

COVENANT MEMORIAL

A Fresh Perspective on Real Presence

Essay No 3

Eucharist and Memorial in Reformation Theology; Luther, Calvin, and Responsible Anabaptist Witness

This study includes the contribution of the **more responsible Anabaptist voices**. It is the view of the author that the caricatured, “mere memorialism”, often attributed to the Radical Reformation does real injustice to its best theologians.

It is written in **direct theological dialogue** with the Reformation traditions, while keeping the **Hebrew-memorial framework** as the evaluative lens.

1. Framing the Question Properly

Reformation debates over the Eucharist are often narrated as disputes over *presence*:

- Is Christ “really” present?
- If so, how?
- If not, what remains?

This framing, however, already assumes a **post-patristic problem-setting** shaped by medieval metaphysics. When the Eucharist is instead examined through the biblical logic of **memorial** (***zikkārôn / anamnesis***), a different picture emerges: many Reformation positions are less divided over *whether* Christ is present than over **how covenantal presence should be spoken of responsibly**.

2. Presence Guarded by Promise

Luther’s Eucharistic theology is best understood as a fierce defence of **Christ’s promise** against both scholastic speculation and reductionist symbolism.

For Luther:

- Christ’s words “*This is my body*” are performative promises,
- presence rests on **divine speech**, not on priestly action or metaphysical explanation,
- the sacrament gives what it promises *because Christ binds himself to it*.

In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther insists that the sacrament is:

“A testament and promise of God... sealed with a sign.”

Although Luther affirms a strong Real Presence, his concern is not to explain *how* Christ is present, but to ensure that **faith receives what Christ has promised**. In this sense, Luther stands closer to a covenantal–memorial theology than is often acknowledged.

Where Luther diverges from a memorial framework is in his **reluctance to emphasise anamnesis as covenantal participation**, fearing it might weaken the objectivity of Christ’s gift. Yet structurally, his theology still rests on:

- sign,
- promise,
- divine fidelity.

3. Spiritual Participation without Reduction

Calvin is often read as occupying a “middle position,” but this risks understating the **sacramental density** of his view.

In *Institutes* IV.17, Calvin argues:

- Christ is really present,
- believers truly feed on Christ,
- the mode of presence is **spiritual, not local**, mediated by the Holy Spirit.

Crucially, Calvin explicitly rejects:

- bare symbolism,
- re-sacrifice,
- metaphysical localisation.

Instead, he writes:

“The sacraments are testimonies of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign.”

Calvin’s Eucharistic theology aligns remarkably well with **biblical memorial logic**:

- the sacrament does not repeat the cross,
- it makes believers participants in its benefits,
- presence is covenantal and relational.

Where Calvin differs from some later Protestant developments is precisely here: he refuses to reduce memorial to recollection. For Calvin, **remembrance is participation**, enacted through the Spirit.

In this respect, Calvin stands closer to the patristic and Hebrew *zikkārôn* framework than many of his heirs.

4. The Responsible Anabaptist Tradition: Memorial as Covenant Fidelity

The Radical Reformation is frequently—and unfairly—collapsed into “Zwinglian memorialism.” This obscures the theological seriousness of several Anabaptist thinkers who understood the Lord’s Supper as a **communal, covenantal, and transformative memorial**, even while rejecting metaphysical Real Presence.

4.1 Hubmaier strongly rejects transubstantiation and re-sacrifice, yet he does **not** treat Communion as empty symbol. For him, the Supper is:

- a confession of faith,
- a binding communal act,
- a participation in Christ’s covenant through obedience and discipleship.

He writes that the Supper is a “memorial of the suffering of Christ” that forms believers into a faithful people. Presence is not denied, but **understood ethically and communally rather than ontologically**.

4.2 Marpeck offers perhaps the most theologically rich Anabaptist account.

Drawing heavily on covenant and incarnation theology, he insists that:

- external signs without inward faith are empty,
- inward faith without embodied obedience is false.

The Supper, for Marpeck, is a **covenantal enactment** that binds believers to Christ and to one another. This resonates strongly with the emphasis on:

- participation,
- community,
- loyalty rather than mere cognition.

Marpeck’s theology avoids both sacramental automatism and subjective reduction by locating efficacy in **obedient faith responding to divine promise**.

5. Revisited: Beyond the Caricature

Zwingli is often treated as the archetype of “mere memorialism.” Yet even Zwingli emphasises that the Supper:

- proclaims Christ’s saving work,
- strengthens faith,
- binds the community publicly to Christ’s lordship.

Where Zwingli falls short—measured against biblical memorial theology—is in **restricting remembrance to human cognition** rather than covenantal action. Yet even here, he resists the idea that the Supper is trivial or optional; it is a **public act of allegiance**.

Zwingli’s weakness is not ethical or ecclesial seriousness, but his **reduced account of how God acts through signs**.

6. Memorial as the Evaluative Key

When a memorial theology—rooted in Exodus 12 and covenantal remembrance—is applied as a critical lens, the Reformation landscape looks different:

- Luther preserves **objective divine promise**, but underplays anamnesis.
- Calvin articulates **participatory memorial through the Spirit**.
- Responsible Anabaptists preserve **communal covenant fidelity** and ethical seriousness.
- Zwingli safeguards divine freedom but narrows sacramental action too far.

What unites the best of these traditions is a shared refusal to:

- repeat sacrifice,
- treat the Eucharist as magical,
- sever faith from obedience.

Our framework draws their strengths together by insisting that:

God acts covenantally through memorial signs he has appointed, and faithful participation is real participation.

7. Concluding Synthesis

Seen through a Hebrew–biblical theology of memorial, the Reformation debates are not primarily about *whether* Christ is present, but **how divine presence should be named without violating the once-for-all nature of redemption or the freedom of God.**

This Eucharistic theology stands in constructive continuity with:

- the patristic tradition,
- Calvin’s participatory sacramentalism,
- and the most theologically responsible Anabaptist teaching.

It avoids:

- sacramental coercion,
- metaphysical reduction,
- ethical hollowing.

What it recovers is something older and deeper:

memorial as covenantal participation in a saving act that God remembers, honours, and makes effective.

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