The Challenge of Menno Simons' Symbolic View of the Lord's Supper

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Introduction

In sacramental Christian traditions there exists a general conviction that Spirit may be mediated by matter, the eternal by the temporal, and the infinite by the finite. More specifically, particular ceremonies are taken to mediate God's power in an especially forceful and direct manner, namely, the sacraments. This theological resolution to the puzzle of the relationship between Spirit and matter has, however, most frequently been perceived to be unavailable to Christians of an Anabaptist orientation. Speaking from within the tradition with which I am familiar, Mennonites from the North American General Conference and Mennonite Church[1] are used to thinking of themselves as decidedly non-sacramental. This is, of course, in contradiction to the general experience of most Mennonites that God is not available just through the Word or the gathered community of believers but more broadly in the world at large. Nevertheless, when it comes to the formal theological or ritualized recognition of many people's general experience, most North American Anabaptist fellowships continue to resist acknowledging the sacramental nature of Christian experience.

One of the most likely places for such acknowledgment is the Lord's Supper. Due to the provocative biblical passages associated with this "ordinance," the direct association of the elements with Jesus, and the clarity of the origin of this rite with his instruction, one might expect it would be here, if anywhere, that Anabaptists could celebrate a sacramental understanding of reality. However, such an expectation is not fulfilled in most contemporary Anabaptist thought or practice. For various reasons, some historical and legitimate and others less clearly either, a fairly strong and widespread resistance remains within Mennonite churches to any notion of an encounter with the "real presence" of Christ in this celebration. For example, in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* under "Communion," one reads that:

> Communion (Lord's Supper, Abendmahl, Nachtmahl) has always had only a symbolic meaning for the Anabaptists and Mennonites and is observed as the ordinance of the Lord and not a sacrament which in itself conveys the grace of God to the participant.[2]

Statements like this constitute a formidable obstacle to the theological and ritualized acknowledgment of the sacramental nature of reality in everyday experience, since many contemporary Anabaptists feel that making such an acknowledgement would represent a betrayal of their tradition and its theological convictions.[3] Given this fact, this paper will seek to examine the theology of a significant sixteenth-century Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons, on the Lord's Supper to determine to what extent his theology of the Supper may accurately be described as "only symbolic," and also to explore some implications of his view for contemporary Mennonite views of Communion.

Historical Background

In order to appreciate Simons' distinctive articulation of the significance of the Lord's Supper, a cursory sketch of some significant elements of his theological context will be provided here.

Regarding the late medieval eucharistic piety that provided the seedbed for many of the Reformers' impulses, Sjouke Voolstra says that "it is not easy for us either to comprehend or describe adequately the magical power ascribed to the host."[4] On a popular level, partaking of the Eucharist became in many people's minds a necessary means for securing the forgiveness of sin,[5] and a host of legends developed around miraculous effects stemming from the presence of the Lord himself in the consecrated disc.[6] For example, those suffering physical ailments were miraculously helped through the host, since in contrast to normal food that becomes transformed into human flesh, the heavenly food of the Eucharist was believed to conform the recipient to its own perfection. Animals too could benefit from the magical healing power of the Eucharist, and there were countless stories of how the Eucharist turned into a child, or bled. Finally, some even believed that one did not age during the time spent attending Mass.[7]

Operating alongside this miracle-cult view of the Eucharist, and in contrast to it, was another tradition of mystical piety that stressed the reality

of the sacrament as the Christian's spiritual nourishment.[8] We can observe it, for example, in the late medieval writer Wessel Gansfort's distinctive view of "remembrance" as "the stomach of the soul";[9] in remembering Jesus' life, especially the passion that he suffered for our sake, "we eat and are refreshed,"[10] which spiritual eating nevertheless also involved eating Jesus corporally.[11] Or we could look to the distinctive exegesis of the Dutch lawyer Cornelius Hoen, who argued that the word "is" in "This is my body" (from Matt 26:26 and repeated in the Mass), really means "signifies."[12] For Hoen this interpretation provided the foundation for asserting Jesus' physical absence from the Supper which, analogously to his departure from this world via his ascension,[13] he saw as the very prerequisite for a spiritual encounter of the believer with Christ by "faith active in true love."[14] A third example appears in the writings of the Anabaptist Melchior Hoffman,[15] whose use of the figure of the wedding ring in connection with the Supper gave him a means to affirm a mystical union with Christ in its celebration.[16] In a fascinating echo of a theme we observed in Gansfort, the Christ received in a faith-filled Supper is the entire Christ, including his humanity: "Through belief in the Lord Jesus Christ she [the bride] has physically received and eaten the noble Bridegroom with his blood.…"[17]

Each of these examples provides a somewhat different angle on a kind of spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, not necessarily related to the elements of bread and wine, a further variation of which we shall see again in Simons' own writing.

Simons' Theology of the Lord's Supper

An analysis of Simons' theology of the Lord's Supper could be organized in various ways. Using the sections of Simons' 1558 version of the "Foundation of Christian Doctrine"[18] and his 1554 "Reply to Gellius Faber"[19] that address the Lord's Supper, the following analysis will present both his negative and positive agenda.

As noted, two streams of late medieval eucharistic piety prevailed in Simons' time and geographical context. The first focused on the miracle of transubstantiation in the Mass and was accompanied by expectations for miraculous events such as one would associate with encounters with Jesus "in the flesh." The second focused on achieving a spiritual communion with

Christ, perhaps alongside of, but also possibly apart from, the reception of the eucharistic elements.

The initial aspect of Simons' negative agenda comprised a refutation of beliefs supporting the first kind of eucharistic piety. With respect to transubstantiation, Simons rejected the notion that the bread and wine turn into the actual body and blood of Jesus on the basis that Jesus, in his humanity and after his ascension, is seated at the right of hand of God in heaven.[20] According to Simons those who held to transubstantiation, with its associated veneration of the host, were guilty of idolatry in exactly the same manner as "the heathens" who once worshipped objects made from wood or stone.[21] He also echoed the common Reformation critique that in the Supper communicants ought to receive Christ "in both kinds."[22]

Second, Simons clearly rejected the notion that the Eucharist constitutes a repetition of Christ's self-sacrifice for sin: "with one sacrifice, I say, with one sacrifice He has perfected forever those who are sanctified."[23] He thus also rejected the popular view that participation in the Supper was necessary for the forgiveness of post-baptismal sin.[24] Third, his rejection of transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the Mass required fundamental changes in the piety of the time. In his opinion, the people of his generation were like those with an illness who, inexplicably, continually placed themselves in the care of an inexperienced physician. Afflicted with the sickness of sin, most people sought a remedy in such practices as indulgences, holy water, fastings, confessionals, pilgrimages, and the bread and wine of communion.[25] Instead, 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."[26]

All these aspects of Simons' negative agenda could be predicted solely on the basis of his identity as a Radical Reformer. However, the truly distinctive contributions of his theology of the Supper develop out of how his theology was impacted by a concern for the believer's new life in Christ. That this is a central theme of his eucharistic theology is seen in his "Reply to Gellius Faber," in which Simons acknowledges that "if they [Faber and his parishioners] would enter with Christ into newness of life, then I would feel free to admit that that which he has written here concerning the

Lord's Supper, did for the most part, sound not so bad."[27] The main point of contention between Simons and his Calvinist interlocutor did not pertain to a dispute about the significance of the elements but to the moral quality of life within the congregation. According to Simons, the Supper is for those born of God, "true Christians who have buried their sins, and who walk with Christ in a new and godly life,"[28] and those partaking of the Supper when not living a redeemed life eat themselves unto judgment.[29] Likewise, Simons was critical of a Supper celebrated by ministers "who really seek nothing but worldly honor, ease, and the belly."[30] Only where both leaders and communicants experience the new being in Christ does the true Supper occur,[31] and since in Simons' eyes the new being was notably absent from Faber's church, by definition the true Supper could not be celebrated there.

Simons' positive agenda in many ways mirrors his negative one. First, having eliminated Christ's physical presence in the elements, Simons nevertheless left room for a kind of spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper. (This aspect of his theology has not always been acknowledged in academic treatments,[32] and while not the central concern of his agenda, it must be noted.) Thus, Simons allowed that in the Supper "hungry consciences are fed with the heavenly bread of the divine Word, [and] with the wine of the Holy Ghost."[33] In support of this view, and like so many others before him, he referred to Augustine's sermon on John 6, in which the African bishop wrote about spiritual feeding on Christ through faith.[34] Thus where "faith, love, attentiveness, peace [and] unity of heart and mind" are present in the gathered believers, there Simons said "Jesus Christ is present with His grace, Spirit, and promise, and with the merits of His sufferings, misery, flesh, blood, cross, and death even as He Himself says: Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."[35] In addition to noting Christ's spiritual presence Simons here associates with a right celebration of the Supper, it is interesting – and, given his concerns with Catholic piety, an adept theological move – that he adduced the Matthean text "where two or three are gathered" in support of his position rather than any particular biblical promises or statements associated with the elements of bread and wine.

As one might expect, given Simons' concerns about transubstantiation, the precise relationship between the elements of the Supper and this faith-

filled feeding on Christ is not particularly clear. Certainly, eating the bread and wine without the presence of that which is signified did not constitute the true Supper, but what did Simons mean when he said that "where the mystery is joined to the signs for which purpose they are ordained, there the baptism of Christ and the supper of Christ are present"?[36] How are the signs joined to the mystery that they represent? Though one should not expect this passage to bear too much theological freight, at least once Simons seems to point to a kind of simultaneity between receiving the elements and spiritual feeding on Christ:

> But where the Lord's church, the dear disciples of Christ, have met in Christ's name to partake of the Holy Supper in true faith, love, and obedience, there the outward perishable man eats and drinks perishable bread and wine, and *the inner imperishable man of the heart eats in a spiritual sense the imperishable body and blood of Christ* which cannot be eaten or digested, as was said [italics added].[37]

In this connection we may briefly observe the formal similarity between Simons' theology of the Supper and his Christology. That is, Simons understood Jesus – including his physical body – to have originated solely from God, while Mary provided the suitable "field" within which this divine seed was sown and developed. "He [Jesus] did not become flesh of Mary, but in Mary."[38] Just as Jesus in a sense came directly from heaven, conceived by the Holy Spirit without taking on the materiality of this world by means of his mother Mary, so too in the Supper Jesus' spiritual presence comes directly from heaven, in the power of the Spirit, without taking on the materiality of the elements of the bread and wine.[39]

If the question of how the mystery represented in the Supper "is joined to the signs for which purpose they are ordained" is undeveloped in Simons' writing, the question of what is signified in the Supper is repeatedly articulated. Although in the passages noted above Simons does speak of a spiritual presence of Christ, far more significant for him is the reality of the Supper as a memorial to Christ's death, and a time to remember "all the glorious fruits of divine love manifest toward us in Christ."[40] Egil Grislis has noted this aspect of Simons' thought, stating that "as in the Passover celebration of the Old Testament so also in the Lord's Supper in the New

Testament 'the sign signifies the reality.' Ultimately considered, this 'reality' is none other than the atonement of Jesus Christ."[41]

Notwithstanding Grislis' statement, for Simons the "realities" pointed to by the elements are multiple. In addition to signifying Christ's atonement, the Supper also signifies the unity of, and harmony among, true believers: "by the Lord's Supper Christian unity, love, and peace are signified and enjoined."[42] Just as in a physical body, members of Christ's body are to perform their particular tasks to build up the body and to promote its peace and harmony.

Most significantly, the Supper signifies the new life in Christ experienced by true believers. As already noted, 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. Making the transformed lives of believers one of the Supper's signified realities is an example of one such distinctive feature. Many passages could be cited to illustrate this point, but a few should suffice. "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."[43] In another passage from his "Reply to Gellius Faber," Simons says "the reality and the thing signified in the Holy Supper, [is] namely, the remembrance of the sacrifice of the flesh and blood of Christ, [and] the love of God and their neighbors."[44] Later in his reply Simons states that "the signs of the New Testament are in themselves quite powerless and vain and useless if the thing signified, namely, *the new*, *penitent life*, is not there [italics added]."[45]

Now, having noted the what and how of the mystery represented in the Supper, we may direct our attention to its effects. A noteworthy point here is how the Supper functioned to maintain the church's purity. For Simons, the community of believers had a role in drawing attention to, and demanding the amelioration of, behavior not reflective of the new life in Christ. Faber accused Simons of hypocrisy, for while the latter often made allegations of "dissension, wrath, and enmity" in the Reformed churches, Faber felt Simons was not equally attuned to the quarrelling within his own fellowship. Apparently, Simons took Faber's accusation to refer to the practice of the ban in Anabaptist congregations, and in his defence presented

a description of it. Those who willfully followed their own reason rather than the instruction of Scripture were at first reproved by the congregation "reasonably and in love." If they did not seek to amend their ways, the fellowship had to separate itself from them until they would acknowledge their faults and return to the congregation with an amended disposition. All of this, which Faber called "contention, enmity, and discord about the articles of faith," was a necessary exercise of "keeping uncleanness from the house of the Lord."[46] This included keeping insincere believers from participating in communion. 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 church's purity by means of the ban constituted a major purpose of the Supper.

This is the dynamic indicated when Simons spoke of the Supper being a "communion of the body and blood of Christ."[47] Far from pointing to a mystical reality, this terminology had a predictably ethical thrust. Only those who by their way of life showed they were "flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone," who were in Christ and had Christ in them, dared partake.[48] Otherwise, one would be attempting a communion of the resurrected Lord with those who reject him, a situation that could only lead to the judgment and condemnation of those unworthily seeking to be joined with Christ in the Supper. The Supper, and the communion with Christ offered therein, was therefore a kind of spiritual reward for holy living: "For the Lord's Supper is a communion of the flesh and blood of Christ; not to the wicked and perverse, but to the sincere, penitent believers as a gift of reconciliation."[49] It was thus of utmost importance that the church exercise the discipline of the ban with respect to outward behavior, and that communicants examine themselves (i.e., the moral quality of their lives including their intentions), to determine whether they had actually been made partakers of Christ and were thus worthy to partake.

Analysis of Simons' Theology of the Supper

First, Simons' treatment affirms a "spiritual" presence of Christ in the Supper that shares in the general late medieval and Reformation strand of eucharistic piety mentioned in connection to Gansfort, Hoffman, and to some

extent Hoen. As in Gansfort and Hoffman, in Simons we observe a spiritual presence of Christ that may or may not be joined to the elements of bread and wine, the reception of which is predicated upon the faith (manifested in a transformed life) and desire of the recipient (*ex opere operantis*). Further, in at least one citation – "the inner imperishable man of the heart eats in a spiritual sense the imperishable body and blood of Christ"[50] – Simons even seems to share with them a conviction of the possibility of spiritually eating Christ's physical flesh and blood. Interestingly, however, he does not have recourse to his fellow Dutchman Hoen's distinctive exegesis of the words of institution as a means of protecting against an actual, physical presence of Christ in the Supper.

Considering Simons's treatment now simply on its own terms, we observed that in addition to the minor theme of affirming a spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, Simons also spoke of several realities "signified" by the Supper: Jesus' atonement; the peaceful unity of believers in the church; and the new penitent life. That he spoke of these signified realities distinctly and did not join them with a spiritual presence of Christ may strike us as odd: would not Christ himself be the primary "signified" of the Supper? However, Simons was not the first to make distinctions between Jesus' "presence" and the Supper's "significations." Thomas Aquinas too spoke distinctly about what the Eucharist "contains," namely Christ, and also its various significations, e.g., Jesus' atonement, spiritual nourishment, and ecclesiastical unity.[51]

What makes Simons unique, with respect to figures like Gansfort and Aquinas, is his identifying "the new, penitent life" as one of the Supper's significations. This original contribution fits seamlessly with his emphasis on renewed, sanctified life throughout his entire theology, and it makes sense that this theme would also take a central place here. In fact, given the stress on the new, penitent life in his whole theology, this aspect of his view must be seen as at least as important as Jesus' atonement in being the "signified" of the Supper.[52] What is the significance of this theological move, and how did it function?

To take the question of function first, as noted earlier the Supper came to play a key role in maintaining the church's purity by means of the ban. Since according to Simons only the truly redeemed, those who are truly flesh

of Christ's flesh, may participate in a communion of the flesh and blood of the Lord, only such as these could be admitted to the Lord's table. The ban was the ecclesial expression of this requirement with respect to observable behavior, and strict self-examination was the necessary means for individual reflection on one's private intentions.

Next, while the Supper had a crucial role in exhorting or "admonishing" believers to Christlike behavior ("the sacramental signs...signify, represent, and teach"), as has been repeatedly observed in the literature,[53] what has not yet been thoroughly considered is whether making "the penitent life" one of the Supper's signified realities exhausts the theological significance of Simons' approach. There are at least two possibilities for interpreting the importance of making the new life a signified reality and stressing it as much as Simons did.

One possibility is that the new life in Christ as the "reality" signified by the bread and wine could result in re-visioning how God's power is mediated in the Supper. Surprisingly, Simons does sometimes speak of God's power being manifested in Communion.[54] One of the most dramatic examples is the following:

> God's work is not keeping a dead letter, an imitation, nor is it the sounding of bells and organs and singing; *but it is a heavenly power, a vital moving of the Holy Ghost* which ignites the hearts and minds of believers.... For this is the true nature and power of the Lord's Word if it be rightly preached, *and of His Holy Sacraments if rightly used* [italics added].[55]

On the basis of such passages, we might be tempted to trace the flow of divine power in the traditional manner from its source in God, through the elements, and to the communicants. However, such an interpretation can be invalidated on two counts. First, we must remind ourselves of Simons' re-situation of the healing help of the physician Jesus from the Eucharist to "His powerful Word." Solely in hearing and obeying this Word do believers experience God's power transforming their lives. Second, since in Simons' theology the elements signify this new transformed life, in this case the path of divine power is curved, leading from God, through the Word, to the communicants, to the elements, and back to the communicants who perceive the symbolism and power of the Supper. From this we may conclude that

any power in the celebration of the Supper is mediated via the believers to the elements, and not vice versa. In Simons' theology, the gathered community of penitent believers, not the bread and wine, is the visible sign of an invisible grace. As a result, any "power" in the Supper must be seen to travel from the believers to the elements, and not the other way.

To extrapolate from Simons' treatment and to try contemporizing his concerns, another way to speak of the "heavenly power" is that in a faith-filled reception of the Supper the elements and actions possess new significance for believers. There is no objective change in the bread and wine but a subjective change in the participants as a result of a lived faith, which yields new meaning for the elements when used in remembrance of Christ. Perhaps the theological neologism "transsignification" could be used to suggest the direction Simons wished to indicate by placing the path of divine action initially through the subject, rather than the elements.[56]

Excursus: On Idols and Icons

A second possible theological implication of placing the "new, penitent life" at the center of the Supper is related to this last observation, and can be illustrated by reference to the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. In *Dieu sans l'être* (God without Being/God without being God), Marion engages some challenges posed by Martin Heidegger's analysis of "onto-theology." Heidegger critiques western theological and philosophical traditions for presupposing the primacy of theoretical reason in their reflections on Being. The result is that the onto-logical God enters the scene "only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines how the deity enters into it."[57]

For Marion, such a manner of approaching God is idolatrous. In the usual understanding an idol is a false or untrue image of the divine, but for Marion this is not the best way to grasp the nature of an idol. Rather, idols mark "a real, limited, and indefinitely variable function of Dasein [human existence] considered in its aiming at the divine."[58] They are a "low-water mark" of the experience of the divine, according to the circumstances of a particular perspective, whether of an individual, group, or entire culture.

The essence of idolatry is thus not falsity but partiality, in at least two senses: (1) what is revealed of the divine is restricted to what I aimed

at with my intention; (2) what I see necessarily reflects the trajectory of my desire, what I happen to be partial to. Thus the idol is not the source of the limited gaze but the reflection of it. As a kind of "hidden mirror" the idol reflects the gaze back to its origin, and in its brilliance offers to sight "the trace of the bounce." Looking at an idol in this way, one sees only "the gaze gazing at itself gazing."[59] This analysis of the idol applies equally to both conceptual and physical artifacts.

In contrast to this inevitably partial approach to the divine via the *idol*, Marion enunciates an alternative approach by way of the *icon*. Whereas an idol acts as a mirror, reflecting the aim of its viewer insofar as it aspires to and is able to grasp (constrain) the divine, the icon provides its own gaze,[60] the "glory" of which is reflected in the face upon which it gazes. Rather than dividing the invisible into what is visible and invisible (literally invisable), the icon serves to make the invisible visible as such. The icon therefore does "not cease to refer to an other than itself without, however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible."[61]

How might Marion's analysis of the idol and icon apply to Simons' theology of the Supper? Most briefly, it provides a perspective in which making the "new, penitent life" the signified of the Supper presents the possibility of an idolatry at least as dangerous as what Simons wished to protect his congregations from, with respect to transubstantiation. In presenting Christ in the bread and wine, the doctrine of transubstantiation brings with it the danger of a kind of crass material idolatry. According to Marion's analysis, however, if Christ as the holy/wholly Other is conflated with a community's consciousness, a far more insidious and absolute form of idolatry results. Just as no philosophical conditions can dictate in advance the conditions of God's advent without thereby manufacturing a usurping "God" according to human specifications, no view of God's presence in the Eucharist can make that presence dependent on the community's expectations without manufacturing a similar "God." Of course, this "God" will not be a false god in any absolute sense but it will be an idol: a representation of what the collective consciousness of the community "at a given moment in its 'progression'" has been able to secure.[62]

In fact, community consciousness, if it "realizes" what animates it, becomes the only veritable "real" presence without any thing any longer

having to mediate its relation to the eucharistic presence. Then consciousness claims to be immediately the presence of Christ: the idol no longer stems from any representation whatsoever, but from the representational consciousness of self. Thus any gap between self-consciousness and the consciousness/knowledge of Christ among us, between revelation and manifestation, is abolished. The absence of a represented object hence does not eliminate idolatry but establishes the coming to immediate consciousness of eucharistic presence as the insurmountable idol.[63]

It is into just this kind of idolatry that Simons' treatment, which places the new, penitent life of believers at the heart of the Supper, is at risk of devolving.

Contemporary Implications and Conclusions

The main purposes of this article were to determine to what extent Simons' theology of the Supper may accurately be described as "only symbolic" and to explore the implications of Simons' views for contemporary Mennonite understandings of Communion.

The words "only symbolic" are of course very slippery, and greatly depend upon how one understands the role of language in the construction and experience of reality. In contemporary discussions of signs and symbols, the idea that the phrase "only symbolic" is generally meant to convey tends to be expressed by the terms "sign" and "signified." A sign, such as the elements of bread and wine in a strictly memorial understanding of the Supper, is a separate entity standing for something other than itself. A symbol, on the other hand, "participates directly in the presence and power of that which it symbolizes."[64] This definition could also serve as a general description of what in Christian theology is referred to by "sacramentality."

With this view of the significance of symbolism, one may safely say that at least two strands of Simons' thinking offer the prospect of affirming the "symbolic" nature of the Lord's Supper. First, there is the spiritual presence of Christ that Simons occasionally describes in the Supper. Keeney has also noted this feature of Simons' theology, calling it "a real, though spiritual, presence in the Lord's Supper."[65] To the extent that this Christic presence is part of the "mystery" to which the signs of the Supper become "joined,"[66] we do have a "symbolic" understanding of the Supper

in Simons. But a number of factors militate against such an interpretation. First, there is the relative infrequency with which Simons expresses himself on this topic. Second, when this presence is predicated, it occurs on the basis of the biblical promise "where two or three are gathered" and not on the basis of statements related to the elements of bread and wine. Third, at least one passage (cited previously, regarding the physical man eating the physical elements and the spiritual man eating spiritually) suggests that any spiritual presence of Christ occurs at most alongside and distinct from the physical elements. Considering all these factors, it seems rather more plausible to argue that in Simons' theology the bread and wine really are signs, not symbols, of Jesus' presence.

Another possibility for identifying a "symbolic" understanding of the Supper lies in Simons' naming the "new, penitent life" as one of the Supper's "signified" realities. He repeatedly stresses that without true faith manifested in a new, penitent life, the sacraments have no power to save or help anyone.

> Once more, understand that which I write: Without penitence, neither water, bread, nor wine, or ceremony, avail in Christ; even if they were administered by the apostles themselves. 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.[67]

Thus only when the power of the reformed life is present can this reality be "joined to the signs for which purpose they are ordained."[68] With respect to the new life, according to Simons in a true celebration of the Supper this reality truly does become joined to the signs of the bread and wine, in effect transforming them from "signs" to "symbols" (or sacraments). Tracing the path of power in Simons' Supper leads from God, through the Word, to the believers, and then to the elements of the Supper, which acquire a new power and significance to these same believers.

Such an understanding of the Supper is not necessarily to be expected in Simons. Arnold Snyder expresses the opinion that

> ... with the exception of Marpeck, all Anabaptists rejected any hint of sacramental power or revelatory participation of the

> temporal in the divine. The divine needed to be reached by means of pure immaterial spirit, mediated at best by the Word of God.[69]

Keeney, on the other hand, has said Dutch Anabaptists could not accept the complete spiritualization of the Supper partly "because of their epistemology, which required the communication of the spiritual by means of the material while men are in the flesh."[70]

In fact, both of these positions are true. What Keeney does not recognize, as far as Simons is concerned, is that the only means by which God's power is materially mediated occurs via the power of the Word upon believers. The kernel of truth in Keeney's analysis – not allowed for in Snyder's remarks – is that God's power is so great it can even overflow from the believers into material elements. In Simons' words,

> ...the external use of the sign is nothing but a false show and hypocrisy if the thing which is invisibly represented is not present with it....But where the mystery is joined to the signs for which purpose they are ordained, there the baptism of Christ and the supper of Christ are present, as the Scriptures teach.[71]

Opportunities and Challenges

What are the opportunities and challenges posed by Simons' theology for a contemporary Mennonite understanding of Communion? As for opportunities, Simons' theology at least allows for something other than a merely psychological remembering of Jesus in the celebration of the Supper. This is significant for the heirs of the ethically rigorous Anabaptist vision, the high demands of which necessitate a search for spiritual practices empowering them to live on "the resurrection side of the cross."[72] Further, Simons' basing this presence on the promise "where two or three are gathered" offers interesting possibilities for contemporary theological reflection. Finally, the intrinsic connection between the Supper and a transformed life is provocative for contemporary Mennonites.

It is in relation to this latter point that many of the challenges also arise. For example, making Jesus' presence in the Supper "a gift of reconciliation" – in effect a result of (reward for?) the already transformed, obedient lives of

believers – is problematic. Many contemporary Mennonites find themselves more often than they would like on the tomb side of the cross, dead to the possibilities of new life in Christ they wish to embody. In this context many desire to find in the Supper a source of empowerment for discipleship, independent of their particular success in living that life at a given point in time. To make the "new, penitent life" one of the signified realities of the Supper is, for them, to make the desired end the required pre-condition of its proper celebration instead.

Another difficulty is presented by Simons' inability to articulate how Christ's spiritual presence is linked with the elements of bread and wine. Simons's "divine flesh" Christology posited Jesus' flesh coming directly from heaven without taking on the materiality of this earth, which has proven problematic and even theologically embarrassing for some later Mennonites. Likewise, a spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper that has no necessary connection with its elements poses significant theological difficulties.

On the other hand, Simons had no problem linking the new penitent lives of believers with the Supper: this truly was the "mystery" that when joined to the elements of bread and wine made it a true "sacrament." The theological difficulties with this aspect of his thought were illustrated above in connection with Jean-Luc Marion. 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. This in turn presents the danger of a far more subtle and pervasive idolatry than any crass materialism. If from a Mennonite perspective a danger of "high church" traditions is that their sacramental and liturgical life functions as an opiate to meaningful ethical engagement with the world, a serious danger in Mennonite circles seems to be substituting the life of the community for God.

I am not the first to observe this danger. For example, in this issue of *CGR* Paul Martens points out the possible secularizing implications of John Howard Yoder's attempt to construct his Anabaptist theology as an analogue to the development of the Yiddish language. John Rempel also notes several significant tendencies in twentieth-century North American Mennonite celebration of the Lord's Supper. First, there has been a dramatic decline in the practice of having a preparatory service in advance

of communion, the theological grounding for which is clear in Simons' vision of a visible, disciplined church. Second, where it is still celebrated the emphasis of the preparatory service has shifted from an "ethically-binding horizontal dimension" to a vertical devotional focus. Third, in the practice of communion itself the vertical dimension of a spiritual presence of, or communion with, Christ "has been replaced by a celebration of relationships among believers."[73] The result is a focus on human actions: "the current emphasis is on the Supper as an act of remembrance and as a sign of community. In both cases, the focus has been on human actions."[74] In Marion's terms, the "gaze gazing at itself gazing."[75]

In relation to all these tendencies Simons' theology presents contemporary Mennonites not only with challenges to be overcome but correctives to be heeded with respect to current practice and belief. For if Simons' emphasis on the new, penitent life always carries the risk of devolving into community-oriented idolatry, at least he maintained the significance of the "otherness" of God approaching the community with concrete ethical demands coming from without by means of the Word. For Simons it really was the "new, penitent life" and not merely the life of the community in itself that was signified in the Supper. Furthermore, and even though it is a minor theme in his theology of the Supper, he also maintained a sense of the holy/wholly Other approaching believers by means of an (admittedly ill-defined) spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper.

With the disappearance of preparatory services before communion and the associated theological shifts that go with it, all too often contemporary Mennonites are left with a practice that simply presents "the life of the community" to itself, without particular reference to God's presence either directly in the Supper or indirectly as evinced in the transformed lives of believers. This is a significant theological problem. Thus, in our current church context the traditional Anabaptist wariness of idolatry related to reverencing the elements of the Supper must be complemented by an equal sensitivity to the dangers of idolizing "the life of the community."

Perhaps the most salient finding from this investigation that can aid in that endeavor is that, contrary to what one might be led to believe, the Lord's Supper has not always had only a "symbolic" meaning for Mennonites (in a narrowly Zwinglian sense); in fact this was not even true for Menno himself!

From this very modest starting point, whatever expression of the relationship between Spirit and matter contemporary Anabaptists articulate must do justice both to the contemporary existential hunger among Mennonites for encounters with God in worship, and to the fundamental insights and commitments of the Anabaptist vision of the Christian life.

Notes

[1] I use this by now anachronistic nomenclature for the ease with which it describes the particular branches of Anabaptism with which I am most familiar.
[2] Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith, eds., *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. I (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1955), 651; subsequently referred to as *Menn. Enc*., vol. I.
[3] Nevertheless, John D. Rempel has been one voice advocating for figures and impulses within the Anabaptist tradition that may not aptly be gathered under the heading or within the spirit of Zwinglian memorialism. See, for example, his 1990 *Mennonite Encyclopedia* article, where he notes three main emphases in traditional Mennonite understandings of the Lord's Supper: 1) an emphasis on the church, its unity, and the accompanying ethical demands of membership therein; 2) a view of the Supper as a meal of remembrance of Christ's suffering sacrifice, and thanksgiving for the same; and 3) a mystical union or "assured participation in Christ's saving presence" in the Supper. This union is unmediated by the elements of the Supper and is rather "the immediate work of the spirit through the response of faith which unites us to Christ." Cornelius J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin, eds., *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990), 170.
[4] Sjouke Voolstra, *Menno Simons: His Image and Message* (North Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1997), 61.
[5] Cornelius Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1981): 46; George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Third Edition (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, Inc., 1992): 74. *Menn. Enc*., vol. I, 651.
[6] Voolstra, 70.
[7] See Krahn, *Dutch Anabaptism*, 12, on this latter point.
[8] Ibid., 13.
[9] Edward W. Miller, ed., and Jared W. Scudder, trans., *Wessel Gansfort: Life and Writings*, vol. II (London, UK: The Knickerbocker Press, 1917), 17; subsequently referred to as Gansfort.
[10] Ibid., 5.
[11] Ibid., 56.
[12] Heiko A. Oberman, ed., *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 269.
[13] Ibid., 274.
[14] Ibid., 272.
[15] Hoffman was the founder of the Melchiorite movement, of whose peaceful strand Simons eventually became the most significant organizer.
[16] George H. Williams, ed., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1957), 193-94.

[17] Ibid., 194. Bailey states that Hoffman may have received influences from Hoen and Gansfort indirectly via Andreas Karlstadt. Richard G. Bailey, *The Melchiorites in the Netherlands: Origins and Development to 1533* (Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo Press, 1984): 110.

[18] John C. Wenger, ed., and Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 142-58; subsequently referred to as *Complete Writings*. How far may Simons' theology of the Supper have changed from the first edition of his Foundation to the revised editions of 1554 and 1558?

[19] Ibid., 717-23.
[20] Ibid., 153.
[21] Ibid., 154.
[22] Ibid., 156.
[23] Ibid., 152.
[24] Ibid., 156.
[25] Ibid., 156.
[26] Ibid., 157.
[27] Ibid., 718.
[28] Ibid., 148.
[29] Ibid., 149.
[30] Ibid., 142.
[31] Ibid., 719.

[32] For example, I state this in distinction to Egil Grislis's treatment, where he tends to see any mention by Simons of Christ's presence in the Supper as reflecting "the ecstatic character" of the experience of the Supper, e.g., Grislis, 130, and rather frames Simons' view as "symbolic" in the Zwinglian sense. "Consistently, the communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper is described symbolically. The elements of the Lord's Supper point to a specific meaning which is perceived by the faithful partaker": Egil Grislis, "Menno Simons on the Lord's Supper," *Journal of Mennonite Studies 10* (1992): 133. While I agree that much of what is going on in the Supper for Simons relates to communicated meanings by means of "signs," I am here also trying to identify some further aspects as well in agreement with other such analyses. See for example W.E. Keeney, *Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice* (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. De Graaf, 1968): 102.

[33] *Complete Writings*, 148.

[34] Ibid., 155.
[35] Ibid., 148.
[36] Ibid., 155.
[37] Ibid., 153-54.

[38] "Brief Confession on the Incarnation 1554," in *Complete Writings*, 432. For more on Simons' Christology see this work (entire text plus editor's introduction, 419-54), and also "The Incarnation of Our Lord 1554", in *Complete Writings*, 783-834.

[39] Here I add another layer of meaning to the link between Simons' Christology and theology of the Supper as understood by Grislis, who described the significance as lying in the area of sanctification: "Namely, insofar as Christ's 'flesh' and 'blood,' according to Simons, were of heavenly origin and not from the Virgin Mary, the spiritual participation in Christ now assures the believer that he, too, participates in a heavenly mode of existence." Grislis, 133.

[40] *Complete Writings*, 144.

[41] Grislis, 132.

[42] *Complete Writings*, 145. Simons refers to this reality in other writings as well, e.g., "A Kind Admonition on Church Discipline 1541": "Or what does it profit to eat of the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ with the brethren if we have not the true symbolized fruits of this Supper, namely, the death of Christ, the love of the brethren, and the peaceful unity of faith in Christ Jesus?" Ibid., 413.

[43] Ibid., 632.
[44] Ibid., 690.
[45] Ibid., 718.
[46] Ibid., 721.
[47] Ibid., 146.
[48] Ibid., 146.
[49] Ibid., 150.
[50] Ibid., 153-4.
[51] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III Pars, Q. 79, article 1, reply.
[52] This is, I think, contra Egil Grislis. While he correctly notes the demand within Simons' theology of the Supper for ethical human response, he seems to identify Jesus' atonement as the sole "reality" "signified" by the Supper. As cited previously, "One of the meanings of the Lord's Supper is that of a "memorial." As in the Passover celebration of the OT so also in the Lord's Supper in the NT 'the sign signifies the reality.' Ultimately considered, this "reality is none other than the atonement of Jesus Christ." Although Grislis expresses himself here in a general way, the statement occurs in the context of a description of Simons' theology, so I take it to apply to Grislis' understanding of this same theology. Grislis, 132.
[53] Namely, chapter 3 in Voolstra, *Menno Simons: His Image and Message* and Grislis' article.
[54] Simons makes not infrequent, if passing, reference to the "power" of the Supper. See, for example, *Complete Writings*, 151: "Behold, beloved readers, here you have the true instructions concerning the Lord's Holy Supper with its meaning, its fruit, *power*, nature, and the guests, as the mouth of the Lord has ordained.…" [ital. added].
[55] Ibid., 149.
[56] To learn more about this term and some of its phenomenological background, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*, N.D. Smith, trans. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 131-33. Note his qualification on p. 150 that transubstantiation and transsignification cannot be conflated without remainder. See also Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 199-200.
[57] Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 56.
[58] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, Thomas A. Carlson trans. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 28. Rendering Dasein as "human existence" is an attempt at a rough English approximation in what needs to be, for the purposes of this paper, only a cursory and tangential introduction to Heidegger's thought.
[59] Ibid., 26.
[60] Ibid., 19.
[61] Ibid., 16.
[62] Ibid., 166.
[63] Ibid., 168-69.
[64] Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishing, 1991), 35-36.
[65] W.E. Keeney, *Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice* (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. De Graaf, 1968), 102.
[66] See, for example, *Complete Writings*, 155 and 718 for passages where Simons talks of the elements as bound to that which they signify.
[67] Ibid., 719. There are countless other similar passages in Simons' writing.
[68] Ibid., 155.
[69] C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener,

ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 347.
[70] Keeney, 193.
[71] *Complete Writings*, 155.
[72] I borrow this memorable phrase from an article by Harold S. Bender, "'Walking in the Resurrection': The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship" in *MQR* 35 (1961): 97.
[73] John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1993), 210.
[74] Ibid., 224-25.
[75] Marion, 26.

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