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On to Communion

South of the baths at Ragatz and the Swiss village of Maienfeld, south of the snow-crowned peaks of Falkniß and Scesaplana where the setting sun lights up the snowfields of the Glarner and Rhaetian Alps lies the deep valley of the Domleschg. It lies in the part of Switzerland that is neither German nor French, but Romansh.

Romansh is the language of the Grisons (great grey mountains) of Switzerland. It is a Latin dialect, similar to Spanish or Romanian. It came to the Grisons with immigrants from Roman Italy who settled there, a thousand years before Georg Cajacob was born in the Domleschg in the village of Bonaduz.

Speaking Romansh, Georg found Latin easier to learn than German. But by 1513, when he was twenty-one years old, he finished his studies at the university of Leipzig in Germany and became a priest.¹

He returned to the Grisons, and served for two years at Trins, across the river from Bonaduz where the Domleschg meets the canyon of the upper Rhein.

Georg said the *missa fidelium*. He baptised babies. He listened to confessions and absolved people from their sins. But he well

¹ Several writers speak of Georg Cajacob (of the house of Jacob) as “an ex-monk from Chur.” Huldrych Zwingli seems to have thought he was one, but there is no historical evidence that he ever spent time in a monastery.



Much of what happened in European cities escaped Switzerland's rural families, living in rugged isolation as on this farm above Bonaduz in the Grisons. As they had welcomed Waldensian messengers throughout many generations, they welcomed Anabaptist teachings in the 16th Century.

knew that both he and the people whom he served lived in sin, and he did not feel forgiven. He was a tall, lively young man with a dark complexion. People called him “Strong Georg.” But he was weak. He lived under the power of sin and had no strength to overcome it. He sinned time after time until he left the priesthood after two years and got married.

Getting married did not free Georg from sin. He still felt weak in temptation and longed to know Jesus, so he travelled north with his young wife to look for help in the Protestant city of Zürich.

The Protestants disappointed Georg. He could see they did not follow Jesus. But the Spirit of God moved his heart when he met Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, and other seekers at Felix Manz's house on the winter evening of January 21, 1525. Georg

asked Conrad to baptise him. Then Georg baptised the others, and they remembered Jesus by breaking bread and drinking wine together.

Not long after this, the Protestant authorities caught Georg Cajacob, (by now nicknamed *Blaurock*² and imprisoned him in the *Hexenturm* (witches' tower) prison at Zürich. He escaped several times, but they caught him again, and called him to answer before Huldrych Zwingli at the city court.

Zwingli called Georg a “great, foolish dreamer,” too ignorant to read German correctly. He accused Georg and his companions of “mocking the church,” of trying to “build a church within the church,” and of overthrowing “divine and human authority.” Especially offensive to Zwingli and the Protestant court was the way Georg baptised people and held communion services in ordinary houses, in secret, and without permission. To this, Georg replied:

Christ the Lord sent his disciples out to teach all people and gave them power to grant remission of sins and, as an outward sign of forgiveness, to baptise them. When I taught this too, some turned in tears to me and asked me to baptise them. This I could not refuse. I baptised them according to their wish and called upon the name of Christ for them.

I further taught them love and unity and to have all things in common, like the apostles commanded us. I taught them that they should always remember the death of Christ and his poured out blood. I showed them the practice of Christ in the nighttime meal. We broke bread and drank wine together so that they might remember that they are redeemed by one body of Christ and made clean by one blood, and that through this they were brothers and sisters one of another in Christ the Lord.³

² Before he was well-known in Zürich, Georg attended a meeting and commented on what was said. One of those who attended the meeting asked who spoke, and someone answered: “The man in the blue coat.” After that the people called him *Blaurock* (“blue coat”).

³ From a letter Georg wrote to the city council of Zürich in the spring of 1525.

A Nighttime Meal

On Feb. 5, 1525, Hans Ockenfuoss testified before the Protestant court at Zürich: “Two weeks ago I was in Zollikon in Jakob Hottinger’s house. Conrad Grebel and some other men were there. They spoke of baptism and the nighttime meal. After that, Conrad took a loaf of bread and divided it among us. He ate from it too and said that from now on we want to lead a Christian life.”

Leonhard Schiemer wrote from the prison at Rattenberg on the Inn:

Those who have become one body and one loaf of bread in Christ—those who are minded alike (*gleichgesinnt*)—should keep the nighttime meal in remembrance of his death. Through this, everyone should be admonished to become like Christ, in obedience to the Father.⁴

Hans Betz wrote from the dungeon of the castle at Passau in Bavaria:

Mark the counsel of God: Christ has set the pattern for a nighttime meal of bread and wine for his church community—the community that keeps itself from sin. If she eats the nighttime meal in remembrance of him, death will not overtake her.⁵

Huddled Around Jesus

When I began to read what the first Anabaptists wrote, two expressions stood out to me. One was the mention of Jesus as our *Hauptmann* (captain or “head man”). The other was the term *kleiner Hauf* used for the followers of Jesus. *Kleiner Hauf* literally means a little heap or a huddle. At first I had a hard time picturing Jesus’ followers like this. But when I began to see the place of Jesus in the Anabaptist movement, it became

⁴ *Eine Erklärung der 12 Artikel des christlichen Glaubens*, ca. 1526.

⁵ *Ausbund*, 92:15

clear to me. Jesus is the captain, and his followers huddle around him. “Look to the captain. . . . Leap to your captain’s side,” wrote an Ausbund writer.⁶ Those who follow Christ do this continually to get their directions from him.

The first Christians huddled around Jesus by breaking bread and drinking wine in remembrance of him whenever they got together. The first Anabaptists, out of love and necessity, did the same. In the first published statement⁷ of the movement they wrote:

Every time we meet as brothers, we should eat the nighttime meal together, to proclaim in this way the death of the Lord. In doing this we help one another to remember how Christ gave himself up and how his blood was poured out for us. In the same way we need to be willing, for Christ’s sake, to give up our bodies and our lives for the brothers.⁸

The first Anabaptists could not have pictured a formal worship service without the breaking of bread. Christian worship without the Eucharist (the Greek word for thanksgiving, used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:16) was, before the sixteenth century, unknown. Michael Sattler wrote:

Do not forget the meetings, but put forth effort to have them regularly. Pray together, for all the saints, and break the bread together—so much the oftener (*desto fleissiger*) as you see the Lord’s day approaching.⁹

When several Anabaptists were asked before the Dutch court in 1534 what they did in their meetings they replied: “In our meetings we read and discuss the Gospel, after which one of us

⁶ *Ausbund*, 78:1

⁷ This statement, prepared by the Anabaptists of Switzerland, possibly in 1526, was circulating before the *Brüderliche Vereinigung* of Schleithem made its appearance. It corresponds closely to the first confession of the south German and Austrian Anabaptists, written by Leonhard Schiemer.

⁸ From *Christlicher Ordnung . . . damitt die lieb und einickeit erhalten wird*, Bern, ca. 1526.

⁹ From *An die Gemeinde Gottes zu Horb . . . 1527*

breaks the bread and distributes it to all, knowing that the bread is not able to save us, but it is only taken in memory of the suffering of our Lord.”¹⁰

Both in the south (Switzerland, southern Germany, and Austria) and in the north (along the lower Rhein and in the Netherlands) the Anabaptists met for the nighttime meal at least once a week. “Small fellowships of Anabaptists sprang up like mushrooms everywhere,” reads one report. “They moved from house to house for meetings in order to remain inconspicuous, where they read and studied the Scriptures and celebrated the nighttime meal.”¹¹

Conrad Grebel stated in one of his letters, “The nighttime meal shall be practiced often and used much.”¹²

A Wedding Feast

In southern Germany the Anabaptists spoke of baptism as the sign of a believer’s engagement (*Verlobung*) to Jesus, and of the nighttime meal as the marriage feast in which the bread and the wine were the rings.

In the Netherlands, Menno Simons wrote:

Oh delightful assembly and Christian marriage feast! Feast commanded and ordained by the Lord himself. Bodily pleasure and bodily appetite do not belong here. But glorious and holy mysteries are set before and desired by true believers in bread and wine!

Oh delightful Christian assembly! No senseless songs, but peace and unity among the brothers. Words of grace. Glorious benefits.

¹⁰ From a report of the Court of Holland to the Regent Maria of Hungary, then reigning at Brussels, dated February 17, 1534.

¹¹ From C. A. Cornelius, *Historische Arbeiten vornehmlich zur Reformationsgeschichte*, (Leipzig, 1899).

¹² Letter to Thomas Müntzer, September 5, 1524.

Favour, love, service, tears, prayers, cross, and death are set forth with delightful thanksgiving and holy joy!

Oh delightful Christian feast! The unrepentant are not invited. Harlots, rogues, adulterers, robbers, liars, tyrants, and those who shed blood must stay outside. But true Christians come. Born of God, walking with Christ, they come to love and believe. They are members of his body, flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone.

Oh delightful assembly and Christian marriage feast! No gluttonous eating and drinking. No vanity of pipes and drums. But hungry souls are filled with bread from heaven, the divine Word. They drink the wine of the Holy Ghost and sing and play in peace before the Lord.¹³

A Parable

The *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Didache) written in the first century after Jesus said:

As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may your church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.

This parable, known to the first Anabaptists, appears many times in their songs and writings. An Ausbund writer wrote:

This is how Christ taught his disciples to keep the Passover in his flesh: He broke for them the bread and gave thanks. He gave them the cup and they drank. . . . With the bread he showed that whoever has his Spirit belongs to him, becomes one flesh with him, a member of his body and of his church community for which he died. Like one bread is made from many grains, and one wine is made from many grapes, all true Christians become one bread and one wine in Christ the Lord. He sustains us and gives us true love in Gemeinschaft with him.¹⁴

Menno Simons wrote:

¹³ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539.

¹⁴ *Ausbund*, 55:21-23

Just as natural bread is made of many grains ground in the mill, kneaded with water, and baked over the fire, so is the Lord's Gemeinschaft. True believers are broken in their hearts with the mill of God's Word. Then they are baptised with the water of the Holy Ghost and formed by the fire of pure love into one body.¹⁵

Dirk Philips wrote:

Indeed it is a marvellous and blessed union where all Christians are one bread and one body in Christ Jesus. They are one bread . . . baked by the fire of love. They are baptised by one Spirit into one body, and must like a natural body be one heart and one soul. They serve one another, help one another, and comfort one another, just like the members of a natural body.¹⁶

Before they beheaded him at Schwatz in Austria in 1528, Hans Schlaffer wrote:

The body of Christ on the earth is the Gemeinschaft of those who believe on him. Whoever eats the bread of the nighttime meal expresses with that his desire to live in Gemeinschaft with this body and to be a part of it in all things—to stick with the Gemeinschaft though joy and sorrow, riches and poverty, honour and shame, mourning and rejoicing, death and life. He expresses his desire to give everything he has, both body and life for his brothers even as Christ gave himself for us.¹⁷

Inner and Outer Gemeinschaft

The first Anabaptists believed that the nighttime meal, like baptism, is an outer witness (Mitzeugnis) of inner Gemeinschaft with Christ. They believed that inner Gemeinschaft without the outer witness of bread and wine is incomplete. Jaques d'Auchy, killed at Leeuwarden in 1559, called those who spiritualised the meaning of the nighttime meal “heretics” and “destroyers of the breaking of bread.” But the Anabaptists believed just as strongly

¹⁵ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539

¹⁶ *op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ein einfältig Gebet* . . . 1528

that the outer witness without an inner sense of *Gemeinschaft* was incomplete, useless, and actually harmful.

“What does it help to eat of the holy meal if we do not enjoy the fruits it stands for, death to self, love and unity?” asked Menno Simons. “Outer communion profits nothing if we do not live in inner *Gemeinschaft* with the Lord and his body.”¹⁸

In another article Menno wrote:

Be they emperor or king, rich or learned, all who with a proud heart seat themselves at the Lord’s table eat and drink to their own damnation. All who boast of the Lord’s name but reject his commands and blameless example eat and drink to their own damnation. All who love houses and lands, possessions, friends, children, the world, favour, ease, and honour in this life more than they love Christ eat and drink to their own damnation.

He who would sit with the disciples and guests of Christ at the Lord’s table must be sound in the faith and blameless in conduct and life. Be he rich or poor, high or low, emperor, king, prince, earl, knight, or nobleman, none is excepted from this rule. The pious cannot partake of the nighttime meal with those who err in doctrine and whose lives are carnal. Such people are not in Christ. They must be kept outside until they repent and so become one in Spirit with Christ and his body.¹⁹

Without penitence neither water, bread, nor wine avail in Christ, even if they were administered by the apostles themselves. That which avails before God is a new creature, a converted, changed and broken heart, a true fear and love of God, love for neighbours, a subdued, humble, sober, and peaceful life according to Jesus’ example. Where there is such a new being there is indeed the true baptism and the true meal. To be baptised externally and to partake of the nighttime meal merely in letter

¹⁸ *Een liefelijcke vermaninghe ofte onderwijsinghe wt Gods woort . . . ca. 1558*

¹⁹ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers . . . 1539*

and appearance but not inwardly before God is to mimic God's work. It is hypocrisy and deceit.²⁰

Without Superstition

The Anabaptists valued the nighttime meal so highly that they celebrated it together even if it cost their lives. But they rejected the superstitions that had grown up around the *missa fidelium* during the Dark Ages.

Amsterdam, centre of Anabaptist activity in the north, was only one of the many pilgrimage sites in the German countries of Europe. Thousands of pilgrims came to Amsterdam every year to visit its *heilige stede* (holy place) erected on the site of a miracle they said took place in 1345. A sick man there had received the host (the consecrated wafer of the mass). He vomited it up. His wife tried to burn it, but the flames would not consume it. Catholic leaders declared this a miracle and set loose a flood of pilgrims that greatly increased the prosperity and fame of Amsterdam throughout the following centuries.

Dutch and German priests told stories of the host miraculously saving Christians from the Muslims and curing the blind, the sick and the crippled. A lamb could be saved from a wolf by the host. One priest put the host on the tongue of a sick cow and cured her. Many were the stories of how the host had turned into a child or bled when it was broken. People believed that one did not grow older while eating the host.

When the Anabaptists, in the middle of this, began to teach that the bread and wine stayed bread and wine, that Christ was to be found in spiritual *Gemeinschaft* but not in the elements of the nighttime meal, they brought Europe down upon them in wrath. An influential priest of Amsterdam compared the Anabaptists to the plagues of Egypt and called the people to pray at the *heilige stede* for a miracle to drive away these “devilish pigs and frogs.”

²⁰ *Een Klare beantwoordinge, over een Schrift Gellii Fabri . . . 1554.*

Posters and pamphlets were used in the crusade against the Anabaptists. One picture showed the woman picking the vomited host out of the flames with a ring of angels kneeling around her in worship of it. It came with a text lamenting the fact that people were “losing respect for apostolic tradition, the ceremonies of the church, and the pronouncements of its holy fathers.”

The Anabaptists replied calmly. Menno Simons wrote:

We are not commanded in the Scriptures to argue about the tangible elements of the nighttime meal, for of what substance the bread and wine consist may be felt, seen, and tasted. We should strive rather to confirm ourselves to what the elements stand for.²¹

Conrad Grebel wrote:

The mass is not to be reformed but abolished. The nighttime meal is to be restored as the apostles practiced it. Only the words of Christ are to be used, and they are not to be treated as having any magical meaning. In order to avoid a superstitious devotion and a falling away from the spiritual, everything out of the ordinary must stop. No special bread, no special cup, no priestly clothes and customs, and no special singing is to accompany the nighttime meal. It is a meal of *Gemeinschaft* and should not be taken alone, nor by dying persons. . . . All the details of the nighttime meal shall remind the believer of the body and blood of Christ and of the witness on the cross, so that he shall be willing to live and suffer for the sake of Christ and the brothers, the head and the members of the body.²²

Communion with Jesus

After they beat him and drove him out of Zürich on the day they drowned Felix Manz, Georg Cajacob travelled through the mountains of Switzerland and Austria, teaching, baptising, and breaking bread in the name of Christ. He returned to the Grisons

²¹ *Dat Fundament des Christelycken leers* . . . 1539

²² *op. cit.*

and spoke to his own people, calling them to get up and follow the real Christ to find forgiveness of their sins. Many believed and great numbers gathered in secret to hear him speak—until the Austrian authorities caught him near Klausen (now the city of Chiusa in Italy), on August 14, 1529. There they tortured him at the Guffidaun castle, condemned him under a barrage of accusations, and burned him at the stake on September 6, 1529.

Before his death, Georg wrote:

Prepare us for the nighttime meal, oh God, through Christ your beloved Son! Clothe us with your Spirit. Free us from death and suffering! When we shall eat at last of that nighttime meal, who shall wait upon us? The one who knows our hearts and redeems us from our sin!

Blessed are those invited to the Lord's nighttime meal! Blessed are those who stay with Christ through all tribulation. He suffered. He hung on the cross, and those who follow him must suffer now. Oh Lord, give us pure love! Give us love to walk our way with joy! When our time comes to go, may we not, like the foolish virgins, find that the door to the feast has been closed. They cried, "Lord! Lord!" But their oil had run out while they were sleeping.

Blessed is the one who watches with the wise virgins. He will inherit eternal possessions, and his eyes will see the clarity of God. The king will break out with a trumpet blast! The elect will join his parade! Therefore Zion, holy community of Christ, look at what you have received! Hold it and keep yourself pure. Then you shall inherit the crown!²³

In Jesus' communion, the first Anabaptists followed him . . .

²³ *Ausbund*, 5:22-33