From the apostolic era onwards, Christians have sought to celebrate the meal Jesus gave us with integrity. This involved establishing baptism as the initiation rite into the body of Christ. A central concern was the way of life of those who gathered around the Lord’s Table. For example, because warfare was widely believed to go against the teaching of the Gospel, soldiers returning from war had to observe a time of repentance before taking communion.

At the same time, the integrity of the Eucharist was challenged by movements like Gnosticism, which held that the material world was evil and, consequently, that there could be no relationship between the realms of matter and spirit. Here the church, drawing on the Incarnation, declared that God the transcendent One was mediated to believers by earthbound elements such as bread and wine. Descriptions of this reality in the West, such as those of Ambrose and Augustine, were not uniform in their formulation; their importance lay in safeguarding the paradoxical relationship between spirit and matter.

Both the concern for baptismal integrity and for sacramental reality continued to shape eucharistic thought and practice in the ensuing centuries.

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1 On the Eucharist in the Middle Ages, see Gary Macy’s contribution to this volume.
4 I use the term “sacrament” in this article simply as the meeting point of spirit and matter. “Sacramental reality” is more difficult. “Reality” is that which is objectively present. For Catholics in the sixteenth century, eucharistic reality was the corporeal presence of Christ. For some Evangelicals, it was the spiritual presence of Christ in relation to bread and wine. For more radical Evangelicals, it was the congregation gathered to break bread. And for Spiritualists it was the spiritual presence of Christ unbound to outward forms.
The development of auricular confession as the gateway to communion is the most outstanding instance of attention to the sacrament's moral dimension. Manuals of penitential rites and practices continued to be written but theologically the dominant concern increasingly became doctrinal formulations about the nature of Christ's Supper. A widespread perception among the Evangelicals of the sixteenth century was that the more attention was focused on the elements the more the communal nature of the sacred meal receded. Within the celebration the priest became the only human actor; the consecration insured the presence of Christ regardless of the presence or participation of the congregation.5 By the sixteenth century the debate concerning the Eucharist was largely about doctrines of the real presence. Even though all churches were concerned about the moral integrity of the breaking of bread, the fiercest debates concerned the relationship of bread and wine to Christ's body and blood.

Anabaptism protested the preoccupation with correct doctrinal formulation at the expense, in its view, of the human response to God's action in the sacraments and its communal character.6 They sought a different balance between the objective reality of the Supper and its subjective appropriation, individually and collectively. Since the primary focus of the sixteenth-century ferment concerning the Lord's Supper was on doctrinal formulation, we begin there. In our presentation of particular eucharistic theologies in Anabaptism we will also attempt to show how different theologians sought to redress the balance between doctrinal and moral integrity.

In the late Middle Ages there was widespread concern with the breadth of acceptable formulation of eucharistic doctrine. More and more of late medieval formulations of eucharistic doctrine were considered heretical. William Crockett describes the development of a dissident eucharistic tradition. Until the ninth century, Ambrose's realism (that we truly receive

5 For a succinct description of these developments, see Gary Macy, “Diversity in Decline: the Later Middle Ages,” in The Banquet’s Wisdom (Akron, 2005), pp. 129–162.

6 This focus on moral integrity is the core concern of early Anabaptist confessions of faith. See, for example, Schleitheim Articles and the Kempen Confession, in Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition, ed. Karl Koop (Kitchener, 2006), pp. 27–28, 99–100, respectively. The Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse consists largely of biblical quotations, with one striking sentence about the nature of the Supper: "Just as the bread and wine are received with the mouth, so the heavenly body, the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ are received by the believing soul spiritually in faith," ibid., p. 74. Detailed doctrinal formulation is left to the treatises we will explore.