

**SACRAMENTALITY**  
for the **Catholic-Mennonite Theological Colloquium**  
by **Thomas Finger** (April, 2005)

At first glance, comparing Mennonite and Catholic understandings of sacramentality seems like comparing an ant to an elephant. In the field of sacramental theology, the volumes penned by Roman Catholics over the centuries would probably fill several libraries. David Power's useful survey of Catholic developments from 1980-1993 requires 49 pages and 156 footnotes, and must still skim the surface of most works.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, only one book, so far as I know, addresses this theme in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptism at any length.<sup>2</sup> Among contemporary Mennonite theologians, only Duane Friesen and myself, so far as I can tell, devote more than a few pages to sacramentality.<sup>3</sup> In sacramental theology, Mennonites may not add up to ants, and we can wonder whether comparison is even possible.<sup>4</sup>

Add to this that many 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptists avoided the word "sacrament." Since then, most Mennonites have used it hesitantly or not at all. For some, this word connotes perverted, anti-Christian practices. Most Mennonites suppose that "sacrament" refers exclusively to church rituals. Most also assume that people who call these "sacraments" believe that these rituals, or their elements, directly impart divine grace.

In other words, such people, Mennonites tend to think, believe that they receive grace simply by participating in such rituals, even if quite passively. But Mennonites insist that

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<sup>1</sup> David Power, "Sacramental Theology: A Review of the Literature," *Theological Studies* 55:4 (Dec. 1994), 657-746.

<sup>2</sup> John Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See Duane Friesen, *Artists, Citizens and Philosophers* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2000), esp. 145-149. While sacrament becomes an important theme in my *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), I develop it inductively from a number of loci (for the most comprehensive statements, see pp. 253-254, cf. 564-566).

<sup>4</sup> Significant discussion began, however, in the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, from 1998-2003. In my view, however, important potential similarities between the two perspectives are not mentioned or are only partly developed. According to the final report, *Called Together to be Peacemakers*, Mennonites use "the term ordinance...instead of 'sacrament'...." (#120; see esp. #111-140)

God's grace does not really transform our lives unless we respond to it in some way, and seek to live as Jesus taught. Perhaps, then, if we turn from sacramental theology to grassroots understandings, we will not even find the ant and the elephant in the same jungle.

Mennonites, of course, celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper (and some practice footwashing, usually along with the latter). Might some comparisons with corresponding Catholic rituals be made? Mennonites, however, have reflected formally on the practice of these ceremonies hardly more than on their theology.<sup>5</sup> In many Mennonite services, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are tacked on haphazardly. Church practices may provide some material for Mennonite-Catholic conversation, but not nearly enough for significant theological dialogue.

Perhaps, however, this repeated finding arises from linking sacramentality too closely with church rituals. If we consider Mennonite existence more broadly, we notice that Mennonites are very practical people. Might some feature of their daily lives, of the overall *Lebenspraxis* of being Mennonite, correspond to what Catholics call sacramentality? Perhaps we should consider this broader arena -- including its communal, ethical, economic and socio-political dimensions. If we glance back at Catholic sacramental theology, we find that it is often concerned with just such areas. Ever since Vatican II, roughly, many theologians have rethought sacramental notions and found them, or their analogues, operating in other spheres of life.

Catholic sacramental theology usually treats sacraments within the wider framework of liturgical studies. These examine topics like ritual, gesture and symbol within yet broader horizons like anthropology and sociology. Liturgical/sacramental theology then considers Catholic worship as a whole, including the liturgy of the Word. It discusses actions, elements, words and definitions associated with particular sacraments within these contexts.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> However, some excellent reflections on worship, ritual, Baptism and the Lord's Supper by John Rempel appear in Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Power 1994, 1-3, 23.

In general, “there is considerable reconsideration of the ways in which sacraments need to be explained” in today’s world.<sup>7</sup> This is taking sacramental theology into many fields which are also important for Mennonite *Lebenspraxis* -- ethics, economics, sociology, politics and others -- where it discovers many links with religious sacraments. Most theologians insist that Catholics live out the meaning of their sacraments in these arenas. If we turn initially towards the overall *Lebenspraxis* of both Catholics and Mennonite, rather than their theologies, grassroots understandings or church practices, we will find much material for comparing their understandings of sacramentality.

Since Catholic sacramental theology provides vast resources for this, I want first to hazard a description of some of its relevant themes. I am aware that different theologians approach and interconnect these themes in multiple ways, and that Mennonites will not resonate with everything they say. I am also painfully aware that I am attempting this from an outsider perspective. Various generalizations may seem inaccurate, or perhaps even offensive, to some Catholic readers. If so, I welcome feedback offered in a brotherly/sisterly spirit.

I recommend that Mennonites begin to explore Catholic sacramental theology. But if significant continuing dialogue with Catholics is to occur, something else may have greater priority. In my view, whatever theological conceptuality we now possess for articulating our views is insufficient, and we need to develop a better one. For this reason, the second and major task of this essay will be to see if we can begin to quarry such concepts from one possible source: “historic Anabaptism,” from 1525 to about 1575.<sup>8</sup>

## **I.) SOME THEMES in CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY**

**A.) Community.** Well before the Reformation, Catholic sacramental practice began to focus on the priests. At the Eucharist, for instance, priests frequently prepared the holy

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<sup>7</sup> A main conclusion of Power’s survey (Ibid, 23).

<sup>8</sup> Another promising source is Mennonite confessions from about 1575 to the present. See my “Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist/Mennonite Tradition,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78:1 (Jan., 2002), 277-297.

mystery by chanting a lengthy liturgy in Latin with their backs to the congregation. Quite often, active participation of the laity was limited to receiving the bread. Vatican II, however, identified “full and active participation by all the people” as “the aim to be considered” in the liturgy “before all else.”<sup>9</sup> To be sure, priests, through ordination, are “marked with a special character”<sup>10</sup> enabling them to dispense sacraments effectively. Yet Catholic theologians often call the community the true celebrant.

Priests now usually face the congregation. Altars are often placed far enough forward that communicants can gather around them, and share the kiss of peace before receiving the elements. Although elements are dispensed by the priest(s), the overall ritual can be called a “covenant meal” where the participants “are pledging their ‘being for’ one another.” Jesus’ sacrifice elicits their “loving self-gift to their fellow human beings.”<sup>11</sup> Such a Eucharist, moreover, is a “public symbol” through which “communities develop a sense of inner coherence and of public identity.”<sup>12</sup> Such statements will resonate strongly with many Mennonites, even if they have never heard them expressed theologically.

Some Catholic theologians stress this communal dimension strongly enough to conclude that “any liturgical celebration is in its total thrust ‘horizontal.’”<sup>13</sup> Such flat assertions were more common in the aftermath of Vatican II than they are today. The Mennonite emphasis on community, however, sometimes leads to a similar, if unarticulated, “horizontal” perspective.

**B.) Anthropological Horizons.** Concern with the communal dimensions of sacramental activity has led to sophisticated analysis of the human subjects who dispense sacraments, receive them and interact around them. This analysis is part of a broader Catholic concern to explore how the mysteries of faith actually function in concrete, everyday

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild, 1966), 144.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 535.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third, 1983), 108.

<sup>12</sup> David Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery* (New York: Crossroads, 1995), 296.

<sup>13</sup> Tad Guzie, *Jesus and the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist, 1974), 155. Moreover, “the church assembled to celebrate is Christ. The real mystery is that we are sacred.” (Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics* [New York: Paulist, 1981], 99) Even further, “our image of God is not complete until a fourth has been added to the three of the trinity... ourselves, the body of Christ.” (1981, 70)

human life. Such an orientation often challenges the traditional distinction between “grace” and “nature.” It can de-emphasize the former, incorporate much of it into the realm of nature, or apparently eliminate any realm of grace altogether.

Sacramental theology has been much influenced by Karl Rahner, who sought to locate the activity of grace, or the ground of its possibility, by means of existential categories.<sup>14</sup> Rahner defined humans as symbol-making creatures, and developed his sacramental theology from this basic understanding of symbol.<sup>15</sup> Edward Kilmartin is also guided by the conviction that “the profane is always potentially holy if its deepest meaning is penetrated.”<sup>16</sup>

Catholic theologians working from this orientation have made sophisticated use of communications theory,<sup>17</sup> Juergen Habermas’ theory of communicative action,<sup>18</sup> and social psychology, depth psychology, cultural anthropology, ethnology and philosophy of language.<sup>19</sup> Some Catholic theologians warn that an overfocus on the human side of sacramental action can obscure the divine side. Nonetheless, most of these theologians make some use of anthropological categories and/or social scientific tools.

Mennonites tend to be practically and concretely oriented, and to consider theological explanations abstract. They might find, however, that Catholic explorations into the anthropological locus and meaning of sacramentality can bring this subject to life. Yet since many Mennonites are anthropologically oriented, even if unconsciously so, they should be aware that this proclivity can lead to anthropocentrism.

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<sup>14</sup> Despite his anthropological concerns, Rahner ultimately grounded these processes in the life of the Trinity. His complex approach was not “existential” in any narrow sense, but incorporated a variety of philosophies.

<sup>15</sup> See Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. IV (New York: Seabury, 1974), esp. 224-230, 234-242. For a simpler account of this general approach, see Cooke 1983.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Kilmartin, “Theology of the Sacraments,” in Bernard Lee, ed., *Alternative Futures for Worship I* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1987) 143.

<sup>17</sup> Esp. Alexander Ganoczy, *An Introduction to Catholic Sacramental Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> See Power 1994, 7.

<sup>19</sup> A major effort to incorporate many of these disciplines is Donald Gelpi, *Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology for Converting Adult Christians*, Vol. I: *Adult Conversion and Initiation*; Vol. II: *The Sacraments of Ongoing Conversion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993).

**C.) Social-Ethical Relevance.** The social implications of this anthropological orientation are drawn as clearly as anywhere in Latin American liberation theologies. For Leonardo Boff, the entire universe is symbolic and sacramental, and ordinary human activities carry sacramental meaning. “Sacramental language is essentially evocative, self-involving, and performance-oriented. Sacraments refer to sacred moments and places in order to disclose the sacredness of everyday life, and to engage participants in acts of redemption here and now.”<sup>20</sup>

For Juan Luis Segundo, sacraments play crucial roles in forming and strengthening base communities. Segundo rejects any dualism between sacred and secular (or grace and nature); he emphasizes that sacramental liturgy can liberate people from structures of oppression and injustice.<sup>21</sup> Many Latin American theologians investigate “popular Catholicism,” with its sacred places, objects and rituals, which, they maintain, points towards an innate sacramentality of Latin American life. However Mennonites may evaluate particular claims of these investigations, the findings suggest important connections between Church sacraments and concrete cultural life, with specific socio-political implications.

Latin American theologians also critique ways in which sacramental systems, especially when traditional, fixed and repetitive, can support systemic social exploitation. Many feminist Catholic theologians extend this probe further, seeking to unmask ways that sacramental assumptions, language and practice suppress the woman-subject. Feminist theologians also discuss what sacraments “might become when freed from ideologies, opened to new inspiration, encompassing new experiences, and nourished by new memories.”<sup>22</sup> They are more concerned with sacramental liturgy as a process than with its texts, and with producing new liturgical events rather than revised or new formulae.<sup>23</sup> Whatever Mennonites may think of particular proposals, Catholic feminists

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<sup>20</sup> Power 1994, 10. See esp. Boff, *Sacraments of Life, Life of the Sacraments: Story Theology* (Washington, Pastoral, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1974).

<sup>22</sup> Power 1994, 18.

<sup>23</sup> See esp. Mary Collins, “Principles of Feminist Liturgy” in Marjorie Procter-Smith and Janet Walton, eds., *Women at Worship* (Louisville, Westminster/Knox 1993), 9-26.

suggest that sacramental practice need not simply re-present the past, but can also open horizons for transformative, prophetic action.

Many Catholic theologians have been more perceptive than Mennonites in discovering socio-political implications in traditional sacraments. For example, Mennonites have usually underlined the memorial dimension of the Lord's Supper more thickly than Catholics. Many contemporary Mennonite theologians highlight Biblical narrative.<sup>24</sup> Yet David Power points out, as no Mennonite to my knowledge has done, how Jesus' crucifixion recalls the overall narrative in which it occurred, which illumines the cross as a consequence of Jesus' nonviolent yet prophetic response to state and military power, his identification with the most marginalized people, and his self-giving servanthood contrasted with common sociopolitical practice (Lk 22:24-28).<sup>25</sup> For some current Catholic theologians, social praxis provides a criterion for evaluating the genuineness of sacramental activity.

**D.) Postmodern Moves.** At grassroots levels, Mennonites often assume that "sacraments" transmit Jesus' living reality in a crude, thing-like way, by a kind of automatic, impersonal causality. Contemporary Catholic theologians are reconsidering, and often critiquing, concepts of substance and causality in their tradition. This critique is perhaps most detailed in recent postmodern approaches.

Louis-Marie Chauvet finds causal conceptuality inadequate for expressing the gratuitous, personal character of the grace made present in sacraments.<sup>26</sup> He seeks to penetrate behind metaphysical categories to the events which originated these sacraments and the biblical word through which the Church transmitted them. For Chauvet, sacramental meaning cannot be directly communicated through subject-to-subject

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<sup>24</sup> For an overview, see Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 60-69.

<sup>25</sup> Power 1995, 304-316. Among many other Catholic treatments and sacramentality and social justice, see James Emperuer and Christopher Kiesling, *The Liturgy that Does Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1990); Megan McKenna, *Rites of Justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Chauvet works out his contrasting theory of symbolic mediation in great detail, drawing heavily on philosophy, literary studies and social sciences, in Part One of his massive *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 7-155. Chauvet outlines his overall approach much more concisely in *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001).

encounters, but requires distancing from originating and contemporary events through writing.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently Scripture itself, and not simply existential moments conveyed through it, is indispensable for communicating sacramental grace and norming sacramental practice. Chauvet's postmodernism deconstructs metaphysical and various ecclesiastical structures, but frees and opens up Scripture.

Chauvet also warns that sacramental rituals and signs can become the main foci of worship, rather than leading beyond themselves to what cannot be directly ritualized or symbolized. Accordingly he insists, along with some other recent Catholic theologians, that sacraments not only reveal, but also hide, God; that God is not only mysteriously present in, but also mysteriously absent from, sacramental worship. This is primarily because sacraments point above all to the self-effacing, self-giving love of God on the cross.<sup>28</sup>

Jean-Luc Marion contrasts an idol, which draws attention to itself, with an icon, which points beyond itself. He contrasts transmission through causality with giving and receiving a gift. Marion insists that God be named not by metaphysical categories of being, but by the non-being manifested in Jesus' cross.<sup>29</sup> He prefers to call sacramental symbols and actions "traces" rather than "representations."

Again, Mennonites may not always agree with theologians like these, or find all their work useful. Yet these theologians are seeking, in sophisticated postmodern ways, to articulate objections to traditional sacramentalism that Mennonites have shared, and to retrieve biblical and Christological themes that Mennonites have affirmed.

**E.) Theological Categories.** So far it may seem that current Catholic theology is shifting sharply from the vertical to the horizontal, and from theological to anthropological, philosophical, and social science starting-points. But basic Catholic doctrines are also playing a vital role.

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<sup>27</sup> Chauvet 1995, 190-289.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 490-538.

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), esp. 7-107.



Although non-theological disciplines may loom large in today's sacramental theologies, they do not always provide the primary starting-point, or assumptions, or foundations for these efforts. Catholic convictions about God, the Church, and other realities are often more basic. To be sure, since these theologies seek to articulate sacramentality's meaning in our wider world, non-theological concepts express part of their content. Logically or systematically considered, however, these concepts often refine and expand more basic theological convictions.

The systematic starting point of many sacramental theologies is the Trinity. These often derive the giving and receiving experienced in sacraments from, and model it after, mutual self-giving among the trinitarian persons.<sup>30</sup> Symbolic communication in the sacraments can also derived, ultimately, from the Word as a "real symbol" of the Father, where a unity of being exists between Symbol and Symbolized.<sup>31</sup>

Many Catholic also regard the church itself as the *primary sacrament*, and particular sacraments as expressions of this primary sacramentality. Mennonites may be quite open to this approach. C. Arnold Snyder entitles a concluding chapter of his *Anabaptist Theology and History* "The Church as Sacrament."<sup>32</sup> (Nevertheless, when Snyder considers Catholic sacramentalism in the Reformation era, he includes "Anti-Sacramentalism" within "The Theological and Ecclesiological Core of Anabaptism."<sup>33</sup>)

Other Catholic theologians consider the incarnation of the Word the truly *primordial sacrament*, the source of even the church's sacramentality.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Menno Simons rejected the efficacy of sacramental "signs and symbols" precisely because Jesus

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<sup>30</sup> e.g., by Edward Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice*; Vol. I *Systematic Theology of Liturgy* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988), esp. 172-197; also Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: the Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Fransisco: Harper, 1991), 111-142.

<sup>31</sup> Kilmartin 1988, 106.

<sup>32</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist Theology and History: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995), 351-364.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 85-86. By "anti-sacramentalism" Snyder means affirming "that neither priests nor sacraments were capable of conveying God's grace.... This rejection of sacramental efficacy was the first step towards Anabaptist baptism." (85)

<sup>34</sup> see, e.g., Cooke 1983; Eduard Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 19-39.

is “the true Sign of all signs” and “the true sign of grace....”<sup>35</sup> Dirk Philips insisted that our covenant with God was “bound to no external symbol” because “Jesus Christ alone...is the only and true sign of faith.”<sup>36</sup> These historic Anabaptists rejected sacramental efficacy, in part, because it seemed to dilute or obscure something like the primordial sacramentality of the Word incarnate. But if particular sacraments can be considered as subordinate to, derived from and witnessing to this prior sacramentality, might Mennonites be willing to re-examine these notions?

Finally, many Catholic theologians, particularly liberationists, consider the church an *eschatological sacrament*. That is, the church, in all its activities, forms a present, visible sign and foretaste of the kind of communion that God finally wills for all humankind. Most Mennonites, explicitly or implicitly, and without calling the church a “sacrament,” understand it in this way.

**F.) Summary.** I have sought to identify, in very brief and general terms, and from a Mennonite standpoint, some themes in current Catholic sacramental theology that might provide points of contact with Mennonites, who seldom use sacramental language. If readers spot some inaccuracies and omissions, I welcome their comments.

My purpose has been to describe certain features of this field, not to endorse any theologian or approach. Personally, I am uneasy with some tendencies towards “horizontal” reductionism. However, if we are to discover something like Catholic sacramentality in Mennonite *Lebenspraxis*, Catholic insights into the sacramental character of life and work can greatly aid our explorations. In any case, I hope I have shown that Catholic sacramental theology covers a field wide enough to provide many points of contact for discussion with Mennonites.

## II.) HOW “SACRAMENTAL” WERE HISTORIC ANABAPTISTS?

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<sup>35</sup> In John Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1956), 686.

<sup>36</sup> In Cornelius Dyck, William Keeney, Alvin Beachy eds. *The Writings of Dirk Philips* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992), 102. God, moreover, “surrendered Jesus Christ, his only Son, into death for us (John 3:16) as a sure sign of divine grace.” (Id.)

Few explicit comparisons between Mennonite and Catholic understandings of sacramentality can be found in sacramental theology, grassroots understandings or worship practices. I am proposing, however, that more -- maybe many more -- comparisons can be discovered by asking how both groups seek to live out and understand their faith in their everyday relationships, work, and society.

But how shall we investigate the Mennonite *Lebenspraxis*? Through sociological surveys? Perhaps such tools will play an important role in further discussion. But first, I believe, Mennonites need to develop a viable conceptuality for expressing their own notions of sacramentality. At least one resource for beginning this task exists: the writings and records of “historic Anabaptism” (1525 to roughly 1575). Let us, then, start to retrieve whatever theological reflections and concepts we can from this source. This task need not be disconnected from the preceding glimpses into Catholic theology, for these can help us make several initial comparisons.

If we are to find sacramentality of some kind in historic Anabaptism, the preceding section and the importance of Mennonite *Lebenspraxis* suggest that we should define this term broadly. I propose a definition well-known at least since Augustine: the process in which invisible, spiritual, divine grace is bestowed through visible, material, earthly channels. In this definition, the visible matter of sacraments extends far beyond Church rituals and their elements. It could include anything in the visible world, or almost any human activity. Concepts of substance and causality, which many Catholics now question explicitly, and which many Mennonites reject implicitly, are not immediately implied by this definition.

Why, and in what ways, might historic Anabaptists have been, at least in some broad sense, sacramental? I propose the following reasons. To support them, I will occasionally need to address some issues involved in interpreting historic Anabaptism.

**A.) Everyday Life.** If every material object and process, and nearly every human activity, can be or can become sacramental, historic Anabaptists attempted to spread sacramentality at least as broadly as any religious movement of their time. Historic Anabaptists insisted that grace inform all their concrete, daily activities and relationships. To be sure, as many historians point out, most Anabaptists anticipated the demise of their

present world quite soon. Yet this did not diminish the significance of concrete, earthly life. On the contrary, Anabaptist eschatology included a strongly realized strain. This impelled them to actualize all dimensions of God's Kingdom, as far possible, in the present. In my view, historic Anabaptism's insistence on following Jesus' way and teachings is better understood in eschatological than in strictly ethical categories -- as derived chiefly from an awareness of the Spirit's climactic outpouring which alone made this lifestyle possible.<sup>37</sup>

It can be objected that Anabaptists sometimes described this Spiritual transformation, both in the realized present and the consummated future, in ways that denigrated matter, especially the human body.<sup>38</sup> How, then, can I maintain that historic Anabaptism as a whole envisioned the transformation, not the abolition, of matter by God's Spirit, at least until the consummation?

First, John Rempel has shown how nearly all early Anabaptists presupposed, on the intellectual level, that an *ontological barrier* separated Spirit and matter.<sup>39</sup> This did not simply mean that divine Spirit differed, ontologically, from material creatures -- that affirmation is compatible with, even basic to, a sacramental view. This *ontological barrier*, rather, was the assumption that Spirit could neither interact directly with nor transform matter; that physical entities and symbols could not participate in Spiritual reality, but merely point towards it, indirectly. How can I account for historic Anabaptist statements which affirmed or strongly implied this presupposition?

The Anabaptists who assumed this intellectual presupposition had no opportunity for formal study (with very rare exceptions). That presupposition, though, strongly contradicted Anabaptist practice. However disparagingly some Anabaptists might denigrate the body, they unanimously insisted that all physical labor, all ethical acts

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<sup>37</sup> While Anabaptists generally expected this outpouring to increase somewhat before the final consummation, they also believed that it had been occurring ever since Jesus' resurrection. This is esp. clear in Menno Simon's understanding of "The Day of Grace" (Wenger, ed., 108-110).

<sup>38</sup> E.g., according to Balthasar Hubmaier, the flesh, which he virtually equated with the body, "has irretrievably lost its goodness and freedom... and has become entirely and wholly worthless.... It is not capable of anything other than sin...." (in Wayne Pipkin and John Yoder, eds. *Balthasar Hubmaier* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1989], 433, cf. 442, 456).

<sup>39</sup> Rempel 1993, 29-30, 46, 67, 95, 145-146, 192.

performed by their bodies, and all efforts to meet to peoples' physical needs be shaped and imbued by divine power. I am claiming, in other words, that their *Lebenspraxis* provides better clues to their actual, if *implicit*, theology that do *explicit* statements which presuppose, often unreflectively, a Spirit-matter *ontological barrier*.

Second, Anabaptism was not an institutionally organized movement with an official theology. Historians today identify at least three largely independent Anabaptist origins: Switzerland, South Germany/Austria and the Netherlands are most often mentioned. Surviving Anabaptist writings address different problems, reflect different theological conceptualities, and are of diverse genres. This can make it difficult to identify commonly held Anabaptist *positions*. However, it is still possible to identify common Anabaptist *dialectics*, or as Arnold Snyder puts it, "conversations."<sup>40</sup>

Snyder tells how some early Anabaptists, when interpreting the Bible, strongly stressed the Holy Spirit's illumination, but others, the written letter. Snyder then traces this tension through the Anabaptist movement, and shows how the various viewpoints can be arranged on a spectrum between these two extremes, with most seeking to articulate some kind of balance between Spirit and letter.<sup>41</sup> In this way, an historian can maintain that a Spirit-letter *dialectic*, which aimed overall at some sort of balance, characterized historic Anabaptism.

I propose that a similar Spirit-matter dialectic also pervaded this movement.<sup>42</sup> Statements in which matter seems impervious to Spirit fall at one end of the spectrum, and others where Spirit appears to swallow matter, at the other. Yet the movement, on the whole, tended towards a balance that can be called sacramental, in the sense adopted above.

I am proposing that historic Anabaptists were extremely sacramental in this sense, at least in their intentions, their vision. For they insisted, at least as strongly as any current religious movement, that grace inform all their concrete, material activities and relationships.

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<sup>40</sup> Snyder 1995, 379-382. Snyder also identifies many common Anabaptist convictions (83-99, 365-376).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 43-44, 87-88, 159-172, 204-205, 369-371 (Snyder traces a similar interaction between the inner and outer dimensions of human life, e.g., 69, 88-89, 133-138, 305-347).

<sup>42</sup> Another major theme of Finger 2004; see 563-565 for a summary statement.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this emphasis was not unique in church history, even if Mennonites like to think it was. It had appeared earlier in both Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, especially in monastic movements.<sup>43</sup> Many of these had set out to live entirely by Jesus' radical teachings, and to transform all their relationships and material surroundings, so far as possible, into God's Kingdom, by divine grace.

This impulse motivated many similar non-monastic movements such as the Beguines, several of which involved both men and women. Furthermore, the Franciscans, in addition to brothers and sisters, had long included a third order (the *Tertiaries*) open to both sexes, including married couples. As the Reformation approached, the Tertiaries were growing in numbers, as were the Brethren of the Common Life, which also included married persons.

If we place Anabaptism within this monastic and spiritual stream, which had spread beyond single-sex configurations, it appears far less unusual, and even, in significant ways, to advance the stream's flow. Seen from this vantage point, Anabaptism appears more Catholic than Protestant. We should not be surprised, then, if many Anabaptists were guided by a sacramental vision which, even if largely unarticulated, resembled that of some Catholic predecessors.

**B.) Salvation as Ontological Transformation.** The preceding reading of historic Anabaptism was fairly uncommon until the mid-1970s.<sup>44</sup> For centuries, Anabaptism had been interpreted as a fanatical episode of the Reformation era. But in 1944 Mennonite historian Harold Bender, in his influential address "The Anabaptist Vision," called Anabaptism instead "the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli" -- or in short, "consistent evangelical Protestantism."<sup>45</sup> Bender described Anabaptism's significance not only within the Reformation, but also in

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<sup>43</sup> for a groundbreaking development of this thesis, see Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1974).

<sup>44</sup> In addition to Davis, op. cit., see Werner Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptists* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977). For a brief overview, see Finger 2004, 51-54. Occasional precedents for this perspective appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>45</sup> Harold Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1944), 13, cf. p. 18. Bender mentions some 19<sup>th</sup> century precedents for this view (13-14).

light of its future effects. Anabaptism was “the first plain announcement in modern history of a programme for a new type of Christian society which the modern world... has been slowly realizing -- an absolutely free and independent religious society, and a State in which every man counts as a man....”<sup>46</sup>

Here Bender was endorsing, in part, an interpretation of Anabaptism that gained increasing support during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and still exerts much influence today. In this scenario, Anabaptism was primarily a forerunner of the Enlightenment, and ultimately of the modern world. Its critique of established churches began to dissolve not only their links with the State, but also began to dissolve any spiritual world above this one into history’s forward flow. Anabaptism played a major role in desacralizing the world, and stressed “a subjectivism which makes little of cultus, ceremonialism and ecclesiasticism.”<sup>47</sup>

I mention this common interpretation because it reads Anabaptism’s concern with the sacramentality of everyday life differently than I have suggested. From this perspective, historic Anabaptists did not so much *extend* sacramentality from the church into the world as remove it from the church and *relocate* it in the world. In other words, Anabaptists began that depreciation of the ecclesial sphere, and that elevation of the “secular” sphere, which eventually granted autonomous, independent value to the latter, and reduced the former to a hazy penumbra or less.

This essay cannot decide whether historic Anabaptism should be interpreted in light of preceding events, or of future effects. Both attempts have some validity. The second kind of reading, however, raises a question that must be answered: did historic Anabaptists, generally speaking, *extend* the transforming work of God’s Spirit from the church into the world? Or did they *remove* the Spirit from the church and relocate it in the world, into which the Spirit was eventually absorbed? Each claim is consistent with a different soteriology. If the first claim is correct, salvation would have involved the actualization and transformation of human capacities by a distinctly divine reality. If the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 3; Bender is endorsing a quotation from Rufus Jones (*Studies in Mystical Religion* [London, Macmillan, 1909], 369) which he feels, nevertheless, “not only does not exhaust but actually fails to define the true essence of Anabaptism” (5).

<sup>47</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986 [originally written in 1906]), 37; see also 68-69.

second is true, these capacities would really have been transformed by latent human potentialities, which eventually became autonomous.

Influenced by Bender's "Anabaptist Vision," many Mennonites have inclined towards the second understanding. This "Vision" included three components: discipleship, which was Anabaptism's essence,<sup>48</sup> the church as a voluntary brotherhood,<sup>49</sup> and an "ethic of love and nonresistance as applied to all human relationships."<sup>50</sup> Although Bender did not intend it, all three features could be understood basically as human activities, enacted on a "horizontal" plane. As I see it, a tendency towards the reduction of theology (including soteriology) to social-ethical dimensions is visible in much current Anabaptist theology. Not all theologians follow it, however, and it seldom is taken all the way.<sup>51</sup>

How, then, did historic Anabaptists understand salvation? Because Anabaptism emerged in Reformation times, its proponents occasionally employed the language of Protestant-Catholic justification debates. Many of their statements sound Protestant, but others sound Catholic -- not infrequently from the same writer, even within the same writing. This has been taken as evidence that Anabaptists had no consistent theology. But perhaps these apparently conflicting statements, by authors with little theological training, point towards a deeper implicit soteriology, which actually reconciles some Catholic-Protestant differences.

Following this hypothesis, I have concluded that most historic Anabaptists understood salvation as more than justification, in the sense of pardon and right standing, and mainly as ontological transformation.<sup>52</sup> More radically than Swiss Anabaptists, South German/Austrian and Dutch Anabaptists experienced this transformation as divinization. To counter misunderstanding of these terms, though, I insist that this salvation is transformation of human nature by, but not into, divine nature (or transformation by, but not into, another kind of being). As the Orthodox say, it is transformation *by divine*

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<sup>48</sup> Bender, 20-21

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 26-30

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>51</sup> This is a main theme of my *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 2004, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> For the following points, see Finger 2004, 113-132.



*energies*, not *into* the *divine essence*. I also insist that for Anabaptists, this process is *Christomorphic*. It occurs according to the pattern provided by Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection. Salvation, then, undoubtedly includes ethical dimensions -- but cannot be reduced to them.

This intense experience of transformation/divinization, I believe, underlay the Anabaptists' conviction that they could actually live, or seriously attempt to live, as Jesus taught. Divinization language appears in the Medieval monastic and spiritual streams that poured into early Anabaptism, through channels like Johannes Tauler<sup>53</sup> and *The German Theology*.<sup>54</sup> However, Anabaptists often reported direct encounters with grace that transcended common Catholic notions of gradually acquiring merit and finally reaching -- often after Purgatory -- justification. Historic Anabaptist divinization often resembled Orthodox notions more closely, though no historical link has been found.

To return to our original question: historic Anabaptists experienced salvation as thoroughgoing transformation by God's Spirit. Consequently, when they insisted that this be actualized in everyday work and relationships, they were *extending* the Spirit's work, experienced in their churches, into those spheres. Anabaptists were not, in effect, *relocating* salvation in such a way that it could eventually become "secular" or wholly "horizontal." Their human potentialities were being actualized by divine energies, not some power latent in themselves.

If I am correct, historic Anabaptism provides a notion of salvation, and therefore of sacramental action, that entails an important ontological distinction between Spirit and matter. This differentiates divine energies from human and other created capacities.<sup>55</sup> But does this view stand in some tension with current Catholic tendencies to tone down distinctions between grace and nature? I am proposing that both realms, for historic Anabaptists, were real and ontologically distinct. Will many Catholics today find such a sacramental outlook too traditional?

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<sup>53</sup> See Maria Shradly, trans., *Johannes Tauler: Sermons* (New York: Paulist, 1985).

<sup>54</sup> See Bengt Hoffman, trans., *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther* (New York: Paulist, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> I am not claiming that this is the only soteriological motif found in historic Anabaptism, but the dominant one.

**C.) Church Sacraments.** Even if historic Anabaptists sought to embody invisible, divine Spirit in visible, created matter, did they nevertheless shift the locus of this activity from the church to the world? Did they, by emphasizing a sacramentality of everyday life, evacuate churches and their rites of sacramental meaning?

To discover whether early Anabaptist church life was sacramental, or included something like what Catholics call sacraments, it is best to begin by identifying their most common overall practices.<sup>56</sup> Four practices, according to Snyder, characterized all historic Anabaptists: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, economic sharing and discipline (perhaps better named mutual discipling, to avoid overly restrictive, punitive connotations).<sup>57</sup> The first two are obviously ecclesial. The last two merged more into everyday life. Early Anabaptists, though, highlighted the first pair at least as much as the second.

For virtually all of them, a correct Supper and Baptism were essential to an authentic church.<sup>58</sup> Although Anabaptists insisted that baptismal water is not salvific, they risked and sometimes lost their lives by insisting on its ritual use. This physical baptismal rite held extraordinary importance. Given the centrality of the Mass in late medieval Catholicism, Anabaptists could scarcely avoid giving the Lord's Supper great attention. By celebrating it without ordained priests and pastors, they also ran dangerously afoul of established laws.

Anabaptists interconnected these two ecclesial practices with the other two in numerous ways. Balthasar Hubmaier, for instance, identified Baptism, where individuals publicly commit themselves to a congregation, as the basis of their submission to and

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<sup>56</sup> Among contemporary Mennonite theologians, Friesen discusses church life in terms of practices (2000, 139-166) including "Practices of Service to the Wider Community" (163-166). John Howard adopted this approach in *Body Politics* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992)

<sup>57</sup> Snyder 1995: 90-93, 373-374; Marlin Jeschke proposes speaking of discipling instead of discipline (*Discipling the Brother* [Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973]).

<sup>58</sup> Hubmaier, 70; Walter Klaassen and William Klassen, trans., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1978), 292, 340. In many cases, discipline was added to these two as a third necessary practice (Hubmaier, 375; Marpeck 1978, 300; Philips, 218-219, 301, 345; Menno 501-502, cf. 539)

their participation in the exercise of congregational discipline.<sup>59</sup> Since the Lord's Supper was to be celebrated by those at peace with God and their neighbors, discipline preceded the Supper in many congregations.<sup>60</sup> Further, the Supper expressed the communicants' willingness to give themselves for each other, as Jesus had given himself for them. This could literally mean giving their lives, and very often their goods. In this way, the Supper provided the basis for economic sharing, and sometimes the venue for its practice.<sup>61</sup> Sharing could also be connected with Baptism, perhaps because it was expected as a natural result.<sup>62</sup> Since discipline, positively considered, meant mutual discipling, it too often involved economic sharing.

In brief, Anabaptist sacramentality spanned church life and everyday life, linking them together. The two ecclesial practices (Baptism and Lord's Supper) and the two with a more social focus (economic sharing and discipline) were of approximately equal importance, and interconnected in many ways.

During the church's first millennium, many practices like these, which convey Spiritual reality through material channels, came to be called *sacramentals*. But as scholastic theology emerged, Rome wanted to distinguish those which bestowed grace in a more regular and significant fashion from the others. Seven church rituals gained the first status, and were called *sacraments*. Most Protestants reduced sacraments to two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The main reason they gave was that Jesus had commanded only these.

In seeking to retrieve historic Anabaptist concepts, I have assumed neither the sacrament-sacramental distinction, nor that particular practices should be called sacraments. But now let us ask whether some churchly rituals might be usefully

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<sup>59</sup> Hubmaier 1989: 127; cf. 85-86, 239, 389, 413-415; cf. Conrad Grebel and Friends, "Letters to Thomas Muentzer" in George Williams and Angel Mergal eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 80.

<sup>60</sup> This was widely practiced in Swiss Anabaptism (Finger 2004, 210) and by Pilgram Marpeck (Ibid., 214).

<sup>61</sup> Explicitly by Hubmaier (Finger 2004, 236), Hans Schlaffer (Ibid., 237), Marpeck (Ibid., 239-240) and Philips (Ibid., 242).

<sup>62</sup> Hans Hut, "The Mystery of Baptism" in Daniel Liechty ed., *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1994), 72.

distinguished from the others, as in Catholic and most other communions, and called sacraments.

If an Anabaptist/Mennonite theology were to make such a distinction, what would function as criteria? Let me provisionally suggest two: (i) whether practices can be traced to Jesus, and (ii) whether Scripture contains guidelines for performing them as rituals. These criteria might not provide the clear distinctions desired, however. Jesus gave instructions not only for Baptism and the Supper, but also for footwashing (John 13:5-14) and discipline/discipling (Matthew 18:15-18). He often laid hands on people and recommended economic simplicity and sharing, while the New Testament shows how each was later practiced. Other practices might also appear to satisfy these two criteria.

I must admit that I have not yet found foolproof criteria. Nevertheless, it still seems that God's Spirit operates somewhat differently in practices that are ritualized, regularly performed in church and trace back to Jesus, than in others. Let me, then, propose provisionally that sacramentality functions, to some extent, otherwise in these rites than it does in other spheres. If so, these rites may operate somewhat like what Catholics and others call sacraments. If we can describe their actions more precisely, perhaps we can move a bit beyond comparing Catholic and Mennonite sacramentality in the broad sense, and begin comparing Catholic sacraments with some Mennonite church rituals.

**D.) The Lord's Supper.** To better apprehend how sacramentality, as historic Anabaptists experienced it, functions in churches, we could ask how it compares with Catholic notions of the church as the *primary* and/or *eschatological* sacrament. But it would be premature to attempt broad comparisons like this when our examination of church practices has barely begun. This initial essay can explore only one practice -- the same one that Catholics highlight -- but hopefully in some depth. Plenty of work remains for other Mennonite theologians!

It is commonly affirmed that historic Anabaptists espoused a *memorial* view of the Lord's Supper.<sup>63</sup> For virtually all Anabaptists, recollection of Jesus' cross was indeed important. Most of them insisted, like memorialists, that communion bread was simply

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<sup>63</sup> This is the general claim of Snyder's scholarly discussion (1995: 85, 92, 366, 374), and the exclusive emphasis of his popular presentation (*From Anabaptist Seed* [Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1999], 31).

bread; and that Jesus' body was in heaven, and could not be in the Supper. But the presence of these themes hardly means that their primary orientation was memorial.

The memorial strain was strongest among Swiss Anabaptists, whom Ulrich Zwingli had strongly influenced. However, Balthasar Hubmaier, Swiss Anabaptism's chief theological exponent, stressed that remembrance of Jesus' death for each communicant leads them all to give themselves for each other: "to serve their fellow members in Christ at the cost of honor, goods, body, and life...."<sup>64</sup> The Lord's Supper, that is, included a profoundly *communal* dimension that entailed, as I recently pointed out, economic sharing. This pledging of one's life, by the way, was hardly theoretical. Shortly after such celebrations some communicants might be arrested and hauled off to execution. The circumstances surrounding Jesus' original supper were chillingly re-enacted.

In Swiss Anabaptism, then, the Lord's Supper included two main dimensions: not only the *memorial*, but also the *communal*. The communal, as I see it, was more central and more distinctly Anabaptist. It also provides points of contact with the current Catholic emphasis on communal celebration. Nevertheless, might both the *memorial* and *communal* meanings be reducible to the human sphere? Might they simply be expressions of mutual commitment and solidarity? Most North American Mennonites have been much more influenced by the Swiss than other historic Anabaptist forms of the Lord's Supper.<sup>65</sup> Some of them may apprehend its meaning this way.

When we turn to Dutch and South German/Austrian Anabaptism, however, any such reduction becomes less plausible.<sup>66</sup> There the Supper included a third dimension, which might be called the *actual presence* of the risen Christ (not real presence, to avoid confusion). For these two Anabaptists branches, the ritual's divine aspect was indispensable. However, they very often called Christ's presence *spiritual*, and sharply critiqued what theories of material presence they knew, mainly Catholic and Lutheran. These Anabaptists, apparently, found all such notions crudely literal -- and often idolatrous, since they directed worship to a creature rather than the Creator. Their

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<sup>64</sup> Hubmaier 402, cf. 88.

<sup>65</sup> This is evident in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), Article 12, although other emphases are recognized.

<sup>66</sup> For the following points, see Finger 2004, 188-197.

inability to find another name besides “spiritual” for Christ’s presence probably stemmed also from assumptions about an *ontological barrier* and lack of theological sophistication.

To support and illustrate the foregoing generalizations, let us probe the notion of *actual presence* in greater depth, by focusing on a representative from each of Anabaptism’s three branches. To provide points of contact with Catholics, let us ask: How was Christ present in the Supper? and Did this include, in any sense, his body and blood?

**1.) Switzerland.** I propose that even here, Christ could be present in Communion in some indirect sense. Hubmaier, according to John Rempel, defined the communion bread primarily as “the body of Christ in remembrance.”<sup>67</sup> More precisely, the bread which was “offered, broken, taken, and eaten” was “the body of Christ in remembrance.”<sup>68</sup> Hubmaier, it seems, was referring chiefly not to the bread as an object, or *element*, but to the *acts* of offering, breaking, taking and eating. Furthermore, these actions did not simply point to Jesus’ historical, crucified body. They also were, or conveyed, this body in remembrance. That is, through these ritual actions, Jesus’ crucified body, with its saving significance, entered the present world, in a sense, through the remembering community. The community did not simply recall the event, but to some extent also shared and participated in its continuing significance.<sup>69</sup>

Nevertheless, even if Jesus was present in some way through the community’s actions, the community itself -- not the risen Jesus -- was the Supper’s agent. “Bread” -- insofar as this meant offering, breaking, taking, and eating it -- was performed by the community. The community, therefore, was also “the body of Christ in remembrance” -- or the

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<sup>67</sup> Rempel 1993, 48, 59, 63, 82.

<sup>68</sup> Hubmaier, 324.

<sup>69</sup> For Hubmaier, even though Jesus’ human body was in heaven, he, or at least his divine reality, could be present in the Supper in other ways. His deity was omnipresent, or everywhere, including the Supper-- though not in any special sense. Moreover, while Jesus was absent, the Holy Spirit was dynamically present among Christians, and therefore in their rituals. Finally, Hubmaier associated the preached Word so closely with the risen, living Word, that the whole Christ could apparently be present through preaching-- the *activity* of preaching, which transformed hearers through the Spirit.

ritual's very subject -- more directly than Jesus' material body. It is easy to see how this Supper, over time, could become less and less a Divine-human, Spirit-matter, sacramental interaction, and more and more a communal, merely human action.<sup>70</sup>

**2.) The Netherlands.** If Dutch Anabaptists are taken as seriously as the Swiss, the priority of memorialism is clearly challenged. Menno Simons and Dirk Philips explicitly taught that the Supper had three main functions: remembering Jesus' death, uniting his community, and "communion in the flesh and blood of Christ."<sup>71</sup> Here physical terms appeared. Yet their referent was somewhat elusive. Jesus' historical flesh, for Dutch Anabaptists, came not from Mary, but was created in her by a special divine act.<sup>72</sup> And if Jesus' flesh was somewhat ethereal during his life, it became even more so after his resurrection, when it was located in heaven, as all Anabaptists taught.<sup>73</sup> Communicants partook of it spiritually, in their imperishable inner person.<sup>74</sup>

Nonetheless, Jesus' flesh was still remotely physical. In contrast to Swiss understandings, the risen Jesus bestowed it through the Supper as its main agent. He poured his life into the communicants.<sup>75</sup> Jesus was in their midst,<sup>76</sup> in and among them through his Spirit.<sup>77</sup> This was an *actual presence*. Were the Supper's material features, then, really extraneous?

Dirk and Menno's predecessor, Melchior Hoffman, illustrated how Christ could be present *through* the communion elements. Melchior pictured the bread as a wedding

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<sup>70</sup> Rempel, while recognizing this possibility, thinks that Hubmaier desired "not a reducing of spiritual reality to the human," but to assert "that the ethical is the mode of the spiritual." (1993, 81) Hubmaier sought "an innovative way of speaking about spiritual reality as external." (Ibid., 89).

<sup>71</sup> Menno, 515; cf. Philips, 122-123, 112.

<sup>72</sup> See Snyder 1995, 359-361.

<sup>73</sup> Menno, 153; Philips, 117-120.

<sup>74</sup> Menno, 153-154; Philips, 114-115.

<sup>75</sup> Philips, 121.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 120, 126-127.

ring: not a *thing in which* Christ was present, but an *instrument*, or means of expression, *through which* he gave himself. Melchior portrayed the communicant as Christ's bride, and their union in both physical and spiritual terms. Through the elements, the bride received the Bridegroom "physically," and yet "through belief." In this way "the bodily Christ, who sits at the right hand of God, is in truth bodily her own and...she is bodily his, yea with flesh and blood...." Moreover, "the Bridegroom and the outpouring of his blood is one with hers....She is in him and, again, he is in her, and they together are thus one body, one flesh, one spirit, and one passion...."<sup>78</sup>

However one interprets these obscure but vivid images, Christ is dynamically present (*actually present*) through material channels, transforming the communicant, body included.<sup>79</sup>

While Menno and Dirk picked up some of Hoffman's imagery, they avoided his bodily language. In Section I, however, I noted that they both called Jesus the true physical and spiritual "sign" of faith. They affirmed something like current Catholicism's *primordial sacramentality* of the incarnation. Yet they also considered Jesus the only true sign. This seemed to mean that no other material medium could participate in spiritual reality, but at most could be an external sign pointing to it.

Nevertheless, Menno and Dirk, like other Anabaptists, accorded such great importance to Baptism and Communion that the elements and actions must have been more intrinsic to the bestowal of grace than the conceptualities available to them could express.<sup>80</sup> When the Spiritualist Sebastian Franck denied the necessity of material rituals, Dirk, hesitantly and with some conceptual confusion, insisted on "the participation of outward signs in the revelation of inward reality."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Melchior Hoffman, "The Ordinance of God" in Williams and Mergal, eds. op cit., 194.

<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, Snyder, who claims that "all Anabaptists" understood the Supper "as a memorial of Christ's death...." (1995: 92, cf. 85) calls even this a "Supper of unity (understood in a memorial sense)" (*Anabaptist History and Theology: revised student edition* [Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1997], 211).

<sup>80</sup> Their primary rationale for participation in these rites was simply that God had commanded this.

<sup>81</sup> Rempel 1993: 177. Dirk maintained, for instance, that "when Christ is received in faith, bread and wine become signs of his grace." (174) Moreover, some sort of interaction between the spiritual and the external formed "the bedrock of his ecclesiology" (175). Yet Dirk acknowledged this only occasionally, somewhat awkwardly, and infrequently in speaking of sacraments. (For his "Answer to Sebastian Franck," see Philips 445-467.)



**3.) South Germany/Austria.** In marked contrast to most historic Anabaptists, Pilgram Marpeck dissolved that *ontological barrier* which the great majority of them assumed unreflectively, but contradicted in everyday practice. Marpeck taught that communion with God's Spirit became available only through Jesus, who received and followed the Spirit throughout his earthly, human journey. This initial, indispensable mediation of Spirit through human flesh sounds much like Catholicism's *primordial sacrament*.

The risen Jesus then transmitted the Spirit through the church, which Marpeck linked so closely to Jesus' history that he often called it the continuing "humanity of Christ." The church continued the incarnation through activities like service, sharing, discipling, and the "sacraments" -- Baptism, and also the Supper, which became increasingly paradigmatic of the entire salvific process for Marpeck. Salvation involved a continuing transformation, or divinization, of the individual's body, in the indispensable context of the church body, by God's Spirit.

As we might expect, Marpeck affirmed the importance of the Supper's material features more explicitly than other Anabaptists. But how, without falling into the crude materialism that they feared? Perhaps above all, by insisting that the Supper (like Baptism) was not a *thing* but an *activity*. The elements' significance lies not in their *nature*, but in their overall *function*.<sup>82</sup> These elements indeed point to the death of Jesus, whose risen body was in heaven. This *memorial* dimension of the Supper is important. Yet the elements also function in a way which brings Jesus' reality into the present. Through their instrumentality, the Spirit extends that transformation of matter begun in Jesus into the congregation's life. The Lord's Supper, in other words, is itself an agent, expression, even a component of matter's continuing transformation by Spirit.

Consequently, when the Supper's elements are distributed and received with true faith, they are not external "signs" in the Dutch sense, which merely point to that transformation. They actually participate in that transformation, and hence belong to the sacrament's "essence." Marpeck did not mean that the elements' material essences changed, but that they, precisely in their materiality, were essential to that process or

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<sup>82</sup> Marpeck 1978, 170-171, 269, 277, 283; Marpeck, *Pilgram Marbecks Antwort auf Kaspar Schwenckfeld's Beurteilung des Buches der Bundesbezeugung von 1542* (Vienna: Carl Fromme, 1929), 453-456, 465.

*activity* called the Lord's Supper.<sup>83</sup> Since the Supper signifies and actualizes matter's transformation through Spirit, its material elements are actually being transformed as it occurs -- not, however, *ontologically*, but by taking on quite different *functions*. Consequently, there can be no Supper at all without these elements and their transformed and transformative functions.

For Marpeck the Lord's Supper included a profoundly *communal* dimension.<sup>84</sup> Marpeck, who was well educated but theologically untrained, also sought to affirm the *actual presence* of the risen Christ in the Supper in several fairly awkward ways. Since Pilgram wanted to keep maintaining that Jesus' body was in heaven, he at one point taught that Jesus was present in the Supper in his deity, and equated this with the Holy Spirit.<sup>85</sup> But this clashed with his orthodox trinitarianism and his Christology, in which Jesus' humanity and divinity were united in heaven. Finally Marpeck concluded that the one Jesus, in both his natures, was somehow present in the Supper "through his divine power as Holy Spirit, and nevertheless with his body, flesh and blood, he remains wholly undivided in heaven."<sup>86</sup>

**4.) Observations.** Having examined several understandings of the Lord's Supper, what more can we say about Anabaptist sacramentality?

In the very different theologies of Hubmaier, Hoffman and Marpeck, Christ proves to present in some way, since they all understood the Supper chiefly as an *activity*. Even for the memorialist Hubmaier, communion bread was Christ's body "in remembrance."

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<sup>83</sup> "[N]ot the element... but the activity... not water, bread and wine...but baptism and the Supper" are "one essence with the inner" (Marpeck 1929, 137, cf. 114, 121, 124, 127, 456, 458; Marpeck 1978, 195, 196).

<sup>84</sup> The communicants' inner experience corresponded with the outward ritual. Marpeck called these two *co-witnesses*. Since this ritual was communal, the communicants also co-witnessed to each other. Often this included, or led to, sharing of material goods (Marpeck 1978, 279-281), and was preceded by a discipling process (Ibid., 112, 275-276, 296-297). Moreover, since the Spirit performed the inner work and the outer ritual expressed the continuing "humanity of Christ," the process was rooted in the co-witness of Son and Spirit, and ultimately in the interactivity of the Trinity, as many current Catholic theologians maintain. Marpeck's Supper and his entire soteriology were sacramental-- if sacraments are largely activities or processes.

<sup>85</sup> In line with his description of the church as "the humanity of Christ," Marpeck had spoken earlier of Jesus' eucharistic presence in his "unglorified body." He meant to stress that Christians encounter Jesus not simply in his resurrected glory, but perhaps moreso by taking on his sufferings and journey to the cross.

<sup>86</sup> Marpeck 1929, 515, cf. 470.

Remembrance is an activity. The bread, so considered, is not a stationary loaf, but a loaf in the process of being "offered, broken, taken, and eaten." The bread, in other words, is not Christ's body in any literal, substantive sense. But it is called his body insofar as it functions, through the communion process, to communicate his reality into the present.

Hubmaier attributed this communication, on the divine side, to the Holy Spirit far more directly than to Christ, whose literal body was in heaven. But even in Hubmaier's Supper, God's invisible Spirit is utilizing a visible material object, the bread (along with the wine), and transforming it greatly in its function, or use, to transform the visible Christian community.

Hoffman, by comparing the bread with a wedding ring, also conceived it as an instrument through which -- through the process of being broken, offered, received and eaten -- Christ's Spiritual reality transforms the communicant's physical reality. In Hoffman's theology, the communicant's spiritual reality, and even Christ's bodily reality, were also somehow involved.

Finally, Marpeck articulated the Spirit's transformation of matter in the Lord's Supper most clearly, and linked it inseparably with the incarnation and the church. Material elements and actions are absolutely essential to the Lord's Supper because the Supper itself participates in, and is an agent of, the transformation of matter by Spirit. Yet these material realities are transformed in their functions, not their substance. Since all early Anabaptists, including Hubmaier, Hoffman and Dirk Philips, wrestled with the *dialectic* between Spirit and matter, and aimed towards some balance between them, Marpeck offers a genuine conceptualization of historic Anabaptist sacramentality (though not the only one). His is probably the most accessible for theologians today.

This conceptuality avoids most problems associated with traditional notions of substance and causality. It could be fruitfully compared with notions proposed by post-modern Catholic theologians for this purpose, such as icon and gift. I find Marpeck's outlook also comparable to a Catholic theory much discussed in the 1970s and '80s, though less often today: transignification. Briefly, this theory proposes that sacramental elements do change -- but in their signification, or in what they signify, and the way they

perform this.<sup>87</sup> A loaf of bread, for instance, usually signifies, or functions as a means of, bodily nourishment. But when the risen Jesus employs it, through the actions performed by a Christian community, to convey his spiritual, invisible, divine presence, the bread takes on quite a different function (though it still provides some nourishment).

Some Catholics explain this by drawing on the illustration Hoffman used: a wedding ring. When a ring sits in a jeweler's shop, it is merely a circular object. But when it is offered in the context of engagement and marriage, it becomes a special token of a person's love and commitment, even of that entire person. As years pass, many additional events and commitments become associated with the ring. Some people find that their wedding ring conjures up multiple impressions of their spouse, and even makes the spouse seem present.<sup>88</sup> Is a ring, at one's golden anniversary, the same in every respect as it was before, or at, the wedding? Has it not altered greatly -- in the way it functions? in the meanings it conveys? in what it signifies?<sup>89</sup>

### III.) SUMMARY

The Roman Catholic Church is highly sacramental. Mennonites are thought to be a- or even anti-sacramental. Catholics have explored sacramentality in voluminous depth. Mennonites scarcely mention the subject. Despite all this, does any basis for Catholic-

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<sup>87</sup> Such a change can also be called *Transfinalization*. This means that all the eucharistic actions and elements are caught up into the kind of final unity with God that will someday pervade all creation. In this way, eucharistic transformation affects not only humans, but begins permeating all creation. This new creation, which is "not yet" fully present becomes "already" present in this way (Joseph Powers, *Eucharistic Theology* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1967], 115-116, 131-139).

<sup>88</sup> Powers, 166-167; cf. Hoffman: "a perky little bride, when she receives her engagement ring from her bridegroom, could speak to her childhood playmates and friends, showing it to them: Look here, I have my bridegroom Jack, Nick, or Peter. Now those who hear such words and see the ring understand very well how the bride intends this kind of language, namely, that she does not mean that the ring is physically the bridegroom himself or that the bridegroom is physically contained in the ring but that she has with all her heart, spirit, and emotion received a bridegroom by virtue of his will, word, spirit, and intention" (*Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, op. cit., 194-195).

<sup>89</sup> Transignification is often criticized for not really affirming an ontological change in the elements, as required in Catholic doctrine (see Pope Paul VI, *Mysterium Fidei* [London: Catholic Truth Society, 1965], #46, cf. #11, #14. As far as I can tell, however, many Catholic theologians are vague about what "ontological" means here. How different Catholics and Mennonites may really be on this traditionally fundamental point is a good topic for future discussion.

Menonite theological discussion of sacramentality exist? I have answered “yes,” and suggested several points of contact, or starting points.

**A.)** Sacramentality can be defined broadly, in accord with ancient and continuing church tradition, as the process in which invisible, spiritual, divine grace is bestowed through visible, material, earthly channels.

**B.)** Mennonites and Catholics emphasize the operation of such a sacramentality in everyday life, including areas like ethics, economics, sociology, politics and many others. Anabaptists and Mennonites stress this sacramentality much more than most Christian communions. Catholic sacramental theologians are searching for signs and forms of sacramentality in all these areas, and reformulating many concepts in light of this.

**C.)** Historic Anabaptism provides various theological reflections, themes and concepts that can help Mennonites (and others) articulate a theological understanding of sacramentality. These include:

**1.)** Salvation is understood as ontological transformation of human nature by divine energies, actualized by the Holy Spirit inwardly, and also outwardly in the revitalization of human bodies, activities, relationships and corporate entities, and through these, the non-human world. Such a transformation of matter by Spirit is sacramental in the broad sense (**A.** above).

**2.)** This sacramentality operates in everyday life as well as church life. Central church practices (Baptism, the Lord’s Supper) are interlinked with practices operating in both spheres (especially economic sharing, and discipline, or mutual discipling). In this way and others sacramentality functions in both the church and everyday life.

**3.)** At least as an hypothesis: Sacramentality operates somewhat differently in ritualized, repeated church practices which trace back to Jesus than it does in other spheres of life. This phenomenon makes some specific comparisons between these practices and Catholicism’s seven sacraments possible.

4.) The material features of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are extremely important. (Not only because many Anabaptists identified them as essential to any true Church, but also because many insisted on practicing these rituals at great risk to their lives.)

5.) A theological rationale for these two practices, aside from the assertion that God commanded them, is seldom given. Given their great importance, however, it can be assumed that significant *implicit* theological reasons for their performance exist, and inquiry into them is a legitimate historical task.

6.) Since a pervasive *dialectic* between Spirit and matter characterized the Anabaptist movement, and also its discussion of these practices, 16<sup>th</sup>-century theological explanations which provide some balance between Spirit and matter can be considered genuine conceptualizations of historic Anabaptist sacramentality (though not the only ones).

7.) The Lord's Supper and Baptism are primarily activities, or rituals, not things. When they are viewed this way, the importance of material elements and their roles can be best understood.

8.) The elements are essential to these rituals, although their material essence remains unaltered throughout. They are indispensable as channels or instruments through which Spiritual grace is bestowed. These elements change greatly in their function, although their substance remains the same.

9.) The Lord's Supper has three important dimensions: the *memorial*, the *communal*, and the *actual presence* of Christ (though the last was marginal, at best, among Swiss Anabaptists). Many similarities exist between the *communal* dimensions in historic Anabaptism and contemporary Catholicism. More similarities may exist between the *actual presence* in historic Anabaptism and the *real presence* in contemporary Catholicism than is usually supposed.

**10.)** Although nearly all historic Anabaptists called Christ's *actual presence* "spiritual," this apprehension may be more compatible with materiality of some sort than it seems, because most Anabaptists **(i)** unreflectively assumed that an *ontological barrier* separated spirit and matter; **(ii)** lacked the theological sophistication necessary to devise another term; **(iii)** viewed the entire Catholic sacramental system, and often the Lutheran, in an extremely negative light; and **(iv)** nonetheless considered material elements and actions very important in their practice of the Supper.