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The Body and Blood of Christ within the Bulgarian Church of God: Alternative beliefs and practices

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Abstract. This article examines the beliefs and attendant practices of a particular doctrinal strand within the Bulgarian Church of God (BCG) – a Protestant denomination established after 1928. While most Protestant communities in Bulgaria understand the Eucharist primarily as a symbolic or commemorative rite, a dedicated group within BCG affirms the ontological presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the Eucharistic bread and wine. This conviction appears to be aligned with Orthodox sacramental thought and informs not only the community's Eucharistic theology but also its wider spiritual observances. By examining the interplay between theology, ritual, and, to some extent, musical expression, the study highlights how these convictions produce a sacramental ethos in which ordinary believers are recognized as active participants in the divine presence and music serves as a meaningful medium of spiritual communication.

Keywords: Protestantism, Pentecostal, The Bulgarian Church of God, Eucharist, Holy Communion, epiclesis

The Bulgarian Church of God (BCG) is a Protestant (Evangelical[1]) denomination that occupies a distinct position among the Christian communities in Bulgaria. Established after 1928 within the Pentecostal[2] movement in the country, it represents a particular manifestation of early twentieth-century

[1] The terms "Protestant" and "Evangelical" (and their corresponding forms, "Protestantism" and "Evangelicalism") are largely synonymous, despite subtle distinctions. In some countries (e.g., France), "Protestant" refers to continuations of early Lutheran and Reformed churches, while "Evangelical" denotes newer Protestant movements arising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, primarily in the Anglophone context. In Bulgaria, where communities of the former type do not exist, both terms are used to designate confessions "imported" from contemporary Anglo-American churches.

[2] Relating to, or being any of various Christian religious congregations whose members seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit, in emulation of the Apostles at Pentecost (see Pentecostal n.d.).

religious renewal, characterized by an aspiration toward heightened experiential piety and a biblically grounded focus on charismatic gifts. In the Bulgarian local context and BCG in particular, these dynamics gave rise to a distinctive, entirely oral hymnody that became an integral component of the congregation's religious culture and customary practices. Understood as divinely inspired and folk-based, this hymnal repertoire has contributed to the self-perception of the Bulgarian Church of God as a *localized* spiritual movement with a distinctive religious and cultural profile (see Ignatov 2006, 159). In this article, I examine a specific theological position concerning the real and ontological presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in *the Eucharist* (also called *Holy Communion*) – a stance upheld in certain circles within BCG. This tenet diverges not only from other Protestant confessions in Bulgaria but also from most adherents of BCG itself. Understandably, it informs specific faith-based observances and finds its expression in hymnody.

To contextualize the issue, I should first like to outline certain commonly held views (and associated arguments) regarding the essence and function of the bread and wine in the Eucharist within the context of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.

Roman Catholicism

In Roman Catholicism, the doctrine known as *transubstantiation* holds that the bread and wine undergo a change during the Eucharist at Mass. The *substance* (that is, the essence, or deep ontological reality) of the bread and wine is transformed into the *Body and Blood of Jesus Christ*[3]. The philosophical underpinnings of this position derive from the Aristotelian distinction between *substance* and *accidents*, where substance represents the true, underlying reality of the thing in itself, whereas the accidents represent its sensory properties or outward appearances (colour, shape, taste, texture, etc.). According to the Catholic doctrine, during the rite of consecration, the substance of bread and wine becomes Christ's Body and Blood, although the accidents (outward appearances) remain those of bread and wine. Catholics maintain that this change is: *real* (not merely symbolic); *complete* (the fullness of Christ – His Body, Blood, Soul, and divinity – is present); and *permanent* (enduring as long as the sensory appearances of the material elements persist).

Eastern Orthodoxy

In Orthodox Christianity, the bread and wine in the Eucharist are likewise believed to undergo a real transformation into the Body and Blood of Christ. However, rather than attempting to explain the precise "mechanics" of the change, the Orthodox tradition refers to it simply as "transformation" or "change

[3] See the webpage of Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Availabe at: https://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html [Accessed: January 2006].

of essence" – in Greek, μετουσίωσις (metousiosis), from οὐσία (ousia), that is, "inner essence". While the underlying doctrine is fundamentally similar to that of Roman Catholicism, there are subtle distinctions in emphasis. In the Eastern Orthodox view, this miraculous transformation is attributed to the sacramental mystery of the Eucharist. The term "transubstantiation" is generally avoided in authoritative discourse, although some sophisticated believers may use it in a more general or approximate sense. Philosophically, Orthodox theology eschews overly scholastic explanations on the subject. It affirms that the bread and wine truly and objectively become the Body and Blood of Christ, yet the Church does not define the process in technical or metaphysical terms. Instead, priority is given to the sacramental mystery of the change and to participation in divine life. The focus is thus less on explicating *how* the bread and wine become Christ and more on fostering communion with God and the faithful's experience of divine reality.

Protestantism

Among Protestant Christians, the prevailing view is that the bread and wine received in the Eucharist serve as *symbolic representations*, commemorating Christ's sacrificial death and manifesting the spiritual communion of the congregants. However, earlier strands of Protestant theology exhibit a more nuanced position, shaped in large part by the theological dispute between Huldrych Zwingli and Martin Luther during the Reformation. Zwingli is commonly regarded as the paradigmatic "symbolist" and "memorialist" among the Reformers. He maintained that the Lord's Supper functions primarily as an act of remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, in which the bread and wine signify Christ's Body and Blood without mediating or containing His real presence, that is, Christ is only present spiritually through the faith of the believer, not in the elements themselves. Accordingly, Zwingli argued that the words "This is my body" (Matt. 26:26, KJV 2001) are to be interpreted as "This *signifies* my body" (Zwingli and Bullinger 1953, 193).

In contrast to memorialist interpretations, Luther articulated a doctrine sometimes described as *consubstantiation* (sacramental union). It holds that during the Eucharist Christ's Body and Blood are truly present *together* with the bread and wine – the latter are also real and do not cease to exist. Rather, Christ is present "in, with, and under" them. There is no change of substance in the Aristotelian sense. According to Luther, Christ's statement "This is my body" should be taken literally, with "is" understood in its plain sense rather than as merely "signifies". Zwingli's words delivered during his debate with Luther in the town of Marburg (1529) exemplify the essential nature of the disagreement: "The body of Christ is in heaven at the right hand of God; therefore it cannot be physically present in the bread" (LW 38, 1971, 59). Well-known is Luther's retort: "God is not constrained by mathematics. The body of Christ is where He wills it to be" (LW 38, 1971, 59–60).

Nowadays, Lutherans (a major Protestant denomination) generally reject the label "consubstantiation", as it suggests a commitment to metaphysical assumptions they do not endorse. In their view, the sacramental reality of Christ's

presence is grounded in His promise rather than in technical accounts and abstruse explanations. Within the broader field of Protestantism, neither the doctrine of transubstantiation nor that of consubstantiation enjoys widespread acceptance today. Most Protestants view the Eucharist primarily as a symbolic (commemorative) act rather than an ontological transformation – the focus is on faith and devotion rather than on the "mechanics" of the Eucharist.

The Apostolic Church of Christ "God's Mercy" within BCG

I would now like to draw attention to a particular subgroup of believers within BCG, self-identified as the Apostolic Church of Christ "God's Mercy"[4]. Due to limited access to the inner life of this confessional community at the time of research, description through direct observation was not possible. Nevertheless, insights are drawn from the theological writings of Pastor Yuri Iliev, who serves as the congregation's pastor and spiritual guide and who contributed directly to this study; community perspectives are also captured through focused open-ended interviews with Iliev and other informants, some of whom share the theological commitments of God's Mercy and others who do not.

Within a spiritual milieu where most Evangelical churches maintain a symbolic or memorial view of the Eucharist, the belief in the real transformation of the bread and wine into Christ's Body and Blood is quite uncommon[5]. To say the least, it stands out as a distinctive stance within Protestantism, both within BCG itself and across the broader Bulgarian Protestant movement. This relatively limited yet dedicated group of Christians does not simply have reverence for the Eucharistic rite (which the majority of Protestants share), but holds the explicit belief that an actual ontological change occurs in the elements themselves. The adherents of God's Mercy articulate a position that the Eucharist is not to be held merely as a symbol or representation, but as the true and transformed Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This is believed to occur in the Eucharistic gifts by virtue of Christ's words of institution and through the prayer of ἐπίκλησις[6] (*epiclesis)*, which invokes God's grace to bring about the real presence of Christ's Body in the bread and wine. Within this doctrinal framework, the Eucharist is affirmed to be thanksgiving, remembrance, sacrifice, covenant, messianic banquet, and ultimately, sacrament (see Matt. 26:26–28, KJV 2001). It is therefore regarded as a real and living communion with Christ Himself, in which congregants partake in accordance with His words (see John 6:54–56, KJV 2001).

Here, the words of Pastor Yuri Iliev reveal the pathos of a believer convinced that the Eucharist, being far more than a symbol, is to be understood as a sacred mystery: "The Holy Communion is not merely a remembrance – an imagined

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[4] After 1989, the Bulgarian Church of God gave rise to newer Protestant charismatic communities sometimes bearing different names, yet still regarded as part of BCG, which is now considered an umbrella designation for charismatic Christian communities characterized by a focus on spiritual gifts and grassroots social base.

[5] Author's interview with Slavimir Dimov, Sofia, 12.02.2026.

[6] Greek for "invocation" or "calling upon".

construct or symbol, as some confessions hold – but a living and real communion with the Body and Blood of Christ" (Iliev 2025, 22). Pastor Iliev grounds his position in a New Testament text: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16–17, KJV 2001). The underlying idea is that the Eucharist is "a mystery in which the believing Christian participates in the Body and Blood of the Lord, and is redeemed and forgiven through His holy blood" (Iliev 2025, 22). Once again, a foundational text is invoked – this time drawing on a well-known biblical passage: "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:28, KJV 2001).

It is noteworthy that the position of God's Mercy closely corresponds to the Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the Eucharist rather than that of conventional Protestantism; the stress lies not so much on rational justification as on conviction in the presence of a miraculous reality. This is understandable, since some Bulgarian Protestants, immersed in the broader cultural context of Bulgarian society, carry an Orthodox "leaven" in their formative background, whose influence continues to shape their theological outlook[7]. This becomes clearly evident in their doctrinal critique of those Protestants who reject the material possibility (and the ethical legitimacy) of literally consuming the Body and Blood of Christ (see Iliev 2025, 34–35). Unsurprisingly, reason-based interpretations are prevalent in mainstream Protestantism, which, broadly speaking, has been shaped by the Enlightenment program framed by the so-called "disenchantment of the world"[8] (Horkheimer, Adorno 1972, 1). By contrast, as noted above, Bulgarian Protestants influenced by the grassroots theology of their religious and cultural milieu tend to be unreceptive to rationalist-leaning perspectives – as theologian Veniamin Peev observes: "Contemporary Christians who remain closely aligned with the traditional theology of their religious and cultural context are generally suspicious of the claims of modernism" (Peev 2009, 15).

Nevertheless, from a cultural-analytical standpoint, what is at stake here is not the question of doctrinal correctness, but rather how belief in the ontological reality of the Eucharist shapes communal behaviour and modes of expression. In what follows, I will comment on several concrete practices within the God's Mercy congregation as part of its distinct spiritual character, although the extent to which such observances directly derive from a literalist interpretation of the Eucharistic gifts is contestable. Even so, they remain illustrative of the group's idiosyncratic character.

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[7] Author's interview with Pastor Pavel Ignatov, Sofia, 9.03.2026.

[8] The "disenchantment of the world" ("Entzauberung der Welt" in German) is a term typically associated with Max Weber. It encapsulates the view that historical and cultural processes are no longer viewed as driven by mystery, magic, or supernatural forces, but instead are interpreted through rational, scientific, and instrumental reasoning.

Foot-washing

The practice of foot-washing before the Eucharist is not typical of mainline Protestant churches in Bulgaria, where worship generally centres on preaching rather than ritual reenactments[9]. Where it does occur, it is most commonly found in less conventional evangelical settings. In these contexts, foot-washing draws on the Gospel account of Christ washing the disciples' feet. It functions as a sign of humility and service, an expression of mutual care and equality, and, at times, as a gesture of spiritual renewal, repentance, and reaffirmed belonging within the believing community. Regarding God's Mercy, the ritual is not prescribed as a formal or obligatory rite – rather, Pastor Yuri Iliev notes that participation is left to individual discretion, with some believers engaging in it while others refraining, according to individual conscience.

The invocations of grace upon the Eucharistic Gifts

Within this theological horizon, particular attention is generally accorded to the prayer of the epiclesis (ἐπίκλησις), understood in a manner discernibly aligned with Eastern Orthodox theology, as invoking the Holy Spirit to sanctify and transform the Eucharistic elements. Even where this invocation is not embedded within a formally codified liturgical structure, it appears to function as a decisive moment in the liturgical action, during which the transformative action of the Spirit is both expected and affirmed. For Pastor Iliev, the epiclesis resonates with the Orthodox emphasis on the Eucharist as a sacramental mystery (μυστήριον), in which the transformation effected is real and objective, yet ultimately beyond rational explanation.

Persistent imagery in the group's oral hymnody

One might cautiously suggest that the beliefs upheld by this distinct circle of Christians also find expression in the group's hymnody. According to Natalia Ilieva, certain examples within the community's hymnal repertoire reflect a particular reverence for the Body and Blood of Christ, including "Somewhere There on Golgotha", "Your Blood Makes Me Clean", "Oh, How Blessed I Feel", "In the Blood of Christ", and "Have You Been Washed in the Blood of Christ", among others[10]. From a musical point of view, these examples are not marked by any markedly distinctive idiom; rather, they are shaped by melodic contours situated within a broadly European intonational framework. The issue here, however, lies not in their musical language as such, but in the extent to which they serve as vehicles for articulating the doctrinal specificity of this tightly-knit community.

One should bear in mind that a worship song cannot be expected to expound on the technicalities of a complex theological concept in any direct or

[9] It is worth noting that foot-washing is not part of the Orthodox liturgical rite.

[10] Author's interview with Natalia Ilieva (Pastor Iliev's wife), Sofia, 19.01. 2026.

systematic way. Neither its verbal nor its musical dimension is well-suited to explicating fine-grained doctrinal distinctions, such as the precise nature of the Eucharistic bread and wine. Instead, their theological meaning is conveyed indirectly, through recurring soteriological images and motifs – for instance, Christ's crucifixion, the saving power of His blood, and redemption through sacrifice. Just as the Eucharistic elements are believed to undergo a real, invisible transformation, so musical performance is conceived of as a medium through which divine speech is incarnated.

Beyond the immediate context of God's Mercy, similar theological commitments in some instances have emerged within a wider Protestant milieu – Pastor Iliev points out that there are other Evangelical ministers who foreground the real presence of Christ's Body and Blood in the sacrament of the Eucharist (see Iliev 2025, 214). According to Iliev, similar convictions are also present within certain Romani Protestant communities (see Iliev 2025, 214) – something he corroborated in a personal interview[11]. While detailed data on these communities remains limited at present, their broader sociocultural context (marked by distinctive practices, social networks, and faith-based norms) may offer additional insights into such comparatively uncommon beliefs within Bulgarian Protestantism.

Final reflections

The distinctive Eucharistic theology of the Apostolic Church of Christ "God's Mercy" demonstrates how belief in the real and ontological presence of Christ's Body and Blood can shape an entire spectrum of communal life, from ritual observance to musical expression and devotional imagination. Unlike mainstream Protestant communities, which typically frame the Eucharist as symbolic or commemorative, this group holds the bread and wine – and, by extension, human participants – as capable of being transformed into a locus of divine reality.

The theological logic governing the Eucharist thus resonates throughout the group's behaviours. The epiclesis, even when informally enacted, affirms the active sanctification of the elements, while foot-washing, though optional, reinforces the intertwining of humility, service, and ritual participation. Sacramental participation operates according to the same principle – ontological transformation rather than mere symbolic representation. In this respect, the community's praxis reflects an ecclesial sensibility recognizably aligned with Orthodox sacramental thought, yet articulated within a Protestant framework. While interconfessional dialogue has long sought to bridge confessional differences concerning the nature of the Eucharist, such divergences remain unresolved, and communities such as this one illustrate how these theological tensions continue to be lived out in concrete and distinctive ways (see Iliev 2025, 211). It appears that literalist views of the Eucharist in Bulgaria are not confined to a single Protestant congregation but resonate across a broader Evangelical

[11] Author's interview with Pastor Yuri Iliev, 17.02.2026.

landscape, including certain Romani communities that likewise attach importance to the ontological reality of Christ's Body and Blood. Within these contexts, the active participation of ordinary believers – including those from socially marginalized strata – reinforces spiritual agency, individual dignity, and broader inclusivity, highlighting the community-driven character of BCG.

Overall, God's Mercy, as an idiosyncratic strand within the Bulgarian Church of God, illustrates how theological convictions regarding the Eucharist can produce a coherent and integrated ethos, where devotion, music, and social experience mutually reinforce one another. It exemplifies a lived theology in which the sacred is immanent, transformative, and accessible, and in which grassroots believers are affirmed as active participants in a communal spiritual realm. The study of such practices offers a lens for understanding the complexity of doctrine, ritual, and community identity in contemporary Protestant movements.

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