the relationship of the church and world, to a division between spiritual practices (worship, prayer) and profane ones (work, play, eating). If dualism under-girds an MB theology of worship and the Lord's Supper, it is natural that MB's would place less value on the physical aspects of worship. It is also likely that a dualistic theology will separate the "spiritual" act of Communion from the ethical actions of sharing food, loving our neighbours and caring for creation. Communion practices that are rooted in a theology of incarnation are particularly important in light of an Anabaptist dualistic theology. How the incarnation forms missional Communion practices in the MB church will be discussed below in section two.

³⁰²Driedger, Currie and Linden, 242.

³⁰³Ibid., 233-234. Driedger, Currie and Linden argue, however, that some of these attitudes are likely to change as Mennonites become increasingly urbanized and receive higher levels of education.

³⁰⁴Kaufman, *Nonresistance and Responsibility, and other Mennonite Essays*, 112.

³⁰⁵Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 228.

1.2 Missional Vocation

As the body of Christ in the world, the church is called to carry on the work of Christ through the power of the Spirit. The church's vocation is bound up in Christ's mission as it is called and created to be the sign, foretaste, agent and instrument of the reign of God. Unlike the Christendom model of church, which assumed a one-on-one correlation between the church and the reign of God, George Hunsberger argues that the church is not synonymous with the reign of God.³⁰⁶ Instead, the church's mission will pattern itself after the way that Jesus carried out God's mission: as the *community, servant, and witness of the reign of God*.³⁰⁷

The church is prepared for its missional vocation as the community is cultivated by the Spirit. Inagrace Dietterich argues that the ecclesial practices of the church are the means through which the Spirit cultivates the community of God's kingdom. She states, "Regular and intentional participation in ecclesial practices [baptism, communion, reconciliation, discernment, and hospitality] is God's way of cultivating the missionary people who are sent as the witness to the gospel into the world."³⁰⁸ The next section will discuss how corporate worship cultivates a community for mission.

1.3 Missional Worship

At first glance worship and mission may seem like two separate activities of the church, located in two separate spheres of life. Anabaptist dualistic theology, along with post-Christian culture, can lead one to view worship as belonging to the sacred sphere of life, something that is interior, private and spiritual. Mission, on the other hand, is seen as something that happens in the secular realm; it is exterior and public. A missional understanding of worship rejects this division between spiritual and secular, private and public.

Mission and worship are not separate activities of the church; together they form the vocation of the church and cannot be divided from one another. Schmit argues that "each activity that takes place

³⁰⁶ Guder, *Missional Church*, 102.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 180.

inside the Lord's Day assembly is interwoven with the life outside the church doors."³⁰⁹ Miroslav Volf sees worship as forming the missionary character of the congregation:

By aligning with God's character and purpose in adoration one aligns oneself also with God's projects in the world. By praising God who renews the face of the earth and redeems the peoples one affirms at the same time one's desire to be a cooperator with God in the Word. Adoration is the well-spring of action.³¹⁰

Rodney Clapp also offers significant insights on missional vocation as it relates to the worship of the church. Clapp rejects the distinctions of "private" and "public," "inward" and "outward." He writes:

Liturgy is the public work par excellence of the church.... Far from being a retreat from the world, worship enables Christians to see what the real world is and equips them to live in it.... So all liturgy is related to mission, to what happens in our world not just on Sunday but also on Monday through Saturday. The church exists for the sake of the world.... Worship teaches and forms us to live by the Jesus story so that others – the entire world, the church prays – will learn to live according to reality and wholeness.³¹¹

Schmit, Volf and Clapp so beautifully remind the church that its missional calling to love God and neighbour is interwoven into the very fabric of the church's worship. As the Mennonite Brethren church articulates its vocation in light of the mission of God, their vision must find its locus in worship because it is through worship that the community is renewed, transformed and sent by the Spirit.

1.4 Patterns of Missional Worship

In order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between mission and worship it is worthwhile to consider Linford Stutzman and George Hunsberger's discussion on missional worship. In *Treasure in Clay Jars*, Stutzman and Hunsberger identify four key ways that worship is missional. First, they note that worship is a public witness. In the New Testament the key words to describe worship were derived from terms that spoke of public activities. Stutzman and Hunsberger state: "The church as a community [ekklesia], the church's message [kerygma], and the church's worship [leitourgia] are all cast in the most public of language.... Everything [the church] does – when we look closely at its effects and

³⁰⁹Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 44.

³¹⁰Ibid., 55.

³¹¹Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 114-15.

consequences on participants and onlookers alike – has a public horizon.”³¹²

Second, Stutzman and Hunsberger argue that worship declares the reign of God: the very act of worship declares allegiance to God over and against the current order and powers of the world. Churches that are missional will be “*attentive* to the seriousness of such a declaration.... They are learning to recognize their worship to be a declaration of allegiance on their part.”³¹³ Willimon describes this aspect of worship as the prophetic witness of the church. The purpose of prophetic preaching, according to Willimon, is to produce a community of prophets: “Let the church begin telling the truth, speaking the truth to power, witnessing to the fact that God, not nations, rules the world.”³¹⁴ He goes on to argue that “one of the great prophetic gifts that the church gives the world is the church – a political reality that presents, in its speech, in its life together, in its love for the world, an alternative to the world.”³¹⁵

The third way that worship is missional is that it sustains the identity of the Christian Community. The worship practices of the church form an alternative community that is distinct from the world. According to Stutzman and Hunsberger, “The church is called to have a different political identity from the people around it.... The praise and prayer of worship, the reading and preaching of Scripture, the fellowship around the table, and the washing of baptism that initiates new citizens of heaven – all these define an alternative community with an alternative allegiance.”³¹⁶ This statement highlights the tension that exists between the church’s call to be in the world (Matt. 28:16-20) and its call to be separate from the world (2 Cor. 6:16-18; 1 Pet. 2:8-10). Stutzman and Hunsberger have articulated how the practices that make the church distinct from the world are the practices that actually form the community for mission.

³¹²Linford L. Stutzman and George R. Hunsberger, “The Public Witness of Worship,” in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, Barrett et. al., 106.

³¹³*Ibid.*, 107.

³¹⁴William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 257.

³¹⁵*Ibid.*, 258.

³¹⁶Barrett et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars*, 110.

The fourth marker of missional worship is that it permeates the public life of the congregation. The authors of *Treasure in Clay Jars* had spent time observing churches that were demonstrating patterns of missional faithfulness. A member from one of these churches, Transfiguration Parish in Brooklyn, NY, noted that “people do not come to the Mass because of the music, but because of the impact the church has in the community.”³¹⁷ Stutzman and Hunsberger observed that after visiting missional churches in North America, they found themselves “less and less able to draw clear lines between public witness and worship.... We began to see that their worship is public witness and their public witness is worship.”³¹⁸ These four markers suggest that missional worship is incarnational, set within the context of community, and is propelled by an eschatological vision of God’s reign.

With the correlation between mission and worship firmly fixed, the next section will turn to the task of discussing how a theology of the Lord’s Supper, rooted in incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology, might shape MB practices of the Lord’s Supper.

2. Incarnation: Material Matters

Chapter Two discussed the implications of the incarnation for mission. It concluded that grounding the Lord’s Supper in the incarnation brings together the spirit and flesh in corporate worship. This grounding connects love of God with love for neighbour in a concrete and tangible way. The doctrine of the incarnation further implies that Christ’s incarnation continues in the world today through the body of the church. Just as Christ was sent into the world, the church, as the body of Christ, is sent into the world. This section will look at how the doctrine of the incarnation gives shape to missional practices of the Lord’s Supper.

2.1 Our Humanity Matters

The incarnation affirms that our humanness matters. Through Christ’s incarnation, God has identified God’s-self with humanity, taking on our flesh and joining in our final destiny. Nathan Mitchell

³¹⁷ Ibid., 113.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

states that a Christian anthropology finds its footing in a theology of the incarnation as the incarnation reveals that “God cherishes bodies and calls them to share Christ’s own risen destiny.”³¹⁹ The theology of the incarnation rejects a dualism that pits the soul against the body. The incarnation reminds us that our humanness constitutes both body and soul, and is part of God’s good creation.

Christian scholars from the second -to-fifth centuries C.E. provided a framework for a distinctly Christian anthropology:

Human identity is corporate and social in both its source (God) and its destiny (union with the body of Christ and hence with that body’s resurrection). Second, since identity is radically embodied and social, the human subject...is also embodied and social. Human subjectivity is thus *intersubjectivity*; reflexive selfhood leads not to ‘splendid isolation,’ but to communion-of-life-with-others.³²⁰

These scholars argued that salvation cannot be found through individual self-knowledge or transcendence. Salvation is found in love – made possible by God’s love for humankind, most clearly demonstrated through the incarnation. It is only as humans begin to live in loving communion with God and each other that they experience the gift of salvation and what it means to be truly human.

Contemporary Christian scholarship has continued to build on these anthropological ideas. While Christians have continued to debate anthropology over the centuries,³²¹ Mitchell states that contemporary scholarship has reached a consensus on the following points about the body’s meaning.³²² First, “the human person is not someone who *has* a body but someone who *is* a body, and that the body is not an *object* (a machine, a tool, a ‘husk’ or prison) but a *subject*.”³²³ Mitchell argues that these affirmations about the human body mean, in short, that “the body is the *whole human person* in relation to God, world,

³¹⁹ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 157.

³²⁰Ibid., 158. Mitchell notes that the Pauline metaphor of the body had a powerful influence on emerging Christian anthropology during the 2nd - 5th centuries. Paul’s body image taught that “Christians are not loosely connected individuals; they constitute a new *social* reality, the body of Christ, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone (as some early manuscripts of Eph. 5:30 put it), members of one another (1 Cor 12:5)”: Mitchell, 156.

³²¹This is a point that deserves further discussion, particularly as anthropology has played a significant role in Anabaptist ecclesiology. Unfortunately, there is not enough room in this paper for further discussion on this topic.

³²²Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery*, 175.

³²³Ibid.

and others. It is the supreme and privileged meeting place between God and humanity.”³²⁴ Secondly, Mitchell points out that these scholars agree that human understanding is incarnate; humans understand the world, including the hard sciences, as embodied, subjective persons.³²⁵ This means that humans come to understand God through the body; worship is an incarnational moment where the whole person meets God.

Anthropology has a direct bearing on how one understands the Lord’s Supper. Mitchell points out that the most basic language of ritual is “*the body itself*.”³²⁶ Human bodies are an indispensable part of the worship service, as it is through the body that one sees, touches, smells, tastes and hears God. Mitchell goes on to point out that a positive Christian anthropology will have a direct bearing on the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. If human bodies are not objects, but subjects, then Christ’s body will be perceived in the bread and wine in a new way. The body of Christ offered in the bread and wine is not an object (it is not *something* that performs a task or function) but a subject (it represents *someone*). According to Mitchell, in the Lord’s Supper, “Christ is present not as an object to be admired but as a real person to be met.”³²⁷ It is this idea of meeting that fosters our understanding of how God communicates God’s-self. Furthermore, it fosters an understanding of how Christians are to relate to one another.

Human nature is given meaning as it is understood in light of humanity’s relationship to the Creator. The incarnation teaches that God values our humanness and that he has chosen to share in our human condition and future. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a meeting with God that is mediated through human activity and community. The MB practice of the Lord’s Supper, therefore, needs to reflect the reality that human bodies, activities and communities are bound up with God’s plan of salvation. This means that MB’s need to rethink their current practices. Why do so many congregations sit quietly in rows, isolated in personal, spiritual reflection? The MB church needs to find creative ways for their

³²⁴Ibid.

³²⁵Ibid.

³²⁶Ibid., 149.

³²⁷Ibid., 176.

Communion celebrations to reflect that God's grace is revealed through human words, symbols and gestures.³²⁸ Perhaps congregants could leave their pews and gather around small tables scattered through the sanctuary. Or perhaps individuals could leave their pews and gather around the Table as an entire community, taking turns to serve each other. How each church decides which practices to adopt will depend on the space where they gather, the size of their community, and the accessibility of the table to the group. The important point is that the MB church adopts practices that affirm the goodness of our humanity and humanity's need to be in relationship with God and each other.

2.2 Jesus' Table Ministry

God's mission became a tangible reality through Christ's life, death and resurrection. Jesus' earthly ministry, as an integral part of this mission, can shed light on how the practice of Communion continues to reveal the mission of God incarnationally. Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus met with people at the Table, acting as both guest and host. His actions at the Table were often surprising and disconcerting. In each of the four gospels Jesus is often found participating in a meal or banquet. He turned water to wine at a wedding banquet, dined with sinners and tax collectors, fed multitudes, and took on the role of a servant as he washed the disciple's feet during their last meal together. Jesus' actions at each of these meals reveal the subversive nature of the kingdom of God, and the surprising nature of God's mission.

Inagrace Dietterich reminds readers that Jesus' critics were shocked and appalled by the people that he welcomed to the table (Mark 2:15; Matt. 11:19; Lk 15:1). She states their reaction stemmed from the fact that shared meals "construct and sustain human relationships. Inviting someone to share a meal powerfully symbolizes solidarity. Indeed, the word for *companionship* comes from the Latin *cum + panis*, meaning 'breathing together.'"³²⁹ Dueck notes that meals in the ancient Mediterranean world were "maps,

³²⁸I participated in one Communion service where we were asked to gather in groups of eight to ten. One person from each group was asked to come up to the front and collect a basket of bread and a cup of juice. This person brought the bread and juice back to the group. Each group then proceeded to pray and then break bread and pour the juice into separate cups. This allowed us to actually participate in the human acts of breaking and pouring, sharing and serving. After the groups had finished celebrating Communion, the entire gathering stood together to sing a hymn. This experience highlighted the communal nature of the Lord's Supper and allowed us to celebrate the fellowship we have in Christ.

³²⁹Inagrace Dietterich, "Cultivating Communities of the Holy Spirit," *Missional Church*, 164.

structuring social relationships and designating ‘who ate what with whom.’³³⁰ For Jesus to welcome sinners to the table was an indication of his acceptance and companionship. Willimon argues that when Jesus dined with sinners he “manifested the radically inclusive nature of his kingdom, a kingdom that cuts across the barriers we erect between insiders and outsiders, the saved and the damned, the elect and the outcast – barriers often most rigidly enforced at the table.”³³¹ For Jesus to welcome sinners and outcasts alongside the well-respected members of society indicated that the kingdom of God was a radical reordering of society.

In this way, Jesus’ table ministry captures the heart of God’s mission to redeem and restore all of creation to himself. Jesus’ radical inclusiveness at the table has led many to question how the church should practice Communion. Dave Esau has noted that “while Christians are generally united on the importance of celebrating the Lord’s Supper, we are not always agreed on our practice, especially when it comes to who’s invited.”³³² However, Jesus open invitation at the Table was also an invitation to discipleship. This is an invitation that cannot be taken lightly. Kreider argues this point well:

Jesus’ vision of the grand inclusive table of the kingdom need not be taken as instruction to take away all boundaries from Christian communities. Jesus made a great point of the inclusive invitation to all, but he also insisted that choices be made. It was not a light thing to acknowledge the kingdom and to enter into its costs and joys.³³³

As a symbol of God’s kingdom, Jesus’ table fellowship revealed the mystery of God’s gracious welcome and the necessity of human response.

A question that the MB denomination will continue to wrestle with, however, is this: Where are the boundaries at the Communion table, if there are any? This is not a mere question of polity, but is a significant question in light of the church’s mission. That is, this is not merely a question of practice; how

³³⁰Fast Dueck, “Worship Made Strange,” 8.

³³¹ William H. Willimon, *The Service of God: How Worship and Ethics Are Related* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 133.

³³² Dave Esau, “The Lord’s Supper: Who’s Invited?” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 39 no. 17 (Sept. 2000), available from <http://old.mbherald.com/39-17/lordssupper.html>. See also, Wall and Penner, “The Lord’s Supper and the Church,” *Direction Journal*.

³³³Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 130.

one answers this question will have significant theological implications for how one views the church and salvation. In light of these challenges, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to suggest whether Communion practices in the MB church should be open or closed.³³⁴

Communion practices need to reflect Jesus' open invitation. This can only be done through a careful selection of language and terms. Mennonite Brethren tend to use language that highlights the importance of faith and human response. This has led communities to focus on individual merit as a precondition for participating in Communion. The theology of incarnation suggests that MB's can reframe their language so that Christ's grace and forgiveness become the foundation of the celebration. In this way, Communion services become a proclamation of good news for all people. It is a visible message that Christ's body and blood has been given "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Michael Welker argues that Communion "is an event of unconditional acceptance of all the participants"; the Last Supper included "Judas, who betrayed him; Peter, who denied him; [and] the disciples, who abandoned him."³³⁵ And yet, the very nature of an invitation requires a response. Celebrating the Lord's Supper requires that the church hold in tension the mystery of God's grace and the human response of faith.

2.3 The Interrelatedness of Life

The doctrine of incarnation is a reminder that God reveals himself using human methods of communication and activity: stories, bread, wine and water. The bread and the wine symbolize Christ's body and blood, but they also represent real sustenance. Inagrace Diettrich argues that the bread reminds Christians of the interrelatedness of all life.³³⁶ Commenting on the symbolic nature of the bread, Willimon asserts that the bread "thrusts our vision both forward toward all of God's gifts and backwards toward the

³³⁴ For further discussion on this topic in Anabaptist circles see: Penner and Wall, "The Lord's Supper and the Church," Gay Lynn Voth, "Anabaptist Liturgical Spirituality and the Supper of Christ," *Direction Journal* 34 no. 1 (Spring 2005): 3-14; Kroeker, "The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord's Supper," Esau, "The Lord's Supper: Who's Invited?"; Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*.

³³⁵ Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* Trans. by John F. Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 71, as found in Sean O'Leary, "Rediscovering the Eucharist in the Evangelical Churches" (M.of Theology thesis., Wycliffe College, 2003), 69.

³³⁶ Diettrich, *Missional Church*, 165.

bread we had for breakfast, to the gifted and social nature of our existence, to the interconnectedness of worship and life.”³³⁷ When we touch and taste the bread and wine we are connected to creation; to the water, soil, sun, kernels, vines, and hands that produced the bread and wine.

2.3.1 Bread as Sustenance

The theme of sustenance shines through the practice of Communion and has ethical implications for how the church responds to hunger. The Roman Catholic missionary Bartolome de las Casas reminds the Catholic Church that the bread that is offered at the Table cannot be separated from the production and procurement of bread.³³⁸ This principle can be applied to the MB church in North America today. The church cannot eat bread at the Table and ignore issues of hunger around the world and in its neighbourhood. As the MB church in North America becomes increasingly aware of the realities of the global village, it realizes that hunger is alive and well today. However, hunger has taken on a different reality in our world: it no longer strikes the rich and powerful and “since the poor usually die quietly in relative obscurity, the rich of all nations comfortably ignore this kind of famine.”³³⁹ Ronald Sider reminds Christians that “even in good times, millions and millions of persons go to bed hungry, and children’s brains vegetate and their bodies succumb prematurely to disease.”³⁴⁰

When the Lord’s Super is celebrated, food is shared physically as the symbol of Christ’s forgiveness and reconciliation. Joseph Grassi argues, “Jesus’ sharing of bread and wine was an effective symbol that *every* man and woman could be brother and sister and thus share together the earth’s resources.”³⁴¹ Jesus inaugurated the new covenant, announced the kingdom of God, and sent his Spirit to form a new people who live out the realities of this kingdom. Self-sacrificial love and care for our

³³⁷ Willimon, *The Service of God*, 131.

³³⁸ See chapter two, p. 70.

³³⁹ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*, (Vancouver: Word Publishing, 1997), 9.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Joseph A. Grassi, *Broken Bread and Broken Bodies: The Lord’s Supper and World Hunger* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 83.

brothers and sisters is part of the reality of this new kingdom. Grassi argues that Paul, in 1 Cor. 11, implies a serious responsibility for rich Christians to care for their brothers and sisters who are poor and needy.³⁴² Sider has also offered a thought provoking summary of Paul's communal ethic for Eucharistic celebrations:

To discern the Lord's body is to understand and live the truth that fellowship with Christ is inseparable from membership in his body...Discernment of that one body of believers leads to sweeping availability to and responsibility for the other sisters and brothers...Discernment of that one body is totally incompatible with feasting without sharing in costly ways with other members of the body who are hungry.³⁴³

The relationship between food, wealth, hunger and poverty, and the body of Christ, are inextricably linked in 1 Corinthians 11. The MB church in Canada needs to heed Paul's words to the wealthy in Corinth. The church in Canada is in a position of wealth and abundance, and it has a responsibility to extend unity and fellowship to its hungry brothers and sisters around the world.

The practice of the Lord's Supper must include concrete ways to effectively share food with those who are hungry. I have attended a couple of churches where a special diaconal offering was collected on Communion Sundays to care for the physical needs of people in the church and community.³⁴⁴ This is a practice that could be adopted by more churches. The practice of the early church connected the Lord's Supper with the concrete act of sharing food. Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology*, describes the weekly worship of the Christian community. When they gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper, gifts were collected to distribute to those who were in need: "They who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need."³⁴⁵ Dueck comments that, for these

³⁴²Grassi, *Broken Bread and Broken Bodies*, 86.

³⁴³Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 85.

³⁴⁴This is an offering that is taken up once a month on Communion Sundays. The money that is collected is used as a discretionary fund by the deacons of the church to care for families, both in the church and local community, who are in need, experience poor health, or have a family emergency.

³⁴⁵Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chap. 67, Trans. by Marcus Dods and George Reith, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*,

early Christians, “faith and life were intimately linked through the celebration of the Eucharist and the distribution of the bread to all who are in need of it.”³⁴⁶ This is another practice that could be revived in MB churches. Communion Sundays could be a time when extra food is brought for the church’s food pantry and later distributed to people in need.³⁴⁷

As Communion services are planned, the connection between the bread on the table and the bread for the world needs to be effectively communicated. The way that the Lord’s Supper is practiced can form the way that people in the congregation apprehend the relationship between food and justice. Gordon Lathrop provides a powerful summary of how Communion practices can give clarity to this relationship:

If we use these gifts in such a way as to let them stand in clarity, undiminished and obscured, they will show us the remarkable connections that exist between our worship and daily life...So, for example, let the Lord’s supper be practiced as a meal. That is: let us use real and beautiful bread and a real drink from a great cup of good wine. Let the altar be seen as a table, a great and important and yet utterly simple table, around which we gather...We will not receive a belly-filling menu here, but only the bread and cup of the meal...Still, let us bring much more food than that – and money to buy food – and then let us give away all these gifts to the hungry – directly, through food pantries in our churches or communities, and more indirectly, through relief agencies that build up the dignity and mutually caring life of those they help.³⁴⁸

Adopting the practices that Lathrop suggests will allow the symbols of bread and wine to reflect the holistic nature of God’s mission. Furthermore, connecting Communion practices to the physical needs of the world will curb dualistic tendencies that obscure the nature of mission and the church’s role in that mission.

2.3.2 Care for Creation

The bread and wine of the Supper reminds Christians of their reliance on God’s gracious

vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885, accessed 31 January 2011) Revised by Kevin Knight for New Advent, available from <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>.

³⁴⁶Dueck, “Worship Made Strange,” 8.

³⁴⁷I want to highlight here that the church should have a food pantry on hand. We are too quick to hand off the work of the church to Para-church and community organizations. The church cannot engage in mission from an arm’s length: it must be the hands and feet of Christ in tangible, visible ways.

³⁴⁸Gordon W. Lathrop, “Liturgy and Mission in the North American Context,” *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, 209.

provision of food through creation. Reliance on God's creation inevitably reminds Christians of their mandate to care for creation. Christians need to take their role as stewards of God's creation seriously for two reasons. First, as stewards, Christians recognize that the created order belongs to God; humans are not able to create or sustain life. A recent MB Herald article, written by Brian Cooper, in conjunction with the MB Board of Faith and Life, discusses the relationship of Christians to the created order. Cooper points out that many Christians are wary of modern environmental movements, afraid that they may lead to worship of the creation rather than the creator.³⁴⁹ This fear is not an excuse to abuse or misuse creation. Cooper states, "Even in its fallenness, creation still reveals something of the majesty of God, and as believers in the creator God, we have a responsibility to view and use creation in accordance with this revelation...The coming of the Kingdom of God, though yet to be fulfilled, heralds the work of God that creates *shalom* even now and anticipates the renewing of God's creation."³⁵⁰ Cooper points out that, while care of creation was part of the mandate to all humanity, Christians continue to follow this mandate, as caring for creation reveals that God's mission includes the entire created order.

Second, by caring for creation, Christians acknowledge that God's mission is to restore *shalom*. Bernhard Ott states that *shalom* exists when we can look God, each other, and creation in the eye, knowing there is no debt or guilt separating us; *shalom* prevails when we can say "everything is right between us!"³⁵¹ Ott goes on to describe the redemptive narrative of the Bible in terms of God's project to restore *shalom*. The purpose of God's mission, argues Ott, is the restoration of true *shalom* for humanity and creation. Redekop describes Jesus as the "prince of shalom," and the one who is bringing about the kingdom of shalom. He states, "Shalom is the metaphor of a kingdom, where the King is concerned about each member and also concerned about the land, which nurtures the people...It is a symbiotic kingdom, where the Lord, his people, the living systems and the sustaining inorganic substances are mutually

³⁴⁹Brian Cooper, "God Saw That it was Good: Toward a Theology of Creation," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* 50, no.1 (January 2011): 9.

³⁵⁰Ibid.

³⁵¹Bernhard Ott, *God's Shalom Project*, trans. by Timothy J. Geddert (Intercourse: Good Books, 2004), 11.

serving each other.”³⁵² *Shalom* cannot exist while humans exploit creation, which is to abuse God and each other.

Christ has given the church the gift of bread and wine as the means by which the church remembers not only his death but also his coming kingdom; a kingdom that is defined by *shalom*. Liturgical practices should, therefore, be a foretaste of this coming kingdom, which includes caring for creation. Caring for creation will lead the church to consideration where the bread and juice/wine for Communion comes from. Where possible the church can use bread and juice that has been bought, traded and made equitably by farms and industries that show concern for the environment. Where plastic cups are used for Communion, the church can consider how it can reduce the use of plastic cups, or ensure that cups are recycled after being used. Lathrop summarizes the relationship between Communion and care for creation:

The assembly in word and sacrament...will call us to a way of living on the land that comes from standing before that God, under the mercy of that God. The assembly may even invite us to resist certain characteristics of the pervasive North American cultures. In any case, it will certainly invite us to see ourselves as a people in communion with other peoples of many other cultures, many other ways of living on the lands of the earth, many other patterns of interdependence from throughout the world.³⁵³

The practice of the Lord’s Supper is an opportunity to witness to a different set of values; instead of valuing speed, efficiency and planned obsolescence, notions of time and conservation can be redeemed.

3. Ecclesiology: Communal Practices

Chapter two of this thesis explored Marpeck’s theology of the church as the prolongation of Christ’s humanity in the world. This theology might be called “church as sacrament.” Marpeck’s theology resonates with the Mennonite Brethren confession of faith, which affirms that the Church makes Christ visible to the world. It was concluded in Chapter two that the implication for the church is that all of its activities, including the Lord’s Supper, are means through which God’s grace is extended to the world.

³⁵²Redekop, “Mennonite Ethic of Creation,” 401. Emphasizing the importance of creation by no means diminishes the importance of loving God and loving our neighbour. Caring for creation is certainly an important expression of our love for God and neighbour.

³⁵³Lathrop, “Liturgy and Mission in the North American Context,” 203-204.

The church as sacrament necessitates a social, or political, body. As the Lord's Supper forms believers into Christ's actual body (as the church "becomes what it eats"), the church becomes a social body that is able to resist the forces of this world that isolate, fragment, and dehumanize. The Supper realizes Christian love for God and neighbour through a commitment to this new social body. This section will discuss how ecclesiology, the "church as sacrament," can give further shape to missional practices of the Lord's Supper.

3.1 Unity of the Body

As the prolongation of Christ's humanity, the church is called to imitate Christ. Before Paul began to instruct the church in Corinth on propriety in worship, he urged the church to follow his example, as he followed the example of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). The example of Christ should guide the practices of the church, so that the church's life together is a picture of Christ's ministry and message. Being Christ's body in the world is explicitly ethical as the church is called to live now as the people of God for the sake of the world.

In an essay on the relationship between mission and Communion, Mark Bangert asks the question: "Does our eating make any difference in how we live and move and have our being as Spirit-led people in the world?"³⁵⁴ Bangert uses Paul's first letter to the Corinthians as a foundation for his argument that Communion has ethical implications for the church community. He argues that Paul's clearest proclamation of the gospel is found in his discussion of the Lord's Supper. Bangert states, "The Living One is recognized in the icon of the community – real presence can be perceived both in the community's eating and in the community itself."³⁵⁵ Paul's radical vision of community shows up throughout the latter part of this letter. Bangert notes that in 1 Corinthians, Paul "hammers away at varieties of gifts given by one Spirit (12:4ff)," he stresses the value of diversity (12:27ff), the importance of love (13:1ff), and

³⁵⁴Bangert, "Holy Communion: Taste and See," 60.

³⁵⁵Ibid., 66.

exhorts the Corinthians to honour each other's gifts in order to show forth the body of Christ (14:20ff).³⁵⁶ Paul's vision of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians is two-fold; it highlights unity in diversity and the under-girding ethic of love. Bangert concludes: "The composition of the assembly and the behavior of the assembly is at the heart of being the body of Christ – that which we eat. By permitting diversity to fracture the Christian community, the body of Christ dilutes its witness, siphons off power for its mission, and soils the gospel. The body of Christ is seen even as it is tasted."³⁵⁷ The unity of believers is integral to the practice of Communion; without unity the body of Christ loses its visibility in the world.

Communion practices should reflect that the church – as it worships and works together - is the body of Christ. The term liturgy was derived from the Greek work *leitourgia*, and originally referred to the public work of citizens.³⁵⁸ The use of this term to refer to the worship service reflects the reality that worship is not only something that is done for the community, it is something that is done by the community. Kreider notes that *leitourgia* "is the work of both God and of the people in the service of the public – the world God loves."³⁵⁹ Stutzman and Hunsberger note that the term liturgy is a public term. In the classical sense, liturgy indicated "'a work done for the people,' in other words, something like a 'public works project' on behalf of the *polis*, the city."³⁶⁰ The church's liturgy is an act of public witness that is done by the community for the sake of the world.

Anabaptists have affirmed the priesthood of all believers; this needs to be visibly demonstrated in its Communion practices.³⁶¹ All ages, abilities, races and genders need to be included in Eucharistic ritual. The people who are chosen to offer prayers, lead music and distribute the elements should reflect the

³⁵⁶Ibid.

³⁵⁷Ibid.

³⁵⁸Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 30.

³⁵⁹Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 141.

³⁶⁰Stutzman and Hunsberger, "The Public Witness of Worship," 106.

³⁶¹ See Kroeker, "The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord's Supper," 33-38, for further discussion on the abolition of distinction between laity and clergy, and the importance of unity in Anabaptist thought.

unique make-up of Christ's body. The unity of believers around the table is a missional practice; it is a realization of Jesus' prayer, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:22-23). Wally Kroeker echoes Jesus' prayer when he states that the joy and unity of believers gathered around the Lord's Table flows from their embrace of God's mission.³⁶²

Unfortunately, the "church as sacrament" does not always guide the way the church practices Communion. For example, the attractional church model has missed the radical nature of the local body of Christ gathered for Communion. In order to attract more members, churches often target interest groups based on age, ethnicity, shared interests or perceived needs, and economic status. This is not the prolongation of Christ's body in the world that Paul – or Marpeck – envisioned. If the church is to be truly missional, it needs to *be* the radically diverse body of Christ. This section will look at two examples of how unity through diversity at the Lord's Table can be an expression of God's mission.

3.1.1 Intergenerational Worship

Intergenerational worship is necessary from a missional standpoint. As the church is called to be a sign and foretaste of the reign of God, the church's ability to cross generational barriers will be a powerful witness to the world. In *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together*, Howard Vanderwell argues that Christian unity is a biblical principle that requires intergenerational worship.³⁶³ Jesus' prayer for the unity of believers in John 17:22-23 is not only concerned with unity for the sake of the Christian community; it is concerned with the unity of believers for the sake of the world. Intergenerational worship is also a prophetic witness that demonstrates the reality of the reign of God. In a society that increasingly segregates people according to age, the church is called to be a sign that Christ has broken down the barriers that divide us.

³⁶² Ibid., 38.

³⁶³ Howard Vanderwell ed., *The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2008), 19.

Intergenerational worship is a practice that reflects Christ's work of reconciliation - it requires Christians to break bread with strangers who have a different set of values, life experiences and perspectives. In *The Church of All Ages*, Gil Rendle explains how accommodating generations other than one's own challenges and expands notions of hospitality:

Intergenerational as a way of seeing is an act of...rich Christian hospitality. Too many congregations limit their practice of hospitality to politeness. This form of hospitality is like fixing your home up just the way you like it and then inviting friends in to share it with you. All is well and good as long as the friends play by the rules.³⁶⁴

In his book *Welcoming the Stranger*, Patrick Keifert argues that worship gatherings need to be public spaces that make room for strangers. He states, "In the church, showing hospitality to a stranger is less a matter of making the stranger feel at home and more a matter of opening one's private world to the stranger.... It is a matter of opening one's private [spiritual] world to a public one."³⁶⁵ The reality is that many people in the church, especially those that find themselves in opposing generational groups, will not become intimate acquaintances. In many respects, the people that we worship with will continue to be strangers. Fortunately, Christian hospitality, according to Keifert, does not require us to become "friends."³⁶⁶ It does require that the Communion practices of the church reflect Christ's own table ministry by people of different ages, classes, genders, and races sitting down to eat together.

Facilitating intergenerational worship is not an easy task.³⁶⁷ It requires creative planning, patience

³⁶⁴Gil Rendle, "'Intergenerational' as a Way of Seeing," Howard Vanderwell ed., *The Church of All Ages*, 68.

³⁶⁵Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 8.

³⁶⁶The word friend here is used in the sense that in North American culture friends are considered intimate acquaintances with whom one has a lot in common. For more on issue of intimacy in the church versus hospitality in the church see Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*.

³⁶⁷North American society encourages divisions according to ages. This can be seen in particular in the North American market-driven economy and in the educational system. It is not uncommon for churches to develop programs for specific ages, rather than creating activities that foster intergenerational community. For example, many churches have programs for children, jr. youth, sr. youth, college and career, young married couples, 55 plus, seniors etc. It is also not uncommon for a church to excuse children from the worship service so that they can attend an age-appropriate service. While a congregation may be intergenerational, in that several ages attend the church, the programs and worship services suggest that the generations cannot mix in a meaningful way. Furthermore, there also seems to be a growing trend among attractional churches to target specific age-brackets. In most cities one can find a church that markets itself to college and careers, Gen Xer's, or young families.

and love. However, the end result is important, because the Christian faith is passed on from one generation to the next. Intergenerational worship is vital to the missional vocation of the church. According to Cory Seibel, passing on the faith tradition will require at least two things from the congregation:

- 1) that it rise to the challenge of expressing its witness in a manner that communicates and connects effectively with the individuals embedded within the cultural particularities of each rising generation; 2) that it be prepared to allow the rising generation the opportunity to make its own mark upon the shape of the faith tradition that it is asked to carry forward.³⁶⁸

Keeping these two tasks in mind, the following suggestions may help the MB church to welcome each generation to the Table in a meaningful way.³⁶⁹

First, the church can include more storytelling. We need to tell the stories from Scripture and we need to share our personal stories. Storytelling is an art form that has a way of communicating effectively across the span of ages. Part of the Communion celebration could include personal stories of encounter with Christ and the Spirit's ongoing work. Second, pastors and service leaders should work diligently to use language that is accessible to children. Children could also receive a blessing as part of the Communion celebration. Third, when music is used in Communion services, leaders need to select music that includes all generations, including the children. Fourth, young people need to be intentionally included. This means inviting children and young people to read scripture, participate in music teams, offer prayer, and help distribute the elements during Communion.

3.1.2 The Church for all Abilities

There is often a divide between temporarily able-bodied members and members who have physical or mental disabilities in the church. Nancy Eiesland speaks from her own experience about the ways in which the church has failed to discern the body of Christ in its celebration of the Eucharist. She recalls the following occasion:

³⁶⁸ CL Seibel, 2009, "Intergenerational reconciliation and justice as essential dimensions of missional renewal in the post-modern transition," D.Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, viewed 10/05/26 < <http://upetd.up.ac.za/thesis/available/etd-10172009-105350/> > 77.

³⁶⁹ These ideas are taken from various chapters in *The Church of All Ages*.

When I initially attended services, I would often be alerted by an usher that I need not go forward for the Eucharist. Instead I would be offered the sacrament at my seat when everyone else had been served. My presence in the service using either a wheelchair or crutches made problematical the ‘normal’ bodily practice of the Eucharist...Hence receiving the Eucharist was transformed for me from a corporate to a solitary experience; from a sacralization of Christ’s broken body to a stigmatization of my disabled body.³⁷⁰

Eiesland goes on to challenge the able-bodied “majority” members of the church because their “normal” practices have excluded and segregated people with disabilities from the rest of the community. “Normal” practices that have either restricted or marginalized members from participating fully in the Eucharist include: architectural barriers, ritual movements, demeaning body aesthetics, unreflective speech, and bodily reactions.³⁷¹ Eiesland concludes:

The Eucharist becomes a dreaded and humiliating remembrance that in the church we are trespassers in an able-bodied dominion...In making the Eucharist a physical practice of exclusion, the church demonstrates a tangible bias against our nonconventional bodies and dishonours the disabled God.³⁷²

In light of Eiesland’s critique, one must ask discern which Communion practices honour the whole body of Christ. Implicit in Eiesland’s critique are suggestions for how the church might move forward. First, each church must discover which barriers currently exclude some members from full participation in the Lord’s Supper. Does the church need to alter their physical worship space? Does the church need to rethink which ritual movements and actions it employs? Second, Eiesland would suggest that there is a need for new symbols. The church needs to incorporate the image of the disabled God into their worship services, “whereby people with disabilities can affirm our bodies in dignity and reconceive the church as community of justice for people with disabilities.”³⁷³ McElvaney also suggests ways the church can “spread the welcoming table for persons with disabilities.”³⁷⁴ Many of his suggestions surround awareness, inclusion, and education. Eiesland highlights the necessity of breaking down the

³⁷⁰ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 112.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 113.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid., 94.

³⁷⁴ William K. McElvaney, *Eating and Drinking at the Welcome Table: The Holy Supper for All People*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998), 99.

existing barriers that exclude people with disabilities:

The church is impoverished without our presence...we reveal the physical truth of embodiment as a painstaking process of claiming and inhabiting our actually existing bodies. People with disabilities in the church announce the presence of the disabled God for us and call the church to become a communion of struggle.³⁷⁵

These perspectives are important, as they challenge the church to reconsider what it means to discern the body of Christ when they come together for Communion.

3.2 The Discipline of Discipleship

Discipleship, covenant, church unity and discipline are all closely interwoven with the MB theology of the Lord's Supper. The words of institution for the cup found in Mark (14:22-25) and Paul (1 Cor 11:25) speak of the new covenant that has been established through the blood of Christ. The theme of covenant highlights the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death. The Mennonite Brethren confession of faith states that "the sacrificial death of Jesus is for the establishment of a covenant, a covenant of oneness, a body, a partnership of being."³⁷⁶ This covenant of oneness includes oneness with the way of Christ. Kreider notes that the theme of discipleship, developed so clearly in the Gospel of Mark, finds expression as Jesus speaks of the cup of the covenant during the Last Supper. In Mark, Jesus' sacrificial death and the disciples' call to follow is connected by the images of cup and cross.³⁷⁷ Commenting on the relationship between suffering and discipleship, Kreider asks:

Why does the Christian suffer? Surely not to pay off an offended God. To this question sixteenth-century Anabaptists made a distinctive insight. They insisted that 'the *benefit* of the death of Christ applies only to the person whose acceptance of it includes discipleship. That is, the inward appropriation of the broken will and the outward following in the steps of Jesus.'³⁷⁸

Discipleship is closely connected with the suffering of the Christian. The covenantal nature of

³⁷⁵ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 115.

³⁷⁶ *Confession of Faith*, 99.

³⁷⁷ Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 135. Kreider states: "in chapter 8 Jesus calls the disciples to take up the cross; in chapter 10 Jesus uses for discipleship the symbol of the cup. 'The cup that I drink you will drink' (Mark 10:39). In Gethsemane, referring to his impending death, Jesus prays, 'Remove this cup from me.' Both cross and cup refer to Jesus' martyr death and the disciples' call to follow him": 135-136.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

Communion suggests that Communion forms a covenanted community of disciples through participation in the benefits and suffering of the cross.

Cavanaugh connects Christian suffering with the missional nature of the Lord's Supper. He states that "the true body of Christ is the suffering body, the destitute body, the body which is tortured and sacrificed. The church is the body of Christ because it performs an *anamnesis* of Christ's sacrifice, suffering in its own flesh the afflictions taken on by Christ."³⁷⁹ The willing suffering of Christians demonstrates true unity in the body. Cavanaugh argues that the Eucharist reveals true solidarity: "In the church's communities of solidarity, the poor are fed by Christ but, insofar as they become Christ's body, they also become food for others. The Eucharist reveals the true meaning of solidarity."³⁸⁰ For Cavanaugh, a key component of mission is identifying with those who suffer.

The practice of the Lord's Supper needs to reflect this radical solidarity. The theme of discipleship implies that Christians have been called to live a lifestyle that is radically different from the world, for the sake of the world. Kreider sums up the Communion call to discipleship this way: "We are nourished at the table. We 'feed on him with faith' and go out together into a life which bears witness to Jesus' life-giving way. Not isolated individuals, we are Jesus' own disciple band. People will see us and be either repelled by the cost or attracted to join Jesus' way."³⁸¹ Participation in the Lord's Supper is connected with the unity of the Christian community – a band of disciples who follow the way of Christ – whose life together witnesses to the in-breaking of God's kingdom. Discipleship and unity cannot be separated from a missional theology of Communion.

3.2.1 Practicing Discipline

Discipleship cannot exist outside of a community; one cannot love Christ without loving their brothers and sisters and giving themselves for others. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul discusses the demands of Christian unity and discipleship at the Lord's Table. Cavanaugh summarizes the force of Paul's argument

³⁷⁹Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 267.

³⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 268.

³⁸¹Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 136.

in chapter 11 well, stating, “In Paul’s view the Eucharist carries with it certain demands. The Eucharist creates unity, it is true, but the Eucharist also *requires* unity.”³⁸² When Paul tells the Corinthians, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27), he is not speaking merely of individual sin, he is speaking of disunity among believers. Kroeker argues that “the problem that led to Paul’s warning was one of disunity...Eating unworthily, which many modern Christians interpret as coming to the Lord’s Table with sin in one’s life, was the act of destroying unity.”³⁸³ The act of Communion is one of the most vivid expressions of unity in the church; as such, it must be a practice of Christian love and discipleship.

Discipleship among the community of believers is an important aspect of Communion from a missional viewpoint. Cavanaugh points out that immorality, according to Paul, is a denial that our “bodies are members of Christ” (6:15); he states “[immorality] endangers not just the individual sinner but the entire body of Christ on earth.”³⁸⁴ What is at stake in the practice of church discipline, argues Cavanaugh, is “the visibility of the body of Christ, not simply the condemnation of individual wrongdoing.”³⁸⁵ The unity of the church, through its life of disciplined discipleship, witnesses to the reality of the kingdom of God. Discipline, as part of the Lord’s Supper, is an integral part of the mission of the church.

Historically, Anabaptists have taken Paul’s word seriously and Christian unity has been closely connected with discipleship and the purity of the church. Kroeker argues that for the Anabaptists, “partaking amid disunity and impurity was tantamount to eating unworthily.”³⁸⁶ He goes on to say that

³⁸²Cavanaugh, 235.

³⁸³ Kroeker, “The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord’s Supper,” 31.

³⁸⁴Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 246.

³⁸⁵Ibid. The Catholic Church in Chile had to reconcile the fact that torturers were participating in the Eucharist alongside the families of those who had been kidnapped and tortured. Excommunication became a necessary means of church discipline.. Commenting on the situating in Chile, Cavanaugh states: “formal excommunication remembers the tortured body of Christ and anticipates judgment against torturers, thus making visible in the present what is and is not the church. Excommunication is one of the clearest examples of how the Eucharist is a resource for the social practice of the church...[This] is by no means an argument for the use of excommunication in general for other types of sin.”: 263-64.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 34.

participation in the Lord's Supper was a "corporate sign of obligation to live a Christian life and be allied with Christ's bride, the church."³⁸⁷ The current practice in most MB churches is highly individualistic. Herb Kopp has described Communion as time of reflection and self-examination; it is "a reflective time of meditating on the meaning of the atoning death of Christ. It is a time of looking inward."³⁸⁸ Kroeker argues that the practice of the Lord's Supper for many Mennonites "is primarily a Zwinglian celebration, with virtually all emphasis placed on the commemorative aspect and almost no attention given to the aspect of unity."³⁸⁹ The church needs to reclaim the Anabaptist view of Communion as a practice of unity and discipline for the sake of mission

In order for the church to practice unity and discipline, the practices of the Lord's Supper must challenge – not reinforce – the individualistic imagination that has shaped North American society. Cavanaugh's in-depth look at the Catholic Church in Chile is a stark reminder that it is not only the health of individual believers that is at stake when Christians come to the Table. The visibility of the church as a social body that stands in contrast to the violence of the state requires practices of communal discernment and accountability. Each local community needs to establish practices that move beyond personal piety to include the discipline of the community. Communal language and practices, including prayer, confession, celebration and reconciliation, need to be incorporated into MB Communion observances.

4. Eschatology: The Future Made Present

This chapter has discussed how the relationship between mission and the Lord's Supper finds expression in the practices of the church. The words and symbols used by the church need to convey a missional theology of Communion, rooted in incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology. This final section will discuss how eschatology fills the symbolic act of Communion with meaning that changes the way Christians understand and live in the world.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Kopp, *New Life in Christ*, 53.

³⁸⁹ Kroeker, "The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord's Supper," 36.

4.1 Understanding Who(se) We Are

Gathering for worship shapes the way Christians understand the world and their place in it. It is a ritual activity that “calls us to remember who we are in relationship to God, and it re-members us as a community bearing witness to be the living body of Christ in the world.”³⁹⁰ The bread and wine enable Christians to remember that they live by God’s grace through faith; that they are dependent on the Spirit from one moment to the next. Roth reminds the church that humans are always engaged in some form of worship: “All of us – even the most secular people – are deeply committed to a particular understanding of reality that guides our assumptions, attitudes and actions.”³⁹¹ Roth goes on to argue that worship is an expression of allegiance, “Because we are forgetful people, worship serves as a regular opportunity to name publicly our deepest allegiances.”³⁹² In light of human nature, weekly participation in corporate worship is essential for the formation of God’s people.

As the Christian life is reordered in light of a relationship to God, one begins to live differently. Dueck argues that “as Christians gather in worship, particularly as they gather around the Lord’s Table, they become Christ’s body. They enact and perform another way of living in the world.”³⁹³ Christians experience transformation as they participate in the sacramental activities of the church. Schmit argues that one of the chief reasons people gather for worship is to be drawn closer to God, or as Don Saliers states, Christians seek “to participate in the life of God.”³⁹⁴ Schmit equates this participation with transformation; he goes on to argue that engaging in corporate acts of worship enables Christians to become better imitators of Christ. Schmit surmises that Christian worship “is about something, has direction, and moves people to some new place. The mission in worship is twofold: to serve God through

³⁹⁰Roth, *Practices*, 209.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 70.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Dueck, “Worship Made Strange,” 17.

³⁹⁴ Clayton J. Schmit, “Worship as a Locus for Transformation,” *Worship That Changes Lives: Multidisciplinary and Congregational Perspectives on Spiritual Transformation*, ed. Alexis D. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 26.

lively adoration and to do God's work in the world as active service."³⁹⁵

The process of transformation cannot happen without regular participation in worship. The powers in the world work tirelessly to claim allegiances and distract Christians from their relationship with God. North American values of individual preference, freedom, and autonomy continuously tempt Christians to worship themselves instead of God. These values are continuously reinforced in society via media and technology. In a study on the impact of electronic media, Gregor Goethals labels television "the electronic golden calf."³⁹⁶ Schattauer states that Goethals "convincingly interprets the constant flow of images from the television, which saturates our experience, as an 'expression of an encompassing faith in the American way of life.'"³⁹⁷ The pervasiveness of electronic media in society gives it the power to construct a symbolic canopy that shapes how people view themselves and the world. In contrast, Schattauer argues: "The images at work within the church's own symbolic life, especially its liturgical assembly, are potentially the Christian community's most powerful force for engaging and critiquing the electronic images of contemporary life and breaking the idolatrous images that contend for our worship."³⁹⁸ The Lord's Supper is a transformational practice as it requires Christians to set aside all other competing claims for sovereignty over their lives.

In light of the challenges that face the church in North America, more frequent Communion celebrations will be indispensable for the vitality and mission of the church. Christians are beset with competing claims for their allegiance. Roth has pointed out that humans are forgetful in light of the temptations Christians face in a post-Christian, post-modern society; their lives need to be continually reordered in light of Christ's saving presence. This means that the MB church needs to move towards a weekly celebration of Communion. Roth argues: "If worship expresses our deepest understanding of the way the world works and if we think the incarnation is central to our faith, it would seem obvious that we

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 31.

³⁹⁶ Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly As Locus of Mission," *Inside Out*, 18.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

celebrate this central conviction in a more regular and visible way in our worship.”³⁹⁹ For the early Anabaptists, there were many good reasons for celebrating the Lord’s Supper less frequently.⁴⁰⁰ However, these reasons do not hold weight today. In light of the competing claims for allegiance, and the power of electronic media to shape how Christians understand the world, we need to be regularly re-minded of who (se) we are. Weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper is necessary in order to form a people who live under the symbolic canopy of God’s kingdom.

4.2 Representing God’s Kingdom

Chapter two discussed how an eschatological vision of the Lord’s Supper provides a framework for understanding the relationship between mission and Communion. In *Missional Church*, George Hunsberger argues that the church’s vocation is to represent the reign of God.⁴⁰¹ He states that representing the reign of God is both passive and active: “The passive meaning indicates that one thing stands for another. When you have seen the one, you have known the other.”⁴⁰² Just as Christ said, “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), when someone sees the church, they should be able to see Christ. The active meaning of represent “indicates the way a person may be given authority to act on another’s behalf...such as, ‘A lawyer represents her client.’”⁴⁰³ The church actively and passively represents the reign of God as both a sign and agent.

The church gathered around the Table is a representation of God’s already/not-yet kingdom. Through the action of breaking bread, the reign of God is made visible and tangible in the world. Rempel articulates the relationship between the “now” and “not yet” as it becomes visible in the Eucharist this

³⁹⁹ Roth, *Practices*, 209.

⁴⁰⁰ These reasons included needed reform of the medieval Church’s theology of the mass as sacrifice. From a practical perspective, Anabaptists were suffering from persecution and were not able to practice Communion frequently. More recent arguments for infrequent celebration hold less weight. For a discussion on this topic see Roth, *Practices*, 208.

⁴⁰¹ George Hunsberger, “Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” *Missional Church*, 100.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

way:

The Eucharist is the icon of the church's and the believer's communion with Christ, here is the paradox: our bond with God is spiritual in nature but it is enacted by the elements of earthly existence, like bread and wine.... Sacraments are inherently collective and particular. They give God's saving work a location – they actualize the new humanity and make tangible the place where eternity is breaking into time (Eph. 2).⁴⁰⁴

Corporate worship is a symbolic/prophetic activity of the church, as it “always points to the eschatological reality beyond itself, to the purpose of God in Christ for the world and its peoples, for the whole created order.”⁴⁰⁵ Schattauer summarizes this point well: “The church in its assembly around word and sacrament enacts a ritual symbol of God's gracious purpose for the world and so participates in God's world-encompassing mission.”⁴⁰⁶ Rempel and Schattauer provide an important insight into the eschatological nature of Communion. Communion is not simply a practice that prepares the church for mission. It is a practice that actually realizes God's mission. In the act of Communion, God's not-yet kingdom becomes a present reality.

Understanding the prophetic/symbolic action of the Lord's Supper is important for mission in the North American context. The eschatological reality of the church challenges the assumption that people can experience salvation outside of the church. In a society that increasingly values individualistic spirituality corporate worship proclaims that it is the church that is already experiencing God's good purpose for humanity. The very act of strangers being gathered together as family is a prophetic witness to God's plan of redemption. The church's life together, most potently expressed through its fellowship with Christ at the Table, witnesses to the reality that there is another way for humanity. Forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, unity, hope, joy, and love are available in abundance at the Table. For this reason, the church cannot forsake its assembly around the Table; as a kingdom of priests, it is called to continually bear witness to God's mission for the world. Peter exhorted the church: “You are a chosen people, a royal

⁴⁰⁴John Rempel, “Sacraments: The Inner Grounding of Worship – A Mennonite Perspective,” as found in Fast Dueck, “A Critical Examination of Mennonite Worship and Ethics: A Praxis Approach,” 77.

⁴⁰⁵Thomas H. Schattauer, “Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission,” *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, 13.

⁴⁰⁶Ibid.

priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:9, 21).

5. Summary

Chapter three discussed how a missional theology of the Lord's Supper, rooted in incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology, leads to transformative Communion practices in the MB church. This final chapter discussed how theology and practice of the Lord's Supper merge together in the life of the MB church; forming a community that participates in the mission of God through the power of the Spirit. According to Volf, "Adoration is the well-spring of action."⁴⁰⁷ As the community gathers around the Lord's Table, it is transformed into a missional community. And yet, the Lord's Supper is a missional act in and of itself; as the community gathers around the Table it becomes a visible body that represents God's mission.

Section two discussed how the doctrine of incarnation brings together the spirit and flesh in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It is a doctrine that connects love of God with love for our neighbour in a concrete and tangible way. Incarnational practices will reflect God's grace through human means of communication and activity.

Section three examined the implications of ecclesiology for the Lord's Supper. Just as Christ was sent into the world, the church as the body of Christ is sent into the world. As the Lord's Supper forms believers into Christ's actual body (as the church 'becomes what it eats') the church becomes a social body that resists the forces of this world, and also offers itself, broken and poured out for the life of the world. This section discussed communal practices that affirm the church as the body of Christ.

The final section discussed the eschatological nature of Communion. As the church gathers around the Lord's Table, it witnesses to a new reality that is already, but not yet here. Communion is a symbolic/prophetic activity of the church that points to the eschatological reality beyond itself, to the

⁴⁰⁷ As quoted in Schmit, *Sent and Gathered*, 55.

purpose of God in Christ for the whole created order. The words and actions of the Communion liturgy reflect a new reality, demonstrating to a hungry world God's power to welcome strangers and create restored fellowship.

CONCLUSION

The missional church has been pondering an important question: instead of asking “What kind of church should we build?” the missional church is asking, “What is God’s mission and how can we join in?” The realization that the era of Christendom has passed is a tremendous gift for the church. It has allowed the church to re-evaluate and experiment with its structures in order to remain faithful to its calling to be salt and light, a royal priesthood, and a missional community that represents God’s kingdom in a new context. The idea that the *church*, and not just individuals, is called to mission has provided fresh insights into how the church might structure itself in a post-modern, post-Christendom society. The church has begun to recognize that its missional vocation is to be a sign, foretaste, agent, and instrument of the reign of God. Jesus was sent into the world to accomplish God’s mission; after the resurrection Christ sent his Spirit to form the church; the church is now sent into the world to participate in this mission. In the twenty-first century the church is called to incarnate God’s mission through its life together and its activity in the neighbourhood, city, country and world.

How is the church’s worship connected to its missional vocation? Becoming a missional church is not an intellectual enterprise. One cannot write a handbook on being missional and expect a missional church to spring up from the ground. A missional church must be cultivated by the Spirit, and this can only happen as the community regularly meets God in worship. It is through worship that Christians are unified with God and each other; that their lives are reordered in light of God’s kingdom; that they are transformed by the Spirit; and that they are nourished and strengthened for mission.

One of the central aspects of the church’s worship is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It is a multifaceted symbol that expresses the heartbeat of God’s mission and a practice that realizes this mission in time, space and locality. God’s mission is not a theoretical, intellectual, or invisible mission; it is a spiritual, physical, and ever-present reality that can be heard, seen, smelled, touched and tasted each time the church celebrates the Lord’s Supper.

This thesis argued that the sacramental insights that influenced Anabaptist thought and ecclesial practice are a rich resource that the MB church can draw upon in order to articulate an interrelated

theology of mission and the Lord's Supper. Incarnation, ecclesiology and eschatology are the theological pillars of this argument and they are indispensable for forming a missional theology of the Lord's Supper. In the incarnation God acted concretely in history through his son Jesus to accomplish the mission of redemption. The Lord's Supper continually reminds the church that God's grace is a tangible and concrete reality. The ecclesiological pillar underscores the relational nature of Communion; God's grace mysteriously requires human response and action. Through grace individuals become part of God's new people; the body of Christ. As individuals are incorporated into the body of Christ they participate in the unity and love of God that finds expression in the local church. Finally, the eschatological vision of the Lord's Table propels the church into mission as it places worship and mission within the larger framework of God's ultimate purpose for the created order.

A missional theology of Communion has several practical implications. First, the church must celebrate Communion more regularly. The Lord's Supper cannot be a monthly afterthought for the pastoral staff. The Lord's Supper is an expression of what the church believes about salvation, the church, and God's purpose for the world. It is a practice that orients the community to their own need for redemption and their calling to be a sign and witness of God's plan of redemption for the world. The church needs to celebrate Communion weekly in order for believers to remember who (se) they are.

Second, the practice of the Lord's Supper has, in many respects, been co-opted by the values of individualism. This is a serious issue that must be addressed by the church. This means that pastors and lay leaders need to pay careful attention to the language that is used during the Lord's Supper. Pastors, worship leaders and lay leaders also need to find creative ways to express the communal nature of the supper. There are many ways that our practices can reflect the communal nature of the Supper: the congregation can take turns serving each other; time can be set aside for communal prayers of repentance and forgiveness; bread can be shared from a common loaf; the Lord's Supper can be set within the context of a meal; children can be called forward to receive a blessing. The MB church must work hard to cultivate practices that will counteract the ideology of individualism and self-fulfillment that has been working tirelessly to claim the allegiance of its church members.

Finally, the theology of the incarnation should change the way the church practices Communion. The church cannot consume bread and wine/juice while ignoring issues of hunger and injustice in the world. The incarnation suggests that our humanness matters and that salvation is a holistic enterprise. Communion needs to be a practice that reveals the holistic nature of mission. One practice the church could adopt is taking up a special offering of food and money during the Communion service. The church then distributes food to those in need and supports Christian relief agencies. Communion is a participation in the body and blood of Christ; the church itself becomes the body of Christ that is offered to the world.

Communion matters! The bread and wine are God's gift to the church; they are symbolic, tangible expressions of God's mission for the world, made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Each time the church gathers around the Lord's Table it experiences anew God's self-giving mission for the world. Each time the church participates in Communion it participates in the mission of God as it is formed into the body of Christ which is given for the life of the world. Each time the church celebrates the Lord's Supper it anticipates the already/not-yet kingdom of God and acts as a sign and foretaste of God's mission. The church needs Communion, just as people need food for nourishment and sustenance. The Lord's Supper is the beginning of mission as Christ forms the church into his body, which is then sent out into the world.

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