THE LORD'S SUPPER AND THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST

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Introduction and Historical Background

The simple acts of breaking bread and passing a cup are of tremendous importance to Christians. Among the various traditions of the Church, however, various theological interpretations of the Lord's Supper have arisen. In this article, an attempt will be made to examine the Lord's Supper in the context of one particular denomination, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. Attention will first be given to the development of a theological understanding of the Supper. Then, the practice of administering the Supper will be traced.

The Church of the United Brethren in Christ developed during the eighteenth-century spiritual awakening among the Germans of Pennsylvania and Maryland. The church gradually became more formally organized, having its official birth as a denomination in 1800, with Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813), and Martin Boehm (1725-1812), as founders. Otterbein, a German Reformed, and Boehm, a Mennonite, were elected the first bishops of the church. If the development of the Lord's Supper among the United Brethren is to be understood, it is essential that the two streams of tradition, as represented by these two men, be examined.

The Developing Theological Understanding of the Lord's Supper

Philip William Otterbein and the German Reformed

Philip William Otterbein immigrated to colonial Pennsylvania in 1752, becoming pastor of a church in Lancaster. In subsequent years he ministered in other German Reformed congregations of Pennsylvania and Maryland, until assuming the pastorate of the semi-independent "German Evangelical Reformed Church" of Baltimore, in 1774, where he was to serve for the rest of his life.

Any search for Otterbein's theological understanding of the Lord's Supper must begin with the Heidelberg Catechism, the official doctrinal statement of the German Reformed Church, and a document that Otterbein not only appreciated personally, but used in all of his congregations. In regards to Christ's presence in the Supper, the Catechism reflects Calvin's understanding of the meal, seeing Christ's spiritual, but not physical real presence in the elements, which is a via media position between Luther's consubstantiation and Zwingli's symbolism. The Catechism taught that the Lord's Supper was not only a meal of remembrance, but one in which believers are spiritually fed and nourished by Christ through the elements.1

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The *Catechism*, however, was not the only influence upon Otterbein. Another was pietism. As Steven O'Malley has said, because of his strong pietistic tendencies, Otterbein was not really interested in precisely how Christ was present in the Supper. [He] vastly limited the role of the elements by regarding them primarily as the outward signs and seals of an invisible immanent kingdom of Christ within the believer.\(^2\)

Otterbein believed, with the *Catechism*, that Christ was spiritually present with the church when it celebrated the Lord's Supper, but was unwilling to engage in debates over the particulars of this presence. Of primary importance to him was the spiritual new birth of the individual. The Lord's Supper became primarily a sign and seal of this spiritual change within.

Since partaking of the sacrament was a "... sign and seal of the rebirth, whereby believers become visible to one another,"\(^3\) Otterbein believed there was no theological justification of limiting communion to members of his own congregation. Since, for Otterbein, the essentials of Christian unity were not denominational affiliation, but the new birth experience, all Christians who "truly and earnestly" repented of their sins were welcome at his table. Also, since the Lord's Supper was seen as a sign of God's grace already accomplished in the life of the communicant, before an individual communed they were to examine themselves to see if they were in the faith, and worthy recipients of the meal.

Because of his pietistic background and increasing involvement with revivalism, the mature Otterbein's emphasis on the sacrament was probably less than that of his Reformed contemporaries and that taught in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. His primary emphasis on the Supper was as an outward sign of inward faith, not spiritual feeding. For Otterbein, the primary means of grace were feeding upon Christ at the new birth and subsequently through prayer and scripture. Thus, for Otterbein, any understanding making the Supper the chief means of grace, instead of just one among these others, would have been rejected.

**Martin Boehm and the Mennonites**

The other stream of tradition creating the United Brethren in Christ was that of the Mennonites, as represented by Martin Boehm. Boehm was

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3. Ibid., 140.
The Lord's Supper and the United Brethren in Christ

The Lord commanded it to be observed by believers in commemoration of the death and sufferings of the Lord—the breaking of His worthy body and the shedding of His precious blood—for the whole human race. So is the observance of this sacrament also to remind us of the benefit of the said death and sufferings of Christ, namely, the redemption and eternal salvation which He purchased thereby, and the great love thus shown to sinful man; whereby we are also earnestly exhorted also to love one another.

For Mennonites in colonial America, the primary source of theological understanding, apart from the Bible, came from the writings of Menno Simons. It can be assumed that Martin Boehm's understanding of the Lord's Supper was influenced by these writings. In regards to the Supper, Menno Simons objected to any "sacramental" interpretation of the meal as a means of grace.

For Simons, and the other early Mennonites, there were four basic tenants regarding the Supper. First, the bread and wine were not the flesh and blood of Jesus, but symbols to be eaten in remembrance of his death and sacrifice. Second, communion was observed as a reminder of Christ's great love, perfectly demonstrated in his sacrifice. Third, the meal was observed to signify unity with fellow Christians. And fourth, since the rite identified participants with the body and blood of Christ, communicants needed to be believers.

For the Dordrecht Confession of 1632, the Mennonites of the Lancaster Conference, of which Boehm was a member, adopted the Dordrecht Confession of 1632 as their official doctrinal statement. Article 10 of the Confession dealt with the Lord's Supper and read as follows:

The Lord... commanded it to be observed by believers in commemoration of the death and sufferings of the Lord—the breaking of His worthy body and the shedding of His precious blood—for the whole human race. So is the observance of this sacrament also to remind us of the benefit of the said death and sufferings of Christ, namely, the redemption and eternal salvation which He purchased thereby, and the great love thus shown to sinful man; whereby we are also earnestly exhorted also to love one another.

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5. The Dordrecht Confession of the 1632 was written by the Mennonite minister Adrian Cornelis, bishop of the Flemish Mennonite Church of Dordrecht, Holland. It became one of several early Anabaptist statements of belief.
another—to love our neighbor—to forgive and absolve him—even as Christ has done unto us—and also to endeavor to maintain and keep alive the union and communion which we have with God, and amongst one another; which is thus shown and represented to us by the aforesaid breaking of bread. 6

As can be seen from the Dordrecht Confession, The Lord’s Supper was understood as a memorial meal, in which the bread and wine are symbols, used to recall to the communicant the mercies and merits of Christ. As the Confession also shows, the bread and wine represent the communion of believers with one another and with God.

The doctrine of the new birth had been an accepted truth of the Mennonites from their inception. As the years passed, however, and especially upon their arrival in America, insistence upon immediate, experiential new birth, as taught by Boehm, was gradually replaced with the idea of a more natural growth into the Christian faith, which was outwardly demonstrated by baptism and partaking of the Lord’s Supper. 7 By 1770, a formalism had developed whereby baptism, church membership, and participation in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, had become the initiatory rites of faith.

For such an evangelistically minded man as Martin Boehm, such a view of the sacrament was deadening to faith. For Boehm, the sacrament could only be an outward sign of the regenerating work of Christ within, a position fully in accord with Menno Simons and the Dordrecht Confession. Apparently, in some of Boehm’s sermons he pointedly criticized the Mennonite Church for a general decline in the fervency of their faith, feeling that they were “satisfying the people with ordinances.” From these attacks, his fellow Mennonite ministers became alarmed. Boehm had conveyed the idea of these men, that “so much stress was laid upon the ordinances, and on the manner in which the world observes these ordinances, [that] they lead more to the devil than to God.” 8

In part because of his views on the ordinances, formal charges were brought against him around 1776. 9 In his defense, Boehm denied ever saying that the ordinances lead to “the devil,” but did not deny that he placed less stress upon the sacrament’s efficacy than did his accusers. By this time Boehm was solidly in the revivalist camp. He was so consumed with the need for salvation of souls and the experience of the new birth, that he opposed any doctrine which seemed to stand in its way. Boehm certainly

8 John F. Funk, The Mennonite Church and Her Accusers (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1878), 52, 49.
9 The original charges are recorded in Funk, The Mennonite Church, 41-87.
did not object to the use of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper as originally explained by Simons and the Dordrecht Confession, but only to the near salvificatory understanding of his contemporary Mennonites.

Early Formulation of a Distinctly United Brethren Doctrine

At the United Brethren Church’s official establishment in 1800, the new denomination’s one, central doctrinal belief, was that of the crisis new birth experience, superceding understandings of sacraments, ethics, church order, or even theology. The early United Brethren were very opposed to the notion that the sacraments could bring about conversion. They believed the sacraments were of “no use” apart from a changed heart. As the early United Brethren historian Henry Spayth said, the church believed that “... the kingdom of God did not consist in external ordinances, but in Justification by faith in Jesus Christ, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. . . .”

Around 1800, a Lutheran frontier preacher, Paul Henkel, made the following observation in regards to their understanding: “As far as I understand the doctrine of these people, it was always to deny the grace of the Holy Sacraments, and to seek their inherent efficacy in their personal experience. . . .” This was a fair evaluation. Most United Brethren did not see the Lord’s Supper as an objective means of grace, “but rather as [a] public [sign] of the presence of saving grace within the reborn believer.” As can be seen, the early United Brethren Church adopted their founders’ essential understanding of the Supper.

Nevertheless, for one who was already changed of heart, already the recipient of divine grace, the partaking of the sacrament could be an occasion of great blessing and spiritual nourishment. At a United Brethren sacramental meeting on Pentecost 1804, Christian Newcomer, an early leader of the church, recorded in his journal that as he drew near the Lord’s table, “... my poor soul alas! was fed on heavenly manna, and drank plentifully from the wells of salvation.” This language should not imply, however, belief that the elements actually became physical heavenly food

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12 Spayth, History of the United Brethren, 161.
and drink, which would have been a stark departure from Newcomer's Mennonite background. It would be better, more likely, to view it as figurative of the spiritual benefit received in the entire communion service. Newcomer was still within the tradition of Simons and Zwingli, viewing the elements as *symbola nuda*, symbols without presence.

On these occasions persons could expect to receive a blessing, but it depended upon the faith with which they came to the table. Newcomer wrote of another sacramental occasion: "... we administered the sacrament, and the Lord was at hand to bless every one that diligently sought him."16 Due to the early United Brethren ministers' emphasis on emotionalism and experience, it is not surprising that they understood the Lord's Supper as an occasion to "receive a blessing." But this blessing was only occasioned by the sacrament, not dependent upon it. In other circumstances, another spiritual experience could just as easily occur, without any sacramental observance. The key was a direct relationship with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

In 1814 the church formulated its first doctrinal statement in the *Confession of Faith*. Article 5 of the *Confession* concerned the ordinances, and read as follows: "*We recommend* [italics mine] that the outward signs and ordinances, namely, baptism and the remembrance of the Lord in the distribution of the bread and wine, be observed; also the washing of feet where the same is desired."17 Adopting Otterbein and Boehm's understanding, the article also explained the sacrament as an outward sign of an inward work of grace and as a memorial meal of Christ's suffering and death. By merely "recommending" the ordinances, the United Brethren betrayed their "low" view of the Supper.18

In 1815 a new *Confession* was approved, and Article 7 read:

> We believe that the outward means of grace are to be in use in all Christian societies, namely: that baptism and the remembrance of the death of the Lord in the distribution of the bread and wine are to be in use among his children, according to the command of the Lord Jesus; the mode and manner, however, shall be left to the judgement of everyone. ..."19

As if understanding their error previously, the ordinances are now definitely "to be in use" in the church.

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16Ibid., 257.
18An early tradition holds that the 1814 *Confession* was originally written by Otterbein for use in his Baltimore Church. If this is true, the mere "recommendations" that the sacraments be observed would seem to reveal an important departure in his understanding of their significance, from that stated in the *Heidelberg Catechism*. For a fuller treatment of this issue see O'Malley, "Distinctive German-American Credo," 51-63.
In 1845, Jacob Ritter, a presiding elder of the Allegheny Conference, published a book of his sermons on various subjects, which was declared by the General Conference of 1845 as being in accordance with United Brethren doctrine. One sermon concerned the Lord's Supper, and is the first attempt by a United Brethren minister to systematically explain its meaning.  

According to Ritter, the Supper's origin was with the Lord, and "all that are begotten of the father and are truly pious, and in good standing in society, of every name and color, have an equal right to their Father's table." The object of the Lord's Supper was not seen as obtaining pardon for sins, "... but it should be to show forth the Saviour's death, and should call to memory what great things the Lord has done for us, in a general, and individual sense, etc." Anyone desiring to commune at the table had the responsibility to examine themselves in regards to their doctrine, their "proficiency in the divine life," and in their conduct toward others. Ritter believed there is a sense of communing with all the saints who have gone before us as we gather around the table: "... whilst we are communing in the lower house, they are feasting in the upper house." But the Supper was not just a memorial of the past, or a communion of the present, but a prophesy of the future as well, since it "... shows that it may be the last time, until we eat and drink it anew, in our Father's kingdom above." 

Even more so than the earlier United Brethren, Ritter understood the Lord's Supper primarily as a memorial meal. Objective grace was not given in its practice, with the bread and wine being outward signs only. For nearly forty-five years this brief, two-page sermon, was the most extensive explanation of the United Brethren Church's understanding of the doctrine.

The Doctrine's Mature Formulation

Throughout the period from 1845 to 1889, the United Brethren Church experienced great change in regards to the theological education of its ministers. A new sense of importance was given to systematizing United Brethren doctrine and belief. The fruition of this concern occurred during the last decade of the nineteenth century, when many of the newly theologically trained ministers began writing books and journal ar-

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20 An analysis of the early United Brethren sacramental hymns is not very helpful in gaining a theological understanding of the Supper since they are an eclectic collection from many different theological traditions.  
22 The most thorough study of United Brethren theology, William Naumann's "Theology and German-American Evangelicalism: The Role of Theology in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association." (Ph.D. Dissertations, Yale University, 1966) does not consider the theology of the sacraments.
articles on theology. Included in these were discussions on the Lord’s Supper. Prominent ministers such as Jonathan Weaver, J. H. Snyder, J. W. Hott, L. Bookwalter, and J. W. Etter, all wrote on the subject. From these sources it is possible to discover the mature formulation of the United Brethren’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, which would remain the church’s basic understanding in the future.

The recently adopted Confession of Faith of 1889 changed the term “ordinance” to “sacrament,” so as to be more in keeping with popular usage. Nevertheless, the United Brethren Church continued to understand the term sacrament in a non-sacramentarian sense, in accord with the early Latin meaning of “sacramentum” as an oath of loyalty to a nation taken by its soldiers. Thus, as J. H. Snyder wrote:

... partaking of the bread and wine as emblems of the body and blood of Christ, constitutes a pledge of union with Christ, and also a union with each other. It is a public declaration of our Christian love and fellowship, and should greatly strengthen the relation existing between all who enter this divine union.

The Lord’s Supper was thought to have its theological roots in the Jewish Passover. “Prefigured” in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, Christ’s new supper was seen as an antitype of all the sacrifices under the ceremonial law. Thus, Christ’s new supper was to forever supplant the old Passover meal. Through this new supper, Christ signalled the end of the old ceremonial covenant of the law, and the inauguration of a new covenant of grace, founded upon himself as the paschal lamb.

Preeminently, however, the Lord’s Supper was understood as a commemorative rite. Snyder believed,

The special design ... of this ordinance is to preserve a grateful and affectionate remembrance of the blood of the blessed Savior. It is a memorial of his death, and it expresses the guilt and wretchedness of man and the grace of God in his salvation.

The table becomes a place where we remember and consider the cross of Christ, and all the blessings for sinful humanity which flow from it. The reenacting of Christ’s last supper becomes a means of public proclamation, being an object lesson or a pictorial sermon. This pictorial sermon has the ability to bring to mind the paschal sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Bishop Weaver understood the elements as emblematically testifying to Jesus’ life, suffering, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and second coming.

25Ibid., 507.
26Ibid., 511.
27Bookwalter, “Lord’s Supper,” 49.
All of these United Brethren writers joined in a chorus of condemnation for the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. The elements of bread and wine were not to be understood as the real body and blood of Christ, but figures of the real. Snyder argued it is “absurd” to think that while the glorified body of Christ is in heaven, we have somehow been feeding upon that body on earth. For him, the body and blood of Christ are not corporally present in the ordinance, nor are they received in any corporal sense; nor are the blood and wine in any sense expiatory, nor do they feed the soul. The body and blood of Christ are received only in a spiritual manner, the benefits of his atonement communicated to the soul by the Holy Spirit, being the only manner in which we can be said to receive the body and blood of Christ in the Supper. 29

From Snyder’s statement, it can be seen that the United Brethren Church continued to reject a physical real presence in the Supper. The elements themselves did not feed the soul. But, in agreement with the early United Brethren, the meal was understood as an occasion when a communicant could spiritually feed upon Christ apart from any objective efficacy in the elements. As the elements bring to remembrance the sufferings of Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit could give blessing. The physical elements serve a spiritual purpose as outward forms of grace, which God uses as avenues to “communicate” the blessings of his inward grace to those who “approach the table with true penitence and faith.” 30 Therefore, it would not have been said that Christ was spiritually present in the elements, the via media or middle way of Calvin and The Heidelberg Catechism, but that Christ was spiritually present in and among the gathered church as the communion was celebrated and the elements distributed.

The Lord’s Supper was also understood as a sign and seal of salvation; a great federal act, of which God and the church are parties. As L. Bookwalter wrote:

As in every covenant of old between God and men both entered vows, so here Christ pours the cup representing his blood in solemn pledge of full salvation to be carried on to its completed work, and the disciples take and drink it in token of sacred oath to live faithful unto death to their Savior and Lord. 31

By partaking of the Supper, we confess our trust in Christ as Savior. In return, God renews his promise to lead us into that salvation.

Finally, these United Brethren saw a prophetic element in the Supper. Every time the sacrament is celebrated, it “proclaims the Lord’s death

29Weaver, ed., Christian Doctrine, 509-510.
30Ibid., 512.
31Bookwalter, “Lord’s Supper,” 49.
till he comes." The Lord's Supper is to be a permanent and perpetual signpost to Christ until his return and the consummation of all things.  

In many respects it is remarkable that the theological understanding of the Lord's Supper has remained so constant during the history of the United Brethren Church. From Otterbein and Boehm to Weaver and Snyder, and beyond, a common understanding of the sacrament has been maintained. It is seen as a memorial, a pledge, a symbol, a sign, and unifier, and a prophecy. It is seen as a preeminent depiction of god's love for humanity in his Son, Jesus Christ. But most importantly, it has been seen as a testimony to the new life sinful humanity can find because of Christ's sacrifice, once for all, on the cross.

The Administration of the Lord's Supper

Philip William Otterbein and the Palatinate Liturgy

In order to survey the practice of administering the Lord's Supper in the United Brethren Church, we must look again to its founder Otterbein and his German Reformed heritage. First, the sacramental worship of the colonial German Reformed churches will be considered.

Throughout the years Otterbein's ministry, the German Reformed Church "... showed a marked preference for forms of worship which [were] simple and unpretentious," but at the same time insisting that everything should be done "decently and in order." To provide "order," it was deemed especially important that the form of words used in the administration of the Lord's Supper be determined by the church. There was a concern that without some form, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper might be "defamed." 33

A document from 1762 states that in the German Reformed churches of the colonies the Palatinate Liturgy of 1563, companion liturgy to the Heidelberg Catechism, and used in all the churches of the coetus. 34 This was only natural, since the German Reformed pastors would have been familiar with the liturgy from their homeland. Since Otterbein pastored five different German Reformed congregations from 1752 to 1813, it must be assumed that he was not only familiar with this eucharistic liturgy, but in all likelihood used it.

Included in the Palatinate Liturgy was a special preparatory service for the "Holy Supper." 35 As early as 1757, Otterbein was using a

32Weaver, Christian Theology, 263.
34Ibid., 256.
35Bard Thompson, "The Palatinate Liturgy," Theology and Life 6(Spring 1963):56. This is an English translation of the entire rite, with notes and commentary.
preparatory service for holy communion, which was almost certainly in the form prescribed by the *Palatinate Liturgy*. In that year, Otterbein drew up "rules of order" for the Lancaster German Reformed Church, of which he was the pastor. The second rule concerned the Holy Supper:

To the end that all disorder may be prevented, and that each member may be more fully known, each one, without exception, who desires to receive the Lord's Supper, shall, previous to the *preparation service* [italics mine], upon a day appointed for that purpose, personally appear before the minister, that an interview may be held. No one will, by this arrangement, be deprived of his liberty; or be, in any way, bound oppressively. This we deem necessary for the preservation of order. . . .

The idea of interviewing communicants before the Lord's Supper was in conformity with questions 81 and 82 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which stressed the need for an examination before sharing in the sacrament. The "preparation service" was a time in which confession could be made for sin, and examination be made to see if one was worthy of receiving the sacrament. In this service, Otterbein emphasized the necessity of inward, personal faith as a requisite for communing.

Otterbein continued the practice of holding a "preparation service" in Baltimore. Rules 6 and 9 of that church's 1785 *Constitution and Ordinances* state that the young people were catechized weekly, being taught the necessity of "striving through divine grace, to become worthy recipients of the holy sacrament." Following a *preparation* sermon, those young persons and others could declare that they were "ready to submit to all wholesome discipline." Upon their declaration the individuals were received into the church and admitted to the Lord's table.

That Otterbein's "preparation service" and the "preparation service" of the *Palatinate Liturgy* were the same can be seen in their comparison. In the *Liturgy*, a sermon was delivered on the true understanding of the sacrament. In Otterbein's service a sermon was also preached. Following the Saturday night preparation sermon, the *Liturgy* stated that the new catechumens would make public profession of their faith, followed by an examination by the minister from the *Catechism*. Following the examination of the catechumens, the entire congregation was examined in the form of questions. Following the questions were the Lord's Prayer and benediction. The two services seem to be essentially the same.

Otterbein did make one original contribution to the administration of the Lord's Supper. Due to his background in Reformed Pietism, believing visitors present in the Baltimore Church were still invited to the Lord's

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37 Ibid., 111-112.
table, even if not desirous of becoming full communicant members. Rule 7 of the *Ordinances* states:

> Foreasmuch as the difference of people and denominations end in Christ ... and availeth nothing in Him but a new creature ... it becomes our duty, according to the gospel, to commune with, and admit to the Lord's table, professors, to whatever order, or sort, of the Christian church they belong.\(^{39}\)

This tradition of open communion for *all* Christians was continued among the later United Brethren.

Since Otterbein was so concerned with the "preservation of order" that he used the *Palatinate Liturgy's* preparation service," it is reasonable to assume he was equally concerned with the sacrament's proper administration. While no evidence exists stating Otterbein's use of the *Palatinate Liturgy* for the communion, it can be assumed he did use it, at least at some point in his ministry. The following is an abridgement of the *Palatinate Liturgy* for the "Lord's Holy Supper:" (1) sermon on the Lord's death and supper; (2) standing by the table a long exhortation was read, including words on institution, call to self-examination for worthiness, and the description of the acts of Christ to be remembered; (3) prayer of epiclesis asking the Holy Spirit to act upon their hearts, cleansing them for spiritual worthiness and unity; (4) the Lord's Prayer in unison; (5) the Apostles Creed in unison; (6) the words of invitation; (7) the distribution of the elements accompanied by singing or scripture, and (8) unison prayer of praise.\(^{40}\) Overall, the service had a strong penitential tone, stressing, not unlike the rites of Calvin and Cranmer, more the personal examination to determine worthiness, than thanksgiving.

One thing is certain, the use of the *Palatinate Liturgy* did not find its way into the practice of the United Brethren Church. Very likely this was because of the Mennonite influence and the fact that the liturgy was more appropriate in a formal church surrounding. There were very few meeting houses among the early United Brethren, causing the sacrament to be observed, more likely than not, out of doors. At these great meetings, at which Otterbein often distributed the elements, use of the *Liturgy* would have been highly impractical.

**Martin Boehm and the Mennonite Practice**

As for the Mennonite practice and administering the Lord's Supper, very little is known of the colonial period. Because of their anti-liturgical nature, set forms would have been avoided. We do know, however, that the eighteenth-century Lancaster Mennonite community gave great emphasis to the importance of the ordinance. Indeed, as we have seen, Martin Boehm accused some of his contemporary Mennonites with "sacramen-

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\(^{39}\)Core, *Philip Otterbein*, 111.

\(^{40}\)Thompson, "Palatinate Liturgy," 60-66.
Mennonites considered the communion service a most solemn occasion, to be attended at all costs. The Lancaster churches observed the ordinance twice a year, including with it their separate ordinance of feet washing. A common practice of the Lancaster Mennonites was to fast the morning of communion and spend time in prayer before approaching the table. According to one source, the early Mennonite bishops often preached as they walked back and forth in the aisle of the church distributing the bread and the wine.41

The Lancaster Mennonites continued Menno Simons' practice of closing the communion to non-Mennonites, who did not practice their particular beliefs. Martin Boehm rejected such an exclusive concept of the Supper, preferring to see the unity of believers in shared experience, rather than the differences of doctrine. For this reason, Boehm actively took part in ecumenical sacramental meetings. Indeed, one of the charges brought against him in 1776 was that he associated "... with men which allow themselves to walk on the broad way."42 Boehm gladly admitted to their charge. For him, participating in union communion services was a way of demonstrating that there was only one true church, with Christ as its head.

Early United Brethren Practice of Administering the Supper

While rejecting a "sacramental" interpretation of the Lord's Supper, the early United Brethren Church held the ordinance in high regard, and saw the occasions of its administration as times of great spiritual blessing. The most likely place for the United Brethren to administer the sacrament was at the "great" or "sacramental meetings." These were occasions for ministers and laypersons from the surrounding area, sometimes up to fifty miles, to gather in a field or barn for a weekend of meetings. The meeting usually commenced on Saturday, which was devoted to preaching and exhortations. On Sunday morning several ministers would preach followed by the "sacramental occasion" when the bread and wine were distributed. On Monday they held their "love feast," which was a testimony meeting when spiritual experiences were shared. Evangelism was the main concern in all of these services.43 On some occasions the crowds were so large on Sunday that the sacrament became impractical, and thus was celebrated on Monday with the love feast.44

One sacramental meeting which was a highlight for the United Brethren, was held annually in conjunction with Pentecost at George Geeting's Meeting House, on Antietam Creek, in Maryland. As long as

42Funk, Mennonite Church and Accusers, 44.
43Newcomer, Journal, 27.
44Spayth, History of the United Brethren, 88.
their health permitted, Otterbein and Boehm made every effort to attend this special occasion. Because of their size, these meetings were usually held out of doors with the sacrament administered under the trees. In inclement weather they would retreat to a nearby barn. In his journal, Christian Newcomer recorded the Antietam meeting of Pentecost 1800:

Otterbein preached first, I spoke after him; he and Br. Geeting distributed the bread and wine. The hearts of many believers and spectators were tendered, and to some it was a most precious time, a time no doubt long to be remembered.45

Usually before the administration of the elements, the minister would preach a sermon on the atonement of Christ.

These sacramental meetings were occasions of great emotion and evangelistic preaching. Often, the administration of the elements was accompanied with great outbursts of emotion, as people "approached the table with streaming eyes."46 The gathered congregation would sing as people walked to the table to commune, both sexes coming freely. Because of the strong emphasis upon self-examination associated with the sacrament, the evangelistically minded United Brethren ministers used the Supper as evangelistic tool. It was not uncommon for sinners to cry out during the distribution of the elements that they were lost and needed salvation. Newcomer recorded the following account of the administration of the sacrament in October of 1809:

The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered; I do not know that I ever witnessed such a display of the power of God; every heart was touched. Many fell lifeless to the ground, and laid in this situation, apparently dead for several hours. Some were carried into the tents; as soon as they recovered, they generally burst forth in praises to Emanuel [sic]; my poor soul also caught some of the heavenly flame.47

The communion table was not understood to be the province of a single congregation or denomination, but the table was the Lord's. At the sacramental meetings, Christians from many traditions were often present. Therefore, for the sake of the unity of all believers, none were refused participation. Of another meeting Newcomer wrote:

At the administration of the Sacrament, you could perceive all distinctions of sects lost in christian love and fellowship. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Baptists, and Methodists all drew near the Lord's table, and united in commemoration of the dying love of the Redeemer; many were not able to avoid shouting and praising God for his unbounded mercy and goodness.48

These were presumably concelebrative services wherein the clergy of the variously represented denominations shared in administering the sacrament.

45Newcomer, Journal, 53-54, 68.
46Ibid., 27.
47Ibid., 182-183.
48Ibid., 99.
Since the United Brethren Church was slow to develop a formal organization and church discipline, during the earliest years of the denomination it was not necessary to be formally ordained in order to administer the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. In 1799, while still unordained, Newcomer records joining Martin Boehm in administering the sacrament, even though only a lay preacher.\(^{49}\) As early as 1800, however, the Annual Conference was taking seriously the qualifications for administering the sacraments. In that year they resolved to “... investigate whether D. Aurand should baptize and administer the Lord’s Supper.”\(^{50}\) During these early years, as J. W. Etter wrote, “Preachers were empowered to administer the ordinances... according to their character and the special exigencies, rather than through a prescribed course of advancement.”\(^{51}\) However, with Otterbein’s ordination of Christian Newcomer in 1813, and Newcomer’s subsequent election as bishop, the groundwork had been laid for a fully structured, ordained clergy.

Not unlike the Methodist practice, the first Discipline of the church, adopted in 1815, created a ministry of elders supervised by presiding elders. Section 4 described the duties of the presiding elder, who was to “appoint the quarterly and great meetings, and if possible conduct them... [and]... administer the Lord’s Supper.” Section five stated that the elders had the responsibility to “assist the presiding elders in administering the Lord’s Supper, and when the presiding elder cannot be present, one or two elders shall perform this office.”\(^{52}\) The presiding elder was thus given the primary authority of administering the communion, with the elders responsible for assisting. Since the presiding elder was usually present in a congregation only at the Quarterly Conference, the tradition developed of celebrating the sacrament then. For years after the demise of the structured Quarterly Conference meetings, churches continued the tradition of celebrating communion four times a year.

In regards to the actual contents of the sacramental service, the United Brethren believed it was wrong for any church to dictate the precise form to be used. One United Brethren, Nathan Wolfard, believed that since Jesus did not give any specific directions how the meal should be observed, it must be concluded, therefore, that the method of celebration is unimportant, and may be “determined by our own convenience.”\(^{53}\) As J. W. Hott said, the Lord’s Supper must be “a matter of orderliness, propriety, sacredness, convenience, and personal preference of the individual’s con-

\(^{49}\)Ibid., 54.
\(^{50}\)Core, Philip Otterbein, 121.
\(^{52}\)Drury, Disciplines, 16-17.
\(^{53}\)Nathan D. Wolfard, Popular Manual of Theology (Reading, PA: I. M. Beaver, 1908), 153.
The "individual conscience" was always important to the United Brethren in relation to the sacraments. Due to the unique mixture of Mennonites and Reformed among the early United Brethren, compromise and freedom over the issue of infant or believer baptism had been necessary. This freedom of practice was also granted to the Lord's Supper. Indeed, the church's Constitution of 1841 ruled that "There shall be no rule adopted that will infringe upon the rights of any, as it relates to . . . the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper." 55.

Later Developments in the Administration of the Supper

There is no recorded description of a typical church observance of the sacrament until that of William Dillon, a presiding elder of the Auglaize Annual Conference. In 1881, Dillon recorded that the typical service began with preaching at 10:30 A.M. continuing to about Noon. At that time an offering was received with the communion itself administered from 12:00 to 1:00 P.M. 56 During the communion, the only "ceremonial" aspects were the "blessing," or the prayer spoken in consecrating the elements, and the breaking and giving of the bread and cup. 57 The elements were consecrated by prayer because it was considered "orderly" and "most becoming." 58 Only the ordained clergy were authorized to handle the elements.

Those present and wishing to commune would assemble around the altar (mourner's bench), with heads uncovered and hands ungloved, where they were served the elements by "tables." Some, when receiving the elements might kneel, while others might sit. By the 1880's, singing during the distribution of the elements had been largely replaced with quiet reflection. As each table had finished receiving the elements a formal "dismissal" was usually given by the minister. A communicant of that day could have expected to receive common, leavened bread, though the type of bread used was considered non-essential. In concluding the communion service, the congregation would usually join in a hymn, following the example of Jesus at his supper. 59 This can only be understood as a typical service, however, Variations, to some degree, would have been found in every church.

55 Drury, Disciplines, 206.
58 Hott, "Sacraments," 125.
An interesting development in the United Brethren practice of the Lord's Supper, was the transformation of the contents of the cup. In all of the early references to the Supper, from Otterbein and Boehm to Newcomber, wine was used in the communion service. But as the church moved further west and farther from the eastern cities, wine became harder to acquire for use in the sacrament. Due to their remoteness and inability to acquire real wine, a special mixture of diluted whiskey was often substituted and used in its place. The mid-nineteenth century practice of serving this “wine” was recorded by J. Miller:

First the steward goes to the drug store, and calls for wine, and suffers an imposition; the druggist sells him diluted whiskey, sweetened with sugar, colored with logwood, and mixed with some other drugs, and calls it wine. The preacher in charge inquires of the steward if he has procured the wine for the sacrament—he answers in the affirmative—The minister presents this mixture to the communicants, and again he calls it wine; when, in fact the stuff has no connection with or relation to the juice of the grape, other than it belongs to the vegetable kingdom, and hardly that. 60

Due to the church’s temperance policy, the use of grape juice gradually replaced that of alcohol in the Supper, until its use was made mandatory by the Discipline in 1889.

Although the denomination had been reluctant to prescribe a set form for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, in the 1893 Discipline of the United Brethren Church (New Constitution) 61, the first simple outline of an order was printed entitled, “Formula for the Holy Communion.” It must have been perceived that the newly systematized theology of the Supper, then appearing in print, needed accompaniment by an appropriate order of service. The rite was divided into five parts. First, the scriptures of Isaiah 53:3-5, Luke 22:14-20, and I Corinthians 11:23-26 were read. Second, an invitation was given for all who “truly love” the Lord to receive the elements in “memory” of Christ’s death. Third, there was singing. Fourth, there was prayer. And fifth, the elements were administered. 62

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61In 1889, the United Brethren Church divided over constitutional issues. Both groups continued to use the name, Church of the United Brethren in Christ, with (Old Constitution) or (New Constitution) added for convenience to distinguish.
62Origin, Doctrine, Constitution and Discipline of the United Brethren in Christ (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1893), 197-199. A substantive revision occurred to the order in the 1925 Discipline when the title was changed to “The Lord’s Supper,” and the singing of the hymn was placed at the beginning of the rite. Also, a short introduction was added before each scripture passage with the apparent purpose of enhancing the flow of the service. Imperceptibly, the invitation was removed. The prayer was now specifically called a “consecratory prayer” and the details of the administration of the elements was left “to the judgement of the pastor and church.” The service remained unchanged in subsequent disciplines. Discipline of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Dayton, OH: Otterbein Press, 1925), 205-206.
In 1894, M. R. Drury compiled a pastor's manual, published by the United Brethren for use not only by the denomination's pastors, but by the wider evangelical church as well. For the service of the Lord's Supper he expanded upon the order printed in the United Brethren *Discipline* of the previous year, making several significant changes. Although Drury's revisions seemingly improved upon the version in the *Discipline*, his changes were not adopted into the official order until 1925, and not even then in their entirety.

No liturgy for the sacrament was included in a denominational hymnal until the New Constitution's hymnal of 1935. The liturgy was not, however, the simple order contained in the *Discipline*, but rather two entirely new liturgies prepared specifically for the hymnal. The first was a more full and formal service "... based in general on the Order for Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer, revised in accordance with the usage of non-liturgical churches and adapted to meet the need of our own Communion." The service was somewhat novel in that it excluded the sermon. The compilers believed the Lord's Supper "constitutes the loftiest service in our common worship ... is truly a festival of thanksgiving, and the occasion for penitential confession and consecration ..." Nothing was to detract from the sacrament's central importance, and thus the sermon was eliminated. This liturgy was a curious mix of Anglican prayers, gospel hymns, poetry, congregational responses, and the distribution of the elements.

The second liturgy in the 1935 hymnal was included for "... churches that desire a shorter and freer service." In all likelihood it was more in keeping with the type of service commonly in use. But as the preface for this order stated, "Whether the service is ritualistic or more simple and unadorned, it should always be orderly, reverent, and deeply spiritual." These services continued in use until the merger with the Evangelical Church in 1946.

The much smaller, Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution), did not publish a form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper until 1938. In its hymnal, published that year, a simple service of the Lord's Supper was printed. It too contained elements borrowed and adapted from other traditions, including the Book of Common Prayer. First, there was the introduction to the communion service, the reading of I Corinthians 11:27-29 on worthiness to commune, and specifically called for an "extempore prayer of consecration" instead of the more general "prayer" of the *Discipline*.

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63 M. R. Drury, *The Pastor's Companion* (Dayton, OH: W. J. Shuey, 1894), 33-35. Drury changed the service title to "The Lord's Supper," included provision for a preparation service on the previous Sunday or prayer meeting, including Isaiah 53:6, included I Corinthians 11:27-29 on worthiness to commune, and specifically called for an "extempore prayer of consecration" instead of the more general "prayer" of the *Discipline*.


65 Ibid., 420.
11:23-26. Second, the General Invitation from the B.C.P. was read. Third, there was the singing of a hymn. Forth, the communicants would come to the church altar by “tables.” Fifth, the bread and cup were distributed using the words of Jesus. Sixth, another hymn was sung. And seventh, a prayer and benediction were offered. This service has been included in all subsequent hymnals.

While the printing of these orders in official publications of the church may imply general usage, the reality was probably quite different. In the first place, they were never more than suggestions of what would be appropriate. In many cases the local minister would change and adapt the official order as local conditions required, sometimes using an entirely different service. The orders are, at best, general guides to what the practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper was like in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

Conclusion

In contrast to baptism, which aroused great controversy, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was remarkably free from dispute during the entire history of the United Brethren Church. The understanding of Otterbein and Boehm, that the Supper was primarily a symbolic, memorial meal, was very easily accepted as United Brethren doctrine. Following the systematic treatments of the subject in the 1890’s, very little else was ever published. It can only be assumed that the church never had reason to question these formulations. While never placing the same stress upon the sacrament as other churches, the United Brethren have always understood the meal to be of deep spiritual significance, an occasion when those who have experienced the grace of Christ come together in fellowship, to celebrate the redemption they experience in the sacrifice depicted and remembered in the Supper.

66The United Brethren Hymnal (Huntington, IN: United Brethren Publishing Establishment, 1938), 360.