

THE CENTRALITY OF CHRISTOLOGY IN THE MARBURG COLLOQUY

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The Marburg Colloquy of 1529 was a pivotal event of the Reformation era. The political and religious consequences of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli's failure to come to agreement on the Eucharist set the course for a political and religious split with reverberations that have lasted almost 500 years. Today's observer of the theological discussions at Marburg may too easily embrace a post-Enlightenment arrogance that assumes the doctrinal disputes of Luther and Zwingli to be petty and superfluous. But the Reformers did not engage in polemics and debate over minor theological intricacies. Certainly the personalities, ethnicities, and fallen nature of the Reformers played a part in the discussions, but the political and religious stakes were too high to disagree for disagreement's sake. Luther and Zwingli firmly agreed on at least one thing: one's theology of the Lord's Supper was not minor or secondary, but essential to correctly understanding the entire Christian faith. The debate over the Lord's Supper occupied a primary place in both Luther and Zwingli's theologies because of the questions of Christology that arose in the midst of conflict. This essay will show how Luther and Zwingli's differing views on Christ's humanity were the primary cause of their division on the Eucharist. We will start by looking at each Reformer's Eucharistic theology in particular, and then we will turn to the Reformers' views of Christ's humanity and their debate over "flesh" and "spirit."

An Overview of Luther and Zwingli's Theologies of the Lord's Supper

Before Luther and Zwingli entered the Marburg castle in 1529 for their famous debate over the nature of the Lord's Supper, both these men had formed strong convictions regarding the Eucharist and the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament. We will begin by looking at the Reformers' views of the Lord's Supper in particular before turning to the debate at Marburg.

Luther's Theology of the Lord's Supper

In the medieval period before the Reformation, the mass formed the centerpiece of Christian worship and devotion. Three centuries before Luther began teaching in Wittenberg, the fourth Lateran council of 1215 established the doctrine of transubstantiation, which holds that upon the priest's consecration of the bread and wine, the accidents (according to the senses) remain the same, but the substance (the internal "essence") is miraculously transformed into the physical body and blood of Christ. The implications of this doctrine were widespread. Laypeople began to adore the bread and wine from afar or superstitiously carry pieces of bread back home to plant in the garden for good crops or to give to an ailing animal for good health. To avoid an accidental spilling of the wine, the priests began giving only the bread to parishioners, keeping the cup for themselves. By the 1500's, even the bread was withheld in most churches. The mass had turned into a show instead of a sacrament. Some parishioners feverishly hurried from church to church to obtain the blessing of seeing more than one host in a given day.¹

Luther objected to the extreme practices brought by medieval superstition, but he continued to regard the "images, bells, Eucharistic vestments, church ornaments, altar lights and

¹ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 185-187.

the like” as “indifferent.”² Two things in particular bothered Luther about the Roman Catholic view of the Lord’s Supper. First, he disagreed sharply with the practice of withholding the cup from the laity. So strongly did Luther believe in the laity’s participation in the mass that he condemned the Roman Catholic practice as one way that “Babylon” holds the church “captive.”³ (It should be noted however that Luther did not believe that withholding the cup necessarily invalidated the sacrament or that the Christians who were denied the cup during the previous centuries had not received sacramental benefits.⁴) Secondly, Luther believed that the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacrament as a “good work and a sacrifice” was the “most wicked abuse of all.”⁵ Luther argued forcefully that the mass must be seen as a testament – something to *receive*, not a good work to perform. The only sacrifice at the Lord’s Table is the sacrifice of ourselves. The idea that a priest could sacrifice the body and blood of the Lord was especially appalling to Luther and he considered this belief the most abominable of Roman errors.⁶

Despite Luther’s independent thinking on the Lord’s Supper, in most aspects, he remained very close to Roman Catholic theology and practice. Though he rejected the adoration of the consecrated host, he affirmed the idea of reverence in the forms of bowing or prostrating oneself before the table. He insisted that the object of adoration should be Jesus Christ, as He is present in the sacrament, not the bread and wine.⁷ But the line between reverence and adoration remained blurry, and though Luther sought to distance himself from Rome in this regard, he actually left the door open for the extremes he condemned.

Another area in which Luther remained close to Roman doctrine is in the doctrine of the “real presence.” Up until 1519, it appears Luther agreed with the official doctrine of transubstantiation. In 1520, he criticized the idea quite forcefully, painting it as needless speculation based on Aristotelian thought.⁸ A popular misconception among Reformation students is that Luther affirmed and promoted “consubstantiation,” but neither Luther nor the Lutheran church ever accepted that term. Luther simply refused to speculate on *how* Christ is present and instead settled for affirming *that* he is there. The presence of Christ in the Supper is miraculous and thus defies explanation.⁹

Roman Catholic theologians strongly emphasized the moment of consecration, when the priest would lift the bread and say “*Hoc est corpus meum.*” At that moment, bells would be rung and all eyes would be on the elevated host, which had magically been transformed into Christ’s body.¹⁰ Luther similarly emphasized the words of institution, but only because Christ’s command leads to the change, not because the priest has made a special utterance.¹¹ In this and other practices, Luther was content to alter the understanding *behind* Roman Catholic practice without feeling the need to actually change the tradition itself.

² Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper – Part III” *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, Second Edition*, edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 69.

³ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, Second Edition*, ed. Timothy Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 215-220.

⁴ Herman Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), 90, 95.

⁵ Sasse, 225.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85, 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁸ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 221.

⁹ Sasse, 103-104.

¹⁰ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 146-147.

¹¹ Sasse, 168-171.

Luther believed that the fruit of the Lord's Supper is the forgiveness of sins. Roman doctrine held that Communion was for the righteous, those who have confessed their sins to the priest. Luther believed Communion was for sinners, those who needed Christ's incarnation the most. The center of Luther's theology of the Lord's Supper is the idea of "sacramental union." At the Lord's Table, in this sacred moment in which the elements of bread and wine are sacramentally united to the body and blood of Christ, God simultaneously reveals and hides himself. The paradox of God's incomprehensibility and self-revelation formed the basis for Luther's rejection of all philosophical speculations on *how* Christ is physically present. The idea of sacramental union was Luther's response to Roman transubstantiation.¹²

Zwingli's Theology of the Lord's Supper

Zwingli did not see the need for a "sacramental union" in the Lord's Supper because of his modified understanding of sacraments. According to Zwingli, the sacraments serve as a public testimony of a previous grace. Therefore, the sacrament is "a sign of a sacred thing, i.e. of a grace that has been given." For Zwingli, the idea that the sacraments carry any salvific efficacy in themselves is a return to Judaism's ceremonial washings that lead to the purchase of salvation.¹³ Whereas Luther sought to prune the bad branches off the tree of Roman Catholic sacramentalism, Zwingli believed the problem to be rooted at least partly in sacramentalism itself. The only way to legitimately resolve Roman excess was to reinterpret the nature of the sacraments. Pruning the tree was not enough; pulling the tree up from its roots was the only action that could actually fix the problems.

Applying his modified understanding of the sacraments to the Eucharist led Zwingli to affirm its primary purpose as the proclamation of salvation and the strengthening of faith in the hearts of believers. Zwingli insisted that the biblical text taught that the Lord's Supper was a sign, and that to make it something more violated the nature of the sacrament.¹⁴ However, this caution did not keep Zwingli from strongly affirming a "spiritual presence" of Christ in the Eucharist brought by the "contemplation of faith."¹⁵ What Zwingli could not accept was a "real presence" that claimed Christ was present in his physical body with no visible bodily boundaries. "I have no use for that notion of a real and true body that does not exist physically, definitely and distinctly in some place, and that sort of nonsense got up by word triflers."¹⁶

Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper should not, it seems, be viewed as an innovation without precedent in church history. Zwingli claimed that his doubts about transubstantiation were shared by many of his day, leading him to claim that priests did not ever believe such a thing, even though "most all have taught this or at least pretended to believe it."¹⁷ Had Zwingli's modified doctrine of the "real presence" been an innovation, it would probably not have been so eagerly accepted by his parishioners. The symbolic view spread rapidly because Zwingli had given voice and legitimacy to an opinion that was apparently already widespread.

¹² Sasse, 114-115, 162.

¹³ Ulrich Zwingli, "An Account of the Faith of Zwingli" *On Providence and Other Essays*, ed. William J. Hinke (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1983), 47-48.

¹⁴ Ulrich Zwingli, "Letter to the Princes of Germany" *On Providence and Other Essays*, 117-118.

¹⁵ Ulrich Zwingli, "An Account of the Faith of Zwingli," 49.

¹⁶ Ulrich Zwingli, "Letter to the Princes of Germany," 119-120.

¹⁷ Ulrich Zwingli, quoted by W. Koehler, Luther and Zwingli, p. 74, *from Zwingli's Works, Critical edition* in "Corpus Reformatorum" III. 350, 6 ff.

In Zurich, the mass was abolished in 1525. The Lord's Supper was celebrated with a new liturgy that replaced the altar with a table and tablecloth. The striking feature of the Zwinglian observance of the sacrament was its simplicity. Because the bread and wine were not physically transformed into Christ's body and blood, there was no need for spurious ceremonies and pompous rituals. The occasion was marked by simplicity and reverence, with an emphasis on its nature as a memorial.¹⁸

Zwingli's denial of the "real presence" did not result in the neglecting of the sacrament that would characterize many of his followers in centuries to come. He saw seven virtues in the Lord's Supper that proved its importance for the Christian life. First, it is a sacred rite because Christ the High Priest has instituted it. Secondly, communion bears witness to something already accomplished. Third, the action takes the place of the thing it signifies. Fourth, the Lord's Supper is valuable because of what it signifies (communion with Christ for strength and communion with others for unity). Sixth, observance of the Lord's Supper increases and supports faith, and finally, its power is its keeping of an oath of allegiance.¹⁹

The Centrality of Christology in the Marburg Discussions

Though Luther and Zwingli seemed to be strongly opposed on the question of the "real presence," they were actually closer than one might expect. Both affirmed Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Both affirmed the nature of the sacrament as a sign that strengthens faith in the hearts of believers. Both rejected transubstantiation as well as the Roman Catholic understanding of the mass as a sacrifice. Where the two Reformers diverged was in the philosophical realm, specifically the nature of physicality. Zwingli could not affirm the idea of an omnipresent physical body, which is why he believed that Christ could only be spiritually present in the Lord's Supper. Luther believed that a "spiritual" presence was really no presence at all and that this belief emptied the Lord's Supper of its power, making Christ's words of institution to be a lie. But behind these squabbles is the heart of the Marburg debate: Christology, and specifically the question of Christ's humanity.

Luther: Christ's Humanity Demands a Physical Presence in the Lord's Supper

Luther believed and taught that Jesus' human nature participated in his divine nature, meaning that his body (as both human and divine) must share in the attributes of divinity, including omnipresence. Therefore, Luther had no problem affirming both that Jesus was physically present in one location while also present in another. He did not seek to resolve the logical tensions that arose from such a view since Scripture did not address those issues.²⁰

At Marburg, Luther refused to give up the idea of "sacramental union" that took place between the elements and Christ's body and blood. Though rejecting the idea that the bread and wine were actually transformed, he believed that Christ's body and blood were sacramentally united to the bread and wine, so that when one ate the bread, one was eating Christ's body. At some points, Luther goes *farther* than the Roman Catholic Church, by stating that if a person's

¹⁸ H. Wayne Pipkin, *The Nature and Development of the Zwinglian Reformation to August, 1524* (Hartford: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1989), 240.

¹⁹ Ulrich Zwingli, "An Exposition of the Christian Faith," *On Providence and Other Essays*, 256-259.

²⁰ Sasse, 150, 155, 160.

teeth crush the bread, then the same thing happens to Christ's body also, since Christ's body is united to the bread.²¹

Luther would not compromise with Zwingli on the Lord's Supper because he believed the doctrines of the incarnation and Christ's humanity to be at stake. Zwingli sought to debate based on logical conclusions and reason; Luther appealed again and again to Jesus' words, "This is my body." Luther saw Jesus' words at the Last Supper as all the ammunition he needed to shoot down any other opinions. Zwingli believed, based on logic and human reason, that a human body could not be present in more than one place; Luther challenged him to take Christ at his word. If Jesus said he was physically present, then logic and human reason should be forced to correspond to the everlasting words of Christ – not the other way around. In Luther's eyes, Zwingli was seeking to modify the natural reading of Christ's words in order to make it compatible with human reason.²² As he saw it,

"I do not ask how Christ can be God and man and how His natures could be united.

For God is able to act far beyond our imagination. To the Word of God one must yield. It is up to you to prove that the body of Christ is not there when Christ Himself says, 'This is my body.' I do not want to hear what reason says. I completely reject carnal or geometrical arguments..."²³

Luther did not understand Zwingli's reticence to accept a physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist. He believed that just as the body of Christ was necessary for salvation, so a physical presence of Christ was important for the Lord's Supper. Luther saw Zwingli's attempt to "spiritualize" the presence of Christ as a backhanded way of denying Christ's true humanity.

Zwingli: Christ's Humanity Excludes Omnipresence

Though Luther believed Zwingli's view of "spiritual presence" downplayed Christ's humanity, Zwingli argued that it was Luther's view that actually demoted Christ from his proper place as fully Man. According to Zwingli, Luther's fusion of Christ's divine and human natures was a dangerous flirtation with Eutychianism (the heresy that claimed Christ's natures were fused together, creating a third kind of nature), or even worse, with Docetism (the heresy that Christ only *appeared* to be human). Zwingli believed Luther had so emphasized Christ's divinity that the physical aspects of his humanity were being dismissed or worse, denied.

Zwingli appealed to Augustine as a supporter of his view that the sacrament is a sign and that Christ's physical, human nature cannot be omnipresent.²⁴ Zwingli also appealed to Scripture in his defense, not merely to reason. Zwingli insisted that Christ's words of institution should be understood as "This *signifies* my body" instead of the literal "This *is* my body." As Zwingli cited the Greek text, Luther interrupted him and ordered him to read German or Latin. Zwingli continued to use Greek, as a scholar of the humanist tradition who believed that the language mattered very much. Translation did not equal equivalency. The absence of the word "is" in the

²¹ Sasse, 162.

²² Ibid., 231.

²³ Ibid., 231.

²⁴ Ulrich Zwingli, *On Providence and Other Essays*, 49-50.

Greek was important to Zwingli because Luther had chosen to hang his entire argument on the literal meaning of that word.²⁵

Luther remained adamant that the text should be interpreted literally. So Zwingli pushed back at Luther by telling him to interpret literally Jesus' statement "I am no more in the world" with regard to the Eucharist.²⁶ He also culled several examples from the Old Testament where "is" is interpreted metaphorically (Ezekiel 5:1, Isaiah 9:14, etc.).²⁷

The third session of the Marburg Colloquy (Sunday morning, October 3) featured the Christological debate that formed the heart of the entire controversy. Zwingli argued that Luther's view denigrated the humanity of Christ by not allowing Christ's human body to remain in heaven, at the right hand of the Father. Luther argued that Zwingli's view denigrated Christ's humanity by denying its presence in the Lord's Supper.²⁸ Zwingli believed that Luther's view was particularly dangerous, for if Christ's humanity shares the attribute of omnipresence with his divinity, then one could naturally conclude that Christ's body is in every piece of bread everywhere and even in every part of nature. Because the Scriptures and the ecumenical creeds demanded a strict distinction between the natures of Christ, Zwingli sought to interpret the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper spiritually. For Zwingli, Luther's affirmation of a human body's omnipresence inevitably negated the very essence of what a human body is entirely.²⁹

Luther responded to Zwingli's Christological argument by again appealing to Christ's words of institution. If Jesus was speaking truthfully when he said "This is my body," then God's omnipotence must govern Christ's body, so that his body is not corporeal in the same way other human bodies are.³⁰ Zwingli agreed that God has the power to make a body be in different places at the same time, but he saw no scriptural proof to indicate that this happens in the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, Zwingli believed Luther's interpretation weakened his Christology, neglecting important aspects of Christ's identification with our humanity.³¹

Flesh versus Spirit and the Question of Rationality

If Luther's favorite text in support of his view was "This is my body," Zwingli's favorite was John 6:63, where Jesus claims "The flesh profits nothing." Coursing through the Christological debate over Christ's presence in the Supper was a strong dichotomy between flesh and spirit. For Luther, a spiritual presence with no physical local presence was not a true presence at all. For Zwingli, the belief that the bread and wine contained the physical body and blood of Christ bordered on idolatry. Zwingli continually pressed Luther on *why* the physical presence was necessary if the "flesh profits nothing."

Zwingli's cohort Oecolampadius, who also contributed to the debate at Marburg, claimed that John 6:63 indicates that it is a spiritual feeding on Christ through faith that is necessary, not a carnal, fleshly feeding. Luther agreed with Oecolampadius that John 6 refers to a spiritual eating, but he disagreed with the idea that the spiritual eating is unaccompanied by bodily eating. Luther also affirmed the presence of many metaphors in Scripture, but he did not believe Zwingli

²⁵ Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 71.

²⁶ Sasse, 255.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 259-260.

²⁹ Wandel, 102.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

³¹ Sasse, 256.

and Oecolampadius had strong arguments for seeing Jesus' words of institution as necessarily metaphorical. "I have a clear and powerful text!", he proclaimed.³²

The basis for much of the debate at Marburg goes back to Zwingli's tendency to draw a dichotomy between the physical (outward) and the spiritual (inward) as well as Luther's tendency to keep them too closely united. Both Reformers made good points; both went to extremes. Both were trying to navigate their way safely over a Christological precipice that threatened either to divide Christ too much (Zwingli) or unite his natures too closely (Luther).³³

Zwingli saw in Luther's view of the Lord's Supper an irrational belief that hearkened back to Roman Catholic dogma. In his mind, Luther was afraid to cut the ties from Rome and to seek the true understanding of the Eucharist found in Scripture and based on reason. According to Zwingli, Luther's understanding of the sacraments kept one dependent upon the Church and introduced a foreign paradigm to the biblical texts. Luther likewise saw a return to Rome in Zwingli's view of the Lord's Supper. Granted, Zwingli's view of the "real presence" was quite different than transubstantiation, but his emphasis on the memorial aspect of the Supper and his view of it as an act of obedience more than a gift from God seemed to Luther to be a "good work" performed to receive God's blessing. Luther felt that just as Roman Catholicism had turned the Eucharist into a good work and kept the elements for the priests alone, Zwingli's doctrine would lead to the Eucharist as a *mere* sign, which would then take away any reason for celebrating the Eucharist.

The two Reformers not only had opposing views on the question of "flesh" and "spirit," but they also differed on the philosophical understanding of logic and rationality. Zwingli believed that the Scriptures affirmed logic and reason, and therefore when Christ said in John 12:8 "You will not always have me," a bodily presence must necessarily be excluded for one body cannot be both in heaven and on earth at the same time. Luther appealed to the miraculous, stating that both are true, no matter how logically absurd it may sound. "I confess that the body is in heaven, but I also confess that it is in the sacrament."³⁴

Oecolampadius sought to bring the two together by pointing out the common ground. "What we are agreed on is that Christ is present in heaven (according to his divinity and humanity) and in the Supper (according to his divinity)." He then told Luther that he should not cling to the humanity and the flesh of Christ, but instead lift up his mind to Christ's divinity. Luther's response made it clear that no compromise would take place. "I do not know of any God except him who was made flesh, nor do I want to have another."³⁵ With those words, Luther indirectly implied that Zwingli was denying the true humanity of Christ in his pursuit for a rational understanding of the Supper. The debate would come to an unhappy close, with the Christological questions keeping the Reformers apart on the doctrine of the Eucharist.

The Conclusions of the Marburg Colloquy

Despite the bitter tone of the debates at Marburg, signs of the Holy Spirit's presence surfaced throughout the discussion. By the end of the Colloquy, Luther and Zwingli wept together and asked forgiveness for bitter words. Both remained firm in their convictions and encouraged the other to ask for God's enlightenment. Luther uttered the famous line, "Your spirit

³² Sasse, 232-233.

³³ Wandel, 71-72, 100.

³⁴ Sasse, 248-250.

³⁵ Sasse, 250-252.

and our spirit cannot go together. Indeed, it is quite obvious that we do not have the same spirit.”³⁶

It is unfortunate that Luther and Zwingli saw their differences on the Lord’s Supper as excluding any possibility for political and religious alliance. The two Reformers agreed on fourteen out of the fifteen articles of faith. The Lord’s Supper, the sacrament given by our Lord to be the place for brothers and sisters to come to the table in unity, proved ironically to be the doctrine that has kept the Lutheran and Reformed traditions from greater fellowship.

In the 1540 version of the Augsburg confession, Luther’s disciple Philip Melancthon worded the article on the Lord’s Supper in such a way as to mute the differences between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.³⁷ Today, much of the animosity between the Reformation traditions has passed. Evangelical Lutheran, Reformed, and Baptist groups have reaffirmed their commitments to the Reformation understanding of the gospel, even though maintaining distinctions on issues related to church polity, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. The popular radio program, “The White Horse Inn”, features a panel discussion between four ministers, one Lutheran, one Reformed, one Presbyterian, and one Baptist. Though they maintain distinct views on the Lord’s Supper and other issues, the common ground between each Reformation tradition is evident to listeners.

Conclusion

The question of Christology formed the basis for Luther and Zwingli’s fierce debate on the Lord’s Supper. Both of the Reformers believed the implications of their beliefs about the Lord’s Supper to be too important for compromise. Both also had an exaggerated view of what those implications might be. In a day when the religious beliefs of society were exclusive, these two Reformers agreed that unity must be based on truth in *all* doctrine, not just in certain areas. Though Zwingli and Luther were tolerant of matters “indifferent,” neither one believed the Lord’s Supper to be an issue of indifference. The debate over the Lord’s Supper occupied a primary place in both Luther and Zwingli’s theologies because of the Christological issues at stake and the philosophical underpinnings of their respective schools of thought. Perhaps the best response to studying the Marburg Colloquy today is praying fervently that the act of the Lord’s Supper would once again proclaim Christ’s body, broken for us on Calvary, instead of the broken body of Christ in his Church.

³⁶ Ibid., 265.

³⁷ Kurt Aland, *Four Reformers: Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingli* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 76-77.

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