

COVENANT MEMORIAL

A Fresh Perspective on Real Presence

Essay 4

The Anabaptist Witness: Memorial, Covenant Fidelity, and Eucharistic Participation

What follows is a **monograph-style chapter** that treats the Anabaptist tradition **not as a footnote**, but as a coherent theological witness. It is written to *correct the caricature* of Anabaptism as “mere memorialism,” showing instead a **covenantal, participatory, ethically demanding Eucharistic theology** that stands in deep continuity with Hebrew memorial logic.

1. Introduction: Recovering a Marginalised Sacramental Theology

The Anabaptist tradition is frequently invoked in Eucharistic debates only to be dismissed. “Memorialism” has become shorthand for theological thinness, ethical reductionism, and denial of Real Presence. Such portrayals not only misrepresent the diversity of Anabaptist theology but obscure one of its most important contributions: a **rigorous covenantal account of memorial and participation** grounded in discipleship, communal fidelity, and embodied obedience.

This chapter argues that responsible Anabaptist theologians did not reject sacramentalism per se, but rather **rejected sacramentalism detached from covenant obedience**. Their Eucharistic theology emerges from a consistent reading of Scripture in which memorial is not cognitive recall but **public covenant enactment**. When read through the biblical framework of *zikkārôn*, Anabaptist theology appears not as a denial of participation, but as a **moral–ecclesial construal of participation**.

2. Historical and Theological Context

Anabaptist theology arises amid three pressures:

1. **Medieval sacramental automatism**, where grace was seen to operate *ex opere operato*
2. **Magisterial reform**, which often retained sacramental objectivity while recalibrating authority

3. **State-church entanglement**, which collapsed ecclesial membership into civic belonging

Anabaptists responded by insisting that:

- the church is a voluntary covenant community,
- discipleship is essential to salvation's shape,
- sacramental acts cannot contradict lived obedience.

Their sacramental theology cannot be understood apart from this ecclesiology.

3. Memorial as Covenant Act, Not Mental Recall

Anabaptist writers consistently employ the language of *memorial* (*Gedächtnis, Erinnerung*),¹ but not in the modern psychological sense. Memorial refers to a **public, enacted remembrance** that binds the community to Christ and to one another.

This aligns closely with Hebrew *zikkārôn*:

- the act remembers the saving event,
- the community reaffirms covenant loyalty,
- the memorial carries ethical consequences.

Thus, when Anabaptists speak of “remembrance,” they mean **responsible participation**, not symbolic minimalism.

4. Memorial and Confession

Hubmaier is often misrepresented as dismissing sacramental efficacy. In fact, his opposition was not to presence but to **unrepentant participation**.

For Hubmaier:

- the Lord's Supper is a confession of faith,
- it publicly aligns the believer with Christ's suffering,
- it seals communal bonds of obedience.

He writes that the Supper is a “remembrance of the suffering of Christ” that binds believers to live cruciformly. Participation without discipleship is not harmless—it is a lie.

Hubmaier does not deny that Christ is present; he denies that Christ can be invoked **against his own commandments**.²

¹ Early Anabaptist writers consistently describe the Lord's Supper using the language of remembrance (*Gedächtnis, Erinnerung*), identifying it as a memorial of Christ's suffering (Hubmaier, *On the Lord's Supper*, p. 439), while integrating this remembrance with communal participation and discipleship (Marpeck, *Writings*, pp. 176–179; Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, pp. 187–190).

² Source: H. Wayne Pipkin & John H. Yoder (eds.), Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1989). Balthasar Hubmaier does not dismiss the significance of the Lord's Supper but insists that it is inseparable from faith and obedience, since “where there is no faith, there is no sacrament” (p. 129). He describes the Supper as a public confession of faith before the church (p. 437), in which believers remember the suffering of Christ (p. 439) and declare their intention to live

5. Covenant, Incarnation, and Eucharistic Reality

Pilgram Marpeck offers the most theologically developed Anabaptist Eucharistic vision. Drawing deeply from covenant theology and incarnation, Marpeck rejects both:

- sacramental coercion (grace without obedience), and
- interiorised spirituality (faith without embodiment).

For Marpeck:

- Christ is truly present to the faithful,
- the Supper is a covenantal meeting place,
- presence is mediated through obedient faith and communal practice.

Marpeck insists that outward signs and inward faith belong together. The Eucharist is neither empty sign nor automatic conduit, but a **relational event** in which Christ encounters a faithful people.

This mirrors the Passover logic: the sign is effective *because* it is received in covenant loyalty.³

6. Eucharist, Ethics, and Ecclesial Discipline

One of the most neglected aspects of Anabaptist sacramental theology is its insistence that Eucharistic participation requires **moral accountability**. Church discipline was not punitive but sacramental: it preserved the integrity of the community's covenant life.

The Supper:

- confirms communal reconciliation,
- presupposes restored relationships,
- enacts visible unity.

according to him (p. 440). Participation binds the community in brotherly love and shared obedience (pp. 441–442). For this reason, unrepentant participation is not neutral but false: those who partake without amendment of life “lie before God and the church” (p. 444). Hubmaier’s concern is not to deny Christ’s reality, but to insist that Christ cannot be claimed apart from obedience to his commandments (p. 445).

³ Source: William Klassen & Walter Klaassen (eds.), *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978). Pilgram Marpeck develops a Eucharistic theology grounded in the Incarnation, through which God works inwardly by means of outward, visible practices (pp. 172, 199–200). He rejects both sacramental automatism—since “it is not the bread or wine... that accomplishes anything” apart from faith (pp. 176–177)—and purely inward spirituality, insisting that God does not give the Spirit “without means” and that inner reality must be outwardly expressed (pp. 201, 204). The Supper is therefore a communal participation in Christ, in which believers become “one body” and receive Christ in fellowship (pp. 178–179). Christ’s presence is not located in the elements themselves, but is given where faith and obedience are present (pp. 180–181). Outward sign and inward faith belong together—“neither may be separated without destroying both” (pp. 205–206). The Eucharist is thus not an object but an event: “not in the element, but in the use,” a participatory encounter between Christ and his gathered people (pp. 176–178).

This places Anabaptist theology in continuity with Rabbinic emphases on repentance and reconciliation before atonement, and with Pauline warnings about unworthy participation (1 Cor 11).

7. Presence without Metaphysics

Unlike later debates focused on substance, location, or mechanism, Anabaptists ask a different question:

What kind of people does this meal make us?

Christ's presence is affirmed not through metaphysical precision but through **transformative encounter**. Presence is discerned in:

- obedience,
- love,
- shared life,
- perseverance under suffering.

This does not deny Real Presence; it **refuses to abstract it from covenant faithfulness**.

8. Comparison with Magisterial Reformers

When placed alongside Luther and Calvin, the Anabaptist position appears less extreme than commonly assumed:

- Like Luther, Anabaptists insist that God's action cannot be controlled by ritual.
- Like Calvin, they insist on participation rather than repetition.
- Unlike both, they locate sacramental integrity explicitly within discipleship and ecclesial holiness.

Their divergence lies not in a denial of grace, but in **resisting any account of grace that bypasses obedience**.

9. Anabaptists, Memorial, and the Cross

The Anabaptist insistence on memorial does not weaken the cross; it **protects its moral and covenantal force**. The Supper does not dispense forgiveness mechanically; it summons the community to live out the cruciform life the cross inaugurates.

In this sense, Anabaptist theology implicitly resists Penal Substitutionary reductions that isolate atonement from transformation. Atonement reconciles, and reconciliation reconfigures life.

10. Conclusion: A Necessary Corrective

The Anabaptist witness offers modern theology a crucial reminder: **sacraments belong to the church as a community of obedient faith**, not to abstract systems of grace.

Their theology:

- recovers memorial as covenant action,
- preserves the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice,
- insists on real participation without metaphysical coercion,
- integrates Eucharist, ethics, and ecclesiology.

Far from being a theological dead end, responsible Anabaptist Eucharistic theology represents one of the most biblically consistent and morally serious sacramental visions within the Christian tradition.

Suggested Sources for Further Development

- Hubmaier, *On the Christian Baptism of Believers*
- Hubmaier, selected writings
- C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*
- John Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*
- Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*