

# COVENANT MEMORIAL

## A Fresh Perspective on Real Presence

### Essay No 5

## Contrasting Anabaptist memorial theology with modern evangelical practice

### I. What “memorial” means in responsible Anabaptist theology

In its stronger Anabaptist forms (e.g., Marpeck; also later Mennonite theological reflection), “memorial” is not *thin recollection* but **covenantal enactment**.<sup>1</sup>

- **Ecclesial act:** the Supper is something the *church* does as a visible people, not primarily an individual devotion.
- **Ethical seriousness:** participation presupposes reconciliation, disciplined discipleship, and a church capable of saying “yes” and “no” to membership in meaningful ways.
- **Performative remembrance:** remembering is public allegiance—“we bind ourselves anew to Christ and to one another.”
- **Anti-automatism:** the Supper is not a mechanism that dispenses grace irrespective of obedience; the sign is true only as it is lived.

This yields a “thick memorial”: Christ’s death is proclaimed, the community is re-constituted, and the church’s life is re-aligned with the cruciform Lord.

### II. Common patterns in modern evangelical practice

“Modern evangelical” is diverse, but in broad practice (especially in low-church settings) several recurring tendencies appear:

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#### <sup>1</sup> Sources

Primary: Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*

Translated and edited by William Klassen and Walter Klaassen;

Secondary: John Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*; C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*.)

### 1. **Event/experience orientation**

Communion is frequently appended to a service as an inward, reflective moment—moving from “gathered body” toward “private interiority.”

### 2. **Minimal ecclesiology**

The Supper is sometimes detached from a robust account of the church as covenant community—so it becomes a *personal* act of remembrance rather than a *corporate* act of renewal.

### 3. **Reduced moral-ecclesial accountability**

Participation can be open by default, with limited pastoral framing around reconciliation, restitution, or church discipline. The tone is often “between you and God,” even where Paul treats the Supper as a matter of the body’s integrity (1 Cor 10–11).

### 4. **Atonement framing that can thin sacramentality**

Where the Atonement is viewed solely in terms of Penal Substitution, Communion can become a mental return to “payment made” rather than a covenantal meal of communion, union, and proclamation.

### 5. **Token frequency and weak catechesis**

In many churches, Communion is relatively infrequent and under-taught. The less often it’s celebrated, the more it risks being treated as an optional add-on rather than a constitutive act of the church.

None of this is inevitable—there are evangelical communities with rich sacramental practice—but these tendencies are common enough to be worth naming.

## III. The core contrast: covenantal enactment vs. devotional recollection

A succinct way to express the contrast is this:

- **Anabaptist “thick memorial”** tends to say:  
*Communion is a covenantal act that makes the church visible as a disciplined, reconciled, cruciform community.*
- **Modern evangelical “thin memorial”** often functions as:  
*Communion is an occasion for individual gratitude and introspection about the cross.*

The difference is not whether the cross matters, but whether “remembrance” is **ecclesial participation** or **private recollection**.

## IV. Where evangelicals can learn from the best Anabaptists

Without adopting Anabaptist distinctives wholesale, evangelical practice can be strengthened by retrieving four Anabaptist emphases:

1. **Communion as church-making** (not just church-expressing)
2. **Reconciliation as a liturgical requirement** (not a therapeutic suggestion)
3. **Catechesis that binds Supper to discipleship**

**4. Recovering the Supper's corporate identity:** "one bread / one body" (1 Cor 10:17)

V. Where Anabaptists can learn from evangelicals (and from patristic density)

A fair contrast also notes a risk within some Anabaptist trajectories: the Supper can become so ethically conditioned that its **gift-character** is muted. Evangelical insistence on divine initiative can help keep clear that:

- the meal is fundamentally *received*, not achieved;
- Christ gives himself to the church before the church gives itself back to him.

The best synthesis holds both: **gift that creates obedience**, and **obedience that protects the gift from hypocrisy**.