# On False Distinctions: The Body of Christ, Mystical and Sacramental

*John Rempel*

The meal encounters in Jesus' ministry enacted his mission. At the heart of his table fellowship was Jesus' offer of himself. Not only the Last Supper but all his acts of sharing bread with others foreshadowed the cross, his ultimate act of self-emptying (Phil 2).[1] The sacrifice of his life was completed in his death. The cross and the resurrection are the Christian's hard evidence that fear, hatred, and vengeance will not have the last word. Trust, love, and forgiveness have come within reach. To put it into a single phrase, Jesus' mission was reconciliation, the breaking down of walls separating us from God and one another. In Ephesians, this all-encompassing intention of God for a fallen creation finds its most sublime expression: "For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us…that he might create in himself one new humanity" (2:14,15).[2]

"Peace" in the New Testament is the reality that comes into being to transform into mutual solidarity the antagonism that makes us enemies of God, one another, and ourselves. "Justice" is the composite of social, economic, and legal actions and structures by which peace is brought about. The two move in a benign circle and reinforce each other. Peace begins to happen when conflict is suspended and reconciliation is started. It provides an open space for a just process of change in redistributing power and possessions. Peace as a positive, perpetual state of affairs, rather than merely the absence of war, is the fruit of justice.

What is it that thwarts the church in actualizing the gift of reconciliation in history? Our conference theme places the words "Eucharist," "peace," and "justice" in the same sentence. Yet our secret fear is that it is an oxymoron! The courage to utter these words in a single breath of meaning states not only the problem but its potential solution. What then is that problem? My thesis is that we make a fundamentally false distinction between what we do when we gather to worship and what we do when we scatter. I limit myself to two reasons that account for this split down the

middle of reality: one reason is sacramental, the other is moral. The two often reinforce each other.

What do we mean when we speak of "a sacrament"? Sacraments are the church's holiest rituals. They actualize the past and the future, the memories and the promises that ground a community. Like all rituals, sacraments stylize emotion, condense reality, act out memory, and make meaning tangible. When they function in graceful ways, sacraments are a foretaste of what might be: they have a utopian edge. John Howard Yoder emphasizes the futuristic role of NT ritual by asserting that the common meals of the early church were not the creation of an other-worldly realm of ritual but an organic extension of Jesus' table fellowship.[3] Sacramental living is both the concentrated moments when the cup of salvation is held and drunk, and the dispersed moments when it is poured out for the world. In this light we see the radicality of Jesus' transcendence of conventions, hierarchies, and conditions in his creation of community.

The density of the gathered encounter is essential to our well-being as individuals and groups. Participation in worship refines the agonizingly ambivalent experience of life into its utopian essences – loving, forgiving, and belonging. It offers us unequivocal yet multivalent gestures that reunite us, individually and collectively, with what is most true about our existence. Christ comes to us with bread and wine, and makes us one with himself and one another. "Here, O my Lord," confesses the Presbyterian communion hymn, " I see thee face to face, here would I touch and handle things unseen."

We all long for and live out of such pure encounter, out of those experiences that transcend the limitations of time and space. We're instinctively tempted to enclose this work of grace within a protective domain, the way medieval societies enclosed their cities within fortresses. Who are the culprits in this separation of cultic and literal reality, this insistence that sacraments be idols and not prototypes? Among them are the would-be architects of ritual activity – people like myself, who become so invested in perfecting the sacred moment that God's presence is conceived of chiefly in aesthetic categories. Clergy and church musicians are often romantic personality types, prone to absolute distinctions between sacred and profane, art and life. Our danger is to recognize the coming reign of

God, if anywhere, in the cultic moment. The world outside that aesthetic realm is on its own and left to fend for itself.

I realized I was in danger of making this split some years ago at a Mennonite conference on the Lord's Supper, when I found myself rankled by an ethicist's proposal that we celebrate Communion as a potluck meal as a matter of normal practice. At first I thought he was exaggerating to make his point. But he was really proposing that the Sunday assembly move from the Liturgy of the Word in the church proper, to the Liturgy of the Table in the fellowship hall. The meal was to consist of plain but full courses, framed by a simple prayer of thanks for food, and in particular for the loaf and cup, according to the Jewish berakah pattern as we know it from Jesus' day.

I accused him of not understanding the nature of ritual actions (which I still think is true). But his proposal also exposed my narrow view of them. I was bothered by the thought of tables of adults caught up in neighborhood gossip and noisy children unable to concentrate on anything beyond their momentary diversions. I was unable to imagine the grace of Christ taking form among ordinary people gathered around a profane meal. What would happen to people's devotion and concentration? Would the primal gestures and words of the sacred rite be obscured in such an unsacred setting? I still see the realm of ritual action differently from my colleague, but his warning, that we confine what Jesus offers us to holy forms and places at the cost of its relevance for the everyday world, is well taken.

A second culprit in the separation of cultic and literal reality is the estrangement of the gathered and dispersed dimensions of life. To analyze this estrangement, William Crockett talks about "ideological" ritual (legitimizing the existing order) as opposed to "utopian" ritual (proposing an alternative).[4] Ideology is commonly understood as the sum total of concepts, assumptions, and practices that legitimate – or overthrow – the existing order of things. Conscious and unconscious sleights of hand are part of it, whatever one's worldview. For example, in much Western thought worship and piety is regarded as private and inward practice, and therefore apolitical. But the effect, if not always the intention, is for it to bless the web of social relationships as they are.

Take for instance, the political situation in the Deep South of the United States early in the civil rights movement. African-Americans were

demanding full admission to U.S. society, inclusion in the social and religious institutions existing for the benefit of the white majority. Black people started attending white churches. In some they were shunned and frozen out with silence. In others police were called in to remove intruders on the grounds that the sacred assembly could proceed only once the impediments to its ritual purity had been removed. The ideological role of segregated worship in hallowing the status quo is too plain to miss.

The real problem, then, is not that of separating religion and its rituals from life, because you can't really do that. The underlying question is the use to which ritual is put, utopian or ideological. Like it or not, clergy are the chief public wielders of the power of ritual for either purpose.[5] People of all stripes fear what religion might do once you let it out of its corner. The heirs of communist and other secular schools of thought fear it will function like opium, dulling people to their true condition. The proponents of global capitalism dread it will spawn a wild-eyed egalitarianism set to overrule the autonomy of commerce.

The ministry of Jesus, of which the breaking of bread is the supreme icon, is not so much aimed at establishing a fixed set of institutions as at setting up a dynamic in church and society in which relationships and arrangements can be changed to effect greater sharing and greater inclusion. A pregnant insight from Russian Orthodox philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev makes the point: bread for me is a material matter; bread for my neighbor is a spiritual one.

I have found two noteworthy models of a dynamic of sharing to which the Lord's Supper as act and type is foundational. Enrique Dussel presents Bartolome de las Casas, the 16th-century Roman Catholic missionary to the Caribbean, as a model for just eucharistic fellowship.[6] He ultimately found himself unable to celebrate the Mass because the bread it used was ill gotten. His slaves labored not for their gain but for that of their master. His response to the wrongness of the situation was to put a symbolic moratorium on celebrating the eucharist, and to set his slaves free. The goal of both actions was to liberate people to reap the fruit of their labor.

> What he saw was the identity between the bread-product of everyday work, changed and exchanged, respected or stolen, and the bread of the altar. The bread contains the objectified

> life of the worker…and…what was being done was taking this bread from him unjustly and offering it to God. For this bread to become the very 'body' of the lamb that was slain, it has to be…the bread of justice.[7]

The second model of eucharistic justice is found in William Cavanaugh's *Torture and the Eucharist*, a provocative if convoluted attempt to relate torture in Chile during the Pinochet regime to Christ's mission. Cavanaugh does so by positing an identity between the victim's body and Christ's body, both mystical and sacramental. His argument is that "in the Eucharist…Christ Himself, the eternal consummation of history, becomes present in time."[8] Essential to his case is the patristic use of *corpus mysticum* (the Supper) and *corpus verum* (the church), Christ's ritual and literal presence as two manifestations of the same reality. In the view of this Catholic theologian, the tragedy of his church in Chile, and of the Catholic Church everywhere, was its failure to live out this indivisible reality.[9] The literal or historical body of Christ is by nature visible. It cannot but identify itself with the victims of torture: it suffers these afflictions in its own flesh (Col 1:24). The disappeared re-appear as members of the body of Christ; they remain members of the visible church.[10] And this body of Christ must excommunicate the perpetrators of torture. By torturing they exclude themselves. If the church fails to do both of these, it forfeits its nature.[11]

This is a hard saying indeed. But its accusations have an ancient theological pedigree. The uses of the concept of the "body of Christ" in Augustine's age can guide us in making sense of Cavanaugh's stunning challenge. In more than one of his sermons, Augustine exhorts the congregation to "become what you eat." This is a declaration that in the Lord's Supper we are offered the communion of Christ's body and blood, his very life both mystically and relationally. In his elegant history of the Eucharist, Crockett[12] places Augustine's sentence in context, noting that in the Patristic period "the term, 'body of Christ,' meant primarily the church, in the tradition of Paul and Augustine. In the Middle Ages [it] came to mean primarily the sacramental presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine on the altar."

That is, in the early church the Lord's Supper was seen as the form of Christ's mystical presence and the church community as his sacramental

presence; in the Middle Ages these references were reversed. This reversal led to a preoccupation with a localized presence of the historical body of Christ in the elements of sacrament of the altar, all the while relinquishing the body of Christ as his presence in the world by means of the community of believers who prolong his incarnation.

This theological inversion was a watershed in the church's sacramental and missionary life. It led people to conclude that Christ's sacramental presence is found only on the altar and not in the community. It reinforced the commonly held notion of sacramental reality as a kind of sequestered and heightened dimension of encounter. In other words, I receive Christ the way I listen to Dvorak's cello concerto: I am caught up in an exquisite harmony that stands over against the noisiness of life. I prize the transcendent moment precisely because its sacredness participates in a plane of reality utterly removed from everyday life.

When he urged his fellow believers to become what they eat, Augustine was saying much more than that. The sacramental moment is not the end of the encounter with grace but the means to its realization; it is not the abandonment, but the transformation, of the ordinary. Participating in worship is like going to a chiropractor: there the bones of the body of Christ are reset. Arms can reach out to their full length, and backs can stand erect.

The transformation that happens in ritual, as Christians understand it, is not so much an immediate experience as it is a mark left on our hearts and wills that changes our disposition. Collectively and individually we grow in grace and become more Christ-like. The literal change taking place in communion is not that of bread and wine but of people. This insight is one of the overlooked reclamations of the Reformation. Zwingli, limited though he was in matters sacramental by his rationalistic cast of mind, contemporized Augustine's dictum in attempting to preserve the sacrament as a transformative encounter without being locked into a futile search for what happens to the chemical make-up of the bread. This became an insight shared by Reformed, Anglican, and Mennonite eucharistic thought in the 16th century. The Holy Spirit comes upon the congregation so that it can become what it eats: the mystical manifests itself historically.

This perception of reality enables us to transcend a theologically false and morally untenable distinction between cultic activity and everyday life,

between what we do and who we are, when we gather to worship and when we scatter to work. These are two different forms of life but not two different realities. Liturgy is not a pure, transcendent reality whose afterglow is all that we can take along into ordinary time, like wistful memories of Dvorak's cello piece or a luminous sunset over St. Mark's Square in Venice. Longing is a seductive and integral part of such a split understanding of reality. What remains where art and life are held to be opposite realities is absence – an absence capable of calling forth yearning, perhaps, but not of changing how we live. Underneath this longing is the assumption, or at least the fear, that what we experience in the stylized events of the liturgy is incapable of being carried beyond it – that the hard realities of the fallen world will simply overwhelm the fragile plane of redemption.

It is not hard to be seduced by this chilling apprehensiveness. Let me illustrate. At Communion we're invited to pass the peace of Christ to our neighbor, and in the congregational prayer we're invited to pray for our enemies. Suppose that one Sunday I happen to be in the same service as a colleague I can't get along with at work. In worship the confines of my life are miraculously opened: I am able to release my resentment and offer acceptance to my estranged co-worker. But when we meet at work the next day, we both still need to come to terms with the fact that our personalities grate on each other and that our priorities are at cross purposes. I begin to doubt our ritual encounter can carry over into everyday life.

The way beyond this moral pessimism is incarnational realism. Christ lived our life and died our death. The ritual moment we experience together in worship is also a literal moment. Something has happened to our relationship. We have already been delivered from the lie that nothing can be done to overcome our conflict, that we are stuck being enemies. Think of the significance this revelation can have for the strife between classes, races, and nations. Christ's real presence in the sacrament is God's proximity to the material world. The breaking of bread is the amazing demonstration that the created order, the stuff of everyday life, is the latent bearer of grace.

The point is wonderfully simple. When the Pharisees and tax collectors met at table with Jesus, their very act of passing bread to one another, however profanely they thought of it, actualized reconciliation (Luke 14:7 ff, 15:1 ff). When the five loaves and two fishes were shared among five

thousand – whichever version of the miracle one finds most compelling – people who had little and hoarded what they had became a community where all had enough (John 6:1-15, esp.13). It is a daring but entirely consistent development in the early church for it to move from the sharing of one's immediate provisions to the economic community found in the record of the Jerusalem church in the first chapters of Acts. The institutional narrative in the Fourth Gospel is cut from the same cloth. An astonishing theology of the eucharist is presented in chapter 6, but the author seems to conclude it requires completion. (It can be seen as foreshadowing the impulse of Martin Luther and Pilgram Marpeck to make love of neighbor the twin sacrament of the eucharist.) Therefore, in place of the Last Supper as recorded in the Synoptics, we find the rite of footwashing, flesh touching flesh with grace, servanthood as a posture that readies us for everyday life.

The task of the faithful church in a world where everyday reality is broken is to safeguard the primal human need for unequivocal gestures of blessing, for moments where everything we need is present. Mennonites have much to learn here. But these gestures of blessing must be offered in a way that makes them the starting point of the new age rather than the boundary marker of the old – the prototype of engagement with daily life, not a refuge from it. In order to do so, we must trust that the reality we encounter in worship is sturdy enough to be taken beyond the church door. When we look in on ourselves, we wonder whether the sharing of bread and wine among such an odd, unchosen cross-section of humanity as we are is not a precarious undertaking, perhaps even an impediment to the sacredness of the sacrament. On the contrary, the church's oddness and unchosenness is precisely its glory, the reason for its being.

For Christians ritual is the agent of a realized eschatology, the appearance of the kingdom now, the future age at work in the one that is passing. The Lord's Supper is the initial link in a chain of actions stronger than fate. The reconciliation my co-worker and I experienced in the eucharist was a heightened, but not an isolated, moment. It was the stuff of which new relationships are made. At its best, ritual reality is the spot on a pond from which ripples expand ever outward. The stone setting the ripples in motion is the eucharist. At the close of his "Form for the Lord's Supper" of 1527, Balthasar Hubmaier declares, "As Christ gave up his life for me, so I go

forth to give up my life for others, for my sisters and brothers in faith, my neighbors, my enemies."[13]

I conclude with a story of love expressed in the giving of bread and then of bread given as an expression of love. In the late 1990s when I was Mennonite Central Committee liaison to the UN in New York, I had occasion to travel to Iraq to see first hand the malnutrition and other forms of deprivation the civilian population had endured for years. I went there, as many have, to see if the bread that ex-patriot nongovernmental organizations and the UN Oil for Food Program supplied was adequate to the nation's hunger. (Questions of guilt, responsibility, and strategy abound when one is in such a setting but are beyond the limits of our present subject.) Without sentimentalizing the situation, it dawned on me that providing for the necessities of the civilian population was a direct extension, and in fact a replication, of what we do at the Lord's Table. We happened to be in Basra on a Sunday and attended the Chaldean Catholic Church. We were caught up in its heartfelt singing of 6th-century Aramaic chants. It was the closest thing there could be to hearing the voice of Jesus himself. Yet even more unforgettable was the priest standing beside the bishop at the Lord's Table, arm raised in a beckoning gesture, calling above the singing to this group of Protestants from an enemy country to come and receive the Bread of Life. We had gone there as outsiders to give bread. In the end we were offered bread and became insiders.

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## Notes

[1] See Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God: The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994) for a meticulous and evocative exposition of all Jesus' meal settings.

[2] For a careful and imaginative exegesis of this text see Thomas Yoder Neufeld, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002), 106-37.

[3] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), 17.

[4] William Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 247.

[5] Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (NewYork: Maryknoll, 1979), 116ff.
[6] Enrique Dussel, "The Bread of the Eucharist: Celebration as a Sign of Justice in the Human Community," in Mary Collins and David Power, eds., *Can We always Celebrate the Eucharist?* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 56-65.
[7] Ibid., 61.
[8] William Cavanaugh, *Torture and the Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 223.
[9] Ibid., 233.
[10] Ibid., 277.
[11] Ibid., 243.
[12] Op.cit., 107.
[13] Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, eds. *The Writings of Balthasar Hubmaier* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1989), 404.

*John Rempel is an assistant professor of historical theology and Anabaptist Studies, and associate director of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.*