

# **Was the Bread Only Bread, and the Wine Only Wine? Sacramental Theology in Five Anabaptist Hymns**

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## **The Lord's Supper**

It is well known that Anabaptists in the sixteenth century denied the Roman Catholic assertion that priestly mediation resulted in transubstantiation. The Anabaptist counter-position was simply and naively stated in countless court testimonies: the bread of the Supper is just bread; the wine of the Supper is just wine.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing of divinity in, with, or under the elements. With this negation the Anabaptists expressed a radically anti-sacramental, anti-clerical critique, much in the manner of unlettered commoners in St. Gall, Switzerland in 1525, one of whom testified that “God has blessed all things. If [a believer] ate a piece of bread or a slice of radish, it would do him as much good as the host.” Another witness testified that when the priest elevated the host, “it is just as if someone elevated a radish slice.” The unfavorable comparison of the host to a slice of radish certainly demystified the sacramental claim lying at the heart of the mass.<sup>2</sup>

Despite all the radical talk, there is good reason to doubt that the Anabaptists literally meant that the wine of the Lord's Supper remained just wine and the bread remained just bread. If this were literally true, the Supper would have been nothing more than a snack of radish with a sip of beverage, along with some incidental remembering. The entire sacramental action would be trivialized and brought into question. This was emphatically not the case, as is evident from the intense solemnity with which the ordinance was celebrated.

An historical anecdote sets the stage. The *Martyrs Mirror* contains a lengthy and lively exchange between an Anabaptist named Jacob de Roore and a bombastic, blaspheming friar named Cornelius, whose mighty oaths and curses the *Mirror's* editor replaced with asterisks, to spare the tender sensibilities of his pious readers. Eventually, the long debate between Jacob and the cursing friar arrived at the topic of the Lord's Supper. In the midst of numerous deleted expletives, Friar Cornelius did smoke out an inconsistency in Jacob's position on the bread and the wine.

*Fr. Corn.* "Did not St. Paul say, in the eleventh chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians: 'Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord?' And should this be only a bit of common, simple bread, and draught of stale wine? Why does St. Paul make such an exceeding great matter of it...? [I]s it still only a bit of common bread, or a memorial?"

The foul-mouthed friar had touched a crucial point: if the bread of the Supper is only common bread, why does Paul treat it so seriously and insist on "eating worthily"? Jacob replied with no apparent hesitation:

*Jac.* "The unworthy eating of the bread and the unworthy drinking of the cup of which Paul writes, lies in our conscience; for if I want to unite with the body of Christ, and with many brethren become one bread, and am at variance or in contention with any brother, I eat unworthily of that bread, and drink unworthily of the cup of the Lord... [For if one] comes hypocritically... the same eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning that *the body of the Lord, in the breaking of the bread which we break, becomes for us one communion or participation; and that the cup of blessing, which we bless, becomes for us one communion or participation in the blood of Christ*, as Paul writes in the tenth chapter of the first epistle to the Corinthians."

Jacob's reply shifted the focus from the elements to the state of grace of the participants and the communion that results. Do participants have a clear conscience about celebrating unity and communion with the Body of Christ when they eat and drink of the elements in Supper? Are they in right relationship with one another? But friar Cornelius is convinced that he has finally trapped his quarry. He replies:

*Fr. Corn.* "There you are caught; for if it is a communion or participation in the body and blood of Christ, it is certainly no longer [merely] bread and wine...."<sup>3</sup>

The friar was onto something, but he missed one key point. When Jacob spoke of "uniting with the body of Christ," he was not speaking of uniting with the "real presence of Christ" in the elements. The Body of Christ to which he referred was the church. Jacob was saying that, yes, there is a worthy participation in the Supper. Worthy eating and drinking is part of a real communion. The bread and the wine seal the union of a person with the church, the Body of Christ. However, this communion or uniting with the Body of Christ does not depend on the elements but on the spiritual and fraternal condition of the communicants. Eating and drinking the bread and wine are an integral part of communion, but the focus is not on the elements as the friar thinks.

All the same, the cursing friar had a point. When Jacob de Roore and other Anabaptists took Paul at his word and insisted that a true Supper would be measured by worthy eating and drinking, they were admitting that the bread had the potential to become more than "a bit of common, simple bread" and the cup more than "a draught of stale wine." In fact, a worthy celebration with bread and wine marked the presence of the true Body of Christ in a unique way. Or, as Jacob said in possibly an unguarded moment, "the body of the Lord, in the breaking of the bread which we break, becomes for us one communion or participation."

Dogmatic theologians – both then and now – wished to know exactly how, then, the Anabaptists explained the relationship of the natural elements of bread and wine to the grace of God and the response of faith. Most Anabaptists did not provide sophisticated theological answers to such questions.<sup>4</sup> But the Lord's Supper was a tremendously important part of their worship together. Celebrating it "worthily" lay at the heart of their

gatherings, where they not only examined personal and fraternal spiritual relationships but sang hymns explaining what they were doing. Significantly, the hymns were not much concerned to negate sacramentalism, but rather set out to explain the Supper's place within the Anabaptist view of the spiritual process of new birth and faithful living.

Even limiting ourselves to the Swiss and South German Anabaptist traditions of hymnody we possess a rich collection of texts. The Swiss Brethren hymnal, the *Ausbund*, contains two substantial eucharistic hymns; the Hutterites have preserved three. All these hymns were composed in the first half of the sixteenth century. The text to the eucharistic *Ausbund* hymn 92 was written by Hans Betz from a prison cell in the castle at Passau on the Danube. The tune was designated as "O Son of David."<sup>5</sup> This hymn is still sung in Old Order Amish communities on communion Sundays. The "Danksagung" or "Thanksgiving" hymn was composed by Hans Hut before 1528. It was preserved by the Hutterites and is still sung at every Hutterite communion service.

When we consider all five hymns, we find an interesting melodic connection with the Catholic eucharistic tradition that we would never have guessed simply by looking at Anabaptist antisacramentalism. Four of the five carry instructions that they are to be sung to the tune of the *Pange lingua*, which was a Latin eucharistic hymn, a "hymn of the most blessed sacrament." As practicing Catholics the Anabaptists would have associated this tune with the celebration of the Eucharist. The *Pange lingua* is said to have been composed in the thirteenth century – by none other than Thomas Aquinas – for use during the office of the feast of Corpus Christi. The Anabaptists borrowed this appropriate hymn tune but changed the text to fit their own understanding of the Lord's Supper.

We turn now to an analysis of the content of these Anabaptist hymns. The themes of remembrance and union are central, and provide points of reference for our observations.

### **Remembrance**

That the Supper was one of "remembrance" was axiomatic, but the Anabaptist eucharistic hymns activated several important, surprising layers of meaning connected with remembering and the Supper. The bedrock

“memory” activated by the celebration is, of course, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, through which forgiveness of sins was offered to humankind. All the hymns in our collection presuppose Christ’s sacrifice, but oddly enough only *Ausbund* hymn 92 spends any time in “remembering” the event. The first eleven stanzas are devoted to explaining how Jesus Christ, the food from heaven, the spotless lamb, fulfilled the Law and established the new covenant.<sup>6</sup>

Christ’s atoning sacrifice lies behind all celebrations of the Supper, and remembering that sacrifice calls for thankfulness. So Hans Hut’s hymn, commonly called the “Danksagung” (thanksgiving) today by the Hutterites, begins with these verses:

1. We give you thanks and honour, O Lord God  
     For you nourish us all.  
     You give us food from heaven,  
     For which we praise you eternally, Lord.<sup>7</sup>

The Lord’s Supper in the Anabaptist tradition shares with the wider Christian tradition the *commemorative* and *eucharistic* nature of the celebration, giving thanks to God while remembering and commemorating Christ’s sacrifice. But what is striking on reading the hymns is not how strong the memorial theme is but how faint it is.<sup>8</sup> This is odd, since we are used to repeating that the Anabaptists celebrated a “memorial” Supper.

A more typically Anabaptist emphasis emerges at a second level of “remembering.” The hymns incorporate celebration of the Supper into their understanding of the spiritual life – the spiritual process of repentance, faith, rebirth, and new life that together define the Christian walk. After its careful treatment of Christ’s atonement, *Ausbund* Hymn 92, stanza 12 says “Understand! Christ the Lord has become a mercy seat for all who, if they believe, are born in him.”<sup>9</sup> Here we are entering Anabaptist territory.

Before we trace some steps involved in being “born in Christ,” we must note that for the Anabaptists singing these hymns, the salvation won by Christ is *conditional* upon the faith and rebirth of any given individual. Here the “believers church” nature of the Anabaptist tradition becomes clear. Christ becomes a “mercy seat” only for those who have come to a mature faith and are born again. This understanding is foundational for the Anabaptist view of the Lord’s Supper. *Ausbund* hymn 55, for example,

begins with these words:

1. O God Father on Heaven's throne,  
You who have prepared for us a crown,  
If we abide in Your Son,  
Here with Him bear patiently cross and suffering,  
In this life yielding ourselves to Him,  
Striving for His fellowship at all times.<sup>10</sup>

The phrases “if we abide in Your Son,” “bear patiently cross and suffering,” “yielding ourselves to Him,” and “striving for His fellowship at all times” indicate the human responses necessary for there to be communion and salvation. Christ's death on the cross is the necessary, but not the sufficient, condition for our salvation. Thus the anonymous eucharistic hymn preserved by the Hutterites says:

2. The cup means for us the suffering of Christ  
The Holy Spirit will humble us,  
So we may become like unto Christ  
And carry the cross here on earth  
Not turning away from him until the end,  
Until he takes us from this misery.<sup>11</sup>

If we follow the testimony of these hymns, the emphasis in the Anabaptist celebration of the Supper falls not on Christ as the vicarious atonement for sin but on the extension of the atonement to each believer individually. The Spirit must humble each believer so that the believer “becomes like unto Christ” and is ready to bear the cross.

Clearly, what is meant is the power of the Holy Spirit, but the terminology of the hymns is very imprecise. Sometimes they speak directly of the Holy Spirit, sometimes of the Spirit of God, and other times of the Spirit of Christ, with no particular distinction among them. Nevertheless, the point is obvious enough: the process leading from darkness to light is the result of the activity of the Spirit of God, working in people who have recognized their sin, repented, believed in the merits of Christ, and experienced a new birth by the spiritual power of God. Of course, this process pre-dates the celebration of the Supper; the Supper presupposes the process of coming to faith and rebirth. Peter Riedemann's eucharistic hymn notes the sacrifice of the shepherd and then comments,

4. So he helps us out of trouble  
 And soon makes us one bread with him,  
 If we believe in his name,  
 Abandon ourselves to him and trust in him,  
 Suffer his work, and strive at all times,  
 Then we are members of his Body.<sup>12</sup>

Riedemann alludes here to the common Anabaptist view that in-filling by the Holy Spirit will require a faith that trusts enough to “abandon” itself to God’s power – the favored word to describe this was *Gelassenheit* – and so allow God to work within. This process of self-denial, standing before baptism, is well attested in Anabaptist testimonies.

The role of God’s living Spirit is striking in all of this. Repentance, faith, rebirth, and the new life are the work of the Holy Spirit; remembering this spiritual work is part of what must happen at the celebration of the Supper. *Ausbund* hymn 55 says clearly,

5. The Spirit teaches us to understand the communion  
 Of partaking His flesh and blood,  
 The old man must completely perish  
 with his works, this is certain,  
 the Spirit of Christ must work in us.<sup>13</sup>

*Ausbund* hymn 92, stanza 16 sounds the same theme:

16. The Holy Spirit feeds souls.  
 This is the pledge sent for the inheritance.  
 He is called a seal  
 for your eternal release from pain.  
 You should, therefore, praise God  
 through Jesus Christ at all times  
 for this heavenly food.<sup>14</sup>

It is the work of the Spirit to “feed souls.” This spiritual feeding pre-dates the celebration of the Supper but also accompanies it, as we will note later. It was this feeding that led those once in darkness into the light. Thanksgiving for spiritual feeding at the celebration of the Supper is a “remembrance” of an experience shared by all true participants. Remembering and giving thanks for Christ’s sacrifice merges into remembering and giving thanks for the living Spirit’s presence in the souls of those who have been led to

repentance and experienced rebirth.

For the Anabaptists who sang these hymns, the liberation from sin celebrated in the Supper focuses not only on the historical event on the cross but on the actual, incarnational event that has taken place in believers' hearts and lives. The focus is on the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in individuals, and not on the instrumental work of blessed elements.

A third level of remembering indicated by the eucharistic hymns is their harking back to the seal and covenant of the new birth in baptism. Hymn 92 in the *Ausbund* says it this way:

25. God now holds what you have  
promised to him in baptism.  
According to his command, take the cup,  
complete the sacrifice to him.  
How it is, then, for us in Jesus Christ  
three witnesses decide:  
two are called water and Spirit,  
the third, blood, that is, suffering.<sup>15</sup>

This stanza alludes to the common Anabaptist description of a threefold baptism of Spirit, water, and blood. As celebrants at the Supper sang this hymn, they were reminded they had accepted Christ's sacrifice in their hearts by faith – that is, they had been baptized in the spirit. Further, the act of “eating in memory of Him” also involved “remembering” the covenant made at the event of water baptism, sealed visibly before God and the community. The Supper is a reminder of the commitment made to die to oneself in order to live a new life in Christ.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the commitment made at baptism was also a promise to accept suffering, or the baptism of blood, should it come. Partaking of the bread and wine was thus an occasion for remembering and renewing the deep commitments signified by baptism in spirit, water, and blood.

With the second and third acts of “remembrance,” focusing on rebirth and baptism, the Lord's Supper assumes a particularly Anabaptist shape, linking the celebration with living a new, regenerated life. The *Ausbund* hymn says this:

15. Christ instituted his Supper  
with bread and wine for his community

which separates itself from all sin.  
 In this way she should  
 eat in memory of Him.<sup>17</sup>

If we now ask how Christ's work is remembered in the Anabaptist celebration of the Lord's Supper, we see three works of Christ: on the cross, in the hearts of believers by the Spirit, and in constituting his community, which is his Body, through baptism. In this last instance, the earthly Jesus provides the "flesh and blood" example of what believers may also expect. *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanza 4, says:

4. Therefore, O Christian flock so small!  
 Let us all consider  
 How He went before us here on earth,  
 That we also become like Him,  
 In joy and grief abiding in His covenant,  
 Not shunning here His flesh and blood.

The "flesh and blood of Christ" that must not be shunned has a double meaning. In accepting Christ's flesh and blood here with the elements, one also accepts the suffering of Christ's present body on earth, namely the persecution of his church.

To conclude the theme of "remembrance," asserting that the Anabaptists held to a "memorialist" Supper simply does not go deep enough. On the basis of the testimony of their eucharistic hymns, the recollection that was to occur at the celebration of the Supper was intended to remind celebrants not only of Christ's historic sacrifice and atonement, but more fundamentally of their own personal yielding to the living Christ, namely their rebirth by the power of the Holy Spirit and their becoming members of the Body of Christ by baptism, along with their promise, by the covenant of baptism, to live a new life as fruitful members of the Body of Christ, following in the footsteps of Jesus.

At this point we can begin tracing the theme of unity in these Anabaptist testimonies. This will give us a slightly different angle of vision on the same subject matter.

### **Union and Communion**

The Anabaptists' celebration of the Lord's Supper was not only or even primarily about remembering what had happened in the past. It signified,

pointed to, and visibly enacted the unity of communion in the present, in several dimensions. Whereas the Supper's "memorial" aspects suggest casting one's mind to the past, the examination and celebration of unity brings the present into focus.

Celebration of the Supper points, first of all and most importantly, to the unity of believers with Christ. We may say that the elements point to the *mystical* unity of believers with Christ. Consider *Ausbund* hymn 55 again, stanza 5:

5. The Spirit teaches us to understand the communion  
Partaking of His flesh and blood,  
The old being must completely perish  
With the old works, this must be noted,  
The Spirit of Christ must work in us.

We return to the process of repentance, yielding in faith, and rebirth, seen here as an event not in the past but in the present. Communion depends on the death of the old being and the coming to life of a new being filled with the Spirit of Christ. Galatians 2:20 was often alluded to and cited at this point: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." This sentiment appears in *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanza 9:

9. We must lay aside the old garment  
And purge out the old leaven,  
That He may have His work in us....

And again, stanza 13:

- Christ lets His word be poured out,  
The fountain of life flows within us,  
When we open our hearts to Him....<sup>18</sup>

Likewise the second stanza of Peter Riedemann's eucharistic hymn says,

- Therefore [God] gave from heaven  
The true bread that gives us life,  
So that for us who rightly eat it here,  
We are made pure in conscience....<sup>19</sup>

The all-important verses from 1 Cor. 11:27-29, calling for self-examination prior to participating in the Supper, were heard by Anabaptists as a call to reflect seriously on their present spiritual condition. *Ausbund* hymn 92 says:

19. Whoever, without the Spirit  
 eats this bread,  
 walks in hypocrisy, stands in sin,  
 and will be possessed with the devil,  
 as Judas ate unworthily  
 and trod Christ under foot....
20. You must be clean, then, and pure  
 when you want to partake of it.  
 You must be fed with God's Spirit.  
 His body should include you.<sup>20</sup>

The fundamental union of individual members to the living Spirit of God was to be re-examined carefully at the time of celebrating the Supper. It was not simply a matter of remembering graces past; one needed to re-examine one's true spiritual condition in the present. The threat of eternal condemnation was reason enough for honesty in this matter. Far from being a simple memorial with "mere" bread and wine, celebration with the elements of communion, as instituted by Christ, was laden with spiritual significance. When one took the elements, it was a public pledge and testimony of a clear conscience, of a present, genuine yielding to God and rebirth in the Spirit, a visible pledge of the continuing living Spirit within – and woe to liars, hypocrites, and deceivers.

At a second and equally profound level, celebration of the Supper points to the creation of one body out of many members. Eucharistic hymn 92 in the *Ausbund* uses evocative language pointing to the union of the gathered community with Christ.

14. This community (*G'mein*) is in Jesus Christ,  
 of his flesh and bones.  
 The Holy Spirit brought her together,  
 a united (*gemeine*) body of Christ.  
 As the vine has many branches,  
 so the community of Christ  
 is included in His power.  
 In this way one partakes of Him.<sup>21</sup>

The Holy Spirit not only regenerates individuals – a mysterious process in itself – but brings those individuals together, like flesh and bones, into

one body – again a profound mystery. The Body of Christ as a whole “is included in Christ’s power,” and the communion celebrated in that Body is a present manifestation of this intimate spiritual relationship.

As with individuals before God, so also with individuals before the community: Paul’s call for “discerning the Body of Christ” demands an honest evaluation of communal relationships. The spiritual union among members of the Body of Christ depends on the Holy Spirit’s work in each member. False members outwardly pretend to be united but inwardly refuse to be “ground” or “crushed” in the process of becoming one Body. The images of grains of wheat being ground for bread, and of grapes being crushed for wine, point to the “submission” (yieldedness), patience, and humility that marked the process of conversion and continued to mark the communion of believers.<sup>22</sup> The presence or absence of God’s Spirit will be discerned by the presence or absence of Christ’s love.

Peter Riedemann’s hymn said:

6. In the bread it is prescribed for us,  
That we must exercise ourselves in love,  
Serve one another for improvement,  
We who are members of one body,  
With true hearts, truly without deceit....<sup>23</sup>

And Hans Hut wrote,

7. Therefore we eat the Body of the Lord,  
As we are taught by the Holy Spirit.  
If we would truly see God,  
Godly love must burn in us.  
It makes us into vines, the Spirit gives life,  
And in this way the Body of Christ is given to us.<sup>24</sup>

The bond of Christ’s love creates a united Body out of individual believers. It is this union and communion, based on divine love in action, that is celebrated with bread and wine.

In the third place, celebration of the Supper points to the unity of the gathered community with Christ the Head. Of course, this unity has been implicitly affirmed at both the individual and communal levels already. Eucharistic hymn 55 in the *Ausbund* uses various scriptural images to make the explicit point.

6. He is the Rock and Cornerstone  
laid for the house of his community (*Gemeine*)  
which is His bride, wife and body  
through which He performs His work here.
7. All members of His body  
pursue His work here always,  
according to His will, unto death.  
They are one bread with Christ here.<sup>25</sup>

Celebration of the Supper with the elements of bread and wine makes visible and testifies to a deeper reality: the Holy Spirit has already done (and continues to do) the work of unity, both within individuals and among individuals in the community, uniting them all with the Head. The spiritual community has already been formed of re-born members, united with Christ, who is the center, the Head, the Bridegroom. The occasion of the Lord's Supper simply gives visible testimony to the profound spiritual identification existing between Christ and the individual and collective members of his Body on earth.<sup>26</sup>

The process of "becoming bread and wine," the Body of Christ in the world, will require sacrifice. The eucharistic hymns indicate that belonging to this Body will be painful, as it was in Jesus's own life in this world. *Ausbund* hymn 55 in particular sounds this note repeatedly.

16. ... the flesh must suffer  
If we want to possess the kingdom with him.
17. The Lamb is eaten with distress,  
Covered with bitter salt,  
For whoever does not want to suffer with Christ  
Shall separate himself from His flesh and blood,  
He who is anxious about cross and affliction,  
To him the body of Christ remains hidden.

Identification of the present Body of Christ with the Lord must be complete.

18. One must eat the Lamb entirely here,  
In all forms, not forgetting anything...  
Remaining undivided with Him....
19. You must become a stranger with Him,

- Without citizenship on this earth,  
And practice love with patience...  
You shall love the enemy...  
Bowing your flesh to the dust of the earth.
20. You must also go with Him into the garden,  
Awaiting the cup according to the Father's will...  
...one must crucify the flesh entirely.

This eucharistic hymn underlines that for the Body of Christ on earth, the bread of unity will be accompanied by the bitter cup of suffering. The communion of the body and blood of Christ, incarnated in earthly members, will be visibly marked by the character and marks of Jesus himself. This communion cannot be simply spiritual or invisible, but will be marked by the witness of bread and wine and lives of love and obedience.

In their effort to be the visible Body of Christ on earth, the Anabaptists celebrated a “closed” Supper. In contrast to a spiritualist view that would have seen the elements as incidental and not important to a “true” celebration, they had a keen sense of the importance of a proper or “worthy” celebration. Communion with the elements was open only to those who had undergone the process of dying to self and rising in Christ, were sealed by baptism, and were tested by submission to fraternal admonition in the community. The bread and wine were not for just anybody.<sup>27</sup> The language of *Ausbund* hymn 55 is plain.

11. For whoever is still uncircumcised,  
not yet renouncing the earthly kingdom,  
not wanting to surrender to Christ,  
[such a one] does not live a new life,  
limps all the time, stinks of sin,  
[and] cannot eat or drink of Him.
12. Only those come to the Lamb  
who have received His witness:  
His Spirit, the water, and also the blood...<sup>28</sup>

Far from de-valuing the elements of bread and wine, eating and drinking together with other members of Christ's Body indicates “coming to the Lamb.” The central themes of Anabaptist spirituality – yieldedness to God, faith, humility, spiritual rebirth, baptism, new life, and conformity with Christ

unto death if necessary – are thus concentrated, recalled, examined, and enacted in this celebration. It is this integrated unity, including celebration with the visible elements, that characterizes the Lord’s Supper in early Anabaptism. *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanza 23 says:

23. Just as one bread [is made] from many kernels,  
and one drink from many berries,  
So all true Christians  
are one bread and one drink, without deceit or duplicity,  
in Christ the Lord. He nourishes us,  
multiplying true love and communion.<sup>29</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Was the bread only bread, and the wine only wine? When the cursing friar pushed Jacob de Roore to explain the meaning of celebration with bread and wine, recall that Jacob answered:

...the body of the Lord, in the breaking of the bread which we break, becomes for us one communion or participation; and ... the cup of blessing, which we bless, becomes for us one communion or participation in the blood of Christ....

Eating bread and drinking wine becomes a communion and a participation in the body and blood of Christ, Jacob says. *Ausbund* hymn 55 adds that in the celebration of the Supper, Christ the Lord “nourishes us, multiplying true love and communion.” Likewise, an anonymous Swiss Brethren writing that circulated in the 1580s noted that “[partaking] of the Holy Supper with all true Christians and children of God ... feeds, refreshes and quickens the soul to eternal life.”<sup>30</sup>

At the heart of the celebration with elements of bread and wine is the mystery of spiritual communion with the present, living Lord. This we hear loudly and clearly in the Anabaptist eucharistic hymns. It is the power of the living God, working in the hearts of believers and in their midst, that makes of them the Body of Christ. And it is that power that transforms the plain bread and wine into a spiritual meal that “multiplies true love and communion,” that “feeds, refreshes and quickens the soul to eternal life.” The point is not that this is just bread and just wine, but that, properly understood, this is a spiritual meal that includes bread and wine.

Was there a presence of Christ *in the elements* of the Anabaptist Lord's Supper? The answer is an emphatic "no," if we look for that presence in the accustomed places and with the accustomed explanations. There was no presence of Christ *in* the bread and wine as blessed elements; they were not instruments to convey grace, nor were they blessed by clergy empowered to perform this miracle. But this does not mean the Anabaptists denied the living presence of Christ in and with their celebration of the Supper, only that we are looking for Christ's presence in the wrong places. We make a mistake if we cease looking for that presence just because it is not in bread and wine. The mystery of communion with the living Christ in his Supper comes into being by the power of the Spirit, dwelling in and working through the collected members of Christ's Body.

Perhaps the Anabaptists overcompensated when they denied a complete lack of sacramental efficacy in relation to the bread and the wine, but they knew what they could not agree to. They refused to equate a divine mystery with sacerdotal magic. But they also knew what they wished to keep, and that was the living mystery of union and communion, of the celebration of union between believers and the living Christ, and the union of believers with each other, into a visible Body of Christ. How could such a profound mystery ever be accomplished *instrumentally* by a "slice of radish"? Neither could such a mystery be accomplished in the absence of the visible tokens of bread and wine, co-witnesses and testimonies of God's faithfulness in, with, and through living believers themselves, yielding themselves, eating and drinking at the Supper, and giving visible witness to the working of God within.

When they celebrated "worthily" with bread and wine, Anabaptist congregations looked to the living Christ in their hearts and in their midst, who transformed members and elements together into a mysterious communion, creating his Body in many members, ground like grains and crushed like grapes, into one bread and one drink.

Some believers churches (I speak of Mennonite churches of my acquaintance) seem to have built their celebration of the Lord's Supper on negating the sacramental position and have explained the celebration by a simple biblicism: we celebrate because Jesus said so, and we hope to build community with one another through the celebration. The result can

be a truncated, formalistic ritual focusing on the words of institution and on solemn eating and drinking, with less-than-convincing exhortations to go forth and be the Body of Christ in the world.

If our reading of the Anabaptist eucharistic hymns is correct, what is missing in a formalistic Lord's Supper is the most basic understanding, expectation, and justification for the celebration, namely the mystery of the spiritual presence of Christ among us in the celebration of his meal. We in the believers churches, above all, should expect to meet the living Christ at his Supper, in, among, and with the celebrants and the elements. The living mystery of communion, the Anabaptist experience suggests, should be sought, remembered, cultivated, and celebrated when we break bread together and share the cup. It remains the central point and the only true heart of the exercise.

We will give the last word to Jacob de Roore:

[T]he body of the Lord, in the breaking of the bread which we break, becomes for us one communion or participation; and ... the cup of blessing, which we bless, becomes for us one communion or participation in the blood of Christ...

When breaking bread and sharing wine become a communion or participation in the living body of the Lord, they have indeed transcended mere bread and wine, and have come to share in the mystery of Christ's presence.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A phrase often repeated; an early example is found in Hubmaier's *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*: "everyone can see that bread is bread and wine is wine, like other bread and wine." Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, eds., *The Writings of Balthasar Hubmaier* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>2</sup> "...got hett alle ding gesegnet; wenn er ain brot oder rebschnitz in der mainung nusß, wer glich so vil oder so gut." Heinold Fast, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*, 2. Band, Ostschweiz (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), #411, 342. A similar sentiment was expressed by another witness. When a priest says a mass, he has performed a mortal sin, "unnd wer eben, wenn man das sacrament ufhub, wers eben als ob man ain rebschnitz ufhub..." Ibid., 344.

<sup>3</sup> Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror*, trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972), 781.

<sup>4</sup> See John Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1993), which examines the theological positions of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips in detail.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Martens suggests that “O Son of David” may be the same tune as the medieval hymn *Veni redemptor gentium*. On the *Pange lingua* and *Veni redemptor gentium*, see Helen Martens, *Hutterite Songs* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2002), 120-30, esp. 129, nn. 2 and 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ausbund* hymn 55, in contrast, makes only passing reference to Christ's historic atonement on the cross and only one oblique reference to remembrance during the Supper. The reference to the atonement is in stanza 3 which reads, in part: “As Head You have given us Your beloved Son, the pure life, He has prepared the way before us...” Reference to “remembrance” comes near the end of the hymn, stanza 21: “Therewith did Christ at the last institute a communion supper of His body, when he broke the bread with thanksgiving, He gave them to drink out of the cup, therewith to reflect (*denken*) on what he has given us, if we cling to His body.” Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1 (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, 1999), 112; 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The one exception here is the first eleven stanzas of *Ausbund* hymn 92, which do reflect on the atonement in some detail.

<sup>9</sup> *The Earliest Hymns of the Ausbund. Some Beautiful Christian Songs Composed and Sung in the Prison at Passau. Published in 1564*. Trans. Robert A. Riall, ed. Galen A. Peters (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003), 118.

<sup>10</sup> Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1 (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, 1999), 111, stanza 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Die Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*, fourth ed. Edited by the Hutterian Brethren (Cayley, Alberta: Macmillan Colony, 1974), 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 453, stanza 4.

<sup>13</sup> Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1, 112, stanza 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ausbund*, hymn 92, stanza 16 in Riall, *The Earliest Hymns of the Ausbund*, 119.

<sup>15</sup> *Ausbund*, hymn 92, stanza 25, in Riall, *Earliest Hymns*, 122.

<sup>16</sup> As Hans Denck noted, “one breaks bread many times but is baptized only once....” The reason for this, he said, was that “the realization of the Covenant, which is righteousness, must be constantly practiced and pursued.” Clarence Bauman, ed., *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 195.

<sup>17</sup> *Ausbund*, hymn 92, stanza 15, in Riall, *Earliest Hymns*, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1, 113, stanza 9; 114, stanza 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Die Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*, 453, stanza 2.

<sup>20</sup> Also *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanza 24: “For whoever eats this bread unworthily, Eats to himself judgment and death, He who carries guile and mockery in his heart, for him this bread will do harm.” Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1, 116, stanza 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ausbund*, hymn 92, stanza 14, in Riall, *Earliest Hymns*, 119.

<sup>22</sup> The Anabaptists loved this ancient eucharistic image. It is cited in all branches of the movement. Menno Simons wrote: “Just as natural bread is made of many grains, pulverized

by the mill, kneaded with water, and baked by the heat of the fire, so is the church of Christ made up of true believers, broken in their hearts with the mill of the divine Word, baptized with the water of the Holy Ghost, and with the fire of pure, unfeigned love made into one body.” John C. Wenger, ed. and Leonrad Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 145. See also *Ausbund*, hymn 55, stanza 23; hymn 92, stanza 23 and further examples in Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), chapter 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Die Lieder der Hutterischen Brüder*, 453-54, stanza 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, stanza 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanzas 6 and 7. Translation, with modifications from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1, 112. Stanza 22 picks up the theme again: “For by the bread he shows who has His Spirit. Such a person is His own, of His flesh and bone, a member of His body and His community.”

<sup>26</sup> Two days before his martyrdom, Mattheus Bernaerts wrote to his two children: “Thus did Christ Jesus institute the Supper with bread and wine, to be used in the Christian assembly, in the name of the Lord, for a token of brotherly love and unity, for a sign that we, through His merits, by faith in His holy name, have become partakers of Christ, the true bread from heaven, as Paul declares....” *Martyrs Mirror*, 948.

<sup>27</sup> As with baptism, the Supper could be celebrated falsely, by people who only appeared to have genuine faith and rebirth. Those who celebrated the Supper “unworthily” would not harm the true Body, but would eat and drink to their own condemnation. Pilgram Marpeck wrote, “Where the mouth alone receives the outward sign and the essence is missing in the heart, which has little or no regard to the essence, then it would certainly be better for him if he had never partaken of the sign. Therefore, Paul also says: ‘Let each man examine himself and thus eat of the bread and drink of the wine’ so that he may eat worthy of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:28).” William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener, ON; Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 194. See *Ausbund*, hymn 92, stanzas 18 and 19.

<sup>28</sup> *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanzas 11 and 12. Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1, 113.

<sup>29</sup> *Ausbund* hymn 55, stanza 23. Translation, with modifications, from *Songs of the Ausbund*, vol. 1, 116.

<sup>30</sup> “Ein kurtze einfaltige erkanntnuß....” (ca. 1573), Codex 628, Berner Burgerbibliothek, 13-14. Translation mine.

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