

# The Eucharistic Controversy of the 1520s and the Doctrine of the Real Presence in Luther's Theology

TRIEBEL Christian J.

## 0. Introduction

The Eucharistic controversy, developing in the 1520s and finding its climax in the Marburg Colloquy (1529), was a tragedy according to both Herman Sasse and Heiko Oberman.<sup>1</sup> The bitter disagreements between Zwingli and Luther led to their alienation and weakened the newly formed Reformation movement that found itself threatened more than ever by the Emperor Charles V. Zwingli and Luther could not agree on the real presence of Christ's body in the Lord's Supper. Consequently, Philip of Hesse failed to obtain a joint confession that would have served as a basis to unify evangelical territories in a pan-Protestant alliance of all protestant territories.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the controversy also showed how much theology mattered. Sasse comments that "no one can understand Luther unless he has understood his fight for the Real Presence,"<sup>3</sup> thus placing the controversy of the real presence at the very heart of Luther's theological framework. Others, such as Thomas Davis, have argued against such an overemphasis of the real presence and instead made the Word of God its primary aspect.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the core of Luther's thought might be, what is clear is that his theological view would not allow him to deny the real presence. Some of his deepest beliefs were at stake when Zwingli and others denied the real presence in the Eucharist.

This paper's objective is to, first, review the historical context of the Eucharistic debate leading up to the 1529 Marburg Colloquy, second, summarize the theological points of disagreement between Zwingli and Luther, and, third, place Luther's emphasis on Christ's bodily presence in the elements within the broader context of his theology. This paper argues

---

1 Herman Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*, Revised ed. (Adelaine, South Australia: Openbook Publishers, 1977), 107; Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 243.

2 William J. Wright, "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," in *Pietas Et Societas: New Trends in Reformation Social History: Essays in Memory of Harold J. Grimm*, ed. H.J. Grimm, K.C. Sessions, and P.N. Bebb (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1985).

3 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 9.

4 Thomas J. Davis, "'The Truth of the Divine Words': Luther's Sermons on the Eucharist, 1521-28, and the Structure of Eucharistic Meaning," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 2 (1999).

that the real presence was a necessary consequence of Luther's view of the primacy of God's Word, the hidden and incarnate God, the redemption of the whole person, including the body, justification by faith in God's promise rather than in our conviction, and finally his pastoral concerns for the troubled believer.

## 1.1 The Eucharistic Controversy and Politics in the 1520s

Philip of Hesse stands at the center of the political circumstances surrounding the Marburg Colloquy. The colloquy was his attempt to form a pan-Protestant alliance of all evangelical territories, including the Swiss cantons, against the emperor. The long absence of the newly elected Emperor Charles V played an important role in the realization of the Marburg Colloquy. Soon after the Diet of Worms in 1521, which condemned evangelical faith as heretical, Charles V left Germany. Throughout the 1520s, Charles V was heavily involved in conflicts with Francis I of France and the pope until the three parties reached an agreement in 1529. When Charles V finally returned to Germany in order to stomp out the Protestant movement, the Ottoman Empire's army was approaching Vienna, forcing the emperor to set aside religious differences and, together with the German Protestant princes, defend the empire. Charles V eventually returned to Germany for the Diet of Augsburg in 1530.

The uncertainty of the time of his return and the possibility of him enforcing the Edict of Worms in the near future elicited different reactions from two main camps. On the one hand, Philip of Hesse acted with a sense of urgency and crisis. He tried to form a grand alliance able to resist the emperor. He thought of the empire in its universal, medieval connotation. The office of the Emperor was for him an elected office open to resistance.<sup>5</sup> As Philip understood it, the theological differences between Zwingli and Luther were due to misunderstandings. He was therefore optimistic that once he arranged a meeting between the two parties there would be agreement and he could obtain a confession that would serve his alliance. He was convinced that both Zwingli and Luther held the same essential religious faith.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the confessional party, consisting of Elector John of Saxony, Margrave George of Brandenburg-Ansbach and the city of Nuremberg, preferred an alliance among Germans based on confessional agreement. Influenced by the German national movement, the confessional party supported the imperial monarchy.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, the office of the emperor, viewed as supreme,

---

5 Wright, "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," 163-5.

6 Ibid., 166-7.

7 On the German national movement, see: Oberman, *Luther*, 13-49.

irresistible authority, was a main symbol and common element of the national movement.<sup>8</sup> Resistance against the emperor was therefore unacceptable. Furthermore, the confessional party feared what they saw as “a spirit of revolution and radicalism”<sup>9</sup> in the Zwinglian camp and was therefore wary of including them in an alliance.<sup>10</sup> Whereas Philip of Hesse wanted a grand coalition between Zwingli and Luther for a pan-Protestant alliance to resist the Charles V and the Catholic Church, Elector John wanted German national unity that included German Catholics and Lutherans. Sacrificing the minority of German Zwinglians for this unity was a small price to pay. William Wright summarizes the struggle between the two parties and the importance of the Marburg Colloquy:

The Marburg Colloquy was a calculated attempt by the Landgrave [Philip of Hesse] to gain the support of the Wittenberg theologians, especially Luther, for his policies. Philip sought at the least to wrest from the confessional party the authority of Luther being used by them to block his plans for a pan-Protestant alliance. If Philip could resolve the Sacramental controversy, Luther’s religious objections to a pan-Protestant alliance would be overcome.<sup>11</sup>

Both parties sought the support of Luther, the main authority in Protestantism. Philip tried to bring Luther over to his side and use the theological agreement he sought to obtain at Marburg for his political alliance. The confessional party resented the idea of an alliance against the emperor. It was thus in their interest for the Marburg Colloquy to fail.

The absence of Charles V presented Philip with the opportunity to unite the Protestant princes. First steps towards Philip’s vision were taken in 1526 with the Torgau League, which was shortly after expanded into the Marburg League. Interestingly, Elector John played a central role in these leagues. However, these agreements had not named any potential opponents yet. These first treaties were based on a consensus, though not a confession, reached in 1525 by theologians of Franconia and Wittenberg.<sup>12</sup> John the Elector and the confessional party preferred a unified confession of faith as a foundation of a political alliance, especially since it would inevitably lead to the exclusion of the Swiss party. Philip of Hesse, however, preferred a broader confessional basis that would allow the inclusion of the cities of Southwest Germany and Reformed Switzerland.

While Charles V was at war with France and the pope, the first Diet of Speyer in summer 1526 withdrew the edict of Worms relieving some of the tension in Germany. Soon after

---

<sup>8</sup> Wright, “Phillip of Hesse’s Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy,” 168.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Bainton, “Luther and the Via Media at the Marburg Colloquy,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1949).

<sup>11</sup> Wright, “Phillip of Hesse’s Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy,” 173.

<sup>12</sup> Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 161.

the Diet, Philip entered into dialogue with Zwingli, who also favored a political federation to counter-balance the Roman Catholic territories, about the possibility of a confessional agreement. Unfortunately, starting in 1525, the Eucharistic controversy between Zwingli and Luther had increasingly turned violent and Luther declined the invitation to a colloquy because he thought enough had been written about the issue and there was no potential agreement.

The political atmosphere became increasingly hostile in the following years. Sasse summarizes the political situation in which Philip and Zwingli sought to organize a colloquy to resolve the great controversy:

[A Protestant agreement] became more and more urgent, as the political developments after the year 1528 seemed to lead to a catastrophe. Already in 1528 Germany was on the brink of a religious war, which at the last moment was avoided. The tension in Switzerland was growing, and a war seemed inevitable, since the Catholic cantons had reached an agreement with Ferdinand. The Turks stood at the gates of Vienna. The Emperor had defeated Francis, and was expected to return to Germany in the near future.<sup>13</sup>

As Protestant Germany was under renewed threat of imperial intervention, princes who had been fairly moderate towards the Reformation favored the Catholic side again. This resulted in the reaffirmation of the Edict of Worms at the Second Diet of Speyer in 1529. Philip met with Melancthon during the Diet and proposed a colloquy for the second time.

The confessional party opposed Philip's vision of a greater political alliance of all Protestant territories against the emperor. They preferred to reconcile with Emperor Charles V and in May 1529 decided to send a delegation to approach the emperor. Wright comments that "in spite of the threatening situation, the confessional party wished first to pursue legal means to obtain security. It emphasized that one must trust God rather than alliances, a point made by Luther."<sup>14</sup> A political alliance against the emperor was therefore not a solution to the problem. As soon as Luther heard of the planned colloquy, he warned his elector against this alliance. Sasse writes, "[Luther] questioned the political wisdom of the alliance, since it would only provoke the adversaries to make another alliance."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Elector John signed the Particular Secret Agreement between Saxony, Hesse, Nuremberg, Ulm, and Strasbourg shortly after the Second Diet of Speyer that promised to work out a detailed defensive alliance at later meetings. Wright suggests that the Elector signed out of "personal anxiety" and in contradiction to opposition he had expressed earlier.<sup>16</sup>

---

13 Ibid., 162.

14 Wright, "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," 165.

15 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 167.

16 Wright, "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," 174.

Immediately after this Agreement, the optimistic Philip of Hesse began sending out invitations for what became the Marburg Colloquy. However, in signing the Particular Secret Agreement John of Saxony had acted in contradiction to principles he held.<sup>17</sup> Luther, who was later informed by Melanchthon of the Agreement his Elector had signed, also strongly expressed his disagreement with Elector John's actions.<sup>18</sup> Having re-thought the Agreement, Elector John and Margrave George plotted and carried out the failure of several meetings of Protestant political representatives meant to fulfill the Secret Agreement. Furthermore, the two princes asked the Wittenberg theologians for a theological statement that could be used as a common confession, prerequisite to any political alliance.<sup>19</sup> Even before the Marburg Colloquy began, the confessional party armed themselves with a doctrinal statement carrying the authority of Wittenberg that would prevent Philip from achieving his vision of a pan-Protestant alliance based on theological agreement at Marburg. Wright even comments that the Elector John "committed the ultimate act of sabotage"<sup>20</sup> by specifically instructing Luther and Melanchthon not to make an agreement. Furthermore, John sent the Saxon district official Eberhard von Tann with them to make sure these instructions were fulfilled. In November 1529, amid the political tension between Philip of Hesse and the confessional party and the continuing threat to the survival of the Protestant movement by the imminent return of Charles V, the two main parties in the Eucharistic controversy, represented by Zwingli and Luther, finally met at Marburg.

Sasse comments on Luther's hesitance to commit himself to an evangelical political alliance:

The Gospel...cannot be defended except by Christ himself. Since Luther did not approve of any religious war, any crusade, he could not recognize a political alliance as a proper means to defend the church, especially when this alliance compromised people of various convictions.<sup>21</sup>

This indicates how important defending the doctrine of the real presence was to Luther even during such a politically tricky situation. The Reformation for Luther was a religious movement and not a political one. Wright also comments that even though the Marburg Colloquy was politically charged, theology was what mattered most to Luther. He writes, "[t]he most vexing problem with an alliance as Philip was proposing...was that it would necessitate allying with the

---

17 Ibid., 174-5.

18 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 167.

19 Wright, "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," 175.

20 Ibid.

21 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 168.

enemies of God.... Luther had strong religious reasons for his opposition to Philip's alliance."<sup>22</sup> The "enemies of God" in this case were the Swiss party, which held a contrary view of the Eucharist. Luther would not accept a political alliance to protect the Reformation movement, especially not at the expense of theology.

Furthermore, a major difference between Luther, on the one hand, and Philip and Zwingli, on the other hand, lay in the content of the sought agreement. For Luther, the doctrine of the real presence had to be included in the potential joint confession. However, Zwingli was convinced that this was not an article of faith in the strict sense and therefore thought that it did not need to be included.<sup>23</sup> Sasse concludes that the Marburg Colloquy, because it tried to subordinate a confession of faith to politics, was bound to fail.<sup>24</sup> Oberman makes a similar observation but suggests that not only Luther but Zwingli also was unwilling to submit to political pressure:

The Marburg Colloquy of 1529 attests to the fact that the reformers, Luther and Zwingli alike, were steadfast in their refusal to subordinate their convictions to the demand of political calculation. That an alliance of all Protestants could not be achieved was the political price of the Eucharistic Controversy.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, Luther's steadfast insistence on the real presence shows how important this doctrine and all that it entailed was to him.

What was at stake in connection with the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist was not a trivial matter, both politically and theologically. However, even though the Marburg Colloquy involved groups of different political views, it was primarily a theological discussion rather than a political one. The political tension between Philip of Hesse and the confessional party added to the importance of this discussion and showed that the Eucharistic controversy was more than a superficial disagreement or an unfortunate misunderstanding. The disagreement concerning the real presence let the deep going theological differences between Luther and Zwingli emerge.

## 1.2 The Eucharistic Controversy in Zwingli and Luther's writings

The controversy grew in extent with an increasing number of theologians involved and

---

22 Wright, "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," 170.

23 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 163.

24 Ibid., 169.

25 Oberman, *Luther*, 240.

treatises published. Sasse comments on the early years from 1524 to 1526 of the controversy: “Innumerable sermons were preached on the Lord’s Supper, and an immense number of writings were published....Eventually two great fighters and their parties remained on the battlefield: Luther and Zwingli.”<sup>26</sup> In the years immediately before the Marburg Colloquy, Luther wrote two major works on the Eucharist. His first direct response to his critics was *That These Words ‘This Is My Body,’ etc., Still Stand Firm against the Fanatics* in 1527, and the second was his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* in 1528. These two writings are heavily marked by polemics, but are genuine expressions of Luther’s deepest convictions that he felt were at stake in the controversy. These convictions far exceeded the mere question of the real presence in the Lord’s Supper. This is because he felt the very core of the Gospel was being threatened. However, it was not Luther but Zwingli who initiated the conflict.<sup>27</sup>

Zwingli only started advocating a symbolic presence in 1524, after encountering the Dutch humanist Cornelius Honius’ figurative interpretation of the Words of Institution.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Zwingli seems to have learned from Carlstadt the argument that Christ’s body is in heaven and cannot at the same time be in the bread.<sup>29</sup> Although Zwingli did not completely agree with Carlstadt, he saw him as an ally against Catholicism. Zwingli argued the following points: the Eucharist is a reminder, John 6:63 is the key to understanding the Words of Institution, any bodily presence in the host is absurd in light of Matthew 24:23, “is” in the Words of Institution means “signify”, a real presence of Christ’s body contradicts the Apostles’ Creed, and no miracles of Christ are contrary to sense experience and therefore a miracle to explain the real presence is not justifiable.<sup>30</sup> The Eucharist was a joyful memorial feast of thanksgiving and a communal witness to faith. He saw any reference to a real presence as a relapse into Catholicism.

Zwingli opened the public controversy when he published a letter in spring 1525, written to Matthew Alber, a Lutheran pastor, which harshly criticized the real presence. During the same time, he published *Commentary on True and False Religion*, in which he linked the Lutheran view of a real presence to Catholicism. Luther, on the other hand, first acted against Zwingli and his other critics in January 1526 in a letter to the Reuchlingen congregation that encouraged them to resist Zwingli and Carlstadt’s views. In June 1526, Luther identified

---

26 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 111.

27 Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works American Edition*, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958-1986). Vol. 37:xiii. Hereafter cited as LW followed by volume number and page number.

28 Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 176-7.

29 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 100.

30 LW 37:xii.

Zwingli and others as the leaders of a new sect in the preface to the German edition of Johann Brenz's *Swabian Syngamma*. Luther's first independent treatise on the Lord's Supper, a collection of three Easter sermons titled *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ — Against the Fanatics*, appeared in fall 1526. The collection was put together by friends who felt the need for Luther to address the controversy over the Eucharist. The controversy had expanded greatly and it was clear that Luther had to publish a polemical treatise of his own. A head-on collision occurred at the 1527 spring book fair where Zwingli's *Friendly Exposition of the Eucharist Affair, to Martin Luther* and Luther's *This Is My Body* appeared simultaneously. In his treatise, which argues for a spiritual presence as the most that could be affirmed, Zwingli identifies four errors of Luther: first, Christ's body, eaten physically, strengthens faith; second, it forgives sins; third, it is brought into the sacrament by reciting the Words of Institution; and, fourth, the Gospel is appropriated by the recipient, and the body and blood of Christ are bestowed upon the person.<sup>31</sup>

Zwingli also wrote a letter in April 1527 in which he rebuked Luther for his "self-contradiction and arrogance" and urged him to give up his "vain notion" of a bodily presence so that they could jointly fight the Papacy.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in summer 1527, Zwingli published another German treatise titled *That These Words of Jesus Christ, 'This Is My Body Which Is Given For You', Will Forever Retain Their Ancient, Single Meaning, And Martin Luther With His Latest Book Has By No Means Proved or Established His Own and the Pope's View. Ulrich Zwingli's Christian Answer*. The treatise argues that the real presence is absurd and useless. Zwingli identifies six errors of Luther: first, Christ's body is omnipresent, like his divinity; second, Christ invites us to find him in the Eucharist; third, sins are forgiven by eating Christ's body physically; fourth, Christ's flesh is wholly spiritual flesh; fifth, Christ's body, physically eaten, sustains our body until the resurrection; and sixth, Christ's body gives and increases faith. Luther wrote *Confession Concerning the Christ's Supper* in the winter of 1527/8 as a response to Zwingli. It was intended to be his final word on the subject.

Zwingli's criticism shows that the controversy was not merely about a minor point in the Lord's Supper. Denying or affirming the real presence had far reaching consequences in the areas of the doctrine of the incarnation, Christology, Eschatology, Soteriology, and the liturgical life of the church. The Eucharist was only the point at which their theological differences surfaced. For Zwingli, the real presence was incompatible with his theological system and was also an indication that theology had not yet been completely cleansed from Catholicism.

---

31 LW 37:153.

32 LW 37:154.



Likewise, Zwingli's insistence on the impossibility and absurdity of the real presence had far reaching consequences that Luther could not accept.

Both saw Scripture as their final authority, both emphasized the need for living faith of the recipient, and both rejected the view that the Eucharist was a sacrifice made to God.<sup>33</sup> Their differences, however, were significant. According to Robert H. Fischer's analysis, Zwingli held:

[Faith] is a purely spiritual relationship....[Faith] is drawn away from created things to the Creator and Savior. It must have no earthly thing for its object. Body and Spirit are mutually exclusive. Hence our faith ought not be drawn even to Christ's body, for this too is creaturely and space-bound; it is Christ's divinity alone which saves us....The purpose of the sacrament, therefore, is to lift our faith, by remembrance of the breaking of Christ's body for us on the cross, to heaven, where he sits bodily at the right hand of God.<sup>34</sup>

Zwingli's focus is on the spiritual, void of material existence. Luther, in contrast, saw the tension not between material and spiritual things, but sinful and godly things. He insisted on the primacy of the incarnate God. Fischer summarizes Luther's emphasis:

Faith is spiritual in that God the Holy Spirit produces it and nourishes it....Because God uses earthly means in and through which to come to us, faith must cling to them, not as objects but as signs of his potent presence....The only Christ we know is this one Jesus, God in human flesh. Therefore his humanity cannot be called useless to our salvation....The sacrament, therefore, was instituted as a means of grace, the feeding of Christ's people.<sup>35</sup>

Luther's God was not purely spiritual but united with creation and material things. He saw the Eucharist as the meeting point between humanity and God. The real presence could not be explained by transubstantiation or consubstantiation but was a "sacramental union"<sup>36</sup> analogous to the hypostatic union of two natures in the incarnation based on the word and promise of God.

## 2. Marburg Colloquy: Luther and Zwingli's points of Disagreement<sup>37</sup>

In connection with the question of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper, disagreement occurred concerning three main issues: first, the interpretation of the Words of Institution,

---

33 LW 37:xvii.

34 LW 37:xviii.

35 LW 37:xix.

36 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 129.

37 Arguments from the Marburg Colloquy are based on a reconstruction of the discussions put together by Sasse in *ibid.*, 180-220. The various accounts of the Colloquy and the Marburg Articles can be found in LW 38:3-89.

second the relevance of John 6:63 to the Eucharist, and third, the question of the nature and location of Christ's body.

Zwingli suggests that the word *est* in the Words of Institution<sup>38</sup> must mean *significat* and therefore is to be taken figuratively. He argues that there are many texts that use *est* but do not allow a literal reading.<sup>39</sup> Other passages must be considered and used as keys to understanding the Words of Institution. Rather than understanding the words as they stand, they need to make sense in the context of other passages. Having done this, Zwingli concludes, "comparison of Scripture with Scripture necessitates the acceptance of *est* for significant."<sup>40</sup> The literal interpretation will lead to absurdities.

Luther set forth his counter arguments in his two treatises *This is My Body*<sup>41</sup> and *Great Confession*.<sup>42</sup> Luther holds that the Words of Institution mean what they say unless there is an article of faith that contradicts the literal interpretation. He argues:

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... I do not want to hear what reason says. I completely reject carnal or geometric arguments....God is above and beyond all mathematics, and his words are to be adored and observed with awe. God, however, commands: 'take, eat; this is my body.'<sup>43</sup>

The question is not how the real presence is possible, since this will inevitably lead to other questions such as how the incarnation is possible, but what scripture clearly says. After all, for Luther, "God's Word is God's Word"<sup>44</sup> and "'This is my body'; God says it God does it."<sup>45</sup> Unless it could be demonstrated that in the particular case of the Words of Institution a metaphorical meaning must be applied, Luther is not willing to give up his literal reading.<sup>46</sup> For Luther, all that Zwingli suggests is that the passage can be understood figuratively. Interestingly, for Zwingli, Luther likewise only suggests that it can be understood literally. The focus of the discussion thus shifts to demonstrating the possibility or impossibility of the real presence.

One of the key passages that Zwingli employs to interpret the words of institution

---

38 "*Hoc est Corpus Meum*" ("This is my body").

39 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 193.

40 *Ibid.*, 193-4.

41 LW 37:3-150.

42 LW 37:151-372.

43 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 186-7.

44 LW 37:26.

45 LW 37:48.

46 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 187.

figuratively is John 6:63 “The flesh is of no avail” and “it is the spirit that makes alive.”<sup>47</sup> Zwingli argues that this passage refers to the body of Christ and, therefore, “it is impossible to understand the words of the Lord’s Supper literally because God has forbidden us to eat his flesh bodily.”<sup>48</sup> Spirit is the antithesis to flesh and, therefore, “the body of Christ is not eaten essentially, really, and in a carnal way.”<sup>49</sup> The emphasis is on the Spirit and the spiritual. In response to Luther, he states, “I marvel at how you can say that the body is eaten orally. If he is present, he is present for the comfort not of the body, but of the soul.”<sup>50</sup> Drawing a sharp line between the spiritual and the physical, Zwingli argues from John 6 that the Eucharist must be understood in a purely spiritual way with no elements of body or flesh.

Luther states that John 6 has no relevance to the Eucharist.<sup>51</sup> *Flesh* in this passage refers to the sinful nature which embraces all dimensions of the person, physical as well as mental/spiritual, and not to the corporeal body of Christ or the believer. He writes, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh is of no avail.’ We have interpreted this in no other way than as follows: My teaching is spiritual. Anyone who understands it in a fleshly manner errs, and his interpretation is of no avail, but whoever understands it spiritually will live.”<sup>52</sup> Fleshly and spiritually mean something entirely different for Luther than for Zwingli. Anything, even eating or drinking, if done with faith, becomes something significant and spiritual. If, as Zwingli suggests, the flesh of Christ is of no avail because it is material and corporeal, this has devastating consequences for Luther’s view of the incarnation and Christology as he shows at length in both *This is My Body*<sup>53</sup> and *Great Confession*.<sup>54</sup> Luther writes, “The glory of our God is precisely that for our sakes he comes down to the very depths, into human flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, our heart, our bosom; moreover, for our sakes he allows himself to be treated ingloriously both on the cross and on the altar.”<sup>55</sup> Luther argues that there is no dichotomy between the corporeal and the spiritual as Zwingli tries to show from John 6, because of his view of the incarnation as God genuinely taking on a body and physically suffering yet remaining perfectly spiritual. John 6 cannot be referring to Christ’s body because “God is in this flesh. It is God’s flesh, the

---

47 See: Craig R. Koester, “John Six and the Lord’s Supper,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1990). Gerhard Krodel, “John 6:63,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 37, no. 3 (1983).

48 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 194.

49 *Ibid.*, 192.

50 *Ibid.*, 195.

51 *Ibid.*, 196.

52 LW 37:248.

53 LW 37:78-104.

54 LW 37:237-252.

55 LW 37:72.

Spirit's flesh.<sup>56</sup> It is in God and God is in it. Therefore it lives and gives life to all who eat it, both to their bodies and to their souls."<sup>57</sup> Criticism of the value of Christ's body in the Eucharist was criticism of the incarnate God, the divine flesh and the very foundation of salvation. Denial of the real presence on grounds of John 6 was therefore unacceptable to Luther.

The final main point of disagreement concerns the words of the Apostles' Creed and reference to Christ's ascension. Zwingli argues that the Words of Institution must be a metaphor because, "[Christ] ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father'. Otherwise, a great difficulty would arise, namely, that while Christ says he is in heaven, we should seek him in the Supper. For one and the same body cannot be in several places at the same time."<sup>58</sup> The idea that a body cannot be in several places at once and cannot transcend space is derived from the Zwingli's understanding of the incarnation and the two natures. He says, "[scripture passages] show that the humanity of Jesus was finite like ours....As our body is in one place, so also his body cannot be in two places."<sup>59</sup> Applying divine attributes such as ubiquity to Christ's body would destroy its authentic humanness.<sup>60</sup> This opened Zwingli to the charge of emphasizing the integrity of the two natures at the expense of the unity of the person.<sup>61</sup>

Luther interprets the right hand of God, where Christ's body supposedly resides, as a metaphor. He writes, "The right hand of God is not a specific place in which a body must or may be, such as on a golden throne, but is the almighty power of God, which at one and the same time can be nowhere and yet must be everywhere. It cannot be at any one place."<sup>62</sup> For this reason, Christ, in whom the fullness of God dwells, is omnipresent: "Wherever and whatever God's right hand is in reality and name, there is Christ, the Son of Man."<sup>63</sup> Luther holds that the two natures of Christ, his divinity as well as humanity, are inseparably united in one person.<sup>64</sup> For this reason, there is no God without Christ and no Christ without his human nature, including a body. Luther writes, "Since he is a man who is supernaturally one person with God, and apart from this man there is no God, it must follow that according to

---

56 German: "Ein Gotts fleisch, Ein geistfleisch."

57 LW 37:124-5.

58 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 200.

59 *Ibid.*, 205.

60 Richard Cross, "Alloiosis in the Christology of Zwingli," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 47, no. 1 (1996).

61 W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 127-8.

62 LW 37:57.

63 LW 37:64.

64 See: Dennis Ngien, "Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of the Communicatio Idiomatum," *The Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 1 (2004). Johann Anselm Steiger, "The Communicatio Idiomatum as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000).

[God's omnipresence], he is and can be wherever God is and that everything is full of Christ through and through, even according to his humanity."<sup>65</sup> For this reason, Luther affirms without difficulty that Christ is in heaven as well as in the Eucharist. In fact, "Both God and Christ are not far away but near, and it is only a matter of revealing themselves; they do not move up and down or back and forth for God is immutable, and Christ also sits at the right hand of God and does not move hither and yon."<sup>66</sup> This raises the question of how to explain the omnipresence of a physical body. Zwingli could only see a body being present substantially, meaning locally, by replacing the already existing substance. At the Marburg Colloquy, Luther refused to explain the real presence with a theory: "Let us not try to inquire how Christ's body is present in the Lord's Supper. In Holy Scripture I do not admit mathematical dimensions. God is higher than all mathematicians. Christ can keep his body without a space at a certain place. He is in a sacrament [but] not as in a place."<sup>67</sup> God is the incarnate God of Christ and since the two natures are inseparable, wherever God is there is Christ's body, regardless of any theory that explains how this should happen. Arguments from reason cannot prove articles of faith. Faith can only accept God's Word that in the Eucharist, Christ is truly present and sins are truly forgiven, as the Words of Institution promise.

### 3. The Real Presence and its Relevance in Luther's Theological System

Having considered Luther's arguments for the real presence and counterarguments against the denial of it, several connections emerge between his insistence on the real presence and his broader theology. Sasse rightly comments that:

The incarnation, the true divinity and true humanity in the one person of the God-man, the virgin birth of Christ, his bodily resurrection, his exaltation to the right hand of the Father, his advent glory, our own resurrection: all these are linked to the Real Presence of his true body and blood in such a way that the denial of this Presence is either the cause or the consequence of the denial of the other articles.<sup>68</sup>

The real presence fits into his system and is even a necessary conclusion of many of Luther's assumptions.

First, throughout the controversy, Luther greatly emphasized the primacy of the Word of

---

65 LW 37:218.

66 LW 37:66.

67 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 206.

68 *Ibid.*, 153.

God. Davis has argued for a hierarchy in Luther's understanding of the Eucharist, putting the Words of Institution at the very top. He writes, "Luther made explicit the connection between the Word of power and Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The Word and what it teaches is absolutely reliable....the Word makes present the body of Christ."<sup>69</sup> To deny the real presence was to deny that the Words of Institution meant what they said. To deny the face value of the Words of Institution not only meant the denial of the real presence, but the denial of what they are a sign for—God's promise of the forgiveness of sins. During the Marburg Colloquy, Luther repeatedly refers to the Words of Institution: "I have a clear and powerful text. Do justice to that text."<sup>70</sup> Luther took the words of scripture very seriously. In *This is My Body* the primacy of scripture is one of the first things he addresses.<sup>71</sup> He writes, "[t]he sum and substance of all this is that we have on our side the clear, distinct Scripture which reads 'take, eat; this is my body,' and we are not under obligation nor will we be pressed to cite Scripture beyond this text."<sup>72</sup>

Of course, Luther is not the only one to refer to scripture as the highest authority in matters of faith. Zwingli did so, too. What distinguishes the two? Walter Köhler sums up the difference between the two as follows: "Luther operierte in der ganzen Frage stets mit dem Gemüt, Zwingli mit dem Verstand."<sup>73</sup> For Luther, the primacy of scripture was a matter of trusting in God's promises. Luther cannot but affirm the real presence in the Eucharist because they follow the truthfulness of God's promise in the Words of Institution. At Marburg he claimed, "I am bound and held captive by the words of the Lord, spoken at the institution, and therefore cannot accede to your opinion on the basis of your remarks. The words 'This is my body' prove that the body of Christ can be in many places simultaneously. For these words prove the presence of the body of Christ in the bread."<sup>74</sup> Reasonableness is not Luther's primary concern when reading scripture, trusting that God's words do what they say is. Therefore, even though it is beyond Luther's capacity to explain it, the real presence must be affirmed.

Second, insistence on the real presence in the Eucharist is an expression of Luther's view of God. For Luther, there is no God without Christ, who is both human and divine. He writes, "Apart from Christ there is simply no God or Godhead at all."<sup>75</sup> The incarnate God cannot be

---

69 Davis, "The Truth of the Divine Words": Luther's Sermons on the Eucharist, 1521-28, and the Structure of Eucharistic Meaning," 326.

70 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 188.

71 LW 37:24-46.

72 LW 37:33.

73 Walther Köhler, *Zwingli Und Luther: Ihr Streit Über Das Abendmahl Nach Seinen Politischen Und Religiösen Beziehungen. I. Band.* (Leipzig: Vermittlungsverlag von M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1924), 478.

74 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 210.

75 LW 37:61.

encountered without Christ's full humanity: "I will not let anyone separate the body of Christ from the Word."<sup>76</sup> Sasse describes Luther's doctrine of God as follows: "In the humanity of Christ we have God, the true God, hidden in the suffering and cross of him who cries: 'My god, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?' That is Luther's understanding of God from the beginning to the end of his life."<sup>77</sup> During the Marburg Colloquy, Luther rigorously defended his doctrine of the incarnate God: "I do not know of any God except for him who was made flesh, nor do I want to have another. And there is no other God who could save us besides the incarnate God."<sup>78</sup> The real presence in the Eucharist is a natural conclusion that follows from Luther's understanding of the incarnate God. The hidden and incarnate God is found in unexpected places, such as suffering on a cross, or at the Eucharist being eaten and drunk. Denying the real presence of Christ's body even though God is unquestionably present is equivalent to denying the incarnation and hypostatic union and, therefore, is unacceptable to Luther.

Third, the real presence springs from Luther's view of the whole person as the object of redemption and not just the soul or spirit. For Luther, there is no dichotomy between the physical body and the spiritual soul. He writes:

All that our body does outwardly and physically, if God's Word is added to it and it is done through faith, is in reality and in name done spiritually. Nothing can be so material, fleshly, or outwardly, but it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith. "Spiritual" is nothing else than what is done in us and by us through the Spirit and faith, whether the object with which we are dealing is physical or spiritual.<sup>79</sup>

Thus even the body plays a spiritual role. Luther goes one step further and suggests that the body benefits from salvation:

Our body is fed with the body of Christ, in order that our faith and hope may abide and that our body may live eternally from the same eternal food of the body of Christ which it eats physically. This is a bodily benefit, nevertheless an extraordinary great one, and it follows from the spiritual benefit. For Christ surely will make even our body eternal, alive, blessed, and glorious.<sup>80</sup>

Unlike mere bread, which is turned into components of our own body when digested, the body of Christ when bodily eaten transforms our body into the likeness of Christ's glorified body and

---

76 LW 37:133.

77 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 119.

78 *Ibid.*, 203.

79 LW 37:92.

80 LW 37:132.

prepares it for eternity.<sup>81</sup> The real presence has an eschatological dimension. Luther explains the redemption of the body and the transformation of believers into saints with reference to the real presence in the Eucharist. To deny the physical contact of the believer with the body of Christ and the real indwelling of Christ in the believer means to deny salvation for our body and is, therefore, unacceptable for Luther.

Fourth, justification by faith requires the real presence. Luther tried to solve the problem of his spiritual despair and sense of moral unworthiness by making salvation only dependent on faith instead of external deeds or indulgences. However, faith without reference to something external is completely subjective and ambiguous. As an objective reality, the sacrament provided the needed balance in the form of a real presence. Unlike Zwingli, who emphasized the role of faith in making the sacrament what it is, Luther stresses faith as the result of God's work in the Eucharist. Oberman comments that "baptism and holy communion are the solid ground on which the certainty of a Christian's faith rests."<sup>82</sup> Rather than trust in the strength of one's faith in God, Christ's concrete and tangible real presence in the Eucharist provides the assurance of salvation. If the Eucharist, which is intimately linked with forgiveness of sins, is only valid because of the participant's faith, as Zwingli suggests, then salvation will be made dependent on the fluctuating psychological state of the believer. However, Oberman writes, "[a] Christian can only be promised absolution, the Word of forgiveness, 'from outside.'"<sup>83</sup> This alien or objective aspect is offered in the Eucharist, through the real presence of Christ's body, which is present regardless of the strength of the participant's faith. Although Luther does not explicitly mention the link between the real presence and justification by faith alone, the connection between the two can nevertheless be established. Luther states that the benefits of the Eucharist are "forgiveness of sins, consolation of souls, and strengthening of faith."<sup>84</sup> Although Luther emphasizes the need for living faith in the recipient, faith is a result of the Eucharist and not its presupposed requirement in the strict sense. God's promise is prior to the believer's trust in it and, therefore, the real presence must be affirmed. The sacrament is a place of hope for those who lack faith and feel discouraged precisely because the sacramental promise of forgiveness symbolized in the promise of Christ's physical presence is true regardless of the believer's strength of faith.

Finally, the above mentioned pastoral dimension in connection with the real presence, ties into Luther's idea of where God is to be found. Luther argued for the omnipresence of

---

81 LW 37:100.

82 Oberman, *Luther*, 227.

83 *Ibid.*, 226.

84 LW 37:102



God. Christ is everywhere. However, Christ is also utterly transcendent and, therefore, cannot be definitely found anywhere. Luther writes, “The right hand of God is everywhere, but at the same time nowhere and uncircumscribed, above and apart from all creatures. There is a difference between his being present and your touching. He is free and unbound wherever he is.”<sup>85</sup> The difference that the Eucharist makes is that it gives God, present *for you*. What makes the participant worthy of receiving the elements is the mere acceptance that Christ’s body is personally given to the individual believer. God promises to bind Godself to a certain time and space in order to be found by the believer. God is transcendent, but makes Godself available for creatures. Luther writes:

This God’s right hand does [bind itself to you and summons you to a definite place], however, when it enters into the humanity of Christ and dwells there. There you surely find it, otherwise you will run back and forth throughout all creation, groping here and groping there yet never finding, even though it is actually there; for it is not there for you.<sup>86</sup>

At Marburg, Luther was confronted with the argument that one “should not cling to the humanity and the flesh of Christ, but rather lift up [one’s] mind to his divinity.”<sup>87</sup> Yet in *This is My Body*, Luther describes faith as precisely “clinging” to the real presence of Christ found in the Eucharist.<sup>88</sup> The real presence of the incarnate Christ in the Eucharist, including his divinity as well as his humanity (body), was the answer Luther gave to the common believer who asked “Where can I find God?” Thus, the Eucharist, together with Baptism, serves as the foundation for faith and salvation that the believer can find in the church.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

Close to 500 years after the Marburg Colloquy, quarreling over the question of the real presence of Christ’s body at the Eucharist might at first seem a strange hill to die on. Much of Protestantism has embraced Zwingli’s spiritual interpretation of the Eucharist and has placed itself at odds with Luther. However, the question of the real presence presents a window to look into the worldview of Luther and here it is that important theological concepts emerge that have relevance for us today. In this sense, the Eucharistic debate of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is not merely a sad incident of yet another theological dispute over a medieval tradition. It is an opportunity

---

85 LW 37:68.

86 LW 37:69.

87 Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 203.

88 LW 37:134

to explore the rich theological insights of Luther, such as the incarnation, Christology, Eschatology, and Soteriology that he rigorously defended. And perhaps in this day and age of body-positive thinking and amidst new trends of embodied theology, Luther's insistence on the presence of an embodied God at the center of the life of the church seems quite relevant after all.

### **Bibliography:**

- Bainton, Ronald. "Luther and the Via Media at the Marburg Colloquy." *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1949): 394-98.
- Cross, Richard. "Alloiosis in the Christology of Zwingli." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 47, no. 1 (1996): 105-22.
- Davis, Thomas J. "'The Truth of the Divine Words': Luther's Sermons on the Eucharist, 1521-28, and the Structure of Eucharistic Meaning." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 2 (1999): 323-42.
- Koester, Craig R. "John Six and the Lord's Supper." *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (1990): 419-37.
- Köhler, Walther. *Zwingli Und Luther: Ihr Streit Über Das Abendmahl Nach Seinen Politischen Und Religiösen Beziehungen. I. Band.* Leipzig: Vermittlungsverlag von M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1924.
- Krodel, Gerhard. "John 6:63." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 37, no. 3 (1983): 283-88.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works American Edition.* 55 vols Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958-1986.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction.* 4th ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Ngien, Dennis. "Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of the Communicatio Idiomatum." *The Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 1 (2004): 54-68.
- Oberman, Heiko A. *Luther: Man between God and the Devil.* Translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
- Sasse, Herman. *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar.* Revised ed. Adelaide, South Australia: Openbook Publishers, 1977.
- Steiger, Johann Anselm. "The Communicatio Idiomatum as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology." *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 125-58.
- Stephens, W. P. *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Wright, William J. "Phillip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy." In *Pietas Et Societas: New Trends in Reformation Social History: Essays in Memory of Harold J. Grimm*, edited by H.J. Grimm, K.C. Sessions and P.N. Bebb, 163-79. Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1985.

## 【要 旨】

## 1520 年代の聖餐論争とルターの神学における实在説

トリーベル・クリスティアン・J

本稿は、1529 年のマールブルク会談に至るまでのツヴィングリとルターの間  
の聖餐論争、とりわけキリストの实在説をめぐる相違について論じる。第一に、  
フィリップ 1 世とザクセン選帝侯ヨハンの間の政治観の対立と、政治的な同盟  
を用いて改革を促進させることに対するルターの懸念を中心に、1520 年代の  
議論と会談の歴史的背景を概観する。次に、ルターとツヴィングリの間  
の対立の主要な三つの点を提示し、その神学理解を比較する。すなわち  
制定句の解釈、ヨハネ 6 章 63 節の関連性、そしてキリストの体の場所と  
性質である。最後に、ルターの实在説の強調点を彼の神学全体の枠組み  
の中で理解する。ルターの实在説が、神の言葉の中心性、受肉の神、  
肉体を含む全人格の贖罪、自らの確信ではなく神の約束を根拠とする  
信仰義認、そして当惑の中にある信仰者へのルターの牧会的配慮の必然  
の結果であるということが本稿の最終的な主張である。