
“Do This in Remembrance of Me”

A Brethren Understanding of the Lord’s Supper as an Alternative Political Witness

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While all the versions of the kingdom of the world acquire and exercise power over others, the kingdom of God, incarnated and modeled in the person of Jesus Christ, advances only by exercising power under others. It expands by manifesting the power of self-sacrificial, Calvary-like love.¹

—Gregory Boyd

This article explores the political ramifications of the Brethren understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The Brethren is a movement that began in the early 1700s with a blending of Anabaptism and Radical Pietism. The Radical Pietist side stressed the necessity of a personal (though not private) relationship/experience with Christ. The Anabaptist witness balanced this with the importance of community visible through the corporate, relational gathering of the body.

Unfortunately, in an all-too-common narrative of churches in America in the early twentieth century, several splits occurred. The struggling Brethren, reeling from the fundamentalist/modernist split, aligned themselves entirely with a growing expression of American evangelicalism,² which stressed many of the virtues of the Pietist witness to the exclusion of the Anabaptist socially minded witness.

Two Anabaptist practices of the Brethren that have stood the test of time are (1) our understanding of the Lord’s Supper as three-fold—footwashing, Eucha-

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1 Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 14.

2 I realize that defining “evangelical” is a work unto itself. For the sake of this essay, I separate evangelical, meaning “bearers of good news,” from American evangelicalism, the particularly distorted understanding of evangelical that has been wrapped up with American politics. It is with this latter philosophy/theology that this essay takes issue.

rist, and love feast—and (2) baptism by trine-immersion (posture of kneeling and being immersed three times forward). This essay will focus on the Lord’s Supper and how this practice helps the Brethren recapture a rich, yet lost, Anabaptist witness—specifically Mennonite—that is constitutive of our historic identity.

Recognition of this lost connection with Anabaptist witness prompted the idea for this article’s examination of the Lord’s Supper from a Brethren-Anabaptist perspective, drawing on the work of John Howard Yoder.³ The richness of the Brethren tradition comes in its attempt as a church body to be as close to the biblical narrative as possible. And out of that anchoring in the New Testament comes a voice to a larger audience within Christianity, particularly in the West.

This essay explores the Lord’s Supper as understood from an Anabaptist tradition and examines the political implications that it sheds on our very modern understanding of national identity (i.e., North American). It does so by bringing this specific tradition into conversation with various theologians and political philosophers, both from within and without the tradition, and many from the Catholic tradition.

The central argument of this essay is that the common fellowship, as experienced in the Lord’s Supper, or communion, is a radical challenge to the state’s orientation of “common space,” “common identity,” and “common good.”

Language of Lord’s Supper: What Do We Mean by Such a Title?

When Jesus gathers his disciples in the upper room, they are not preoccupied with the big question that dominates later Christianity (especially after the twelfth and into the sixteenth century) as to what happens to the elements of the Eucharist. As we approach this scene, detailed in all the Gospels, we must attempt to get into the minds of those first followers.

The elements of the Eucharist have traditionally been understood one of two ways: (1) as sacramental (Catholicism and Lutheranism), where the bread

3 The writings of John Howard Yoder sought to assist Mennonites, along with other Anabaptists, to return to the particulars of their faith and to bring those distinctives into conversation with the larger catholic church. In *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World*, Yoder examines five distinct Mennonite practices grounded in the narrative of the New Testament and explores the political significance of those practices for the church today. (Note: The use of Yoder brings challenges related to his known sexual violence against women. Acknowledgment in this essay of the contribution that Yoder offered in the recovery of Anabaptist thought is in no way intended to ignore or minimize the harm caused to his many victims. For further study into Yoder’s maleficence and the decades-long work of church discipline to censure him, see Rachel Waltner Goossen, “Defanging the Beast”: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89 [January 2015]: 7–80).

and the wine *become* the body and blood of the Lord through the process of transubstantiation or consubstantiation; (2) as symbolic (Zwingli and most of Protestantism), where the bread and the cup *remind* us of the body and blood of Christ.

The historic Brethren position is a third way between these two positions. While Brethren hold that the elements are not sacramental, they do believe there is a real presence of Christ manifested by the gathering of the believing community as the community reenacts the story of John 13 to remind itself of the common story that binds all its members together around the Lord’s Supper.

When we remind ourselves of our common story, we realize that the extraordinary power of this meal comes in rather ordinary, non-flashy packaging. Jesus was simply sharing a meal with his followers. They were not partaking of Mass or the Eucharist or even the Lord’s Supper. They were simply sharing a common meal together. Furthermore, we are told repeatedly that the disciples struggled with the true identity of Jesus. They wouldn’t even have realized at that point that this would be their “last” supper with Jesus.

John Howard Yoder shares this understanding when he writes, “What Jesus must have meant, and what the record indicates that his first followers took him to mean, was ‘whenever you have your common meal.’ The meal Jesus blessed that evening and claimed as his memorial was their *ordinary* partaking together of food for the body.”⁴

A different understanding of the significance of the Lord’s Supper is emerging with Yoder’s comments and the larger Anabaptist perspective. Although Jesus’s statements about his body and blood certainly merit theological inquiry, attending to the gathered people changes the focus of the questions. Instead of a conversation about what happens to the elements during the service, we have a broader conversation of what type of people are created by the Lord’s Supper and what trajectory such a meal places disciples on as they gather for it.

In agreement, the late Vernard Eller, Church of the Brethren historian and theologian, affirmed this understanding of the Lord’s Supper:

The first implication to be noted is that things can’t be both ways at once. If the Lord’s Supper is what we suggest it is, it cannot at the same time be what the church has regularly taken it to be. . . . We will not find Scripture supporting the sacramental view that the Supper accomplishes some sort of self-operative transaction between God’s divine sphere and our human sphere through the vehicle of consecrated, divinized elements or objects. No such “mystical transformations” are involved.

Neither is there involved a “presence of Christ” that is any different in kind from his personal presence as we experience it at other tables, in other compa-

⁴ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 16.

nies, on other occasions. No, we remember him there by the same operations of memory used in remembering him (or remembering others) in all kinds of situations. The communion service is designed simply to make us more aware of and sensitive to that unmediated presence of Jesus which is available any time and any place without the office of either priest or element.⁵

The Lord's Supper, as celebrated by the church (twice a year among Brethren) is but an ultimate reminder of the real presence of Jesus at all meals, indeed at all times. Because of the importance of the Lord's Supper as the common meal shared among disciples, Eller argues vehemently against a sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper. Such a view, he states, transformed "table fellowship" into an aspect of worship liturgy that does not emphasize the community gathered as constitutive of the revelation of Christ in the meal. About this truncated understanding, Eller argues,

It makes no difference whether the participants (better: recipients) know one another—or even *want* to know one another. But how can we claim to be commemorating and perpetuating *the table fellowship of Jesus* (calling it "the Lord's Supper"), when our practice retains not so much as one point of likeness with his?⁶

And because the Lord's Supper was originally "table fellowship," a common meal in the same vein as the Jewish Passover, the church ate the meal together as a participating, and re-creating their story, in Christ.⁷ Eller continues:

Equivalently then, it seems clear that, regarding the earliest Christians, as often as any number of them gathered for the honest purpose of eating together because they were hungry—this common meal *was* in fact also a Lord's

⁵ Vernard Eller, "Could the Church Have It All Wrong?" House Church Central, accessed November 2, 2011, <http://www.hccentral.com/eller9/chap5.html#a>.

⁶ Eller.

⁷ Eller is also quick to speak to the uniqueness of the Lord's Supper from the Jewish Passover meal. Eller believes that the Gospel accounts of Jesus's last supper with his disciples offer inconclusive evidence, at best, that Jesus is in fact sharing a Passover meal with them. In this same work Eller contends,

We are unnecessarily complicating the matter when we try to make it hinge upon a detail of dating—as to whether Jesus' Thursday evening meal did in fact coincide with that year's regular date for the Jewish Passover meal. The problem of chronological calculation comes about in this way: All three of the synoptic Gospels have Jesus talking with his disciples about preparing the upper room for "Passover." Luke goes a step further and also has Jesus, in the room, at the supper, call it a "Passover." However, the Fourth Gospel has things a bit different in saying that the supper occurred "before Passover"—so that the death of Jesus coincided with the slaughtering of the lambs (which would be eaten, presumably, on the Passover occasion of what would have to be Friday evening).

Supper. It was supposed to be a conscious extension of *his* table fellowship and a bread-and-cup remembering of *his* story. Both Passover and the Lord’s Supper are *meant* to be integral strands in the religious fabric of everyday family life. If it showed no other traditional influences at all, the Lord’s Supper would still stand as a remembrance, a recital, of the table fellowship practiced by the Lord Jesus.⁸

This only begs the question, why is the Lord’s Supper best understood as “table fellowship” and not the more common Eucharistic understandings that have developed over the centuries? The first response is quite simple: the “table fellowship” understanding is better supported by the example of Jesus in John 13. But what about the understanding of the Lord’s Supper within the Synoptic Gospels or the Apostle Paul’s understanding? Are they in agreement with the Lord’s Supper being understood as a common meal?

To get at the answer to this, we have to ask what the *common meal* really means. In other words, why would Jesus use a common meal to be the reminder for the future of the movement of his life, death, and resurrection?

Importance of the Lord’s Supper as Common Meal

New Testament theologian Peter Lampe explores what it means to “proclaim” Christ’s death in a very participative understanding of the Eucharist:

What, then, does it mean to “proclaim” Christ’s death in the Eucharist? In the Eucharist the death of Jesus Christ is not made present and “proclaimed” (1 Cor. 11:26) only by the *sacramental acts* of breaking bread and drinking wine from one cup. In the Eucharist, Christ’s death is proclaimed and made present by means of our giving ourselves up to others. Our love for others represents Christ’s death to other human beings. Only by actively loving and caring for others does the participant in the Eucharist “proclaim” Christ’s death as something that happened for others.⁹

Lampe calls for a communal—rather than a traditional sacramental—understanding of the Lord’s Supper, where the gathered body itself becomes a sort of sacrament.¹⁰ If the sacraments have historically been a way for the presence of

⁸ Eller.

⁹ Peter Lampe, quoted in Dale R. Stoffer, ed., *The Lord’s Supper: Believers Church Perspectives* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1997), 125.

¹⁰ Pilgram Marpeck (1495–1556) develops this idea further. See Pilgram Marpeck, *Confession of Faith, Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 2000), 148. Marpeck is an important voice in this discussion as his exposition on the Lord’s Supper is a guide for an exploration toward an Anabaptist ecclesiology constituted by the Lord’s Supper. For a more detailed study of Anabaptism and the Lord’s Supper, see

Christ, the very divine life, to be administered or made present among us, then why couldn't the gathered church itself be a sacrament?¹¹

C. C. Pecknold, a theologian at the Catholic University of America, speaks in a similar vein (albeit within a sacramental tradition):

When Christians are drawn together, gathered in the body of Christ through the sacrament of our unity, when we are signed with one Spirit, we have access to God in Christ. It is here that people gain a share in divine power by becoming not only members of Christ's body, but in doing so we become members one of another, where each of us shares in the good of the others.¹²

The phrase “sacrament of our unity” is very important for this conversation as Pecknold ties it to the work of Henri de Lubac, a twentieth-century Jesuit theologian whose works are considered an important catalyst to Vatican II. In his book *Corpus Mysticum*, de Lubac operates with this central thesis: “The Eucharist makes the Church when the Church makes the Eucharist.” His central claim is that as the church gathers to partake of the bread and the cup, the real presence of Christ is manifested through the unity created around the elements. The sacraments unite the individual members of the church to manifest the presence of Christ to the watching world.

This understanding of the Eucharist has similarities to the Brethren understanding of the Lord’s Supper. While Brethren hold that the elements are entirely symbolic—a point of departure from de Lubac’s understanding—they also believe that the real presence of Christ is manifested in the body united around the elements, including footwashing and the love feast.¹³

John D. Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1993).

11 A side conversation to the one on “sacraments” is the Brethren understanding of “ordinances” as those things that Christ ordained us to do. Brethren have traditionally rejected the language of sacrament, finding the term A) not supported by Scripture and B) tied to a problematic praxis within sacramental theology. Dale Stoffer’s book, *The Lord’s Supper: Believers Church Perspectives*, is a great resource for this topic and others regarding the Lord’s Supper from a Believers Church perspective.

12 C. C. Pecknold, *Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 141.

13 Brethren, in their quest to live as closely to the New Testament example as possible, believe that footwashing is just as important to the Lord’s Supper as are the elements known as the Eucharist. There is no question that in John’s account of the Lord’s Supper, Jesus initiates the footwashing. The significance of this act is apparent in four ways in John 13: 1) footwashing is seen as an image of Jesus’s atoning death, calling to mind the cleansing of the believer through Jesus’s blood. It is also a reminder of daily dying to self through mutual submission to one another; 2) footwashing (vv. 14–17) is to be contin-

Thus, each element of the Brethren Lord’s Supper has a vertical (upward to God) and horizontal (outward to neighbor) meaning and purpose as sketched below:

Part of Service	Vertical Meaning	Horizontal Meaning
Footwashing	Cleansing	Mutual submission
Love Feast	Jesus’s love for disciples	Love for one another
Eucharist	Jesus’s sacrificial death	Unity within the body of Christ ¹⁴

At a Brethren communion service, an important passage is from the tenth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It speaks to the communal and participative nature of the Lord’s Supper:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor 10:14–22, NRSV)

The context for this passage is Paul’s warning against eating sacrificial meals at pagan temples. Paul argues that as pagans sacrifice to demons and idols, the harm isn’t the idols themselves. Instead, as people sacrifice to the idols, they are *partnering* with the demons associated with those idols. In the same way, as the church gathers corporately around the meal that commemorates the sacrifice of Christ, they partner with Jesus. They become members of the one “loaf” that is the body of Christ. In a communion service, the gathered body proclaims at the same time, in unison, “The bread which we break is the communion of

ued in Johannine communities (as explicit in perpetuation as the words of institution); 3) footwashing appears in a sacramental context, and some early Christian writers even saw it as a sacrament; 4) John methodically details the footwashing (for example, Peter’s remarks) and even tells us that it happened out of place from what was customary; instead of being done as soon as the disciples arrived, the footwashing interrupted the meal. For more on this, see John Christopher Thomas, “Footwashing within the Context of the Lord’s Supper” in Stoffer, *The Lord’s Supper*, 184.

14 Stoffer, *The Lord’s Supper*, 58.

the body of Christ; the cup which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.”

Brethren (and Anabaptists) have historically used this passage in their discourse on the Lord’s Supper because it speaks strongly to a communal understanding of the tradition. Indeed, a Brethren understanding of the Lord’s Supper is entirely corporate, embodied in each of the three parts as noted in the chart above. The reality of Christ is manifested in the believer and their neighbor as we are all gathered together in Christ.

The question that emerges from the Brethren understanding of the Lord’s Supper could also be the same question asked of Jesus in the famous parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke’s Gospel: “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29). Is it simply my neighbor in the church—the person sitting right next to me at a communion service—or is it broader than that?

In Acts 2 we read the following:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. (vv. 42–47 NRSV)

This picture of the early Jerusalem church offers us a significant window into the importance of this act called the Lord’s Supper, or “the breaking of bread.” Mentioned twice in this passage, “breaking of bread” is a key part of the larger gathering and the more intimate gatherings inside the home. It is also an economic act of selling all property and possessions and giving to “anyone who had need.”

The picture of Acts 2 is a fulfillment of the promise of Deuteronomy 15:4 and the Sabbatical Year (every seventh year): “There will . . . be no one in need among you (NRSV). The risen Lord had radically shifted the priorities of this first-century church, and, because of the implications of breaking bread—the sharing of common meals together—the poor among them were given provision.

This explains the Apostle Paul’s rebuke in 1 Corinthians 11:

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.

No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private

suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? (vv. 17–22, NIV)

The rebuke regards economic abuse. In first-century Corinth, if you were wealthy you could afford to pay hired hands to take care of the job site and could thus arrive to the service of the Lord’s Supper early. If you were poor, you were more than likely working for one of the wealthier individuals, which meant you arrived later to the meal because of your duties on the job site.

The abuse arising from this was that the wealthier individuals arrived early, drank too much wine, and were gluttons before any of the poorer workers could arrive. As these workers arrived, the wealthier individuals were already inebriated and the common meal was ruined because of their greed.

Yoder locates this scene in its larger textual context:

Requests for guidance have to do with table fellowship: with meat that has been offered to idols (chapters 8 and 10) and with class segregated tables (chapter 11). If their meal failed to reflect the overcoming of social stratification, Paul told the Corinthians that the participants would be celebrating their own condemnation (1 Cor. 11:29). In celebrating their fellowship around the table, the early Christians testified that the messianic age, often pictured as a banquet, had begun.¹⁵

The messianic age, the “kingdom of God at hand,” to borrow Mark’s language, was revealed through the table fellowship of the early church. To the watching world, a peculiar people revealed a potent reality that showed no poor among them. As they broke bread, ate a common meal, and quite possibly washed feet, they testified to the presence of the kingdom of God in the present and revealed their collective hope of the grand consummation of that kingdom still in the future.

Transformation of the “Common” Meal

The early church understanding of “common,” as apparent through the Lord’s Supper practiced as table fellowship, even appears in extra-biblical works like the *Didache*, an early manual of church practice and discipline. The author writes, “The *Didache* counsels *synkoinonein*, which is to *co-koinonize*, to copartner in all things: ‘thou shalt not turn away from him that is in want, but thou shalt share (*synkoinonein*) all things with thy brother, and shalt not say that they are thine own.’”¹⁶ Up until the second century, this understanding of “synkoi-

15 Yoder, *Body Politics*, 18.

16 Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Discipleship in a Rebellious World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 178.

nonein,” manifested through the common meal, was seen as remembrance and eschatological hope of a kingdom yet to be fully realized.

By the second century, however, table fellowship and Eucharist had been separated. Everett Ferguson, professor emeritus at Abilene Christian University, offers an explanation for this separation:

[Communicating the gospel with the Hellenized world] required Christians to make many adjustments and reinterpretations in their effort to communicate with their society. The interpretation of the Lord’s Supper was included in those matters influenced by new ways of looking at things. A major aspect was a shift from Jewish thought in terms of function and relationships, to Greek philosophical thought about ontology (or being, where Plato had directed his attention) and substance (where Aristotle had made important analyses).¹⁷

Writings of theologians from the second through fourth centuries attest to this shift in understanding. Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*, which he wrote in the second century, shows the new understanding of Eucharist as separated from table fellowship:

We do not receive [the Eucharist] as common bread and drink. In the same manner as Jesus Christ our Savior became flesh through the word of God and had flesh and blood *for our salvation* (emphasis added), so also the food for which thanks was given through the prayer of the word that is from him, from which our blood and flesh are nourished by metabolism, we have been taught to be the flesh and blood of that Jesus who became flesh.¹⁸

This shift in practice reflected a shift away from understanding the Lord’s Supper as a perpetuation of the table fellowship of Jesus through a common meal. Beginning in the second century, the elements of the Eucharist were separated from the common meal and understood as elements “for our salvation.” This new understanding became increasingly engrained as the conversation shifted from table fellowship to what occurs to the elements themselves, as noted by Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem (ca. 349–378):

The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the worshipful Trinity was simple bread and wine, but when the invocation is done, the bread becomes the body of Christ and wine the blood of Christ.¹⁹

¹⁷ Everett Ferguson in Stoffer, *The Lord’s Supper*, 23.

¹⁸ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 1.66.2.

¹⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 1:7.

As this shift in conversation took place, the alternative political witness of the church, through their understanding of “common” around the table, became increasingly accommodated to the empire by the eleventh century.

The Lord’s Supper as Alternative Political Witness

Up to this point, this article has traced the understanding of the word “common”—namely, what is “in common”—from the New Testament understanding of the Lord’s Supper as table fellowship. A central question for the remainder of this essay is, How did we get to a place where the Eucharist is understood sacramentally, separate from table fellowship, with a mediator to administer it?

The Brethren have always understood the Eucharist as a *part* of the three-fold communion service, which also includes footwashing and the love feast. For a moment, though, let’s step back and briefly trace the changing understanding of the Eucharist.

Throughout the patristic era and the development of the Imperial Church, church and empire increasingly blended together. With this blending, the Lord’s Supper as table fellowship no longer made sense, and the shift in understanding regarding this central practice began.²⁰ When the church was a persecuted minority, the Lord’s Supper constituted this community as they shared a common meal in the already/not yet tension of the kingdom of God. When Christianity became a national religion, the common meal was no longer necessary for the social cohesion of the group’s peculiar identity. The larger empire now understood itself as a new Christian common.

The hierarchical structure of the Imperial Church gave way to an understanding of the Lord’s Supper as Eucharist, which was seen as the *medicine of salvation* to the sinfulness of humanity.²¹ The Eucharist became separate from the common meal of which it had been a part, and the church’s understanding of “common” was forever altered.

De Lubac persuasively argues that prior to the twelfth century, the reference *corpus mysticum* (mystical body) described the sacramental elements of the Eucharist, while the *corpus Christi verum* (true body of Christ) described the

20 By the second century, the Eucharist was being separated from the agape meal in certain circles within Christianity. The increasingly blended nature of church and empire under the reign of Constantine only served to exacerbate this separation. While Constantine’s reign cannot alone be blamed for these shifts in understanding of the Lord’s Supper, his reign serves to perpetuate this truncated understanding by making this distortion of Christianity and its practices the “official” religion of the Roman Empire.

21 The church had hierarchical structures as early as Ignatius of Antioch in the second century, but Constantine’s reign would come to wed this hierarchy with the Roman Empire in what is known as the Imperial Church.

gathered (ecclesial) body.²² By the twelfth century, “these terms were reversed, and the church came to be called *corpus mysticum* while the Eucharistic elements were designated *corpus Christi verum*.²³

This tracing of the historic development of the Eucharist in de Lubac’s tome, *Corpus Mysticum*, shows that once the understanding of the Eucharist developed to accommodate the empire, it opened the door to a slippery slope that led to a major shift in how the church was understood in relationship to power (hear “empire”). While de Lubac does not seek to associate the Eucharist with a “common meal” understanding, his writings are beneficial to show the ongoing dissolution of the common meal throughout the medieval era; and he offers his critique while remaining within the Catholic/Jesuit tradition (a source of tension before Vatican II).

The downfall of de Lubac’s project is much the same as Luther’s; namely, to what point are we attempting to return the conversation? It seems that de Lubac, like Luther, is unwilling to reexamine the understanding of Eucharist as part of a more common meal but instead supports a return to a quasi-sacrament of community understanding (like Marbeck but minus table fellowship).²⁴

The subsequent shifts in understanding of the Eucharist (over and against the common meal) are further exacerbated by changing sociopolitical understandings of empire and sovereignty with the rise of the nation-state. Prior to the sixteenth century, nations or states, as we know them, did not exist. Territories were loosely connected under the larger identity of empire. The development of the idea of the sovereign state and the spread of the Protestant Reformation both, in various ways, show a reaction to a centralization of ecclesial power.

Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh in his provocative book *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, traces the awkward history of the relationship between church and state from the sixteenth

22 See Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

23 Bryan C. Hollon, *Everything Is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Theopolitical Visions) (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), loc. 1337, Kindle.

24 According to de Lubac, the waning of the communal nature of the Eucharist began in the eleventh century with the controversy over Berengar of Tours. Details of the actual controversy have prompted significant debate. It is possible that Berengar did not deny the real presence but argued against transubstantiation. Regardless, he publicly recanted any views counter to transubstantiation in his 1059 confession, in which he argued that “the bread and wine which are placed on the altar are after consecration not only a sacrament but also the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the senses not only sacramentally but in truth are taken and broken by the hands of the priests and crushed by the teeth of the faithful” (Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Eucharistic Liturgies: Their Evolution and Interpretation* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012], 225).

century forward. He describes the sixteenth-century shift from "complex spaces" to a "simple space" as defined by a sovereign nation-state:

What takes place in the modern era—not complete in some places until the late nineteenth century—is a reconfiguration of space that is much more profound than the creation of an expanded common space through the gathering up and coordination of formerly scattered elements into one. What happens is a shift from "complex space"—varied communal contexts with overlapping jurisdictions and levels of authority—to a "simple space," characterized by a duality of individual and state. There is an enfeeblement of local common spaces by the power of the center and a simultaneous parochialization of the imagination of Christendom into that of the sovereign state. To say that the state "creates" society is not to deny that families, guilds, clans, and other social groups existed before the state. Rather, the state "creates" society by replacing the complex overlapping loyalties of medieval *societates* with one society, bounded by borders and ruled by one sovereign to whom allegiance is owed in a way that trumps all other allegiances.²⁵

This gathering up of complex, common spaces into one simple, common space is but another nail in the coffin of the church as an alternative community that manifests an understanding of common that is contrary to the ways of the world. With this gathering up of spaces (including churches), the newly formed state develops an idea once attributed to God—namely, sovereignty. Cavanaugh writes, "The conceptual leap that accompanies the advent of the state in the sixteenth century is the invention of sovereignty, a doctrine that asserts the incontestable right of the central power to make and enforce law for those people who fall within recognized territorial borders."²⁶

As the state continues to centralize power via the myth of common identity, purpose, and good, power and rights continue to be relinquished by the individual to serve the purposes of the state. The myth throughout history is that there actually is such a thing as a "common identity" or "common good" that the state seeks to protect. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes argues that what is "common" is not actually good but a "shared evil." Cavanaugh elaborates:

The foundation of the state in Hobbes is not a common good but rather a shared evil: the fear of death. Each person is possessed of a "perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death." Individuals in the state of nature do not occupy a common space, for each has a *jus in omnia*, a right over everything, and that makes them enemies, locked in the war of all against all. The only way out of this condition is for each to surrender

25 William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 18.

26 Cavanaugh, 19.

his or her will to the sovereign, who gathers up the many into one.²⁷

In light of this “shared evil,” one must ask how the state deals with pluralities like the church. Especially a church whose Lord tells his followers not to fear death and that he, himself, has actually conquered death. In response to such pluralities, the state enters into a sort of dance of give and take. According to Hobbes, the church must be absorbed by the state so as not to challenge the state’s power. Later philosophers called for a sort of privatization of the faith as the state had to seek to centralize power all the while offering the illusion of diversity (seen as a gift from the all-powerful state). Cavanaugh traces the developments of the conversation from Hobbes’s absorption of the church by the state to the privatization of the church away from the state in the writings of seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke:

What Hobbes accomplished by absorbing the church into the state, Locke accomplished by privatizing the church. Peace would never be attained if essentially undecidable matters such as the end of human life were left open to public debate. What is common is therefore redefined as follows: “The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests. Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like.”²⁸

Cavanaugh continues, “When the church is viewed as particular—as one of the many in civil society—and the nation-state is viewed as universal—as the larger unifying reality—then it is inevitable that the one will absorb the many, in the putative interests of harmony and peace. Indeed, war becomes a means of furthering the integration of the many into the one: we must all stand together when faced with an enemy.”²⁹ In other words, for the state to maintain and perpetuate its existence, pluralities like the church must be absorbed or privatized. And in both cases, it is the larger unifying understanding of the state that calls the shots. Already we see a very exclusive understanding of “common” developing in the guise of the state.

Pecknold develops this history a little further for us and shows how even the foundation for our liberal democracy takes shape precisely in this developing conversation of church and state:

The ideas that order our Western political imagination and form the structure for modern liberal democracy were formed out of the patterns of thinking that developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Those patterns began to draw on theological imagery and meaning to bolster their self-con-

²⁷ Cavanaugh, 20.

²⁸ Cavanaugh, 21.

²⁹ Cavanaugh, 68.

sciously secular ideas about government.³⁰

Political philosopher Sheldon Wolin affirms this by discerning a series of historic shifts from the medieval common good to Luther’s individual conscience to Calvin’s collective conscience and, finally, to Locke’s social conscience. The latter is easily transcribed to economic terms when “personal interest” is subordinated to what is in the “public interest.”³¹ By the time eighteenth-century Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau bases democratic freedom on the individual freed from social constraints, the Lockean “social conscience” gives way to the need for community expressed primarily in economic terms³²—for example, Locke’s language of “work” and “sacrifice.”³³

Wolin concludes, “In retrospect the long journey from private judgment to social conformity appears as the desperate effort of liberals to fashion a substitute for the sense of community that had been lost.”³⁴ As he understands it, “The fugitive character of democracy is directly related to the fact about it that Aristotle emphasized: democracy’s politics is the creation of those who must work, who cannot hire proxies to promote their interests, and for whom participation, as distinguished from voting, is necessarily a sacrifice.” Democracy, for Wolin, is radically participatory and demands, as Pecknold noted earlier on the Lockean inheritance, “work and sacrifice (words with a theological memory).”³⁵

And in all of this, Cavanaugh calls us back to the power of the state shaped for the “common good” in relationship to pluralities like the church. He argues, “Pluralism [as in churches] will always be a crisis for the liberal state, and the solution to the crisis of pluralism is to rally around the nation-state, the locus of a mystical communion that rescues us from the conflicts of civil society.”³⁶ The state must always elevate an exclusive understanding of common that will

³⁰ Pecknold, *Christianity and Politics*, 122.

³¹ Luther elevates the role of individual conscience in his desire to provide a corrective to the centralization of ecclesial power. He then de-politicizes the church and elevates the role of the individual will. Calvin recognizes that both church and state serve a collective role in shaping the common good, which he understood to be God. Calvin, for a time, favored theocracy. Locke understands the role of the state as protector of a social contract. Like Hobbes, Locke believes that the state secures individuals’ rights to pursue their own interests. The highest of these, for Locke, was the right to property. Locke’s works were influential for Thomas Jefferson, and Lockean language is evident in the *Declaration of Independence*’s understanding of the “pursuit of happiness.”

³² Pecknold, 129.

³³ Pecknold, 134.

³⁴ Pecknold, 130.

³⁵ Pecknold, 134.

³⁶ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 22.

centralize and solidify its dominance over all pluralities. It does this all while creating the appearance of beneficence and altruism.

Alasdair MacIntyre comments on the duality of centralization and beneficence by the nation-state in the following memorable quote:

The modern nation-state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one's life on its behalf. . . . It is like being asked to die for the telephone company.³⁷

Augustine and “Theo-Drama”³⁸ as Political Witness

It sounds bizarre to argue for a reclaiming of a Brethren understanding of the Lord’s Supper by using Augustine’s *City of God* in defense. (The title of this section is even more bizarre since “Theo-Drama” was a concept created by Hans Urs von Balthasar, a Catholic theologian of the twentieth century.) Augustine, however, offers us a lot as we seek to recapture the practice of the Lord’s Supper as found in the narrative(s) of the New Testament.

As we explore the nature of democracy, Augustine’s inclusion makes a little more sense. Pecknold argues:

Like humanity itself, democracy is restless. That restlessness is a sign, Augustine tells us, of not only a political problem in our nature, but also a theological problem. The restlessness of democracy, like the restlessness of the human heart, also signals to us that there is a peace that we all seek. The desire for human communion is writ into the fabric of democracy, a long-lost memory of what humanity is destined for: participation in the truth that

³⁷As quoted in Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 23.

³⁸ For more on “theo-drama,” see Hans Urs von Balthasar’s five-volume work titled *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989). Balthasar was a prominent Swiss-Catholic theologian of the twentieth century. Many in Catholicism consider him one of the most important theologians of that century. In his tome, Balthasar works on his Christology and soteriology as he seeks to recapture the “theological dramatics” of Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

Theo-Drama is the second of a three-part, sixteen-volume systematic series by Balthasar entitled *Trilogy*. The first part, entitled *The Glory of the Lord*, is dedicated to “theological aesthetics” in a seven-volume series. The third part, *Theo-Logic*, explores the nature of Christology to ontology. Theological Dramatic Theory was an attempt by Balthasar to allow theology to rise above the reductionist tendencies of modernity that centered too much on humanity and lacked a place for the beauty and mystery inherent in theological discourse.

makes us free. In other words, the teleology that we have forgotten can also be remembered and proclaimed afresh in ways that produce a genuine Christian politics that can make the resistance of evil subordinate to the love of the good that we seek.³⁹

What humanity is destined for is the true city of God. According to Augustine, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Therefore, the restless nature of democracy should serve as a reminder of the vision of the city of God about which Augustine speaks.

For Augustine, the earthly city is a distorted picture of the city of God. As is also true of the city of God, it is less a *polis* and more a performance, as Cavanaugh develops further:

For Augustine, however, the stage is the world on which the one drama of salvation history is being enacted. The earthly city and the city of God are two intermingled performances, one a tragedy, the other a comedy. There are not two sets of props, no division of goods between spiritual and temporal, infinite and finite. Both cities are concerned with the same questions: What is the purpose of human life? How should human life be ordered to achieve that purpose? The difference is that the city of God tells the story that we believe to be true, that God in Christ through the Spirit has saved us from the tragedy of inevitable violence.⁴⁰

The city of God is not a space but a performance.⁴¹ As such, Augustine captures the tension of church and state when he speaks of this performance since the two share props, stage space, and actors and actresses. What in the world will differentiate them if not space?

The difference is the story each is telling as manifested through their practices. Each acts differently. Each uses props differently. It reminds one of the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 2:4: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks” (NRSV). The city of God, manifested through the church, picks up props used for violence and destruction (i.e., swords and spears) and repurposes those props to cultivate good in the world (i.e., ploughshares and pruning hooks). Cavanaugh writes, “As Christ’s body, the church is ontologically related to the city of God, but it is the church not as a visible institution but as a set of practices.”⁴²

And to a state that wants to eliminate the complexity of common space by offering the illusion of a simple space (consider the term “American”), Augustine offers these words of rebuke: “The city of God, while it sojourns on earth,

³⁹ Pecknold, *Christianity and Politics*, 141.

⁴⁰ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 64.

⁴¹ Cavanaugh, 59.

⁴² Cavanaugh, 59.

calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, thus reversing the effects of the Fall. In doing so, far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities . . . it even preserves and adapts them.”⁴³

As noted earlier, the state’s understanding of “common” is exclusive. It must perpetuate this understanding to maintain its identity and purpose in the world. The church, however, operates with an entirely different—that is, inclusive—understanding of “common.” While only believers are to take communion, this is still radically more inclusive than how the state understands common. And while you have to be an American to be considered part of the common space that is the United States of America, to participate in the common meal that is the Lord’s Supper, you do not need to come from a particular national, ethnic, or socioeconomic background (to mention a few).

What of the People Called “Brethren”?

Throughout this article I have attempted to understand the Lord’s Supper as the common meal that believers share together, not as a practice based on the lofty understandings of the Eucharist that have dominated much of the conversation over the centuries. I believe the Brethren are positioned for both of the following: (1) to capture the original meaning of the Lord’s Supper offered to us through the New Testament witness and (2) to have a unique positioning in understanding this historic practice in a way that develops a robust alternative political theology to the ways of this world.

Using the language of much of this paper, the church testifies to an alternative “common space” that is manifested in the peculiar practices of peculiar people. The kingdom of God is a radically new creation of common space that Jesus, at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, declares is now “at hand.” As such, the Kingdom pushes back on the artificial barriers the state creates. And the church reminds the state that it (the state) is not an end in and of itself. There is a grand telos wrapped up in our understanding of God’s Kingdom, to which the state is subordinate.

The church in the present period bears witness to this great end of days; it is an eschatological witness to the world. Practices like the Lord’s Supper are our language—really, our metaphors—in describing the beauty and unity that is the kingdom of God.

James McClendon speaks to this vision:

The vision can be expressed as a hermeneutical motto, which is a shared awareness of *the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community*. In other words, the church now is the primitive

⁴³ Augustine, *City of God*, XIX: 17, as quoted in Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 61.

church and the church on the day of judgment is the church now.⁴⁴

The Brethren Church proclaims the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus as they wash one another’s feet, break bread, and share a love feast together. As they “perform” these three practices, they testify to the wedding feast of the Lamb—the “eschatological community”—of the Book of Revelation.

Brethren envision themselves, through the drama of the Lord’s Supper, humbly submitting to one another and their saving Lord through footwashing. They share the “common” presence of Jesus through the Love Feast. And they are unified in Jesus Christ through the taking of the Eucharist. The practice of the Lord’s Supper makes a people of the eschaton who always live out the already/not yet tension of the Kingdom. This all occurs around a common table and is constitutive of a people called “Brethren.”

The pushback to such an understanding of the Lord’s Supper, along with an elevation of historic practices as language, comes from those who view this as a sectarian understanding of the church. Such a charge is an interesting one, and the one making the accusation usually has the upper hand in the conversation. For the one being accused of sectarianism must now go on the defense. Anyone on the defense is always seen, to some degree, as the underdog.

Augustine responds better than anyone else. The imagery of the two cities speaks against what Cavanaugh calls “the monolithic conception of a single public space.” The church is not competing for a space with the empire or state. A charge of sectarianism, however, seems to operate with a related assumption of competition. For Augustine there are no set boundaries for either city since, as mentioned earlier, these distinct practices and performances share a stage that is the world. The world’s practices are tragic and the other comic. Cavanaugh writes, “[For Augustine], the task of the church is to interrupt the violent tragedy of the earthly city with the comedy of redemption, to build the city of God, beside which the earthly city appears to be not a city at all.”⁴⁵

Practices like the Lord’s Supper are theological memory. They remind us of the way the world was intended to operate and how the most significant moment in history was not in 1776 but 2000 years ago when our Lord and Savior was crucified and then resurrected. This event happened within history, within space and time, and our practices are the theological memory to such tragedy and comedy.

As the same practice is done over and over again through the centuries, it somehow is always different because it’s always the same. The dilemma of evangelicalism, to use Stanley Hauerwas’s oft-quoted line, is that “evangelicals think they get to make God up.” Theology is not conquered or learned by competing

⁴⁴ As quoted in Stoffer, *The Lord’s Supper*, 125.

⁴⁵ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 63.

with the world or trying to get the state to give us space. Theology is received, and practices like the Lord’s Supper perpetuate a memory of what truly is common in a world, an empire, and a state that can only offer the illusion of common. Cavarnaugh reminds us:

The church is not a merely particular association, but participates in the life of the triune God, who is the only good that can be common to all. Christians, especially through the Eucharist, belong to a body that constantly challenges the narrow particularity of the nation . . . and is also eternal, the body of Christ that anticipates the heavenly polity on earth. Salvation history is not a particular subset of human history; it is simply the story of God’s rule, not yet completely legible, over all of history. God’s activity is not, of course, confined to the church, and the boundaries between the church and the world are porous and fluid. Nevertheless, the church needs to take seriously its task of promoting spaces where participation in the common good of God’s life can flourish.⁴⁶

This is what we are to embody as a people of the Lord’s Supper—a “heavenly polity” where the life of God can flourish. Against the state’s understanding of a very exclusive “common identity,” the Brethren embody a practice that is not bound by the barriers we call nation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or even age but rather establishes a heavenly polity amid the temporal powers of our world.

Establishing “Gemeinschaft”⁴⁷

This heavenly polity is embodied in the Brethren understanding of the Lord’s Supper as *Gemeinschaft*, often translated as “community.” Eller develops this idea further in his conversation of the “two socialities” in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. In his book *Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective*,⁴⁸ Eller dialogues with the work of Kierkegaard on this very topic.

Kierkegaard is a fascinating philosopher whose works have been at the foundation of many contemporary theologians’ work. Much of his writing targets the nominal Christian masses of his day that were associated with the state Church of Denmark. He is suspicious of truth claims or, more importantly,

⁴⁶ Cavarnaugh, 45.

⁴⁷ *Gemeinschaft* is a German term that, simply stated, is the voluntary identity of individuals with a group whereby the group identity takes precedence over the individuals’ identity. *Gemeinschaft* is often translated as “community.” This is different from the German understanding of *Gesellschaft*, often translated as “society” or “civil society.” In this scenario, the larger association does not take precedence over the individuals involved.

⁴⁸ This was originally Eller’s dissertation.

ways of knowing truth that are so state-oriented that they devalue the role of the individual’s experience of faith and truth.

Kierkegaard is known as an existentialist philosopher and theologian who sought to elevate the individual—*den Enkelte* in Danish—and their experience of faith over and above a state-determined faith based on citizenship. He argues, “Religiously speaking, there is no such thing as a public, but only individuals. . . And insofar as there is, in a religious sense such a thing as a ‘congregation,’ this is a concept which does not conflict with ‘the individual,’ and which is by no means to be confounded with what may have political importance: the public, the crowd, and the numerical.”⁴⁹

Kierkegaard sees a purpose for these “individuals” to gather but is ever mindful of a) not devaluing the individual’s experience of the faith and b) not endorsing the contrived understanding of church as displayed by the Church of Denmark. Kierkegaard understands two “socialities”—one rejected and one approved. Eller explains better:

The terms that denote the two types are “church” (the rejected sociality) and *Gemeinde* (the approved sociality). We should pause to clarify this terminology. *Gemeinde* (German), *Menighed* (Danish), and “community” (English) would seem to be precise equivalents in the three languages. Each is constructed over the root that means “common” and points toward the definition: “a group of persons drawn together on the basis of something they have in common.”⁵⁰

The question that Eller is exploring in this part of his work is, What exactly does “in common” within the *Gemeinde*, or approved sociality, mean for the church? He elaborates:

It follows that the quality of *Gemeinschaft* will be in proportion to the extensiveness, intensiveness, and evaluation of the common factor that constitutes the group. Thus, a community based solely on the geographical proximity of its residents is not likely to be very strong in *Gemeinschaft*; one based upon a common concern for the public school, such as a PTA, gives promise of being somewhat stronger. The *Gemeinde* that should display the most profound *Gemeinschaft* is that based upon the commonality of a redemptive relationship to God in Jesus Christ, i.e., the Christian church. Therefore, although etymologically speaking *Gemeinde* and *Gemeinschaft* have no necessary religious connotations, we will proceed to use them in a highly religious sense.

49 As quoted in Vernard Eller, “Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship: A New Perspective,” House Church Central, accessed November 2, 2011, <http://www.hccentral.com/eller2/part11.html#community>.

50 Eller, “Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship.”

Ultimately, Christian *Gemeinschaft* amounts to “the love of the brethren,” the love of the brethren for one another, which is consequent upon God’s love for them and upon the mutual love they hold for Him. Obviously, true *Gemeinschaft* necessarily involves the intimate, face-to-face relationships of comparatively small groups sharing “life together”; the mere recitation of a common creed or attendance at a common service of worship can hardly represent *Gemeinschaft* at its deepest level. By its very nature *Gemeinschaft* cannot be a purely formal concept; it must exist as an existential reality or not at all.⁵¹

For Eller (and to a degree, Kierkegaard), the *Gemeinschaft* is a network of individuals (to be faithful to Kierkegaard) who voluntarily allow the identity of the group to supersede their own because of a common system of beliefs and/or morals. For Eller, the ultimate expression of this type of community is the church, the brethren, who gather together around a common meal and recall the sacrificial love of their Lord and Savior and anticipate the great feast of the Lamb yet to unfold in human history.

This understanding of “common” is of the utmost importance to our conversation about the role of the church through her historic practices in the ever-changing world in which we live. And the church’s understanding of common, the *Gemeinschaft*, is a challenge to the state’s understanding of “common.”

The tension occurs when the state makes claims that it creates a “common language” and a “common identity” all for the “common good” because it alone is the author of a “common space.” In this scenario, those who are citizens—those who fall within the geographic borders called the “nation”—are safe and protected. Those outside are always viewed as outsiders.

In this vein of conversation, how we understand communion—whose root is the same word from which we get “common,” or the Lord’s Supper—is incredibly important in being a *Gemeinschaft* that challenges competing understandings of common. And as the church gathers around the Lord’s table, it creates an inclusive understanding of common in Jesus as people of various backgrounds proclaim in unison, “The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ; the cup which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ.” For Brethren then and now, rather than wielding the sword to coerce an arbitrary common, we submit to our neighbor, stoop down, take a towel and a basin, and wash their feet. Counter to the kingdoms and fiefdoms of this world, the water of the basin reminds us of King Jesus and his call to “do this in remembrance of me.”

⁵¹ Eller, “Kierkegaard and Radical Discipleship.”