



THE ANABAPTIST'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

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The Lord's Supper is at the heart of the Christian faith, instituted by Christ himself. It is a summary of the very purpose of Christ's advent, and has been special for Christians ever since, at the core of Christian worship. But that which is meant to have the greatest power of unification can often become very divisive when left in the hands of men. Christ's words "This is my body, which is broken for you..." (I Cor. 11:24) were not meant to be divisive, but this short passage of Scripture has become one of the most controversial. To all of Christendom the Lord's Supper is very important but is also divisive.

The purpose of this study is to come to an awareness of the Anabaptist understanding of the Lord's Supper, not to advocate or condemn, but to probe the historical context of that understanding and to view how it is central to Anabaptist theology.

INTRODUCTION - ROMAN CONTEXT

By the sixteenth century A.D. the Christian Church had grown from a small, weak band of followers into a huge body that included most of Europe. Society was viewed as being "Christian" and was unified by the hierarchical system of the Holy Roman Church, heir to Imperial Rome. This system maintained the whole order of Medieval society.¹ Because of this absolute control, the church as an institution became synonymous with Christianity -- salvation was only through the church, for it was the guardian and dispenser of the Scriptures, creeds, and sacraments.²

The sacraments were the channels of grace through which salvation came. They were seven in number, but two, baptism and the Mass, were most important. Baptism was the individual's first contact with the church. It washed away original sin and mystically united the newborn with Christ.³

Next important was the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the core of the Mass, where Christ was mystically offered up again by the priest. The Mass had become a spectacle in which the priest recited Latin in a low voice and the congregation was reduced to the role of spectator, separated from the clergy.⁴

The doctrine of transubstantiation grew gradually over the centuries until it was officially accepted by the Roman church. This view held that Christ had brought to mankind a way of salvation through the sacraments that he instituted. The passage "This is my body..." was taken literally and it was thought that the bread and wine literally became the body and blood of Christ when consecrated, although it did not seem to change.⁵ This sacrament became a celebration "commemorating an event in such a way that what is signified is received."⁶ As a sacrament, the Mass was thought to sanctify men, build up the body of Christ, give worship to God, instruct men, and to impart Christ's grace to men.⁷

By the thirteenth century only the unleavened bread was given to the laity out of the fear that "Christ's blood" would be spilled.⁸

Although the Mass was held often, the average medieval Christian probably partook of Holy Communion only once a year, mainly for fear of being unworthy.⁹

The Roman Catholic Church became dictatorial by the time of Pope Gregory VII and Innocent III. Both men were masterful statesmen and helped to make the office of the Pope entrenched and infallible, God's messenger on earth.¹⁰

The Mass gradually grew into the "special worship of the transformed bread the remained."¹¹ It became a very elaborate and colorful service designed to "impress and subdue the common worshipper."¹²

The Pope had dictatorial powers over the whole church and therefore was able to wield incredible political pressure over the civil authorities. Dissenters could be excommunicated or put to death as heretics. The interdict could be used to bring rulers and princes into line -- a political area could be "cut off from grace," meaning the clergy would stop all Church baptisms, marriages, Mass or burials.¹³ This would bring consternation upon the people of the area and make the local ruler disreputable. Very few people dared to oppose the Pope.¹⁴

Consolidation of power and accumulation of wealth led to abuses and immorality in the Church. The clergy and hierarchy were above civil law and reproach; the laity kept in line through fear of banishment and eternal damnation. Unrest grew throughout Europe as the secularization and awakening of the Renaissance began. The "Babylonian Captivity of the Papacy," the Great Schism, and the reform councils failed to curb the abuses of the Papacy and hierarchy. This unwillingness to reform eventually led to the German reformation under Martin Luther.¹⁵

LUTHER'S VIEW OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Excitement over the new reforms caused intense pressure for radical reform of the Mass, but Luther, being conservative in nature, was hesitant to reform too much too quickly out of respect for the weak in faith.¹⁶ Luther preached salvation through faith alone and rejected the mass as a sacrifice for sins.¹⁷ Seeing God's grace moving throughout the history of the Church, Luther discarded the abuses and corruptions while trying to retain the good out of the past.¹⁸

Philip S. Watson in his book Let God be God states that Luther's doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the sacraments was developed in opposition to the views of Zwingli and the Swiss reformers on one hand, and in opposition to the Romanists and their doctrine of the mass on the other hand.¹⁹ Luther was almost convinced that the Lord's Supper was only instituted by Christ as a memorial. He realized that such a stance would be a powerful weapon against the papacy. However, the text "This is my body" was too concrete for Luther to view as anything but literal.²⁰

The bread and the wine were more than just symbols to Luther -- he saw the "real presence" of Christ in the elements of communion.²¹ The Word of God is what gives the sign (sacrament) its significance, not the sign itself, thought Luther. Sacraments are not just ritual acts of memorial to be performed but are the works of God.²² Christ was seen as being present "as the Host (of the Eucharist), who distributes His own gifts through the minister to His guests."²³ Only where the Word of God is preached is Christ present. Ritual without the Word of God is empty and without Christ.²⁴ God through His Word causes Christ to be present in the bread and in the wine, not the priest.²⁵ The Lord's Supper to Luther was a very sacred symbol, but something more.

Luther rejected the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, for he thought of God as being separate from His created world. The mere performance of a rite in no way guaranteed salvation; Mass was not a sacrifice to obtain the favor of God. God's love is free and universal and the Mass is a sign of that love. Faith was seen by Luther as a prerequisite for the sacraments to be effective.²⁶

Luther also rejected Zwingli's belief that the Lord's Supper was just a memorial. To Luther this would mean that the sacrament would not be a "manifest sign of the presence of the true, gracious God, the incarnate God among men." Luther thought of the Lord's Supper as a sacrament, one of the words of God.²⁷

Luther had a rather vague understanding of a group he called the "Sacramentarians." He lumped Zwingli, the Anabaptists, Karlstadt and some of the reformers in Strasbourg together under this title, even though they were divergent groups. To Luther they were one group, and he saw their divisions as evidence that they were of the devil. "This quarrel among the sects is a sign that their teachings are of Satan, since the Spirit of God is not a spirit of discord, but of peace." When Zwingli and others turned this argument back on Luther saying that "he and the papists disagreed in their understanding of the real presence, Luther was enraged."²⁸

ZWINGLI'S VIEW OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Zwingli and the Anabaptists were quite close in their understanding of the Lord's Supper. As early as 1519 Zwingli had been preaching against the Roman Catholic Mass and other evils, but being quite wary and conservative, he had attempted very little reform. Disagreement between the radicals and Zwingli began mainly on differences of opinion -- how the reform should be done, and the pace at which it should go.²⁹

According to E.G. Schwiebert, Zwingli had "no formal training in theology, but had grown up in the Erasmian tradition and was a Biblical Humanist of the rationalistic type." By 1524 he believed in a symbolic view of the Lord's Supper, and was eager to be independent of the German reformers.³⁰

Zwingli hated the word sacrament. He said:

I wish the Germans had never let this word into their theological vocabulary. Some of them, when they hear it, think of something overpowering and holy which delivers the conscience from sin by its own intrinsic power. Others deny this and think of the sacrament as a sign of something holy. I would agree here if only they would not add that internal purification inevitably goes with the external use of the sign.... And still others see the sacrament as a sign, an attestation of an inward purification being already accomplished.³¹

To the papists, Zwingli said that only God can give a pure conscience. To the Lutherans, he stated that faith is born when one fully trusts in God, and there is no sacramental sign of this. To the Anabaptists he asked what good is a sacrament that only certifies what has already been done?³²

Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper was very simple. To him the bread and wine were just a memorial or commemorative feast. By reflecting on the Lord's death the Christian receives a blessing. The bread and wine were symbols of an historic event -- Christ's suffering, death and resurrection.³³ Through this view Zwingli's humanistic reasoning was satisfied: Christ is at the right hand of God and therefore cannot be present in the supper except in the meditation of the recipient.³⁴ Zwingli followed Erasmus' principle that religion should be made simple and understandable for the common man.³⁵ Human reason should interpret God's Word -- you don't need revelation to understand revelation. Whatever contradicted reality was interpreted in a spiritual sense by Zwingli.³⁶ Communion was in a sense a spiritual exercise and a lifting of man to the right hand of God,³⁷ compared to Luther's principle of God reaching down to man.

Zwingli thought that the Lord's Supper was needed much more by the church body than by the individual ("Sacraments exist above all in and for the Church."³⁸) The Lord's Supper was essentially thanksgiving, a joyful, public remembrance. To take part was to proclaim oneself as being of Christ, part of the Church. Therefore to abstain from communion was to Zwingli "the summit of unbelief."³⁹ Salvation was through Christ's death on the cross. Christ is present only spiritually in the Lord's Supper.

Further, Zwingli saw the Lord's Supper as necessary to identify with fellow believers.

Paul clearly says that to eat this bread and drink this cup is to join our Christian brothers in one body. This is the body of Christ, because it is made up of those who believe in Christ's sacrifice for their salvation.⁴⁰

In other words, the Lord's Supper is constitutive of the visible church.

Quite clearly, Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper was

very close to what the Anabaptists held, especially in the concept of the Lord's Supper being a joyful remembrance and the concept of the visible church. It can be noted here that Zwingli had a belief in the true church being a suffering one (remnant) before his reform gained sway over the majority in Zurich.⁴¹ Unfortunately, Zwingli did not follow through with his theology as the radicals would have liked him to.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE ANABAPTIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Anabaptist understanding of the Lord's Supper was a rejection of Roman beliefs primarily, as well as a rejection of Luther's views. Zwingli's teachings were very influential in the formation of the thought of the Swiss Brethren. Medieval German mysticism and spiritualism were influential factors as well.⁴²

The Mass was rejected outright by the Anabaptists. Menno Simons called the Pope the anti-Christ, adversary of Christ; he called the Mass of his church "the table of the devil," and the doctrine of transubstantiation "idolatrous." Menno complained further that the Romans held communion allowing even the most deliberate sinners to participate, and they celebrated it with "offensive pomp and splendor."⁴³

Michael Sattler stated that the real body of Christ is not present in the Lord's Supper. "Christ is ascended into heaven, so if he is in heaven and not in the bread, he may not be eaten bodily."⁴⁴ Hans Denck saw the Lord's Supper in a spiritual sense and not as "flesh and blood understand it."⁴⁵ Dietrich Philips preached that since Christ's statements about being the living bread and the true vine were to be interpreted figuratively, so should Christ's statement "This is my body...." He thought that the bread of Christ is the Word of God received by faith for the nurture of the soul.⁴⁶ Hubmaier sums up the Anabaptist rejection of the Catholic mass and doctrine of transubstantiation:

And out of this supper we have until now made a bear's mass, decorated it with mumbling and bumbling and sold it for a great deal of money and continue to do so, alas.⁴⁷

This rejection of the Roman Mass as a sacrament branded the Anabaptists as heretics -- it was as good as denying Christ from the papist viewpoint. Generally the Anabaptists had no quarrels with the Lutherans or other reformers on the Lord's Supper, except that they didn't quite agree with Luther's concept of Christ's literal presence in the bread and the wine.⁴⁸ More important to the Anabaptists was the concept of Christ being present in the Church, not sacramentally, but in moral and ethical terms.⁴⁹

According to Walter Klassen all of the Anabaptists had in common a "two-fold interpretation of the Lord's Supper." Firstly, the Supper was a remembrance of Christ's love -- His sacrifice being the foundation of the church. Secondly, the Supper was seen as the celebration of the unity of the Church -- the presence of God

in the world.⁵⁰

Hubmaier wrote that "Christ instituted the Lord's Supper that we might not forget him," and called upon the Christians to "announce it loudly and to be eternally thankful for it."⁵¹

Many of the Anabaptists also interpreted the Lord's Supper in a spiritual sense. Grebel stated that the Lord's Supper has an inner meaning "preceeded by faith and brotherly love."⁵² Hans Denck regarded the Lord's Supper as being unity with Christ "even as food and drink are united with the nature of man."⁵³ Pilgrim Marpeck also interpreted the Lord's Supper spiritually: "In this commemoration, according to the practice of Christ, bread and wine are used as a parable of the mystery of Christ's body and blood, as a spiritual food which is eaten in faith and not in bread and wine."⁵⁴

K.R. Davis sees ascetic overtones in the Anabaptist understanding of the Lord's Supper -- a relationship with the medieval ascetic tradition. The aspect of discipleship, the life of discipline is doubtlessly there in the Anabaptist view of sharing in Christ's sufferings, and the Lord's Supper is for only the disciples (aesthetically separated). Davis states:

Clearly, the close relationship in Anabaptist sacramental theology of the Lord's Supper to Baptism, to fraternal love and discipline and to the ascetic nature of both conversion and the separated life in the brotherhood, elevate the ascetic factors to a uniquely dominant role.

He also sees in footwashing, which is often related to the Lord's Supper in Anabaptist thought, as a "continuation of major ascetic virtues "primarily because of the emphasis on equality and humility." Footwashing was practice mostly within the monastic tradition during the Middle Ages.⁵⁵ Davis sees Anabaptism as being greatly influenced by Medieval concepts of radical self-denial.

THE LORD'S SUPPER AND ANABAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

The Lord's Supper was not isolated in the thought of the 16th Century Anabaptists -- it tied together their view of the church and was at the very core of their beliefs. Many concepts were brought together in their view of the Lord's Supper; indeed a good summary of their view of the Lord's Supper reflects the seriousness of their view of the Church and the importance of ethics in the here-and-now.

William R. Estep, in his book Anabaptist Story, states that "the Lord's Supper was inseparably connected with discipline from the very beginning of the movement." Hübmaier, Riedeman, Marpeck, and Grebel all stressed the close relationship between discipline and the Lord's Supper.⁵⁶ Grebel wrote to Müntzer that the Lord's Supper "should not be used without the rule of Christ in Matt. 18: 15-18, otherwise it is not the Lord's Supper, for without that rule every man will run after the externals." He stated that the true meaning of the Lord's Supper is lost if "brethren and false brethren

approach or eat it together."⁵⁷ Marpeck saw the Lord's Supper as a sign of fellowship directly related to church discipline, a means of keeping the purity of the Church. The prerequisites for participation were baptism, right conduct, and relation to the brotherhood.⁵⁸ Hubmaier as well saw discipline in the Lord's Supper, and not just a memorial to Christ. Menno felt that "worldly users" of the Lord's Supper should be expelled from the church and shunned, hopefully to draw the offender back into right relationship.⁵⁹ The Anabaptists were not primitivists in their view of the Lord's Supper -- they were Bibliocists. This is the Anabaptists' major point of diversion with Zwingli -- the relationship between the Lord's Supper and discipline.⁶⁰

Another way of looking at the relationship between the Lord's Supper and Church discipline is to see it as the fore-runner of Church government, in which the concept of love is basic. Hubmaier wrote in the Eighteen Articles (June 1524 - Article 8):

Just as every Christian should believe and be baptized for himself, so it is his privilege to judge from the Holy Scriptures if the bread and wine are rightly given him by his Pastor.⁶¹

Unworthiness was understood in moral and ethical terms; therefore it was deemed necessary that the brotherhood should exercise spiritual government which would help prevent the spiritual damage caused by unworthy participation.⁶²

In the Lord's Supper was also seen the unity of the Church. Melchior Hoffman said that through the Lord's Supper the Church and Christ become "one body, one flesh, one spirit, and one passion as bridegroom and bride."⁶³ It is given that Christ's followers may become one with Christ.⁶⁴ A beautiful picture of unity is taken from the Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, a writing from the second century A.D.) by Dirk Philips:

For as the bread is made of many grains broken and ground together, and out of many grains has come one loaf of bread in which every little kernel has lost its individual body and form; and likewise as the grapes, by changing their form become the body of a common wine and drink, so must all Christians be united with Christ and with one another.⁶⁵

The unified Church, the body of Christ, was to the Anabaptists a community or brotherhood of love, and a suffering one, as the Lord's Supper shows. Bernhard Rothman stated that the Lord's Supper should be a love gathering of those who believe in Christ, and that Christ's love as evidenced by His sacrifice should be the disciples' model of servanthood.⁶⁶ Hubmaier preached the Lord's Supper to be a public testimony of love, a pledging of the brotherhood, a sharing of love and each other's lives even to the point of death. Baptism to Hubmaier was a sign of the believer's relationship to God, and the Lord's Supper a sign of the relationship with

the neighbour.⁶⁷ Joerg Volk thought that in receiving Christ's body and blood spiritually, the Christian receives the cup of suffering.⁶⁸ Hans Schlaffer sums up this aspect of the Lord's Supper neatly:

Whoever eats of this bread in the Supper of the Lord ... commits himself to the community in all things, in love and suffering, wealth and poverty, honor and dishonor, sorrow and joy, death and life ... as Christ gave himself for him. Similarly with the cup in the blood of Christ: whoever drinks of this cup has first surrendered himself and testifies with it that he is prepared to pour out his blood for the sake of Christ and his church....⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

The Anabaptist view of the Lord's Supper was a vast one with far-reaching implications that affected their concept of the Church. To a great extent their understanding was a reaction to the Roman Church. Zwingli and the humanist tradition was also responsible in shaping their views -- Zwingli's preaching was taken to its conclusions, something that Zwingli did not dare to do. Medieval asceticism and spiritualism were contributing factors as well. Above all else, and despite the general rejection of the Anabaptists by the rest of Christendom in the 16th Century, the centrality of Christ and his great work of salvation for mankind is very evident in Anabaptism.

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