

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF
LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

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THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT
OF
LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

By
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AN ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

The sacrament variously known as the Lord's Supper, the Holy Eucharist, or the Holy Communion, was probably the most hotly debated topic in the sixteenth century. Not only did Catholics and Protestants take opposing stands, but the Protestants themselves divided on this issue. Martin Luther was one of the central figures in this three way dispute. In 1520 he published a denunciation of the Catholic view of the sacrament and proposed a reformed doctrine in its place. But a few years later Luther's own view of the sacrament came under attack by more radical reformers who felt that he had not gone far enough in this particular reform. The first of these was Luther's former colleague Andreas Carlstadt. The attack was later taken up by Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Reformation in Switzerland. Luther vigorously defended his view against both of these attacks in a series of polemical treatises. In 1529 a meeting was arranged between Zwingli and Luther at Marburg in an attempt to resolve the dispute. The differences were found to be irreconcilable, and the breach in the ranks of the Protestants remains unclosed to this day.

Luther's thoughts on the sacrament were long and complicated, and it is impossible to summarize his position intelligibly in a few sentences.

We can only mention a few of the major issues involved. Against the Catholic Church Luther 1) argued that both the bread and the wine must be given to the communicants according to the biblical account of the institution of the sacrament, 2) rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, but retained belief in the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine, and 3) rejected the doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass, but insisted that in the sacrament forgiveness of sins is granted through faith in the words of institution: "This is my body and blood, given and shed for you for the remission of sins." Against the attacks of Carlstadt and Zwingli, who both insisted that the sacrament is simply a symbolical meal in commemoration of Christ's death, Luther had to defend his belief in the Real Presence and his association of the forgiveness of sins with the sacrament.

But Luther's writings on the Lord's Supper offer the historian much more than simply the delineation of one particular theological position. They are, in the author's opinion, an excellent source for gaining a broad, general idea of the content and method of Luther's thought. This is due to the fact that in developing and defending his doctrine of the Lord's Supper Luther justified his stand in terms of other important elements in his

thought. In fact, there is probably no other body of writings in Luther's whole output in which so many elements of his thought have been gathered together into one context. Some of the major issues involved are his doctrine of justification, his concept of the Word of God, his attitude toward the relation of the world of material things to the world of the spirit, and his attitude toward the role of reason in religion. Therefore the author's purpose in this thesis is not only to tell what Luther's position on the Lord's Supper was, but to tell why he took that position, in the hope that the reader will come away with a broader understanding of Luther as a religious thinker.

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INTRODUCTION

On May 2, 1507, Brother Martin Luther, just recently ordained to the priesthood, celebrated his first Mass in the Augustinian Cloister at Erfurt. Thirteen years later Luther publicly denounced the doctrine according to which that first Mass had been celebrated, and put forward a different doctrine which labelled that first Mass an offense against God. Obviously a fundamental change had taken place in the intervening years, for the pious and conservative Catholic of 1507 had by 1520 become a "Lutheran," a heretic in the eyes of the Church which had trained him. In order to understand what Luther wrote in 1520 concerning the Mass we shall first have to understand the nature of that fundamental change which took place years earlier in his mind.

In May 1501 Luther matriculated at the University of Erfurt, taking his Bachelor of Arts degree in September 1502, and his Master of Arts in January 1505. The ultimate goal of Luther's studies was, according to his father's wish, a degree in law. But Luther's own personal inclination was toward the

if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."² But all this did not bring Luther the assurance that he had won a gracious God. Instead Luther tells us that his early years in the monastery were a period of violent internal struggle and profound unhappiness brought about by his failure to win God's grace.

The root of Luther's problem, as he himself later diagnosed it, was that he thought that he must "do enough to obtain a gracious God." Luther had been taught that if a man does all that he can within his own natural powers to turn toward God, God will unfailingly reward this as meritorious³ and pour His saving grace into man's soul. But the rub was this, what did doing all that one could amount to? Luther's teachers in theology at Erfurt were followers of the "modern" or Nominalist school. Luther studied the works of the Nominalist masters, especially William

²Quint, XIX, 1845. Translation taken from Roland H. Reinton, Here I Stand; A Life of Martin Luther (Nashville, 1950), p. 45.

³Theologically defined as meritum de congruo, congruous merit.

of Occam and his student Gabriel Biel. These men made extravagant claims for the powers of the human will. Luther probably knew by heart the following passage from Biel:

The human will can love God above all things through its own natural powers. The sinner is also able to remove the hindrances to grace, because he is able to keep from sinning and committing sinful acts, yea, to hate sin and to will not to sin. By the removal of the impediments and by the good steps toward God made by his own free will he can acquire the merit de congruo, the first grace in turning toward God.⁴

Luther accepted this as a practical requirement. Before he could win God's grace he had to do "all that he could," which, according to Biel, meant loving God above all things through his own natural powers and at the same time willing not to sin. Luther expected that through spiritual discipline he should be able to achieve this, a conviction which was reinforced by his reading of ascetic writers like Bernard of Clairvaux, who in his book On the Love of God, gave a detailed description of how one could, through the efforts of his own will, transform the natural, egoistic love of self into the pure love of God.⁵

⁴Quoted in Schwiebert, p. 159.

⁵Heinrich Boehrer, Martin Luther: Road to Reformation, trans. John W. Dolanstein and Theodore G. Sagert (Philadelphia, 1945), p. 20. Hereafter cited as Boehrer-Martin Luther.

But, to his horror and dismay, Luther always had to confess, upon self-examination, that he had not fulfilled these requirements. Try as he might, he could not rid himself of the consciousness of the will to sin:

"When I was a monk, I believed that it was all up with my salvation. Each time I experienced the temptations of the flesh, that is to say, a number of evil desires, such as anger, hatred, jealousy, in regard to a brother, etc., I tried all kinds of remedies. I confessed daily, but it was of no avail; the covetousness always returned. This is the reason why I could find no peace, but was perpetually in torment, thinking: "You have committed such and such a sin. You are still the victim of jealousy and concupiscence; in vain you have joined the order. All your good works are useless."⁶

Nor could Luther honestly say that he truly loved God above all things.

In the monastery we had enough to eat and to drink, but the heart and conscience suffered pain and martyrdom, and the sufferings of the soul are the most painful. I was often frightened by the name of Christ, and when I looked upon Him and the Cross, He seemed to me like unto a flash of lightning. When His name was mentioned, I would rather have heard the devil mentioned, for I believed that I would have to do good works until Christ was rendered gracious to me through them. In the convent I thought neither of money nor of the wealth of this world nor of women; but my heart trembled and was agitated thinking how I might render God favorable to it.⁷

⁶Quoted in Schwiebert, p. 153.

⁷WCS, VII, 1329-30; translation taken from Schwiebert, p. 154.

Whereas Luther's goal had been to achieve the perfect love of God, he achieved just the opposite. "Even though I lived an irreproachable life a monk, I found myself a sinner before God, had a greatly disquieted conscience, and could not obtain the certainty that He was propitiated by my works of satisfaction. I did not love the righteous God who punishes sinners, yea, I hated Him."⁸ On the basis of his apparent inability to win a gracious God Luther began to suspect that perhaps he was not numbered among the elect, but among the eternally damned. It was when he contemplated this possibility that Luther would reach the depths of his despair.⁹

All this attention that we have paid to Luther's spiritual struggles should not be allowed to implant the idea that Luther's years in the monastery were one uninterrupted siege of black despair. He was not allowed time for that. Luther's ecclesiastical superiors, realizing not only his unusual intellectual gifts but also his need for work to keep his mind occupied, did their best to keep him busy. Particularly did they urge him to study the

⁸ELCS, XIV, 447.

⁹Voehrer-Martin Luther, p. 90.

Bible and to continue his theological studies with a view to taking his doctorate. But though subdued, Luther's old doubts remained, and were easily reawakened with full vigor by a chance passage in Scripture or some theological work. But eventually it was his study of the Bible that liberated Luther from his doubts and fears, and gave him the certainty of forgiveness which he so earnestly sought.

In April 1511 Luther was transferred to the Augustinian chapter at Wittenberg in order to join the faculty of the newly founded University of

Wittenberg. There he took his doctorate of theology in October 1512, and immediately began to lecture on the Bible. In August 1513 Luther began a series of lectures on the Psalms which continued through October 1515. Sometime in the fall of 1514 he was preparing his commentary on the seventy-first Psalm when he came across the long familiar words "In iustitia tua libera me (Deliver me in thy righteousness.)"¹⁰ This both upset and confused Luther.

Deliverance was what his heart desired most, but the

¹⁰ Both the date and the number of the Psalm are debatable. Since the passage occurs in the thirty-first Psalm as well as the seventy-first, it is possible that the date should be placed in the spring of 1513, at which time Luther would have been preparing his notes on the thirty-first Psalm. I have here accepted the evidence adduced by Schwiebert for the later date. See Schwiebert, pp. 237-238.

righteousness of God was a concept which he hated, for he pictured the righteous God only as the judge who punishes sinners. He was not accustomed to associating righteousness with deliverance, but with punishment. But it so happened that Luther was simultaneously engaged in studying the epistle of Paul to the Romans, and this passage from the seventy-first Psalm called to his mind Romans 1:17: "For therein [i.e. in the Gospel] is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." It was at this crucial point that Luther discovered what he later described as "the main point of Christian doctrine," namely "that we are justified by faith in Christ, without any works of the law . . ."¹¹ Here is his own description of what took place:

I had begun . . . to lecture on the Psalter . . . All the while I was absorbed with the passionate desire to get better acquainted with the author of Romans. Not that I did not succeed, as I had resolved, in penetrating more deeply into the subject in my investigation, but I stumbled over the words (chapter 1:17) concerning "the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel." For the concept "God's righteousness" was repulsive to me, as I was accustomed to interpret it according to scholastic philosophy, namely, as the "formal or active" righteousness, in which God

¹¹ Works of Martin Luther, ed. Henry Ryster Jacobs, trans. J. J. Schindel, A. T. W. Steinhauser et al., 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1915), V, 15. Hereafter cited as W.L.

proves himself righteous in that He punishes the sinner as an unrighteous person . . . until, after days and nights of wrestling with the problem, God finally took pity on me, so that I was able to comprehend the inner connection between the two expressions, "The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel" and "The just shall live by faith." Then I began to comprehend the "righteousness of God" through which the righteous are saved by God's grace, namely, through faith; that the "righteousness of God" which is revealed through the Gospel was to be understood in a passive sense in which God through mercy justifies man [or "makes man righteous"] by faith, as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." Now I felt exactly as though I had been born again, and I believed that I had entered Paradise through widely opened doors.¹²

This central doctrine in Luther's religion and theology is often designated by the brief Latin phrase sola fide, justification by faith alone. And when Luther said alone, he meant it with his whole heart, for he reacted completely against his former efforts to win God's grace through good works. This had, after all, been the way of despair for him. He even went so far as to deny that the human will can merit anything through its own natural powers:

The true way to Christianity is this, that a man do first acknowledge himself by the law, to be a sinner, and that it is impossible for him to do any good work. For the law saith, "thou art an evil tree, and therefore all that thou thinkest, speakest, or doest, is

¹²WLC, XIV, 447-448; translation taken from Schwiebert, pp. 285-286.

against God," (Matt. vii. 7). Thou canst not therefore deserve grace by thy works: which if thou go about to do, thou doublest thy offense: for since thou art an evil tree, thou canst not but bring forth evil fruits, that is to say, sins. "For whatsoever is not of faith, is sin," (Rom. xiv. 23). Wherefore he that would deserve grace by works going before faith, goeth about to please God with sins, which is nothing else but to heap sin upon sin, to mock God, and to provoke his wrath.¹³

Man cannot approach God, but God comes to man. Hence, says Luther, man must admit that he can do nothing to further his own salvation, but can only throw himself upon the mercy of God with implicit faith in God's promise of salvation. "For God hath revealed unto us by his word, that he will be unto us a merciful father, and without our deserts (seeing we can deserve nothing) will freely give unto us remission of sins, righteousness, and life everlasting for Christ his Son's sake."¹⁴

It is important to notice that in arriving at this doctrine of justification Luther accepted the authority of the Bible over against the authority of the Church, for the Church's position was emphatically not sola fide. Luther had read in Occam the unequivocal assertion that Popes and councils could

¹³ Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians [1535], ed. Philip S. Watson, trans. anon. (London, 1953), p. 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

err and that only Scripture was infallible.

Moreover Occam always saw in the teachings of the Church the correct interpretation of Scripture.¹⁵

But Luther's bitter disappointment with the Church's prescriptions for obtaining grace paved the way for him to take one step further and place the Bible above the traditions of the Church as the sole authority in matters of doctrine. Hence hand in hand with sola fide goes sola scriptura.

It was this new understanding of justification which made it inevitable that sooner or later Luther would have to attack the Catholic Mass and formulate a new doctrine. For Luther eventually realized that he was in basic disagreement with the whole sacramental system of the medieval Church. The sacraments were the very raison d'être of the medieval Church, for it was taught that the sacraments, properly administered by priests of the Church, are necessary to salvation, in as much as through them the benefits of Christ's passion are mediated to mankind.¹⁶ But Luther, with

¹⁵Heinrich Boehmer, Luther in the Light of Recent Research, trans. Carl F. Luth, Jr. (New York, 1913), pp. 92-94.

¹⁶Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae iii, q. 61, Art. 1. I used the English translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (Benziger Bros., New York, 1945-1948).

his doctrine of justification by faith alone, altered this arrangement completely in constructing his theology. In place of the sacraments as indispensable vehicles of grace Luther put the "Word of God." "And therefore man is accounted righteous by virtue of faith in the Word."¹⁷ It is the Word through which salvation is mediated to mankind. Luther's mature concept of the sacraments was part and parcel of his concept of salvation through faith in the Word. "In order that there be a sacrament, there is required above all things a word of divine promise, whereby faith may be trained."¹⁸ This word of promise, when added to a divinely instituted visible sign, constitutes a true sacrament. Luther felt that only two of the seven Roman Catholic sacraments, baptism

¹⁷WLC, XIX, pp. 1429-30. The term "Word of God," in Luther's use of it, is not quite so simple as it appears at first glance. For he did not mean simply the written words of the Bible or the spoken words of the sermon. Philip Watson explains it as follows: "Christ and the Word are virtually interchangeable terms for Luther." Even though he often uses the term "Word of God" as though referring simply to Scripture or the words of the Christian preacher, Luther's meaning always goes deeper than that. "For him, the Word is always fundamentally Christ, even when he does not explicitly say so . . . The creaturely words, whether written or spoken, are for him rather the vehicle or media of the Divine, creative Word, by which God addresses Himself directly and personally to us." Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia, 1955), pp. 147-151.

¹⁸WLC, II, 256.

and the Lord's Supper, fulfilled these requirements.¹⁹

But we have seen that the foundations of Luther's reforms were already laid in 1514. There was a six year lapse before he pronounced his doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The explanation is simply that it took Luther several years to pursue all the implications of the doctrine he had stumbled upon. He had to go step by step, continuing his study of the Bible, overcoming and replacing one by one the doctrines to which he had been thoroughly devoted all his life. The open break with the Catholic Church began when Luther presumed to attack the sale of indulgences with the posting of the ninety-five theses in October 1517. From this point on Luther found himself under attack, and in defending himself he was forced to fully realize and reveal that he was challenging the whole of medieval Catholicism, root and branch. At the Leipzig Disputation in July 1519 John Eck, defending the papal position, maneuvered Luther into declaring that the papacy was of recent and human origin and that popes and councils not only could, but did indeed err, and err seriously. Over against these Luther cited the authority of Scripture and would not be refuted except from Scripture. In other words he declared himself a heretic and

¹⁹Ibid., II, 221-222.

invited excommunication.

But 1520, the year in which Luther published his major early works on the Lord's Supper, was the decisive year in his break with Rome. This was the year in which Luther reached full maturity as a reformer, publishing no less than ten major works either directly or indirectly attacking the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, replacing them with a whole new theology founded upon sola fide and sola scriptura. The most famous of these works are the immortal trio An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility,²⁰ The Freedom of the Christian Man,²¹ and The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.²²

So far we have reviewed rather hastily the experiences and theological presuppositions which underlie Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. But since this doctrine was first put forward in the process of attacking the Catholic doctrine of the Mass, it is time that we consider what the Catholic position was. In the Catholic Church the Holy Eucharist is the chief sacrament and is the focal point of the liturgical worship of the Church. The chief benefit or grace of this sacrament is personal union with Christ by virtue

²⁰ Ibid., II, 55-164.

²¹ Ibid., II, 295-304.

²² Ibid., II, 165-293.

of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated elements of bread and wine.²³ The Real Presence occurs through a miraculous process known as transubstantiation, which can be effected only by a duly ordained priest.²⁴ When the priest pronounces over the elements the words of institution, "This is my body . . . This is the chalice in my blood," the substances of bread and wine are thereupon changed into the true body and blood of Christ, although the outward appearances, or accidents, of bread and wine are still perceived by the senses.²⁵

Stepping directly from this literal belief in the Real Presence, the practice grew up, and was dogmatically fixed by the Council of Constance (1415), of giving the laity the sacrament under the species of bread only, in order "to avoid certain dangers and scandals,"²⁶ one of which Thomas Aquinas had described as the accidental spilling of some of Christ's blood.²⁷

²³Henry Denzinger, The Sources of Catholic Dogma, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis, 1957), sect. 593. Hereafter cited as Denzinger. Section numbers rather than page numbers are given. (This is a collection of official Catholic sources and bears the "Imprimatur" of the Archbishop of Washington.) See also Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica iii, q. 79, Art. 4.

²⁴Denzinger, sects. 424, 430.

²⁵Ibid., sects. 430, 693.

²⁶Ibid., sect. 626.

²⁷Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica iii, q. 80, Art. 12.

However, this was not viewed as any deprivation since it was believed that the whole body and blood of Christ were entire under each species.²⁸

Since the effect of this sacrament is union with Christ, no one who is conscious of mortal sin may receive it, for no one who has an attachment towards mortal sin can be united with Christ.²⁹ If the obstacle of mortal sin is present, it must be removed in the Sacrament of Penance prior to receiving the Eucharist. When no obstacle is present the grace or effect of this sacrament, like that of all sacraments, is conferred ex opere operato, that is, the sacrament causes grace by its own operation.³⁰

But the Eucharist is not only a sacrament, it is also a sacrifice. At the high point of the Mass the priest takes the consecrated elements and offers the body and blood of Christ as a sacrifice to God, thus repeating in a mystical way the sacrifice of Calvary. This sacrifice benefits not only those who participate directly, but it can also be offered on behalf of others, including the faithful in Purgatory. God is appeased by this sacrifice, and the punishment due to sin is

²⁸ Denzinger, sect. 626.

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica iii, q. 79, Art. 4.

³⁰ Ibid., iii, q. 60, Art. 2; q. 62, Art. 1.

remitted according to the measure of the devotion of those for whom it is offered.³¹

From Luther's point of view the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, particularly the doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass, was one of the worst corruptions in the history of Christendom. We turn now to consider his attack upon it and the doctrine which he put in its place.

³¹Ibid., iii, c. 70, Art. 5, 7.

LUTHER CONSTRUCTS HIS DOCTRINE

Although Luther first published his mature doctrine on the Lord's Supper in 1520, he had already published an extended treatment of the sacrament in December 1519 entitled A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament.¹ Luther undertook to write this treatise, he said, "because there are so many troubled and distressed ones . . . who do not know what the holy sacraments, full of all grace, are, nor how to use them . . . so completely are the holy sacraments obscured and withdrawn from us by the teaching of men."² This certainly has an ominous ring, and on the basis of it one might expect to find in this treatise a thorough attack on Catholic dogma and a highly original interpretation of the sacrament. But it is too early for that. Luther still considers himself too loyal a Catholic to launch a full scale attack, and his own doctrine of the sacrament is still far from mature.

But conservative and immature though this treatise is, we can read between the lines and perceive the general direction which Luther's thought will take

¹Full title: A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and Concerning the Brotherhoods, Vol. II, 5-51.

²quoted in ibid., II, 7.

shortly in the future. Perhaps the most striking thing here is that Luther nowhere mentions the sacrifice of the Mass. This can only mean that he had already abandoned that dogma, or he would certainly have mentioned it in a work written especially to explain the sacrament. This is a significant commentary on how far Luther has already gone toward breaking with the Roman Church, for no writer thoroughly devoted to the Catholic dogma could possibly have avoided mentioning the most significant doctrine in the Catholic dogma of the sacrament.

On the other hand, Luther very clearly emphasizes his belief that in this sacrament "all depends on faith."³ Whatever blessings the sacrament has to offer can be received only in faith; without faith the sacrament is nothing. In his forthcoming works on the sacrament Luther places the doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass in strongest contrast to his own doctrine of justification by faith alone, rejecting the former because it is inconsistent with the latter.

Hence from the very beginning a principal point of emphasis in Luther's doctrine of the sacrament is that of faith. But the object of that faith is not yet clearly defined. The problem is that Luther does

³Ibid., II, 25; cf. II, 9, 19.

not come to the point and build a doctrine of the sacrament based on the scriptural account of the sacramental institution, as he does in his later works. Perhaps he was not yet prepared in his own mind to do so. At any rate, his attention here is given over to an aspect of the sacrament which is certainly important, but when taken in the light of his mature doctrine, only secondarily so.

In this treatise Luther sees the significance of the sacrament as communio; we would say in English "communion" or "fellowship." The sacrament establishes a communion among Christ and all saints in heaven and on earth, in which all anxieties, afflictions, and sins are shared by all in common. Thus the believer is taught to rely on the merits of Christ, to derive comfort from communion with other Christians, and to let his heart go out in love to his fellows. Hence the benefit of the sacrament is said to be strengthened faith and mutual love. The bread and wine of the sacrament symbolize this fellowship. Just as the bread is composed of many grains fused into one loaf, and just as the many drops of wine lose their form and become one cup, so should all Christians be united in the church of Christ.⁴

⁴Ibid., II, 10-17.

Luther gives another example of this symbolism which not only illustrates the above point, but introduces a problem of its own. Christ "gave His true natural flesh, in the bread, and His natural and true blood, in the wine, that He might give us a really perfect sacrament or sign. For just as the bread is changed into His true natural body and the wine into His true natural blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints . . ."⁵ So we see that from the very beginning the real presence of Christ's body and blood is an integral part of Luther's doctrine of the sacrament. Luther's statement here that the bread and wine are "changed" into the body and blood of Christ indicates that Luther still acknowledges the doctrine of transubstantiation. Two things, however, indicate that this acknowledgement is only formal. First of all, he speaks of the body and blood as being "in the bread" and "in the wine," which is hardly the proper way to explain the process of transubstantiation. Secondly, when the questions are raised: Where do the bread and wine remain when they are changed into Christ's flesh? and, How can the whole Christ be comprehended in

⁵Ibid., II, 19. The term "spiritual body of Christ" is equivalent to "the church."

such a small portion of bread?, Luther answers: "What does it matter? It is enough to know that it is a divine sign, in which Christ's flesh and blood are truly present—how and where, we leave to Him."⁶ So Luther evidently does not set very much store by the subtleties involved in the doctrine of transubstantiation. His position with regard to the Real Presence and transubstantiation will become clearer later.

Strangely enough, it was the least important part of this treatise which caused the greatest commotion when it was published. Luther suggests, almost in passing, that a general Church council should restore communion in both kinds to the laity in order that they might have the sacred sign in its entirety.⁷ It is hard for the modern reader to understand what a scandal this was to ardent supporters of the papacy unless he bears in mind that communion in one kind had been dogmatically fixed by the Council of Constance,⁸ and that appeals to a general council without the permission of the pope had been specifically

⁶Ibid., II, 20.

⁷Ibid., II, 9.

⁸Denzinger, sect. 525.

condemned shortly before Luther's time.⁹ Moreover, the Bohemian heretic John Hus had taught and practiced communion in both kinds. So by the process of guilt by association, Luther was charged with being a Hussite.¹⁰ If the papal party had known what was to come from Luther's pen in less than a year they perhaps would have been less concerned about this point and more concerned about Luther's attitude toward the sacrifice of the Mass and transubstantiation.

Luther States His Position

There are two treatises involved in Luther's earliest statement of his mature doctrine of the sacrament. The first of these is the Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass (August, 1520).¹¹ This is a rather quiet and constructive statement of Luther's newly-found understanding of the sacrament. Better known, and much more

⁹ Ibid., sect. 717.

¹⁰ Letter of Duke George of Saxony to the Elector Frederick, 27 December 1519, MLSS, XIX, 450-451.

¹¹ WML, I, 287-326. Both in this treatise and in the Babylonian Captivity Luther uses the term "Mass" meaning simply the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Even after they had discarded the Catholic dogma, the Lutheran Churches kept "Mass" for many years before they gave up the term.

polemical in tone, is The Babylonian Captivity of the Church (October, 1520).¹² Since the substance of the Treatise on the New Testament is entirely repeated and expanded upon in The Babylonian Captivity, we shall devote our attention to the latter, drawing upon the former only where it seems helpful to do so.

The Babylonian Captivity is a sweeping, thorough examination and condemnation of the whole sacramental system of the medieval Church. This is a project which Luther had been planning for some time, for he had written to Spalatin¹³ just two weeks after the publication of the Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament:

There is no reason why you or any one else should expect from me a treatise on the other sacraments [besides baptism, the Lord's Supper, and penance] until I am taught by what text I can prove that they are sacraments. I regard none of the others as a sacrament, for there is no sacrament save where there is a direct divine promise, exercising our faith. We can have no intercourse with God except by the word of Him promising, and by the faith of man receiving the promise. At another time you shall hear more about their fables of the seven sacraments.¹⁴

¹²

Full title: A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, WLE, II, 193-293.

¹³ Georg Spalatin, court chaplain to the Elector Frederick and intimate friend of Luther.

¹⁴ WLE, XXIIa, 215; quoted and translated in WLE, II, 193.

But Luther also had a more immediate occasion for writing, at least with regard for the section of the treatise dealing with the Mass. Not only had the publication of the Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament caused a furor when published, but it drew a formal reply from the Catholic side, written by the Leipzig Franciscan, August Alveld, whom Luther referred to as "the Leipzig jackass."¹⁵ Alveld defended communion in one kind only, and with such vigor that Luther had to reply. "For when I published my treatise on the Eucharist [1512], I clung to the common usage, being in no wise concerned with the question of the right or wrong of the papacy. But now, challenged and attacked, nay, forcibly thrust into the arena, I shall freely speak my mind, let all the papists laugh or weep together."¹⁶

Luther discusses the "Sacrament of the Bread" under three headings, corresponding to the three "captivities" of the sacrament in Roman Catholic dogma: the withholding of the cup from the laity; transubstantiation; and the doctrine of the Mass as a good work and a sacrifice.

¹⁵WLSL, XXIIa, 288; Alveld's tract was Tractatus de communione sub utraque specie, see WLSL, II, 157.

¹⁶WLSL, II, 178.

Communion in Both Kinds

In 1519 Luther had contented himself with suggesting the restoration of communion in both kinds for the laity. Now he is out to prove "that it is wicked and despotic to deny both kinds to the laity, and that this is not in the power of any angel, much less of any pope or council."¹⁷ Luther's whole case is based on an appeal to the scriptural institution. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul all record that Christ gave both kinds to all his disciples. Therefore, to do otherwise in this sacrament is to change the institution of Christ, and "if we permit one institution of Christ to be changed, we make all his laws invalid . . . For a single exception, especially in the Scriptures, invalidates the whole." Furthermore, Christ commanded "Drink ye all of it." So if all are to drink, it is impious to withhold the cup from those who desire it.¹⁸ But "what carries the most weight with me . . . [says Luther] and quite decides me is this. Christ says: 'This is my blood, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins.' Here we see very plainly that the blood is given to all those for whose sins

¹⁷ibid., II, 186.

¹⁸ibid., II, 172-180.

it was shed. But who will dare to say it was not shed for the laity?"¹⁹

Luther no longer has any respect for the tradition and legislation of the Church limiting communion to one kind, because it is obvious to him that the Church's position has no basis in Scripture. So he is characteristically indignant at the oft repeated charge that those who insist on communing in both kinds (such as the Bohemians and the Greek Catholics) are schismatics or heretics.²⁰

Come hither then, ye popish flatterers, one and all! Fall to and defend yourselves against the charge of godlessness, tyranny, lese-majesty against the Gospel, and the crime of slandering your brethren,—ye that decry as heretics those who will not be wise after the vaporings of your own brains, in the face of such patent and potent words of Scripture. If any are to be called heretics and schismatics, it is not the Bohemians nor the Greeks, for they take their stand upon the Gospel; but you Romans are the heretics and godless schismatics, for you presume upon your own fictions and fly in the face of the clear scriptures of God. Parry that stroke, if you can!²¹

But Luther will not recommend that communion in both kinds be forced upon people, because this would only offend tender consciences. He does not feel that there is a rigorous and irrevocable command

¹⁹ Ibid., II, 132.

²⁰ See Denzinger, sect. 626.

²¹ Ibid., II, 134.

to commune in one or two kinds, but that men should be free to choose the manner of the original institution if they wish. They do not sin who use only the one kind, "but they sin who forbid the giving of both kinds to such as desire to exercise this free will."²²

The Real Presence

The second captivity of the sacrament, transubstantiation, "is less grievous so far as the conscience is concerned, yet the very gravest danger threatens the man who would attack it . . ."²³

Although transubstantiation had been made the official dogma of the Church by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, Luther simply denies the power of a council to make new doctrine and goes on to a description of how he came to reject the Roman Catholic dogma.

Years ago, when I was delving into scholastic theology, the Cardinal of Cambrai²⁴ gave me food for thought, in his comments on the fourth book of the Sentences of Peter Lombard⁷. There he argues with great acumen that to hold that real bread and real wine, and not their accidents only, are present on the altar, is much more probable and requires fewer unnecessary miracles--if only the Church had not decreed otherwise. When I learned what church it was that had decreed

²²Ibid., II, 136-137.

²³Ibid., II, 137.

²⁴Pierre d'Ailly, disciple of Occam.

this--namely the Church of Thomas [Aquinas], i.e., of Aristotle--I waxed hollower, and after floating in a sea of doubt, at last found rest for my conscience in the above view--namely, that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and blood are present, not otherwise and not less really than they appear to be the case under their accidents.²⁵

Transubstantiation is merely an opinion, and need not be believed, because it has no clear warrant in Scripture. Luther does not go so far as to categorically reject transubstantiation, but says: "I . . . permit every man to hold either of these views, as he chooses. My one concern at present is to remove all scruples of conscience, so that no one may fear to become guilty of heresy if he should believe in the presence of real bread and real wine on the altar, and that everyone may feel at liberty to ponder, hold and believe either one view or the other, without endangering his salvation."²⁶

But Luther thinks he has good grounds for his view. Most important is this, that "no violence is to be done to the words of God. . .but they are to be retained in their simplest meaning wherever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids . . . Therefore it

²⁵Seeberg, II, 183; cf. Reinhold Seeberg, Text-Book of the History of Doctrines, trans. Charles F. May, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1952), II, 203-204. Hereafter cited as Seeberg.

²⁶Seeberg, II, 183-184.

is an absurd and unheard of juggling with words, to under stand 'bread' to mean 'the form, or accidents of bread,' and 'wine' to mean 'the form, or accidents of wine.'²⁷ The text mentions both bread and wine, and flesh and blood, clearly implying that they are both there in their substantial reality. Hence the principal objection to transubstantiation is that it strains the meaning of the text, while O'Milly's view has the advantage that it allows both bread and wine, and flesh and blood to be present in conformance with the text.

To illustrate his view Luther uses the famous example of fire and iron. "But why could not Christ include His body in the substance of the bread just as well as in the accidents? The two substances of fire and iron are so mingled in the heated iron that every part is both iron and fire. Why could not much rather Christ's body be thus contained in every part of the substance of the bread?"²⁸ But Luther also uses a much more significant, but never quoted illustration, drawn from the human-divine nature of Christ:

²⁷Ibid., II, 139-140.

²⁸Ibid., II, 191.

Therefore it is with the sacrament even as it is with Christ. In order that the Godhead may dwell in him, it is not necessary that the human nature be transubstantiated and the Godhead be contained under its accidents; but both natures are there in their entirety, and it is truly said "This man is God," and "This God is man . . ." Even so, in order that the real body and the real blood of Christ may be present in the sacrament, it is not necessary that the bread and wine be transubstantiated and Christ contained under their accidents; but both remain there together . . .²⁹

This whole discussion presents a difficult problem of interpretation. The nominalist doctrine to which Luther here appeals is known as consubstantiation. Therefore scholars without number have concluded that Luther's doctrine of the real presence is consubstantiation. But this conclusion should not be drawn.

We must bear in mind Luther's purpose in rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation. As he sees it, Scripture teaches that it is real bread and wine in which the body and blood of Christ are present. Thus transubstantiation in Luther's view is a scholastic sophistication unwarranted by Scripture, for it insists that after the consecration the substances of bread and wine no longer remain. Consubstantiation, on the other hand, asserts that both real bread and wine, and Christ's body and blood are present in the sacrament. Thus, to the extent that it lends support to his understanding

²⁹Ibid., II, 193-194.

of Scripture, Luther finds consubstantiation a congenial doctrine.

But apart from this, consubstantiation is every bit as objectionable a doctrine as transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is an attempt to explain "how" the Real Presence takes place, founded upon one set of assumptions about matter (Realist). Consubstantiation inevitably boils down to the same thing, but is based upon a different set of assumptions about matter (Nominalist). Its defenders fell to hair-splitting discussions of the nature of substance and various modes of presence in an attempt to explain the manner in which consubstantiation takes place.³⁰

But Luther is not trying to explain how the Real Presence takes place. He was opposed in general to all attempts to penetrate and to explain the workings of God's omnipotence.

When one asked, where was God before heaven was created? St. Augustine answered: He was in himself. When another asked me the same question, I said: He was building hell for such idle, presumptuous, flattering and inquisitive spirits as you.³¹

True, we must teach, as we say, of God's incomprehensible and unsearchable will; but

³⁰See Seeberg, II, 204-205.

³¹Hugh Thompson Kerr, Jr., A Compend of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia, 1943), p. 28.

to aim at its perfect comprehension is dangerous work, wherein we stumble, fall, and break our necks.³²

Luther's attitude toward the "how" of the Real Presence is just the same:

Why do we not put by such idle curiosity, and cling simply to the word of Christ, willing to remain in ignorance of what here takes place, and content with this, that the real body of Christ is present by virtue of the words? Or is it necessary to comprehend the manner of the divine working in every detail?³³

For my part, if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ, and clinging simply to His word, firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ.³⁴

Doctrinally, then, all Luther wishes to maintain is the objective fact of the Real Presence. He often uses prepositions like "in" and "with" to express this, but these must not be interpreted as indicating a physical explanation of what takes place. At worst such explanations are impious and at best they are beside the point. Both transubstantiation and consubstantiation are appeals to human reason; they both are based upon scholastic conceptions of substance which are purely rational and not biblical.

³² Ibid., p. 27.

³³ ML, II, 192.

³⁴ Ibid., II, 193.

The artifacts of human reason simply may not be set forth as binding dogma. Scripture does not define the mode of presence, so Luther insists that it must forever remain an open question. Even though consubstantiation does no violence to the sense of Scripture, its finer workings can no more be proved from that source than can those of transubstantiation.

When an author wishes to document the assertion that Luther taught consubstantiation he usually quotes the passage in which Luther uses the illustration from fire and iron. It is true that when this passage is lifted from its context it appears to denote a rather mechanical view of the Real Presence on Luther's part. But note how tentative is Luther's conclusion from this illustration, being phrased in the form of a question: "Why could not Christ's body be thus contained in every part of the substance of the bread?" The real key to Luther's doctrine is the other illustration from the dual nature of Christ. Here there is no tentative conclusion, but a positive and unequivocal statement that "it is with the sacrament even as it is with Christ." The two natures, human and divine, are both present in the one person Christ. Here it is not a question of "how," but simply a perception by faith of what God in his omnipotence

has done. It is not a philosophical formulation, but a religious mystery. And that is exactly Luther's attitude toward the Real Presence. It is a mystery of God's power not to be understood or explained by the human intellect.³⁵

Thus we see that Luther was really only concerned with half the doctrine of consubstantiation, namely that half which declares the reality of the presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine, omitting that part of the theory which explains "how" this can take place. To the best of this writer's knowledge, Luther never once used the term "consubstantiation" in a discussion of his doctrine of the Real Presence. Therefore, if one wishes to label Luther's doctrine, it must simply be called the Real Presence. Beyond the fact of that presence there is nothing man can know or comprehend in the matter.

The New Testament

So far we have been discussing only secondary issues within the general area of Luther's doctrine of the sacrament. Neither the insistence on communion in both kinds nor speculations on the Real Presence

³⁵The intimate connection between Luther's conceptions of the nature of Christ and the nature of the Real Presence is of recurring importance in his sacramental thought. We shall meet it again in the chapter on Luther's conflict with Zwingli.

explain what the Mass is in its essence. Luther gives us this explanation in his discussion of the third captivity of the sacrament, the doctrine that the Mass is a good work and a sacrifice, which Luther calls "that most wicked abuse of all."³⁵ Luther first outlines what he thinks is the only possible doctrine of the Mass, and then goes on to demonstrate that the Catholic doctrine is utterly at odds with this doctrine. As we shall soon see, Luther's exposition of his doctrine of the Mass is really nothing else than an essay on justification by faith, put forward in a special and limited theological context.

For Luther, the key to the proper understanding of the Mass is the proper understanding of the words by which it was instituted. To properly understand the Mass we must first put aside all outward things, "vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles," and "turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and to this alone, and set naught before us but the very word of Christ, by which he instituted this sacrament, make it perfect, and committed it to us. For in that word, and in that word alone, reside the power, the nature, and the whole substance

³⁵ *Id.*, II, 194.

of the mass."³⁷ These words of institution are:
 "Take and eat, this is my body, which is given for
 you. Take and drink ye all of it, this is the cup
 of the new and eternal testament in my blood, which
 is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of
 sins."³⁸

In the process of explaining these words
 Luther finds a convenient opportunity to comment on
 the basic relationship between God and man. "If man
 is to deal with God and receive anything from him,
 it must happen in this wise, not that man begin and
 lay the first stone, but that God alone, without any
 entreaty or desire of man, must first come and give
 him a promise."³⁹ In the institution of this sacrament
 Christ gave just such a promise when He said "this is
 the cup of the new and eternal testament in my blood."
 "Therefore, [says Luther] let this stand at the outset
 as our infallibly certain proposition,--the mass, or
 sacrament of the altar, is Christ's testament which He
 left behind Him at His death, to be distributed among
 His believers."⁴⁰

³⁷Ibid., II, 125, italics mine.

³⁸Ibid., I, 237; Matt. 26:26, 27, 28; Mark 14:22,
 23, 24; Luke 22:19, 20.

³⁹Ibid., I, 237.

⁴⁰Ibid., II, 125.

This word "testament" has a great deal of significance in Father's train of thought. A testament is the promise or bequest of one who is about to die. It is confirmed or made operative by the death of the testator. "Now God made a testament: therefore it was necessary that He should die. Yet God could not die unless He became man. Thus both the incarnation and death of Christ are briefly comprehended in this one word 'testament.'"⁴¹

So in instituting this sacrament Christ made a testament and then gave his life that it might be carried into effect.

What then is this testament, and what is bequeathed us therein by Christ? Forsooth, a great, eternal and unspeakable treasure, namely the forgiveness of all sins, as the words plainly state, "This is the cup of a new eternal testament in my blood, that is shed for you and for many for the remission of sin." As though he said: "Behold, man, in these words I promise and bequeath thee forgiveness of all thy sin and eternal life."⁴²

Once again, this is a signal for Father to write on his favorite topic, justification by faith.

If the mass is a promise, as has been said, it is to be approached, not with any work or strength or merit, but with faith alone. For where there is the word of God, he makes the promise, there must be the faith of the man who takes it. It is plain, therefore,

⁴¹Ibid., II, 197.

⁴²Ibid., I, 300.

that the first step in our salvation is faith, which clings to the word of the promise made by God, who without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy makes a beginning and offers us the word of His promise.⁴³

To nearly all of his promises God has added a sign "as a mark or memorial of His promise," to remind us of it and more forcibly to hold us to it. Noah had his rainbow and Abraham was given the sign of circumcision. Even worldly testaments have seals and notaries marks to make them authentic.⁴⁴ "Thus also to the mass, that crown of all His promises, He adds His body and blood in the bread and wine, as a memorial sign of this great promise; as He says, 'This do in remembrance of me.'"⁴⁵ For "it is necessary and profitable for us to remember Him; whereby we are strengthened in faith, confirmed in hope and made ardent in love."⁴⁶ And as often as we use these signs we remember God's largess and love, and praise and give thanks for them.⁴⁷

To summarize in Luther's own words, the parts of the sacrament are as follows:

First, the testator who makes the testament, Christ. Second, the heirs to whom the

⁴³Ibid., II, 137-138.

⁴⁴Ibid., II, 203; I, 301.

⁴⁵Ibid., II, 203.

⁴⁶Ibid., I, 300.

⁴⁷Ibid., II, 132.

testament is bequeathed, we Christians. Third, the testament itself, the words of Christ . . . Fourth, the seal or token, the sacrament, bread and wine, and under them His true body and blood . . . Fifth, the bequeathed blessing which the words signify, namely, the remission of sin and eternal life. Sixth, the obligation, remembrance . . . which we should observe for Christ, to wit, that we preach this His love and grace, hear and meditate upon it, by it be incited and preserved unto love and hope in Him . . ."⁴⁸

Since the Mass is a testament in which the forgiveness of sins is promised and sealed with a sign, it necessarily follows what is the best preparation for it. "Without doubt, it is given to them that need and desire it. But who needs forgiveness of sins and God's grace more than just these poor miserable consciences that are driven and tormented by their sins, are afraid of God's anger and judgment, of death and hell, and would be glad to have a gracious God and desire nothing more greatly? These are truly they who are well-prepared for mass."⁴⁹

The receiving organ for this forgiveness is faith. There is a direct line between the promise of God and the faith of the individual. This idea, as Luther points out here, has definite implications for Catholic confession:

⁴⁸Ibid., I, 301-302.

⁴⁹Ibid., I, 324.

So if you would receive this sacrament and testament worthily, see to it that you bring for and these living words of Christ, rely thereon with a strong faith, and desire what Christ has therein promised you: then it will be given you, then you are worthy and well prepared . . .⁵⁰

For this reason, I have said, everything depends upon the words of this sacrament, which are the words of Christ, and which we verily should set in pure gold and precious stones, and keep nothing more diligently before the eyes of the heart, that faith be exercised thereby. Let another pray, fast, go to confession, prepare himself for the mass and the sacrament as he will. So thou the same, but know that it is pure fool's-work and self deception, if you do not set before you the words of the testament and arouse yourself to believe and desire them.⁵¹

It is important to notice that Luther clearly distinguishes between word and sacrament, that is between the promise of God and its external sign. Not only does he distinguish between the, but he rates them as to their relative importance.

In the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine are the sacrament. And as there is a greater power in the word than in the sign, so there is greater power in the testament than in the sacrament; for a man can have and use the word, or testament, apart from the sign, or sacrament. "Believe," says Saint Augustine, "and thou hast eaten." But what does one believe save the word of promise? Therefore I can hold mass everyday, yea, every hour, for I can set the words of Christ before me, and with them refresh and strengthen my faith, as often as I choose.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid., I, 304.

⁵¹ Ibid., I, 303.

⁵² Ibid., II, 203-204; cf. I, 306.

To understand why Luther makes this assertion it must be remembered that he was writing at a time when he daily expected to be excommunicated from the Church. He thus comforts himself by saying that the fruits of the Mass will not be denied him even though he is denied access to the signs in the liturgical administration of the sacrament. But also it is a good polemical argument, emphasizing that it is faith in the word of God which makes the sacrament what it is; it is of no benefit by virtue of its objective administration, that is, ex opere operato.

But this assertion that faith alone suffices raises a serious question, and Luther anticipates it. "What need is there then to observe mass in the churches? I answer: It is true, such faith is enough, and truly accomplishes everything, but how could you think of this faith . . . sacrament and testament if it were not visibly administered in certain designated places and churches . . . Moreover, since God has so ordered this sacrament, we must not despise it, but receive it with great reverence, praise and gratitude." There is also the advantage that when the members of the congregation come together and outwardly hold the sacrament they encourage one another and move one another to an increase of faith.⁵³

⁵³Ibid., I, 310-320.

These answers are acceptable, but Luther has a better one still. "The chief reason for outwardly holding mass is the Word of God, which no one can do without . . ." Luther is referring specifically to the function of the sacrament as part of the preaching of the Gospel. Christ said: "This do in remembrance of me." And St. Paul says in I Cor. 11:26: "As oft as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye shall preach and proclaim the death of the Lord until He come."

In these passages [Luther continues] you see how the mass was instituted to preach and praise Christ, to glorify His sufferings and all His grace and goodness, that we may be moved to love Him, hope and believe in Him, and thus, in addition to this Word or sermon, receive an outward sign, that is, the sacrament, to the end that our faith, provided with and confirmed by divine words and signs, may be strong against all sin, suffering, death and hell and everything that is against us. And but for the preaching of the Word He would never have instituted the mass. He is more concerned about the Word than about the sign. For the preaching ought to be nothing but an explanation of the words of Christ when He institutes the mass and says: "This is My body, This is my blood, etc." What is the whole Gospel but an explanation of this testament? Christ has comprehended the whole Gospel in a short summary with the words of this testament or sacrament. For the whole Gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God's grace and the forgiveness of all sins granted us through the sufferings of Christ . . . This same thing the words of this testament contain, as we have seen.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Ibid., I, 320-321.

It is for this reason that the treatise from which the above passage is quoted was entitled by Luther, A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass. For in Luther's mind the two are equated. The Mass is the New Testament.

It is on the basis of these ideas that Luther launches his attack on the doctrine that the Mass is a good work and a sacrifice. He does this with great energy and complete lack of diplomacy.

It is Luther's principal contention that the promise of God is the chief thing in the Mass, whence it follows "that when we see, hear, or see the Mass without the words or testament, and look only to the sacrament and sign, we do not even half keep the Mass. For sacrament without testament is keeping the Mass without the jewel, quite an unequal separation and division."⁵⁵ But this, Luther charges, is precisely what the Roman Catholic theologians have done.

That which is the principal and chief thing, namely, the testament and word of promise, is not treated by one of them [the Catholic theologians]; thus they have obliterated faith and the whole power of the Mass. But the second part of the Mass,--the sign, or sacrament,--this alone do they discuss, yet in such a manner that here too they teach not faith but their preparations and opera operata, participations and fruits, as if these were the Mass, until they have fallen

⁵⁵Ibid., I, 427.

to babbling of transubstantiation and endless other metaphysical quibbles, and have destroyed the proper understanding of both sacrament and testament, altogether abolished faith, and caused Christ's people to forget their God . . .⁵⁶

These are strong words and perhaps unfair, but Luther feels very strongly about the issue of faith and works.

It follows of necessity, where faith and the Word or promise of God decline or are neglected, that there arise in their place works and a false, presumptuous trust in them. For where there is no promise of God there is no faith. Where there is no faith, there everyone presumptuously undertakes to better himself by means of works, and to make himself well-pleasing to God. When this happens, false security and presumption arise therefrom, as though man were well-pleasing to God because of his own works.⁵⁷

So the Catholic theologians, because they do not heed the Word of God regarding the sacrament, have made of it a meritorious work, whereby man does honor to God. But, says Luther, if it is true "that the mass is nothing else than a testament and sacrament, in which God pledges Himself to us and gives us grace and mercy, I think it is not fitting that we should make a good work or merit out of it. For a testament is not beneficium acceptum, sed datum;⁵⁸ it does not

⁵⁶Ibid., II, 204.

⁵⁷Ibid., I, 307.308.

⁵⁸I.e., not a benefit accepted by God, but one conferred by him.

derive benefit from us, but brings us benefit. Who has ever heard that he who receives an inheritance does a good work? . . . Likewise in the mass we give Christ nothing, but only take from Him . . ."⁵⁹

Inseparably bound up with this is Luther's attack on the sacrifice of the Mass. But here we must distinguish between what Luther says in the Treatise on The New Testament and what he says in The Babylonian Captivity. In the earlier work Luther rejects the doctrine of the unbloody repetition of Christ's sacrifice on the ground that it is in contradiction to the true nature of the Mass, that is, a sign and seal of God's testament of forgiveness. But here Luther shows his essential conservatism in a valiant attempt to make the traditional terminology acceptable by redefining it. So Luther can declare that the idea of sacrifice is not irrelevant in the Mass if it is used properly.

What sacrifices then are we to offer? Ourselves, and all that we have, with constant prayer, as we say: "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven." Whereby we are to yield ourselves to the will of God, that He may do with us what He will, according to His own pleasure; in addition, we are to offer Him praise and thanksgiving with our whole heart, for His unspeakable, sweet grace and mercy, which he has promised and given us in this sacrament.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ ib., I, 303.

⁶⁰ ib., I, 313.

But we do not present this sacrifice of ourselves, our prayers and praise "before God in our own person, but we are to lay it on Christ and let Him present it," for he is our mediator and intercessor in Heaven. Thus "we learn that we do not offer Christ as a sacrifice, but that Christ offers us. And in this way it is permissible, yea, even profitable, to call the mass a sacrifice . . ."⁶¹

Pursuing this idea further Luther brings in a statement of his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers:

For all those who have the faith that Christ is a priest for them in heaven before God, and who lay on Him their prayers and praise, their need and their whole selves, and present them through Him, not doubting that he does this very thing, and offers Himself for them, . . . these take the sacrament and testament . . . as a sign of all this, and do not doubt that all sin is thereby forgiven, that God has become their gracious Father and that everlasting life is prepared for them.

All such, then, wherever they may be, are true priests, observe the mass aright and also obtain by it what they desire. For faith must do everything. It alone is the true priestly office and permits no one else to take its place. Therefore all Christians are priests . . .⁶²

But by the time he writes The Babylonian Captivity Luther has lost his willin'ness to reinterpret

⁶¹ Ibid., I, 314.

⁶² Ibid., I, 316.

the word "sacrifice" and demands its complete exclusion from the doctrine of the Mass. "For unless we hold fast to the truth, that the Mass is the promise or testament of Christ, as the words clearly say, we shall lose the whole Gospel and all our comfort. Let us permit nothing to prevail against these words, even though an angel from heaven should teach otherwise. For there is nothing said in them of a work or a sacrifice."⁶³

Since the Mass is not a work or a sacrifice offered to God, but God's promise received in faith, Luther calls it a

manifest and wicked error to offer or apply masses for sins, for satisfactions, for the dead, or for any necessity whatsoever of one's own or of others . . . No one can receive or apply, in behalf of another, the promise of God, which demands the personal faith of every individual? . . . Where there is a divine promise every one must stand upon his own feet, every one's personal faith is demanded, every one will give an account for himself and will bear his own burden . . .⁶⁴

Luther has now stated his own position on the Mass and also made his case against the Catholic doctrine. Throughout the whole presentation the dominant themes have been justification by faith alone and dogged opposition to the righteousness of

⁶³ Ibid., II, 212.

⁶⁴ Ibid., II, 202-203; cf. I, 300, 317.

works. So we would be rather surprised if in The Babylonian Captivity Luther did not conclude with a reiteration of his basic position:

This testament of Christ is the one remedy against sins, past, present and future, if you but cling to it with unwavering faith and believe that what the words of the testament declare is freely granted to you. But if you do not believe this, you will never, nowhere, and by no works or efforts of your own, find peace of conscience. For faith alone sets the conscience at peace, and unbelief alone keeps the conscience troubled.⁶⁵

This is essentially the doctrine which Luther adhered to throughout his life. We know, of course, that this doctrine was vigorously attacked, particularly by other reformers. But some of Luther's greatest works were written in its defense, and he never retreated or compromised on a single important point. He was, however, forced to more fully explain himself on many points and inevitably he further developed and deepened some of his concepts.

This is especially true in the matter of the Real Presence. The weakest part of Luther's doctrine as of 1520 is the role he assigns to the Real Presence. Luther clearly distinguishes between word and sign in the sacrament. The power of the sacrament resides in the promise of God, expressed in the words. The signs, the bread and wine, together with the true body

⁶⁵Ibid., II, 212.

and blood of Christ, are important only in so far as they signify or call to mind the promise and move the recipient to faithful acceptance of it. True, the presence of Christ's body and blood makes this a divine sign, but they are included when Luther asserts that strictly speaking the sign can be done without. The evident conclusion from this is that as yet Luther has found no significance for the Real Presence per se. It has not yet occurred to him that there might be a closer relationship between the word of God and the present Christ than that of promise to sign. Consideration of these matters is forced upon Luther by his attackers. We shall presently examine these attacks and the answers which Luther found.

THE CONFLICT WITH CARLSTADT

Carlstadt's Attack

It was a sad fact for Luther that the most potent opposition to his doctrine of the Lord's Supper came not from the Catholics, but from within the ranks of the reformers themselves. The first attack came from Luther's own former colleague, Andreas Carlstadt, in 1524. Later the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, took up the attack, and what Luther had described as a sacrament of love and fellowship became the object of a titanic and bitter feud, continuing unabated until the Marburg Colloquy of 1527.

In the earliest days of the Reformation and before, Luther and Carlstadt were closely associated. Carlstadt was Luther's senior colleague at the University of Wittenberg and he presided at the ceremonies in which Luther was granted his doctorate in theology. Carlstadt was early won over to Luther's reform movement, and was Luther's partner at the Leipzig Disputation. But he soon proved to be a far more radical spirit than Luther ever dreamed of being, and eventually became Luther's bitter enemy as a result of his attack on Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

The trouble began in 1521 while Luther was in hiding at the Wartburg (May 1521- March 1522). During Luther's absence Carlstadt assumed the leadership of the reform movement in Wittenberg and began to incite and confuse the people with sermons in which he decried clerical celibacy, the Mass, and the use of ritual and images. In the matter of the Mass he went so far as to declare that "who partakes only of the bread, sins."¹ On Christmas Eve 1521, Carlstadt officiated at Holy Eucharist without priestly vestments, and encouraged the laity to come to the altar and help themselves directly to the bread and wine. It should be remembered that these things were said and done before people who were still immersed in Catholic forms and doctrines, and who might therefore take serious offense. Moreover, the people were not yet well enough instructed in the Reformation theology to guard them against the possible conclusion that the Reformation consisted only in desecrating every ritual and dogma ever associated with the Roman Church.

When Luther learned of the general radicalism of Carlstadt's reform measures he decided to return to Wittenberg, doing so in spite of the Elector

¹ quoted in Schwiebert, p. 546.

Frederick's order to the contrary. Upon arrival Luther immediately preached a series of eight sermons against Carlstadt's excesses,² restoring sanity and calm to the situation. In his actions and statements Carlstadt had gone much further than Luther would have stood for had he been present. For although Luther had declared his firm belief that the laity should have access to both the bread and the wine if they desired it, he certainly did not favor forcing it upon them under pain of sin. Such an uncompromising stand on a non-essential issue would only be running the unnecessary risk of offending conservative consciences and turning them against the whole of the Reformation theology. Under Luther's direction the Mass was restored to its original form, with the exception that the passages referring to the sacrifice of the Mass were omitted. Mass in German and in both kinds was introduced only gradually, over a period of years.³

Popular reaction forced Carlstadt to leave Wittenberg. He gave up his position at the University, took a pastorate in the peasant village of Cramonde, and began to publish his views on religion. Carlstadt's

²AML, II, 324-425.

³For a discussion of liturgical changes in the Lutheran Reformation, see Schwabert, pp. 663-675.

writings on the Lord's Supper, which appeared in 1524, are anything but models of cogent reasoning and religious profundity, yet the arguments adduced were sufficiently convincing on the surface to force Luther to reply.⁴

Like Luther, Carlstadt constructed his doctrine of the sacrament in harmony with the basic premises of his religion. Central in Carlstadt's religious thought was the idea that "spiritual growth . . . meant growing in likeness unto Christ through denial and reflection. Man would have to become thoroughly permeated with God's will before he could obtain the 'heavenly composure,' the Christian's ultimate virtue."⁵ In the matter of justification Carlstadt wrote: "To acknowledge Christ's obedience, or to understand the will of Christ . . . is our justification, and purifies the heart and forgives guilt . . ."⁶ Thus Carlstadt makes of the Lord's Supper a memorial meal in which man

⁴The works of Carlstadt under consideration here are: Dialogus oder Gesprächbüchlein von dem greulichen abgöttischen Miszbrauch des hochwürdigen Sacraments Jesu Christi (August or September 1524), MLSS, XX, 2312-2359; and Von dem widerchristlichen Miszbrauch des Herrn Brod und Kelch (September 1524), MLSS, XX, 92-109.

⁵Schwiebert, p. 549.

⁶MLSS, XX, 100.

acknowledges and remembers the fact that Christ gave his body and blood on the cross. But Carlstadt insists that this remembrance is more than a mere calling-to-mind:

This remembrance is an ardent and loving way of acknowledging the body and blood of Christ. No one can remember that which he has not acknowledged . . . This acknowledgment of the surrendered body of Christ and his shed blood is the chief reason which should move one to take the Lord's Supper. But there you must take care that you do not make mere flesh out of Christ's body and blood, which is of no profit. You must hold before your eyes and understand in the depths of your heart the great invisible love, the superabundant obedience, the perfect innocence of Christ, and the like. Then you are justified and set free from sins . . . Out of the acknowledgment of Christ grows the remembrance of Christ, which is not a crude, cold and decaying remembrance, but a fresh, passionate and powerful remembrance, which with joy esteems and highly treasures the surrendered body of Christ, gives thanks for it, and is ashamed of all that which is against Christ . . . Therefore we should meditate on the Lord, and in the depths of our heart remember and understand that Christ gave his body into death and shed his blood, innocently, out of great love and incomparable obedience.⁷

The necessary corollaries of this doctrine amount to a direct attack on Luther's doctrine of the sacrament. Carlstadt vehemently denies that forgiveness of sins is to be sought in the sacrament. To teach that the sacrament forgives sins is just as foolish as the Catholic doctrine that Christ is daily

⁷Ibid., XX, 97-99.

offered for sins in the sacrifice of the Mass. Scripture teaches that Christ died on the cross to earn man's forgiveness once and for all. It nowhere says that Christ forgives sins in the sacrament. For if it were possible that Christ could forgive sins in the sacrament, it would necessarily follow, argues Carlstadt, that His death on the cross was not sufficient for man's redemption. The Lord's Supper is a memorial contemplation of the past sacrifice, not a repetition of it. "Christ says: My blood is shed for the forgiveness of sins. Now I ask [says Carlstadt]: Is the blood shed in the sacrament, or on the cross?"⁸

With equal emphasis Carlstadt denies the Real Presence. First of all, it is impossible for Christ's natural body, as it hung on the cross, to be contained in such a small piece of bread.⁹ The Real Presence is also impossible because Christ ascended bodily into heaven, and has not promised to come down to be in the sacrament.¹⁰ Furthermore, Christ taught that "the flesh profiteth nothing,"¹¹

⁸Ibid., XX, 100-101.

⁹Ibid., XX, 2318-19.

¹⁰Ibid., XX, 2352.

¹¹John 6:63.

so we should not expect Him to give something in the sacrament which is of no profit.¹²

This assertion naturally requires Carlstadt to explain the words "this is my body" in some manner which will rule out a literal interpretation that the bread is Christ's body:

For a long time I have not been able to discover how it could be possible for the bread to become the body of Christ. I have always considered it in this way, that Christ pointed to his body and then said: This is my body, which is given for you. For Christ did not point to the bread; nor did he speak thus: This bread is my body, which is given for you. But those who say that the bread is the body speak to suit themselves and lie . . . Listen: Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to God, broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said that they should eat it in remembrance of him. He placed in the midst of his words the basis and manner of this remembrance, namely that in such a manner his disciples should remember that he gave his body for them.¹³

In other words, the words "this is my body" were added to define the object of the remembrance, not to indicate that the bread is the body.

Carlstadt further argues, on the basis of the Greek text, that the words cannot mean "this bread is my body." He claims that in the words of institution, the Greek word for "this" (touto=German das), since it is neuter, cannot refer to the word for "bread," which is masculine, but only to the word for "body,"

¹² MSS., XX, 2332.

¹³ Ibid., XX, 2325.

which is also neuter. In other words, Carlstadt claims that when Christ said, "This is my body," Greek grammar requires that he was referring, not to the bread, but to himself, as he sat at the table. Hence the literal meaning of the words of institution, Carlstadt believes, disproves the Real Presence.¹⁴

Luther Defends the Real Presence

Luther was disappointed and embittered at the defection of his former colleague. "Dr. Andreas Carlstadt has fallen away from us, and moreover become our worst enemy . . . He pretends he wants to purify the sacrament, but has an entirely different thing in mind, namely, to destroy the entire teaching of the Gospel . . . by cunning manipulation of Scripture."¹⁵ Indeed, Luther is convinced that Carlstadt has become nothing less than an instrument of Satan for this purpose.¹⁶ Luther's reply to Carlstadt's attack appeared in January 1525 under the title: Against the Heavenly Prophets, Concerning the

¹⁴Ibid., XX, 2322-2325.

¹⁵Ibid., XX, 132.

¹⁶Ibid., XX, 132ff.

Sacrament.¹⁷ We shall want to examine this work in some detail, because it is the work to which Twinnell decided to write a reply and thus inaugurate the great dispute between himself and Luther over the Lord's Supper.

Two things are at stake in the dispute with Carlstadt: the Real Presence, and the doctrine that the sacrament is the new testament. Whereas in his writings against the Catholic Mass Luther had fully explained his doctrine that the Mass is the new testament, and proved it to his own satisfaction from Scripture, he had not felt called upon to prove the Real Presence, since neither he nor his opponents doubted it. Thus that dispute had centered around varying explanations of the Real Presence. But now the doctrine itself is under attack, and in this treatise Luther is forced to devote a disproportionate amount of space to a defense of that doctrine on the

¹⁷Wider die himmlischen Propheten, von Sacrament, WMS, 17, 131-337. In December 1521, while Carlstadt was still exercising personal leadership over the reform movement in Wittenberg, a group of religious radicals from the town of Zwickau arrived in Wittenberg. Some of them claimed to have had familiar conversations with God, hence the name "Heavenly Prophets." Carlstadt's doctrines had just enough in common with those of the "prophets" that Luther classed him among them in the title of this work.

basis of his understanding, of the appropriate texts.

Luther's belief in the Real Presence is grounded in obedience to the authority of Scripture, which for him supercedes any rational considerations of possibility. So at the outset he states his basic principle of biblical interpretation: "wherever Holy Scripture establishes something to be believed, one should not stray from the meaning of the words as they read, nor from the order in which they stand, unless an express article of faith forces a different meaning or ordering of the words." To Luther's mind there is no article of faith to contradict the literal implication of the words of institution that the bread is the body of Christ, hence man is bound to believe it.¹⁸

Luther quite frankly admits that from the point of view of reason alone it would be much easier not to believe in the Real Presence, but will not allow reason to determine the meaning of Scripture.¹⁹ In 1524 Luther had written:

I freely confess that if Carlstadt or any other could have convinced me five years ago that there was nothing in the sacrament save bread and wine, he would have done me a great service. I was sorely tempted on this point, and wrestled with myself and strove to believe that it was so, for I saw

¹⁸Ibid., XX, 213-214.

¹⁹Ibid., XX, 209.

that I could thereby give the hardest rap to the papacy. I read treatises by two men who did not so torture the word of God in their own imagination.²⁰ But I am bound, I cannot believe as they do; the text is too powerful and will not let itself be wrenched from the plain sense by argument.²¹

For Luther, then, the clear and obvious meaning of the words "this is my body" in their context is "this bread is my body." Luther has only contempt and scorn for Carlstadt's assertion to the contrary on the basis of touto. He sarcastically derides Carlstadt for apparently not knowing either Greek or German grammar. Luther points out that touto in Greek, like das in German, is com only used as an indefinite pronoun to indicate objects regardless of gender. (Since the English language is not inflected like Greek and German, we shall have to leave Luther's German illustrations untranslated in the following passage):

In the German tongue it is the normal custom of the language, when we indicate an object which is before us, to indicate it and call it a das, even though the thing itself is a der or a die. Just the same as when I say:

²⁰It is not certain to whom this statement refers. We do know that late in 1522 Luther read a treatise by the Dutchman, Cornelius Honius, in which the words of institution were interpreted symbolically and the Real Presence denied.

²¹Luther to the Christians of Strassburg, December 17, 1524, Preserved Smith and Charles F. Jacobs trans. and ed., Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1915), II, 277. Hereafter cited as Smith-Correspondence.

Das ist der wein . . . das ist die Frau
. . . Thus speaks the common man in Germany.

The Greek language does the same with its touto, so that it speaks of the bread, when it indicates it and says: das ist mein Leib /this is my body/, which is given for you; here I call to witness all those who know Greek.²²

Furthermore, Luther points out, Christ, in referring to the wine, used this selfsame touto and said: "This cup is the new testament in my blood." Here touto specifically modifies "cup," and cannot possibly refer to Christ himself as he sat at the table.²³

Luther goes even further and insists that if Christ had not been speaking of the bread, the text would be completely senseless:

For because Christ takes the bread in his hands, gives thanks, breaks it, gives it to his disciples and says: "Take and eat," and immediately thereafter says, without anything intervening, "This is my body," the style and natural order of the words require that he be speaking of the bread which he took in his hands, distributed and commanded to be eaten. Otherwise the disciples who heard him would not have understood him, for their eyes must have been on his hands as he took the bread, broke it and passed it around; and their ears must have heard the words which he spoke during the distribution. But he said no other words during the distribution than these: "This is my body," etc.²⁴

²² MS., XX, 221.

²³ Ibid., XX, 222.

²⁴ Ibid., XX, 223.

If Christ were referring to his own body, "he would have to say: take, eat, for I say to you that here sits my body, which is given for you . . ." But this makes just about as much sense "as if a person were to offer another a drink and say: Take and drink, here I sit, Jack with the red pants."²⁵ Why should Christ hand out bread and wine and command to eat and drink, if He is only telling that His body will soon be given into death? If Carlstadt's version is true, the bread and wine are not only unnecessary, but also distracting.²⁶

In his attack on the Real Presence Carlstadt had also briefly used two arguments which Luther answers with corresponding brevity. However, we should note them well because the issues involved will assume major importance in the coming struggle with Zwingle. The first one is that Carlstadt said that Christ ascended bodily into heaven and does not come down to be bodily in the sacrament. Luther thought this a childish argument:

For we do not say that he comes down from heaven or leaves his abode empty. If this were so, this genius [Carlstadt] would also have to say that God's son had also left heaven when he became man in his mother's body . . . This foolish genius is going

²⁵Ibid., XX, 227.

²⁶Ibid., XX, 228.

around with the childish notion that Christ travels up and down . . . He does not understand . . . that he [Christ] is in all places, and, as Paul says: "fills all [ph. 1:23]." It is not given to us to investigate how it happens that our bread becomes and is Christ's body. The Word of God is there which says it; to that we cling and believe it.²⁷

The other point is that Carlstadt argued that the passage 'the flesh profiteth nothing' proves that the Real Presence of Christ's flesh would be of no benefit. Luther replies that here Christ is not talking about his own flesh, but about the flesh. He did not say: "My flesh profiteth nothing," but "The flesh profiteth nothing." Flesh and Christ's flesh are two different things. Concerning His own flesh Christ said: "My flesh is meat indeed."²⁸ But "'flesh' here means carnal intellect, will, understanding and self-conceit, as Paul says in Rom. 8:6: 'To be carnally minded [fleischlich gesinnt] is death.'²⁹ In this sense "flesh" is certainly of no profit, but it is blasphemous to say this of Christ's flesh, for "he is everywhere profit-ble, wherever he is . . ."³⁰

But it is not sufficient for Luther to

²⁷ Ibid., XX, 273.

²⁸ John 6:55.

²⁹ Ibid., XX, 252-253.

³⁰ Ibid., XX, 255.

demolish Carlstadt's doctrine. He must carefully explain the grounds upon which his own doctrine stands. His grounds are exegetical, derived from his understanding of four major texts which are concerned with the sacrament.

The first text is that part of the words of institution which pertain to the wine, as recorded by Luke and Paul: "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you."³¹

This verse of Luke and Paul is brighter than the sun and mightier than thunder. First of all, no one can deny that Christ speaks of the cup, because he says: "This is the cup." Secondly, it proclaims rightly that he calls the cup "the new testament." But it is not possible that the cup should be a new testament by means of, and for the sake of, mere wine. Beloved, what else is the "new testament" than forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, earned for us by Christ? . . . If the cup is to be a new testament, there must be something in and with it which has the same value as the new testament. If that is not Christ's blood, as he says, "in my blood," tell me what it is then.³²

This cup is a new testament . . . because of the fact that . . . Christ's blood is there . . . Whoever, therefore receives the cup, and there receives the blood of Christ, shed for us, receives the new testament, that is, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.³³

Therefore, says Luther, since these words explicitly teach a real presence of the blood in the

³¹Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25.

³²WLC, XX, 279.

³³WLA, XX, 278.

wine, it must also be assumed that the words "this is my body," though they are less explicit, refer to the bread and indicate a similar real presence of the body in the bread. "What do I care about Carlstadt's dreams, mockeries or slanders? I see here clear, plain, powerful words of God, which force me to confess that Christ's body and blood are in the sacrament. . . . How Christ is brought into the sacrament . . . I do not know; but I know full well that the Word of God cannot lie, which here says that Christ's body and blood are in the sacrament."³⁴ To Carlstadt, and to all others who doubt that the Real Presence is possible, Luther again offers his illustrations from fire and iron, and the dual nature of Christ.³⁵

The other three texts are also from Paul. The first of these Luther thinks is absolute proof of his position:

"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?"³⁶ This verse is really, I think, a thunder-ax upon the heads of Dr. Carlstadt and all his mob. This verse has also been the life-

³⁴Ibid., XX, 234.

³⁵Ibid., XX, 255-256.

³⁶I Cor. 10:16

giving medicine of my heart in my temptation over this sacrament, and if we had no other verses than this, we could still sufficiently strengthen all consciences with it, and powerfully refute all opposition . . .³⁷

Do you hear, my dear brother? The bread which is broken, or distributed in individual pieces, it is, it is, it is, it is, (he says) the communion of the body of Christ. But what is the communion of the body of Christ? It can be nothing else than that all those who take their individual piece of bread, take the body of Christ in the same.³⁸

Luther finds further proof in the verse:

"Whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."³⁹ "The nature and style of language," says Luther, "require that each one who eats unworthily is guilty of that which he eats." If one eats the bread and drinks the wine unworthily and is thereby guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, it follows that the body and blood must be in the bread and wine.⁴⁰

The final verse which Luther quotes is: "He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body."⁴¹ Here Luther interprets Paul's

³⁷MSA, XX, 235.

³⁸Ibid., XX, 237.

³⁹I Cor. 11:27.

⁴⁰MSA, XX, 242.

⁴¹I Cor. 11:29.

meaning as follows: "He who eats and drinks unworthily justly deserves judgment or punishment, for with his unworthy eating and drinking he does not . . . discern the body of Christ, but proceeds and treats with the Lord's bread and wine as though it were mere bread and wine, even though it is the Lord's body and blood."⁴²

But Carlstadt had not ignored these passages from Paul. He had interpreted them in accordance with his emphasis on remembrance. He said: "Communion consists in this, that no one should drink the Lord's cup, except him who understands why Christ has shed his blood; and out of great love and thankfulness and ardent remembrance he should drink of the Lord's cup, which is not drunk as a blessing without the communion of the Lord."⁴³ Moreover, unworthy eating, Carlstadt said, consisted in eating without the remembrance of Christ.⁴⁴ And finally, "not discerning" the Lord's body, became "not properly acknowledging" the Lord's body.⁴⁵

In other words, Carlstadt made everything connected with the Lord's Supper internal and spiritual.

⁴² Coloss., XX, 243-244.

⁴³ Ibid., XX, 2353.

⁴⁴ Ibid., XX, 105.

⁴⁵ Ibid., X, 102-103.

Loving acknowledgment and passionate remembrance are things which take place within the spirit of man. Luther in turn defends the Real Presence as an objective, corporal reality, outside the spirit of man. Carlstadt is one, he says, "who makes everything inward and spiritual which God fixed as outward and corporal. . ."⁴⁵ But the chief text in question says:

"The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ . . ." Now the breaking of the bread is certainly an outward, corporal thing; no one can deny that . . . How can the outward breaking and eating of bread be a spiritual communion, as Dr. Carlstadt says? Note that also the unworthy and the ungodly, like Judas Iscariot and several Corinthians (1 Cor. 11), performed this breaking and eating of bread. These persons have the communion of the body of Christ, and partake of it . . . So here the unavoidable conclusion is that Paul does not here speak of the spiritual communion, which the godly alone have . . . but rather of a corporal communion, which, just like the breaking of the bread, is shared by both the godly and the ungodly.⁴⁷

In other words, this communion is corporal, because Paul so strongly emphasizes that those who have no spiritual communion with Christ at all, the unworthy, not only receive the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, but incur guilt and judgment thereby.

⁴⁵Ibid., XV, 237.

⁴⁷Ibid., XX, 238.

For Luther, the assertion that this is a corporal communion is in no way contradicted by the fact that it takes place invisibly or imperceptibly.

This verse of Paul's now stands like a rock and asserts with force that all those who break this bread, eat it and receive it, receive also the body of Christ and partake of it. And that cannot be spiritual, as is said, so it must be corporal . . . But on the one hand, this corporal communion cannot be visible or perceptible; otherwise no bread would remain. On the other hand, it cannot be mere bread; otherwise it would not be a corporal communion of the body of Christ, but of the bread only. Therefore, wherever the broken bread is, there must also the body of Christ be present corporally, even though invisibly.⁴³

All this stress on the corporality of the Real Presence was simply Luther's attempt to counteract Carlstadt's "spiritualizing," which included denial of the Real Presence altogether. But very shortly Zwingle will read these pages with their emphasis on the corporality of the Real Presence, take up his pen in protest, and force Luther again to defend, and further to explain his position.

Luther Defends the New Testament

Over against Carlstadt's meal of remembrance Luther has to defend his doctrine of the sacrament as God's testament of forgiveness. Here the basic

⁴³Ibid., XI, 240.

difference between the religious orientations of the two men stands out most clearly. For Carlstadt Christ was man's perfect example or prototype. Justification consisted in perfectly understanding and conforming to Christ's example. Luther's view of Christ, as he explained it in a letter to the clergy of Strassburg, was radically different:

I beg your preachers, dear brethren, to leave Luther and Carlstadt, and point only to Christ, and not as Carlstadt does, only to the work of Christ, and the example of Christ, which was the least part of His work, in which he is like other saints, but to Christ as the gift of God; or as Paul says, the strength of God, wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption given unto us . . .⁴⁹

In fact, the issue in dispute is really that of justification by faith versus the righteousness of works.

Dr. Carlstadt's theology [claims Luther] amounts to nothing more than to teach that we should follow after Christ, and make of Christ only an example and commander, from whom nothing is learned except works. He neither knows nor teaches Christ as our treasure and God's gift, out of which results faith, which is the highest thing; and presumes to embellish and to obscure all this with these words: "ardent acknowledgment, passionate remembrance," and the like. And therefore very nicely falls once again from faith to works . . .⁵⁰

⁴⁹Smith-Correspondence, II, 273.

⁵⁰Ibid., XX, 237.

Carlstadt "takes of Christ's words a clear command and law, which does nothing more than command and bid us to remember and acknowledge him. And in addition takes this acknowledgment nothing more than a work which we perform . . ." ⁵¹

"Therefore," Luther concludes, "if I, according to Carlstadtian doctrine, practiced remembrance and acknowledgment of Christ with such ardor and severity, that I sweat blood and burned to a crisp over it, it would all be nothing and a complete waste. For there would be merely commandment and work, but no gift or God's Word . . ." ⁵²

Remembrance is indeed an integral part of the sacrament, says Luther, but it is not Carlstadt's inward remembrance, but an outward one, namely, the preaching and proclaiming of Christ's death of which Paul speaks. "We should preach of him, when we enjoy the sacrament, and proclaim the Gospel in order to strengthen faith, not just sit and dally with thoughts in the heart and make a good work out of such remembrance, as Dr. Carlstadt dreams." ⁵³

Carlstadt had insisted that the fact that Christ's death on the cross was sufficient for man's

⁵¹ ibid., XX, 266.

⁵² ibid., XX, 271.

⁵³ ibid., XX, 266.

salvation ruled out Luther's doctrine that forgiveness of sins was given in the sacrament, and had as much as called Luther a papist because of his position. Luther's reply is really nothing else than an eloquent restatement and amplification of the doctrine already put forward in the Treatise on the New Testament and The Babylonian Captivity. But here the presentation is adapted to a different polemical situation. Luther's own attack on the Catholic doctrine of the sacrifice of the Mass had been, in effect, an insistence that the historical sacrifice was eternally sufficient and needed no repetition. But against Carlstadt Luther finds it necessary to emphasize that, though forgiveness was won in the past, it must still be a reality in the present. "Because the body and blood of Christ are necessary to those who still have sins to be forgiven, it is forever true that he is given for them. For although this event has already happened, as long as it is not distributed to me, it is just the same as if it never happened for me . . ." ⁵⁴

The effective link between the past sacrifice and the present necessity is the Word of God. "For even though Christ were given and crucified for us

⁵⁴Ibid., X³, 277.

a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God did not come, distribute it, bestow it upon me, and say: This shall be thine, take it and have it for thine own."⁵⁵ Therefore, "Christ has placed the power and might of his passion in the sacrament, that we might draw near and find it in that very place, according to the declaration of the words, 'this is my body, given for you for the remission of sins . . .'"⁵⁶

Thus Luther's doctrine that the sacrament is the new testament is predicated upon a distinction between the earning of forgiveness in general, and the distribution of that forgiveness to individuals:

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First of all, in what manner it is obtained and earned; secondly, in what manner it is distributed and bestowed. It is true, Christ earned it on the cross, but he did not distribute or give it on the cross. In the Lord's Supper or sacrament he did not earn it; but he has distributed and given it in that very place through the Word, as in the Gospel, where it is preached . . . Now if I wish to have my sins forgiven, I must not run to the cross, for there I would find forgiveness not yet distributed . . . but rather I must go to the sacrament or the Gospel, where I find the Word, which distributes, bestows, offers, and gives to me the forgiveness won on the cross. Therefore Luther ~~also~~ has taught correctly that whoever has a conscience troubled by sin should go to the sacrament and seek comfort, not from the bread and wine, nor from the body and blood of Christ,

⁵⁵Ibid., XI, 274.

⁵⁶Ibid., XI, 271.

but rather from the Word which in the sacrament offers, bestows and gives the body and blood of Christ, as it was given and shed for us.⁵⁷

All of this is simply a reassertion that God's Word is "the power, the nature, and the whole substance" of the sacrament.⁵⁸ We find also that the distinction between Word and sign is still maintained, only the Word being of unconditional importance. "For if only bread and wine were there, as they say, but still the words were there: 'take, this is my body, given for you [. . . for the remission of sins]' etc., by virtue of these same words the forgiveness of sins would be in the sacrament."⁵⁹ So Luther still wishes it to be understood that the central element in his doctrine of the sacrament is not the Real Presence, but the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins through the Word of God.

But in this treatise Luther has added to his earlier declaration that the Word bestows the forgiveness of sins the similar declaration that the Word also "offers, bestows and gives the body and blood of Christ, as it was given and shed for us."

⁵⁷ Ibid., XX, 275.

⁵⁸ See above p. 37, note 37.

⁵⁹ WCS, XX, 276.

What then is the relationship between the bestowal of the forgiveness of sins and the bestowal of the body and blood of Christ? We recall that in his discussion of the words "this cup is the new testament in my blood," Luther apparently equates the two: "whoever . . . receives the cup, and there receives the blood of Christ, shed for us, receives the new testament, that is, the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting."⁶⁰ This is scarcely more than a passing thought, but one which could prove fruitful if developed and expanded. We are perhaps justified in conjecturing that in the back of his mind Luther is searching for a formula by which he can draw the significance of the sacrament and the Real Presence in the sacrament into some kind of internal, inseparable relationship, which is closer than that relationship normally understood between a promise and its sign or seal. If Luther can accomplish this he will naturally strengthen his case against the attacks of his opponents. We shall see.

In the long run, Against the Heavenly Prophets did not settle anything. Actually, as we shall see, Luther was not nearly so successful in

⁶⁰ See above, p. 65, note 33.

refuting and silencing opposition as providing
new ammunition for the guns of his opponents. In
reality this treatise was more than anything else
not the conclusion of one dispute, but the grand
overture to another, and more important one. To
that great dispute we now turn our attention.

THE CONFLICT WITH SWINGLI

Swingli's Attack

Carlstadt's views on the Lord's Supper had not fallen entirely on deaf ears, for there were others who were arriving at approximately the same conclusions at approximately the same time. Chief among these was Ulrich Swingli, leader of the Reformation in Switzerland. Upon reading one of Carlstadt's works on the Lord's Supper Swingli wrote: "Carlstadt's meaning does not displease us at all . . . but his words are not adequate to the loftiness of the subject."¹ In other words, Swingli was pleased with Carlstadt's doctrine, but not with his clumsy logic. Swingli made it his task to defend the same general view and to place it on a more secure foundation. He first stated his mature doctrine of the sacrament in his Letter to Matthew Allen,² ostensibly a personal letter to

¹ LM, XVII, 1513. Swingli had read Carlstadt's Von der wildesten biblischen beschreibung des heiligen Trost und Speis, and knew second-hand the contents of the Waldensianer Concordienbuchlein, see above p.54. note 4.

² LM, XVII, 1512-23. Dated 16 November 1524, published in March 1525. The edition used here is a German translation of the original Latin text.

a Lutheran pastor, but which was widely circulated and eventually published. He restated the same views in his Commentary on True and False Religion,³ published two months after the appearance of Luther's Against the Heavenly Prophets. Although Luther is not mentioned by name in either work, much of Zwingli's argument is obviously directed against Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

It is not surprising that these two Reformers found themselves in fundamental disagreement on major theological issues, for they came from entirely different backgrounds. Zwingli, although a priest, was never a monk nor a doctor of theology. His education was predominantly humanistic, grounded firmly in the classics rather than in scholasticism. Thus he was always more of a rationalist and less of a mystic than Luther. He was never the Catholic's Catholic that the young Luther was, and consequently he generally departed farther from Catholic doctrine and practice in his reform than did the essentially conservative Luther. And while each reformer recognized the Bible as the sole authority in

³Clarissa Hovine Heller, ed., The Latin Letters and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli (Philadelphia, 1929), vol. III. Hereafter cited as Commentary. Original Latin edition published in March 1525.

religion, their interpretations diverged on important issues because their presuppositions were different, as we shall soon see.

Be that as it may, the fundamental theological differences between Luther and Zwingli are far more subtle than the differences between Luther and Carlstadt, or between Luther and the Roman Church. Zwingli's doctrine of justification was also justification by faith alone. At the Marburg Colloquy (1529) Luther and Zwingli declared their complete agreement, in formula, on this and twelve other major doctrinal points.⁴ Only on the Lord's Supper did they fail of complete accord. But the disagreement was sincere, and founded upon real and fundamental differences, which under the circumstances proved incapable of compromise or reconciliation. We shall now examine those differences.

Zwingli's attitude toward the Real Presence is at the root of his whole interpretation of the Lord's Supper. He insists that the Real Presence is contradicted by reason, experience, and faith itself. He does not hesitate to ask: "How can it be that you should be compelled to believe that which you cannot see to be possible?"⁵ The evidence of

⁴See the Marburg Articles, WSCC, XVII, 1332-43.

⁵Commentary, p. 215.

our own senses tells us that the Real Presence cannot be. Zwingli rejects transubstantiation as follows:

If he [Christ] is present literally and essentially in the flesh, then in the flesh he is torn apart and perceptibly reconstituted . . . It is evident, then, that the flesh is not there literally and corporally. For if it were, its mass and substance would be perceived, and would be pressed with the teeth . . . And since we do not experience or perceive any such presence, it follows that the words of Christ cannot refer to physical flesh and blood.

So for Zwingli Christ's body is either present perceptibly or not at all. There is no middle ground. Therefore he will not allow Luther to take the word "is" literally but yet deny transubstantiation. "If we take the word 'is' literally . . . then necessarily the substance of bread has to be changed completely into that of flesh. But that means that the bread is no longer there. Therefore it is impossible to maintain that the bread remains, but that in or under the bread the flesh is eaten. Notice how utterly unreasonable this position is."⁶

Therefore Zwingli thinks it is a complete contradiction in terms to make the Real Presence an

⁶G. W. Bromiley, ed. and trans., Zwingli and Bullinger, vol. XXIV of The Library of Christian Classics (London, 1953), On the Lord's Supper (1525), pp. 185-238; pp. 190-191. Hereafter cited as Zwingli and Bullinger.

article of faith:

Let us see now He writes how finely these things fit together: By faith we believe that the bodily and sensible flesh of Christ is here present. By faith things quite remote from sense are believed. But all bodily things are so entirely things of sense that unless they are perceived by sense they are not bodily. Therefore, to believe and to perceive by sense are essentially different. Observe, therefore, what a constrosity of speech this is: I believe that I eat the sensible and bodily flesh. For if it is bodily, there is no need of faith, for it is perceived by sense . . . On the other hand, if your eating is a matter of belief, the thing you believe cannot be sensible or bodily . . . In short, faith does not compel sense to confess that it perceives what it does not perceive, but it draws us to the invisible and fixes all our hopes on that [Heb. 11:1]. For it dwelleth not amidst the sensible and bodily, and hath nothing in common therewith.⁷

All this of course denies the assumption underlying both the Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of the Real Presence, namely, that outward sensible forms, such as bread and wine, can be media of the Divine.

Moreover, on the basis of the above arguments, Zwingli leaves himself only two possible alternatives in interpreting the text, "This is my body." First, it can be taken literally, which, as Zwingli sees it, means asserting transubstantiation in the crudest possible form. "For if the 'is' is to be taken literally, then we must eat the body of Christ with

⁷Commentary, pp. 213-214.

its flesh, bones, veins, nerves, marrow and other members which I will forbear to mention: for God cannot lie."⁸ This is not only repugnant to reason, but is incompatible with faith, the essential element in religion. Or, the text can be interpreted symbolically, as an expression of purely spiritual, non-material truths. Zwingli cannot consistently allow Luther's middle of the road position. It must be one or the other of the extremes.

Therefore Zwingli throws him self wholeheartedly into the defense of the symbolical interpretation of the sacrament. He does not follow Carlstadt's lead in interpreting the words of institution, but rejects Carlstadt's tampering with words on the same grounds as did Luther.⁹ Zwingli focuses his attention on the word "is." He points out that Scripture is full of passages in which the verb "to be" is to be understood metaphorically. For example: "The seven good kine are seven years (Gen. 41:26);" "I am the vine, ye are the branches (John 15:5);" "The seed is the word of God (Luke 8:11)." In all these cases the meaning is obviously not literal, says Zwingli, but the word "is" or its related forms should be interpreted as "signifies." Zwingli thinks this is

⁸Zwingli and Bullinger, p. 199.

⁹MLSS, XVII, 1521-22.

also the real meaning of the words "this is my body:" "'Take and eat, this signifies my body, which is given for you.' Therefore this is certainly the meaning: 'Take and eat, for this, which I now command you to do, will signify to you, or be a commemoration of, my body, which is now given for you; for he immediately thereafter added: 'this do in remembrance of me.'"¹⁰

Thus, like Carlstadt, Zwingli makes of the Lord's Supper simply a memorial ceremony, stripping from it its traditional role as a means of grace. He thinks that the clear intention of Christ in instituting the sacraments was simply to leave behind a ceremony in memory of his death.¹¹ This ceremony can in no way be said to dispense the forgiveness of sins, either in the Catholic or Lutheran definition of the process. For this is the property only of the death of Christ, which is eternally sufficient for the sins of the faithful. The sacrament merely symbolizes or calls to mind that historic sacrifice.¹² In fact, for Zwingli, the real purpose of the sacrament is not to grant some boon to the individual, but to serve as a corporate ceremony

¹⁰ Ibid., XVII, 1522-23.

¹¹ Ibid., XVII, 1527.

¹² Ibid., XVII, 1527; XX, 441, note 2; Commentary, p. 233.

of thanksgiving and confession of faith:

Since this meal of the Lord . . . has been instituted in order that we should remember Christ's death, which he suffered for us, it is clear that it is a sign whereby those who trust in Christ's death and blood witness before their brethren that they have such faith.¹³

When in the thanksgiving, in company with the congregation, you partake of the two elements of bread and wine, all that you do is to confess publicly that you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The chief cornerstone of Zwingli's defense of his symbolical interpretation of the words of institution is the passage: "It is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing (John 6:63)."

Like Carlstadt, he interprets this passage as referring to Christ's flesh. This antithesis between "flesh" and "spirit" in Zwingli's mind is but a more specific corollary of his assertion of the incompatibility of things of sense with matters of faith. The exact origin of Zwingli's rationalistic objections to the Real Presence is not certain, but it seems only reasonable to assume that the cause lies somewhere in his humanistic training. One commentator suggests that "perhaps the revival in humanism of the classical duality of soul and body,

¹³WMS, XVII, 1523.

¹⁴Zwingli and Bullinger, p. 197; Commentary, p. 200.

deriving from Orphism, led Zwingli to his position."¹⁵ At any rate, Zwingli gives a rather thorough exposition of his interpretation of the text "the flesh profiteth nothing," along with the context in which it occurs (John 6:22-35), developing the highly significant argument that participation in the substance of the body and blood of Christ is totally irrelevant to the Christian faith. Here, briefly, is that interpretation:

The crowd which had witnessed Christ's feeding of the five thousand came seeking him after he had departed from them. Perceiving that they sought him because their bellies had been filled, Christ took the opportunity to teach them of spiritual food and spiritual eating: "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)." By this, says Zwingli, Christ meant that those who come to Christ, or trust in him, will never again suffer the "hunger of despair . . . for all those who trust in Him are already certain that they are God's children . . . because they have within themselves the pledge, the

¹⁵Cyril C. Richardson, Zwingli and Cranmer on the Eucharist (Evanston, Ill., 1945), p. 16.

Spirit, through which they know that they have been reconciled with God through God . . ." Christ clearly indicated in what manner he is the food of the soul when he said: "Verily, verily I say unto you, he that believeth on me hath everlasting life. (John 6:47). I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world (John 6:51)." Here Zwingli paraphrases Christ's words as follows:

"The bread of which I now preach is nothing else than that my flesh, which you see here present, will be given for the life of the world . . . In that I am sacrificed for the world I shall be the food of the soul, through which you obtain your hope and become certain of the mercy of God . . . So the bread, that is, the food of the soul, which I have promised, is my flesh; not, as you think, as it lives and associates with you, but in so far as it is sacrificed for the life of the world . . ." From these words [vs. 47, 51] we clearly learn that Christ's flesh is the food and hope of the human soul only in so far as it is slain for us.

Therefore, says Zwingli, the passage: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you (John 6:53)" is a metaphorical passage in which Christ equates "eating" with "believing."

For those who eat here do not eat in a physical manner, and that which is eaten is not the body which appeals to the senses That which man perceives with the senses belongs to the organs of sense. But since one's members (or organs of sense) have nothing to produce here, but rather everything occurs inwardly, what is the necessity of speaking about a body or a substance in so far as it is a substance? For Christ is not the food of the soul in such a manner but rather in so far as he has been slain according to his bodily nature Whoever, therefore, trusts in Christ who died for him, is already inwardly strengthened by Christ's body and blood. And if he did not trust in Christ's death, what greater good than the nourishment of the body would result from the insistence upon eating Christ corporally? For it remains forever true that "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," and further, "that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" [John 3:6]. Therefore Christ intends here a spiritual eating If we do not believe that he has died and shed his blood for us we shall have no life. Further, if we eat his flesh, that is, believe that he died for us, and drink his blood, that is, firmly believe that his blood was shed for us, then Christ is in us and we are in him [John 6:57]. But is Christ corporally present in anyone? Of course not. Then why do we wrangle so about the eating of the body? For one eats his body when one believes that he died for us.

Zwingli thinks that if it could be maintained that there was any spiritual benefit in the corporal participation in Christ's body, it would also have to be maintained that there are two ways of salvation, one by faith, and one by corporally eating Christ's body, which is absurd. Furthermore, Christ said: "For the bread of God is he which cometh down from

heaven, and giveth life unto the world. [John 6:33]."

"But Christ's body did not come down from heaven, but was born in the body of the Virgin . . . Christ gives life to the world in so far as He is God and the Son of God, not as flesh."

But, Swinalli concludes, the Jews who heard Christ mistakenly took Christ's words literally, and were horrified and offended because they supposed him to be commanding the literal eating of his flesh. To correct this mistaken impression Christ said:

"It is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life . . ." What could have been more emphatically stated in order to overthrow all the fables about the corporal and essential body of Christ in the sacrament than this: "the flesh profiteth nothing"? But shall we now say that Christ gave something which is of no profit: Far from it! . . . For we will hold before them [I.e., Luther] this word as a shield and say: Cease from this your carnal wisdom, for "the flesh profiteth nothing." What is profitable then? Answer: that which follows: "the words which I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life." What words: "Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life [John 6:54]." What kind of flesh? What kind of blood? Not that which has bodily humors, nor that which has weight, but that which we acknowledge in our heart to be a pledge of our salvation, because of the fact that it has been slain upon the cross for us. If we believe these words and harbor them in our heart, they bring us eternal life. For we are justified by faith alone.¹⁵

¹⁵MUSE, XVII, 1513-1519.

To make his case even more convincing, Zwingli, like Carlstadt, asserts the impossibility of the Real Presence on the basis of Christ's bodily ascension into heaven. Mark 16:19 reads: "He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." Ironically, Zwingli, the champion of metaphor in Scripture, insists that the meaning of this passage was absolutely literal. But it harmonized well with Zwingli's general view to confine Christ's body to a local presence in heaven. Therefore, he says, since it is not the property of a body to be more than one place at once, the corporal presence of Christ in the sacrament is impossible.¹⁷

We have seen that Zwingli raised the same issues and used approximately the same arguments as Carlstadt. But we have also seen that he developed his case in far greater detail, and with greater logical and exegetical skill. Equally as important as Zwingli's case against the possibility of the Real Presence was his case against its desirability. He defended the proposition that the Real Presence is entirely beside the point in the Christian religion.

¹⁷Zwingli and Bullinger, pp. 212-215.

More than that, it is absolutely opposed by Zwingli's understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Luther has not had to face such a challenge before, for his Catholic opponents shared his belief in the Real Presence, and Carlstadt's attack had concentrated on other issues. If Zwingli's arguments cannot be refuted, Luther's doctrine will fall. This is indeed a serious challenge.

Luther's Reply

There was a lapse of more than a year and a half between the publication of Zwingli's Commentary and the appearance of Luther's first reply. However, the interim was not a time of quiet. Theologians in Germany and Switzerland were taking sides in the dispute and soon a veritable theological war was in progress. For example, in September 1525, Johannes Oecolampadius of Basel, a close associate and supporter of Zwingli, published a tract entitled True and Real Meaning of the Words of the Lord, 'This is My Body,' hoping to win the Lutheran clergy of Swabia over to the Zwinglian view of the sacrament. Whereupon a group of Swabian pastors, under the leadership of Johannes Brenz, replied with a tract

called the Swabian Syngramma, in which they vigorously defended Luther's view. So it went, with each side bombarding the other with tracts and letters, until it became apparent that the sacrament which both sides acknowledged to be a symbol of Christian unity was the source of a bitter cleavage in the ranks of the reformers.

Meanwhile both sides were awaiting a definitive statement from Luther himself. Luther's delay was due in part to the fact that he was an extremely busy man, involved in the task of founding a new church. But more important, he was restudying the Scriptural evidence on the sacrament and re-examining his whole doctrine in the light of Zwingli's attack. Emerging from this study more convinced than ever of the correctness of his own doctrine, Luther defended it in three treatises: Sermon Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, Against the Fanatical Spirits (Fall of 1526);¹³ That These Words of Christ: 'This is My Body' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatical

¹³ Sermon von dem Sacrament des Leibes und Blutes Christi wider die Schwärmer, Wittenberg, 1526, 724-735. Zwingli's reply was Verurteilung und Abweisung (Über die Predigt des trefflichen antini Luther's wider die Schwärmer (March 1527)), Ibid., 1104-1123.

Spirits (April 1527);¹⁹ and Concerning the Lord's Supper, A Confession (March 1528).²⁰

Luther did not take Zwingli's attack on his doctrine gracefully. In fact, in some passages it is obvious that his volatile temper got the better of him. Not only does he rage against Zwingli and his followers as servants of the devil and heretics,²¹ but even resorts to personal abuse, accusing Zwingli, for example, of theologizing "like a filthy old sow."²² Reprehensible as such acrimony may be, Luther was not without provocation. It was naturally a galling and embittering experience for him to have the doctrine he regarded as the hard-won truth from the Word of God openly attacked, not by Romanists, which would have been understandable, but by other reformers. The air of condescending superiority which Zwingli tended to assume in his writings did not soothe matters any. Furthermore Luther was

¹⁹Dasz diese Worte Christi: 'das ist mein Leib' etc., noch fest stehen wider die Schwärmgeister, MLSS, XX, 769-893. Zwingli's reply was Dasz diese Worte: Das ist mein Leichnam, ewiglich den alten einigen Sinn haben werden (June 1527), Ibid., XX, 1122-1229.

²⁰Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnisz, MLSS, XX, 894-1105. Zwingli's reply was Antwort auf Luthers Bekenntnisz vom Abendmahl Christi (August 1528), Ibid., XX, 1228-1378.

²¹MLSS, XX, 762-770.

²²Ibid., XX, 925.

outraged by Oecolampadius' mocking assertion that the Lutherans worshipped a "baked bread God," and were "carniverous devourers of God's flesh" and "swillers of God's blood."²³ But our main interest here is not Luther's riled temper, but the substance of his reply to Zwingli.

The Word and the Real Presence

Luther's case for the Real Presence rests solely upon his literal interpretation of the words of institution. In the last chapter we examined in some detail Luther's exegetical arguments for that literal interpretation. The title of his treatise of 1527, That These Words of Christ . . . Still Stand . . . indicates that his ground remains the same in his conflict with Zwingli, as indeed it does:

Here now stands the verse [This is my body' etc.] and reads clearly and distinctly that Christ gives his body to eat when he distributes the bread. Upon that we take our stand, and also believe and teach that one eats Christ's body truly and corporally in the Lord's Supper. But how this takes place, or in what manner he is in the bread, we do not know, nor are we supposed to know. We must believe the Word of God, and not prescribe limits or methods for him.²⁴

²³"den gebrödenen und gebackenen Gott . . . Gottesfleischfresser und Gottesblutsäufer," from Oecolampadius' Antwort auf Luthers Vorrede zum Synonyma Suevicum, Ibid., XX, 508.

²⁴Ibid., XX, 777; cf. 735.

Actually it is entirely natural for Luther to accept the literal meaning of the text as proof because doing so harmonizes completely with his doctrine of the "Word of God." For Luther, the Word is much more than simply the Bible, it is the active will of God. Thus the Word not only declares the Real Presence, but also causes it. This has been implicit in Luther's thought since he first stated his doctrine of the Lord's Supper, but in these later works it is more clearly expressed. To illustrate what he means Luther refers to the doctrine of the virgin birth:

How does Mary, his mother, become pregnant?
 . . . She knows no man, and her body is inviolate; yet a true, natural child with flesh and blood is conceived in her body
 . . . How does this come about? The angel Gabriel brings the Word: "Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son" etc. [Luke 1:31] . . . Here no one can deny that the power comes through the Word. And just as one cannot deny that she is made pregnant through the Word, and no one knows how it happens, it is the same here [in the Lord's Supper]. For as soon as Christ says: "this is my body," his body is there through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, Psalm 33:9 [“For he spake and it was done”]. If the Word is not there, it is mere bread; but if the words are added to it, they bring with them that to which they refer.²⁵

In the institution of the sacrament Christ commanded: "this do in remembrance of me." Luther

²⁵ Ibid., XX, 741-742; cf. XX, 860-861.

argues that Christ referred not only to the ceremony of eating and drinking, but also to the consecration of the bread and wine, thus binding himself to be present wherever Christians celebrate the sacrament.²⁶ Therefore, "he is truly there whenever we speak the words [of institution] over the bread . . ."²⁷ To Zwingli's objection that this is nothing but a resurrection of the Romish priesthood,²⁸ Luther replies that this is not so because proper consecration depends solely upon the power of the Word and is not dependent in any way upon the sacerdotal character of the ministrant.²⁹

For Luther's own conscience no more proof is necessary, nor is any more convincing proof possible. But his whole position is seriously challenged by Zwingli's argument that the true meaning of the words of institution is not literal, but metaphorical. If this is true, then Luther's doctrine cannot stand, because it would necessarily follow that the words "this is my body" were not intended to indicate a real presence, and God's Word does not accomplish that which it does not intend.

²⁶ Ibid., XX, 920.

²⁷ Ibid., XX, 741.

²⁸ Ibid., XX, 1121.

²⁹ Ibid., XX, 918.

Therefore, Luther's principal task in these three treatises must be to refute Zwingli's arguments for the metaphorical interpretation, and marshal all the evidence possible in support of the literal interpretation.

The Plausibility of the Real Presence

To begin with, Luther is not impressed by Zwingli's observation that "is" often means "signifies" in Scripture. "Everybody knows that."³⁰ It must be proved beyond any doubt that the words "this is my body" are also a metaphor and cannot be taken literally.³¹ Luther thinks that Zwingli has failed to do this, and he will not admit the metaphorical interpretation because he thinks that the premises upon which it rests are false.

Zwingli had cited Christ's ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of God as proof that the corporal presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament is impossible. The underlying assumption is that since it is not the property of a body to be in more than one place at a time, Christ's body cannot be simultaneously in heaven and in the

³⁰ Luther to Gregory Basel, 5 November 1525, Smith-Correspondence, II, 348.

³¹ MSA, XX, 725.

infinite number of places on earth where the sacrament is being celebrated. Luther regards this argument as nothing but a cheap reduction of religious mystery to the limits of human reason.³² "How can we be certain," he asks, "that it is not possible for a body to be simultaneously in heaven and in the Lord's Supper through the power of God, since God's power has neither measure nor limit, and does things which reason cannot comprehend, but must simply be believed?" After all, "with God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:37)."³³

From this point of view Zwingli's objection is both irrelevant and impious. There is no room for doubt that God can cause the simultaneous presence of Christ in heaven and in the sacrament. But being a master polemicist Luther realizes that to make his case convincing he must somehow demonstrate the plausibility of such a paradoxical occurrence. He seeks to do this by turning the tables on Zwingli and arguing that the fact that Christ sits at the right hand of God in heaven supports rather than opposes the literal meaning of the words of institution.

Zwingli's error, Luther charges, is that he has made the right hand of God a particular place or

³² Ibid., XX, 708.

³³ Ibid., XV, 794-795.

location, to which Christ's body is confined. This seems childish to Luther: "If we were to ask them [i.e. the Swinglians] what they call the right hand of God where Christ sits, I suspect they would dream up a story like the one we are accustomed to telling to children, about a make-believe heaven with a golden throne, and Christ sitting next to the Father in a golden crown, exactly as the artists paint it."⁵⁴ Luther asserts to the contrary that "Scripture teaches us that the right hand of God is not a particular place where a body can or should be, like a golden throne, but rather it is the omnipotence of God," which is not confinable to a particular place, but is omnipresent, that is, totally present in all places at the same time, even in the smallest leaf on a tree, as the upholding and animating force of the universe. Among Luther's proofs from Scripture are the following: "For all these things hath mine hand made (Isaiah 66:2);" "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? . . . If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me and thy right hand hold me (Psalm 139: 7-10);" "He is not far from every one of us: for

⁵⁴Ibid., XX, 802.

in him we live, and move, and have our being
(Acts 17:27-28);" and "Am I not a God at hand,
saith the Lord, and not a God far off . . . Do I
not fill heaven and earth? (Jer. 23:23-24)." ³⁵

Considering this much established, Luther
proceeds to turn Zwingli's own evidence against him:

They [i.e. the Zwinglians] admit that Christ
is at the right hand of God, and think they
thereby established that he is not in the
Lord's Supper. This is indeed the dreadful
sword of the giant Goliath which they are
brandishing. But what if we were to take
from you ³⁶ this very sword, with which you
wish to prove that Christ cannot be in the
Lord's Supper, cut off your heads, and prove
with that doctrine that his body can be
there? Would you not consider this a deed
worthy of David? Well then, listen to this.
Christ's body is at the right hand of God,
that is admitted. But the right hand of
God is everywhere, as you must admit from
our previous demonstration. Therefore it
is certainly in the bread and wine on the
table as well. Now the body and blood of
Christ must be present wherever the right
hand of God is . . . What follows from
this? It follows that if Christ had never
said nor established the words "This is my
body" in the Lord's Supper, the words
"Christ sits at the right hand of God" would
nevertheless prove that it is possible for
his body and blood to be there . . . ³⁷

However, this whole argument is based on the
assumption, inherent in Luther's Christology, that
Christ's body is exempt from limitation in space,

³⁵ Ibid., XI, 304-307.

³⁶ Here Luther abruptly changes to direct address
of his opponents.

³⁷ WCS, XI, 310-311.

and is able to be omnipresent like the right hand of God. One of the cardinal tenets of Luther's theology is that two distinct natures, human and divine, are united in the one person Jesus Christ. These two natures in Christ are so closely united in the one person that they are inseparable. "The human nature is more closely joined with God than our skin with our flesh, yea, more closely than body and soul."³⁸ Thus Christ, though truly man, is also truly God:

It is our belief, [Luther states], as the Scriptures teach us, that our Lord Jesus Christ is genuinely, truly, and essentially God, and that God dwells in him totally and corporally, as St. Paul says in Col. 2:9 ["In him dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead bodily"]; and therefore that apart from Christ there is absolutely no God or divinity. As he himself says in John 14:9-10: "Philip, he that hath seen me hath seen the Father . . . Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?"³⁹

Therefore, Luther argues, since the two natures are inseparably united in Christ, wherever one nature is present, the other nature must also be present:

³⁸Ibid., XX, 952.

³⁹Ibid., XX, 808. Here the Christocentrism of Luther's theology is clearly in evidence. His basic position is that there is no proper knowledge of God apart from the man Christ, and that God is not to be found except in the humanity of Christ. For an excellent treatment of this issue see Watson, Let God be God, chaps. 3 and 4.

Wherever you can say: Here is God, there you must also say: Christ the man is also here. And if you were to point out a place where God is, and not the man, then the person would already be divided, because I could then say with truth: Here is God, who is not man, and never was man. But none of that God for me! . . . No, my dear fellow, wherever you place God before me, there you must also place the humanity of Christ; since they have become one person, they cannot be separated or divided from one another . . . ⁴⁰

Thus, since God is omnipresent, the humanity of Christ is also omnipresent. "We believe," Luther declares, "that Jesus Christ is placed over all creatures according to his humanity . . . and fills all things . . . He has everything in his hand and is everywhere present."⁴¹ Since Christ's body is peculiar in that it is supernaturally joined with God, and since there is no God apart from the man Jesus Christ, the ordinary, finite limitations of

⁴⁰ MLSS., XX, 951.

⁴¹ Ibid., XX, 742.

a body cannot hinder this omnipresence.⁴²

If Luther's arguments for the omnipresence of Christ are accepted, he has proved that Christ can be in many places at once and therefore that the Real Presence is possible. However, even if one accepted all of Luther's arguments here without question, all that is proved is a kind of indiscriminate omnipresence of Christ in all places: stone, fire, water, bread, wine or what have you. To this type of presence Luther attaches no special sacramental significance. For the sacramental presence something additional is required, namely, the Word. "It is one thing if God is there, and another thing if he is there for you. For he is there for you when he adds his Word thereto, binds

⁴² Ibid., XX, 951. In other contexts Luther expressed this same position regarding the person of Christ in terms of the ancient (fifth century, see Seeburg, I, 251 ff.) doctrine of the communicatio idiomatum, that is, the communication of the attributes of each nature in Christ to the other. By this means it is argued, for example, that the sufferings and death of the human nature are communicated to the divine nature. And Luther argues, on the same basis, that the omnipresence of the divine nature is communicated to the human nature. See W/L, XVII, 285-290. It is also worth noting that Luther's Christology was not developed as a result of his speculations on the Real Presence, but that his position on the Real Presence was taken because of his Christology, which was a separate and earlier development, see Schwiebert, p. 702.

himself by it and says: Here thou shalt find me. If you have this Word, then you can certainly grasp him and have him . . ." It is the Lord's Supper which Christ has appointed as the means of continuously revealing himself to mankind, as he promised in the words "this is my body . . . this is my blood."⁴³

Thus, where Zwingli emphasized the remoteness of Christ's humanity from human affairs by virtue of his ascension into heaven, Luther emphasizes the immanence of Christ and his continued personal presence and communion with the faithful by means of the sacrament. This is a vastly comforting thought for Luther, and he is not willing to have Zwingli rationalize it away.⁴⁴

Zwingli had also argued that Christ's body and blood are not truly present in the sacrament because no such presence is perceived by the senses. Here the underlying assumption is that there is only one possible way for Christ's body to be present, namely, in a perceptible, comprehensible manner. Once again Luther charges Zwingli with setting limits to God's omnipotence, and feels

⁴³Ibid., XX, 814-815; cf. 743.

⁴⁴Ibid., XX, 743, 817; cf. Luther's remarks on the ascension in his sermon for Ascension Day, 1523, Ibid., XI, 940-941.

called upon to demonstrate that Christ's presence need not necessarily be perceptible.

Deriving his argument from Occam and Biel,⁴⁵ Luther distinguishes three possible types of presence: circumscriptive or local, definitive, and repletive. Circumscriptive presence refers to a local, comprehensible, quantitative, purely spatial relationship, such as wine in a flask. This mode of presence is attributed to Christ's body during his earthly life. Repletive presence refers to a supernatural, incomprehensible presence in all places, otherwise known as omnipresence. This mode is attributed to Christ by virtue of his divinity. But it is the definitive mode which pertains to the presence in the bread:

A thing is present definitive, incomprehensibly, if the thing or body is not present comprehensibly, and is not measured according to the space of the place where it is, but can occupy a great deal of space or only a little space. In this way, they [*i.e.* Occam and Biel] say, angels and spirits are present at various places; for in this way an angel or a devil can be in an entire house or city; moreover he can be in a room, a box or a pot, yea, even in a nutshell . . . This is what I call incomprehensible presence; for we cannot comprehend or measure it, as we measure bodies, but it is nevertheless present.

In this way Christ is said to have come forth out of the sealed tomb and passed through closed doors

⁴⁵See Seeberg, II, 204-205; 326, note 1.

to the disciples, leaving the stone and wood unchanged although being truly present in them. It is in this same incomprehensible way, Luther asserts, that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper.⁴⁶

This discussion does not attain the same level as Luther's speculations on the person of Christ and the right hand of God, yet it serves well to clarify Luther's attitude toward the nature of the Real Presence. He is especially anxious not to have any notion of a local, quantitative presence or limitation of Christ in the bread associated with his doctrine. It is necessary for him to explain this carefully since his own frequently used expression "in the bread" can easily be interpreted to mean such a local, quantitative presence, like straw in a sack or bread in a basket. Luther disclaims any such view, insisting that by using the word "in" he only intends to confess his belief that Christ is present in the sacrament.⁴⁷ The presence itself is definitive, that is incomprehensible, non-quantitative, unmeasurable, not limited by the place in which the presence occurs. Christ's body

⁴⁶ *WA*, XX, 947-949.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, XV, 811, 832, 963.

should not be thought of as present in the same way that bread is in a basket or straw in a sack, but similar to the way that a single voice is totally present in the ears of each person in the audience,⁴⁸ or a scenic landscape is entirely present in the eyes of each beholder.⁴⁹

Closely related to the above problem is Zwingly's argument that Luther cannot take the word "is" literally and still maintain that bread remains. Either Christ's body is present or the bread is present, they cannot be together in the same place at the same time. Luther might well answer this by re-emphasizing that if a thing is present definitively it does not affect the status of the place in which it is present, as when the stone and the wood remained unchanged when Christ passed through them. But instead he treats the problem separately, and with a rather more original argument.

Luther fully realizes the difficulty involved in his belief that both bread and the body of Christ are present in the sacrament:

⁴⁸Ibid., XX, 739, 958.

⁴⁹Ibid., XX, 950.

It is indeed true, and no one can deny that two distinct essences⁵⁰ cannot be one essence. For example, that which is an ass cannot be an ox; that which is a man cannot be stone or wood . . . Now if we come to the Lord's Supper with such an understanding our reason is offended; for here it our reason finds that bread and body, two distinct essences, are spoken of as one thing or essence in these words: "This is my body." Here reason shakes its head and says: Indeed! it is neither possible nor desirable that bread should be a body; if it is bread it is bread, if it is a body it is a body, one or the other, whichever you wish.

In the face of this dilemma, Luther observes, two positions have commonly been taken. The Roman Catholic theologians assume that since the body of Christ is present the substance of bread cannot be, and take refuge in the sophistications of the doctrine of transubstantiation. On the other hand reformers like Zwingli assume that since bread is obviously present the body of Christ cannot be, and, in defiance of the word of God, throw out the doctrine of the Real Presence altogether. Each of these positions is in its own way more rational than Luther's, in that each one circumvents the logical impasse of treating two essences as one.

⁵⁰The German word here is das Wesen, which has a number of possible translations: essence, being, entity, existence, or substance. It seems clear from the context that Luther means simply one thing or being which has an independent existence. He is not dealing with the philosophical categories of essence or substance such as they are found in scholastic philosophy (e.g., in the doctrine of transubstantiation).

But Luther is not one to be intimidated by a paradox if he thinks the Word of God requires it. He holds with the one party that Christ's body is truly present, and with the other party that the bread is also present. "And therefore," he declares, "I hold, against all reason and acute logic, that two distinct essences may indeed be one essence and be referred to as such . . ." But Luther insists that the truth of his position can be demonstrated from the articles of faith and the Bible:

The lofty article of faith concerning the Holy Trinity teaches us to believe and to speak of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost as three distinct persons; nevertheless, each one is the sole God . . . If, here, the unity of nature and essence can cause distinct persons nevertheless to be spoken of as one and the same thing or one essence, then it must certainly not be contrary to Scripture or any article of faith that two distinct things, like bread and body, be spoken of as one and the same thing, or one essence.

This unity Luther calls natural unity because the three persons are all one nature.

Luther also offers the by now familiar example of the person of Christ: "I point to the man Christ and say: This is the Son of God, or this man is the Son of God. Here it is not necessary that the humanity disappear or be destroyed in order that the word 'this' refer to God and not the man, as the sophists imagine concerning the bread in the

sacrament; nevertheless man and God are much more different, more widely separated, and more contrary to one another than bread and body" This unity Luther calls personal unity because the two natures are one person.

Luther offers yet another example which he thinks comes even closer to illustrating his conception of the Real Presence. "The evangelists write that the Holy Ghost came upon Christ in the river Jordan in the form of a dove [John 1:32]. We say . . . that if one points to the dove he can rightly and properly say: This is the Holy Ghost; for the reason that the two distinct essences, Spirit and dove, are in some fashion one and the same essence" This unity Luther calls formal unity because the Holy Ghost chose to reveal himself in this particular form.

Luther concludes that in the light of all this evidence it is perfectly proper to speak of a "sacramental unity" between the bread and the body of Christ, similar to the unity between the dove and the Holy Ghost. "For it is no longer ordinary bread in the oven, but flesh-bread or body-bread, that is, bread which has become one thing, one sacramental essence with the body of Christ. The same is also

true of the wine in the chalice . . . for it is no longer mere wine from the cellar, but blood-wine, that is, wine which has become one sacramental essence with the blood of Christ."⁵¹

With reference to this concept Luther can solve the problem of whether or not the body of Christ is actually chewed by the teeth.

Therefore it is by all means proper for one to point to the bread and say: This is Christ's body; and whoever sees the bread sees the body of Christ; the same as when John says that he saw the Holy Ghost when he saw the dove, as we have heard. Therefore it is also correct to say that whoever handles this bread handles the body of Christ, whoever eats this bread eats the body of Christ, and whoever presses this bread with his teeth or tongue presses the body of Christ with his teeth or tongue; and yet it remains forever true that no one sees, handles, eats or chews the body of Christ in the same way that one visibly sees and chews other flesh. But whatever is done to the bread is properly attributed to the body of Christ by virtue of the sacramental unity.⁵²

The New Testament and the Real Presence

The question still remains: what is the benefit of the Real Presence for the recipient? This question must be answered in terms of Luther's concept of the blessing of the sacrament itself. In

⁵¹ Ibid., XX, 1027-35.

⁵² Ibid., XX, 1032. Note the similarity of this last statement to the conception of the communicatio idiomatum in the person of Christ. See above, p. 103, note 42.

the midst of all this theologizing on the Real Presence one almost forgets that the central theme of Luther's sacramental doctrine is that the Lord's Supper is the new testament of the forgiveness of sins. Zwingli attacked this concept on identically the same grounds as did Carlstadt, claiming that the death of Christ alone is the means of man's redemption, not the sacrament as well. Luther's reply is identically the same as that directed against Carlstadt, though somewhat more acrimonious:

The blind and raving genius does not know that meritum Christi /Christ's merit/ and distributio meriti /the distribution of the merit/ are two different things, but mixes them together like a filthy old sow. Christ merited and gained the forgiveness of sins for us once and for all on the cross; but he distributes this wherever he is, at all times and in all places, as Luke writes in chapter 24:46-47: "This it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day (which is his merit), and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name (which is the distribution of his merit)"; therefore we say that the forgiveness of sins is in the Lord's Supper . . . not because Christ merits or gains the forgiveness of sins there, but because of the Word, through which he distributes among us the forgiveness of sins already won . . .⁵³

Now we are once again faced with the question: what exactly is the relationship between the benefit of the sacrament, the forgiveness of sins, and the

⁵³Ibid., XX, 925.

Real Presence? Luther's original answer to this question was that the body and blood of Christ are a seal or sign of the forgiveness which is granted through faith in the Word. This concept still remains: "Here my Lord has given me his body and blood in bread and wine to eat and to drink and to have as my own, whereby I am certain that my sins are forgiven, and that I am free from death and hell, have eternal life, am a child of God and an heir of heaven. It is to seek this that I go to the sacrament."⁵⁴ Or, to express it in another way, the body and blood of Christ, through which the forgiveness of sins was won on the cross, are by their presence in the sacrament, the best possible evidence that the promise in the Word is indeed true, and therefore faith in the promise is strengthened.

But this original concept has now been deepened. In his writings against the Catholic Church Luther was overwhelmingly concerned with establishing that only faith in the Word of God brings forgiveness to man, with the result that in his early sacramental writings Luther drew a sharp and somewhat artificial distinction between the word of promise and the sacrament or sign, which includes the body and blood

⁵⁴Ibid., XX, 751. Italics mine.

of Christ. In his zeal to emphasize the importance of the Word Luther went so far as to assert that if absolutely necessary the sign could be done without if only the Word remained. Strictly speaking this position remains unchanged, because Luther never abandons his belief in justification by faith alone. However, the emphasis has changed completely. The sweeping denials of both the existence and the value of the Real Presence by Carlstadt and Zwingli have forced Luther to turn his argument around and to emphasize not the distinction between Word and sacrament, but their integral and intimate connection.

We first noted this shift of emphasis in Luther's reply to Carlstadt, where, in commenting upon the Lucan-Pauline text "This cup is the new testament in my blood (Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25)," he seemed to equate the reception of Christ's blood with the reception of the new testament, that is, the forgiveness of sins.⁵⁵ This idea is carried over into the dispute with Zwingli, and the equation is unmistakable. Again commenting on the above mentioned verse, Luther says:

Now where are all those who prate idly that the forgiveness of sins is not in the sacrament? St. Paul and Luke say that the new testament is in the Lord's Supper . . .
 . If the new testament is in the Lord's

⁵⁵See above, p. 76.

Supper, so must the forgiveness of sins, spirit, grace, life and salvation.⁵⁶

For the new testament is the promise, yea, much more, the gift of grace and the forgiveness of sins . . . For although the cup [of wine] is a corporal thing, nevertheless, because it is one sacramental thing with the blood of Christ, or with the new testament, it is justly called a new testament, or, that blood to which one may point and say: this is a new testament; this is the blood of Christ . . . [in the same way that the dove was the Holy Ghost]. Therefore, whoever drinks from this cup truly drinks the blood of Christ, and the forgiveness of sins or the spirit of Christ, which are taken in and with the cup . . .⁵⁷

Therefore, if the blood of Christ is equated with the new testament, and the new testament is equated with the forgiveness of sins, then the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament is the living presence of that which is the forgiveness of sins. Thus, while it still may properly be said that the Real Presence is the sign or seal of the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament, it may also properly be said that the sign itself is the thing signified.

Luther sums this whole argument up in terms of his doctrine of the Word, describing the inter-relation of the various parts of the sacrament in one of the most interesting passages in his writings

⁵⁶MSS, XX, 1071.

⁵⁷Ibid., XX, 1059.

on the sacrament:

Therefore behold what a beautiful and wondrous thing this is, how everything is interdependent and is one sacramental essence. The words are the first thing, for without the words the bread and the wine would be nothing. Further, without the bread and wine the body and blood of Christ would not be there. Without the body and blood of Christ the new testament would not be there. Without the new testament the forgiveness of sins would not be there. Without the forgiveness of sins life and salvation would not be there. Thus first of all the Word embraces the bread and wine in the sacrament. Bread and wine embrace the body and blood of Christ. The body and blood of Christ embrace the new testament. The new testament embraces the forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins embraces life and salvation. Behold, the words of the Lord's Supper offer and give us all this, and we grasp it by faith.⁵³

Flesh and Spirit

But against all Luther's arguments for the benefit of the Real Presence Zwingli has answered that "the flesh profiteth nothing." This means, he argues, that Christ's body is not in the sacrament because God does not give man something which is not profitable for him. Luther's reply is that the passage does not refer to Christ's body at all, and therefore does not contradict the doctrine of the Real Presence.

⁵³ Ibid., XII, 1071-72.

At the basis of the dispute are conflicting definitions of the terms "flesh" and "spirit." In Zwingli's mind there was an antithesis between material things and the invisible world of spirit and faith. He understood the contrast between flesh and spirit in this sense. But for Luther the doctrine of creation⁵⁹ means that all material things are intrinsically good.⁶⁰ Therefore, there is no necessary contrast between material and spiritual things, but rather material things may well be the vehicles of the spirit.⁶¹ In fact, Luther argues, God always deals with man in some visible, perceptible fashion, as in the person of Jesus Christ, who was God incarnate, in the written and spoken Word, which tell man about Christ, and also in the sacrament, where Christ continues to reveal himself personally to the faithful.⁶²

Therefore Luther understands the contrast between flesh and spirit differently than did Zwingli. It is Luther's understanding that wherever in Scripture flesh is contrasted with spirit the intent

⁵⁹"And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold it was very good." Gen. 1:31.

⁶⁰Ibid., XX, 970.

⁶¹Ibid., XI, 879.

⁶²Ibid., XX, 839, 813, 832-833.

is to contrast original sin, or "the old Adam," with the Holy Spirit.⁶³

Everything that stems from the Holy Ghost is called spirit, spiritual, and a spiritual thing, no matter how corporal, outward, or visible it may be; on the other hand, everything that stems from the natural power of the flesh, apart from the spirit, is flesh [~~fleisch~~] and carnal [~~fleischlich~~], no matter how inward and invisible it may be. For in Romans 8, St. Paul calls carnal intellect flesh, and in Galatians 5:20 numbers heresy, hate, envy, etc. among the works of the flesh, even though those things are entirely inward and invisible.⁶⁴

Thus flesh is condemned in so far as it is sinful, not in so far as it is material.⁶⁵

What exactly did Christ mean, then, when he said in John 6:63: "It is the spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing"? Up to a certain point Luther's interpretation of John 6 is the same as Zwingli's. Both agree that all the references in the chapter to eating refer to spiritual eating, or faith. Both agree that many of the disciples were offended at Christ's words because they understood him to be teaching that they must literally eat his flesh in the same way that one would eat meat from a butcher shop. But from this point on the interpretations diverge.

⁶³ Ibid., XX, 333-340.

⁶⁴ Ibid., XX, 844.

⁶⁵ Ibid., XX, 840.

Zwingli interpreted "the flesh profiteth nothing" as a statement by Christ that his flesh is of no profit if eaten in the crude physical manner imagined by those who were offended. Since, in Zwingli's mind, corporal eating of Christ's body in the sacrament was necessarily the same type of cannibalistic eating as that imagined by those who were offended, he insisted that this text disproves the Real Presence and requires a metaphorical interpretation of the words "this is my body."

But Luther points out that Christ did not say specifically "my flesh profiteth nothing," but simply "the flesh profiteth nothing."⁵⁶ He insists, therefore, that Christ is not here referring to his own flesh, but speaking in general terms of the contrast between flesh and spirit as defined above. Therefore, when Christ said "the flesh profiteth nothing," what he was doing was condemning the carnal understanding of those who understood him to be teaching a cannibalistic eating of his flesh, instead of understanding his words in a spiritual sense, referring to the spiritual eating of his flesh, which is faith.

⁵⁶ III., XX, 924-925.

He [Christ] teaches⁶⁷ concerning the [spiritual] eating of his flesh, and thereafter deals with the distinction of the disciples who hear this teaching. Some he finds carnal, some spiritual, and in verse 63 he pronounces this judgment: "the flesh profiteth nothing, it is the spirit that gives life." In addition to this he explains himself by saying: "My words are spirit and life." Which can mean nothing else than this: "I must have spiritual disciples for my words; carnal disciples will not do, for they are disciples of the flesh and not of my words; but the flesh profiteth nothing and leads them astray." For just as the spirit is his word and teaching, the flesh must likewise be the word and teaching of the flesh. Therefore the "spirit," that is, his word and teaching, gives life; and "flesh," that is, the word and teaching of the flesh, "profiteth nothing . . ."⁶⁸

To be sure, the type of eating imagined by Christ's hearers would be of no profit, but in Luther's mind this type of cannibalistic eating bears not the faintest resemblance to the corporal eating of Christ in the sacrament. Therefore he sees nothing in the whole of John 6 to contradict the literal meaning of the words "this is my body."

Luther cannot understand how Zwingli can refer the passage "the flesh profiteth nothing" to Christ's

⁶⁷In John 6:51: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

⁶⁸Lut., XL, 961-982; 840.

flesh and still profess to take seriously Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection or ascension, all of which were accomplished in the flesh.⁶⁹ Zwingli would answer that Christ's flesh is profitable if spiritually eaten, that is, if one believes that it was given into death for man's redemption, but not if eaten corporally in the sacrament.

But I ask /Says Luther, addressing the Zwinglians/: If I were to eat Christ's flesh corporally in the Lord's Supper in such a way that I ate it spiritually at the same time, would you not admit to me that Christ's body is very much profitable in the Lord's Supper? But how can this be? This is how it can be: I will eat his body corporally with the bread and at the same time believe in my heart that it is the body which is given for me for the forgiveness of sins . . . which is what you yourselves call spiritual eating. If the spiritual eating is there then the corporal eating can do no harm, but on the contrary must also be profitable for the sake of the spiritual eating.⁷⁰

The corporal eating indeed would be unprofitable if that were all there is to the Lord's Supper, but:

"Then have you ever heard from us that we eat, or teach anyone to eat, the Lord's Supper in such a way that there is only an outward, corporal eating of the body of Christ? Have we not taught in many books that there are two things to observe in the Lord's Supper? One is the highest and most necessary, the words: "Take, eat, this is my body" etc. The other is the sacrament or the corporal eating of the body of Christ . . . And have said further that to eat the sacrament corporally without these words, or without this spiritual eating, is

⁶⁹Ibid., XX, 827-828.

⁷⁰Ibid., XX, 829-930.

not only not profitable, but also harmful, as Paul says in I Cor. 11:27: "Whosoever shall eat this bread unworthily shall be guilty of the body of the Lord."⁷¹

Thus Luther is here actually dealing with the familiar concepts of Word and sacrament in terms of spiritual and corporal eating. And once again his emphasis is on the intimate connection between the two parts of the sacrament. Because Zwingli made spiritual and corporal eating antithetical we find Luther angrily demanding: "What devil has commanded you to separate the Word from the body of Christ in the Lord's Supper /?/ . . ."⁷²

But not content simply with the negative argument that "the flesh profiteth nothing" does not apply to Christ's flesh, Luther argues that Christ's body is per se a thing of great profit, and furthermore that its reception in the sacrament produces an effect upon the body of the recipient. Zwingli had reasoned that even if Christ's body were eaten in the sacrament, nothing more would result than the nourishment of the flesh, because "that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit (John 3:6)." But, Luther argues, the doctrine of the virgin birth

⁷¹Ibid., XX, 830-831.

⁷²Ibid., XX, 842-844.

teaches us that Christ was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. Therefore his flesh properly belongs under the heading of "that which is born of the Spirit" rather than "that which is born of the flesh." Because of this, Christ's flesh is distinct from all other flesh in that it is spiritual.⁷³ It is "an imperishable, immortal, incorruptible flesh . . . God is in this flesh; it is a God-flesh, a Spirit-flesh [ein Gottesfleisch, ein Geistfleisch] . . ."⁷⁴

Therefore, to eat this imperishable food is much different than to eat ordinary, perishable food. "Perishable food is changed into the body of him who eats it; this food, on the other hand, changes the body of him who eats it into itself, and makes his body like itself, spiritual, living, eternal . . ." Thus, when Christ's body is eaten in the sacrament, the body of the recipient is transformed and becomes like the body of Christ, spiritual, holy, confirmed in the hope of the resurrection of the dead and eternal life.

What happens in this eating [luther continues], if I may use a crude example, is the same as if a wolf were to eat a sheep, and the

⁷³ Ibid., XV, 842-844.

⁷⁴ Ibid., XX, 867-868.

sheep was so powerful a food that it transformed the wolf and made a sheep out of it. Thus when we eat Christ's flesh corporeally and spiritually, the food is so powerful that it changes us into itself, and makes spiritual, holy, living men out of carnal, sinful, mortal men . . .⁷⁵

But even though the blessing of the Real Presence is here described in terms of an effect upon the body, the benefit is still seen to depend upon the spiritual eating, or faith. For the body cannot by itself even know that it receives this spiritual food, but the heart must grasp the words of promise: "This is my body, given for you."⁷⁶ Furthermore, the sacrament without the Word, or corporal eating without spiritual eating amounts to the sin of unworthy eating, as Luther has explained before.⁷⁷

This conception of an effect of the Real Presence upon the body of the recipient, an inference not drawn in Luther's earlier writings, is obviously well suited to the controversy with Zwingli, but for Luther it has only a secondary importance. In the Large Catechism (1529) Luther leaves it out altogether, concentrating instead entirely upon his original conception of the forgiveness of sins proclaimed through the Word and sealed by the presence of Christ:

⁷⁵ Ibid., XI, 844-845. In this argument Luther is following closely the reasoning of the ancient Church Father Irenaeus, see MLSS, XX, 861-863.

⁷⁶ Ibid., XX, 831, 837.

⁷⁷ Ibid., XX, 871-872.

Now we come to the power and blessing for which the sacrament was instituted, which is the most important part of it, in order that we may know what we there should seek and receive. This is clear from the aforementioned words: This is my body and blood, given and shed for you for the remission of sins. In other words, we go to the sacrament in order that we there receive this treasure, in and through which we receive the forgiveness of sins. How so? Because there stand the words which give it to us. For he commands me to eat and drink in order that it be mine, and a source of blessing for me as a certain pledge and sign, yea even the very blessing itself, which has been established for me against my sins, death and all misfortune.⁷⁸

Thus, apart from this one concession to polemical necessity, Luther's basic view of the Lord's Supper, as originally stated in 1520, has remained fundamentally unchanged. In the course of being defended against attack much has been explained, clarified, refined and deepened, but the leading ideas remain the same: The Word declares God's testament of the forgiveness of sins, the real presence of Christ seals the testament, brings with it the assurance of the forgiveness of sins, and strengthens faith in the promise.

Postscript on the Marburg Colloquy

With the publication of his Concerning the Lord's Supper, A Confession, the development of Luther's

⁷⁸Ibid., X, 137-133.

doctrine of the Lord's Supper was completed. He considered this his final and definitive statement on the subject,⁷⁹ and so it is. We find no statement thereafter which represents any advance in this particular phase of his thought. In the following year (1-4 October 1529) Luther and Zwingli came face to face at the Marburg Colloquy to debate the issue of the Lord's Supper in person. This very important debate has not been treated in this study for the reason that the issues raised and the arguments used on both sides were the same as those in the written phase of the dispute, and therefore constitute no significant addition to the material already covered.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Ibid., XX, 896.

⁸⁰See Walther Koehler, "Das Marburger Religionsgespräch 1529; Versuch einer Rekonstruktion," Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte, Jahrgang 48, Heft 1 (Nr. 148), (Leipzig, 1929), pp. 7-38.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Primary Sources:

The principal sources for this thesis were the writings of Luther himself. One edition used was Works of Martin Luther, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs, trans. J. J. Schindel, A. T. W. Steinhäuser, et. al., 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1915), commonly known as the Philadelphia Edition. The small scope of this edition severely limits its value for research. The other edition was Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften, ed. Johann Georg Walch, rev. G. Stockhardt, E. W. Kähler, et. al., 23 vols. (Saint Louis, 1831-1910). Known as the St. Louis Edition, this is a revision of the original Walch edition published in Halle, Germany from 1740-1751. Although the selection is large, this edition does not include all of Luther's known works, especially those discovered since the middle of the eighteenth century. But the materials dealing with his doctrine of the Lord's Supper are complete. The definitive edition is now D. Martin Luthers Werke, kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. J. K. F. Knaake, et. al., over eighty volumes to date, with more in preparation (Weimar, 1883 ff.). However, the author did not have access to this edition during the preparation of this thesis.

Luther's writings on the Lord's Supper

are divided roughly into two periods: the earlier writings in which his doctrine was first stated in opposition to the Roman Catholic Doctrine, and the later writings in which the doctrine was defended against the attacks of Carlstadt and Zwingli. The earlier works are available in English in the Philadelphia Edition: 1) A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and Concerning the Brotherhoods (December 1519), vol. II, 5-31. This is Luther's first extended treatment of the sacrament, in which his mature position has not yet been developed. 2) Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass (August 1520), vol. I, 287-326. Luther's first statement of his mature position. 3) A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (October 1520), vol. II, 165-293. Luther's attack upon the whole Catholic sacramental system, repeating and expanding the position stated in the Treatise on the New Testament.

But the later works are available only in German. All of them are printed in volume XX of the St. Louis Edition: 1) Wider die himelischen Propheten, vom Sacrament (January 1525), pp. 199-287. This is Luther's reply to Carlstadt, concentrating on his exegesis of all the Biblical texts pertaining to the sacrament. 2) Sermon von

dem Sacrament des Leibes und Blutes Christi wider die Schwärmeister (Fall of 1526), pp. 734-763.

Luther's brief first reply to Zwingli, emphasizing adherence to the literal meaning of the words of institution. 3) Dasz diese Worte Christi: 'das ist mein Leib' etc., noch fest stehen wider die Schwärmeister (April 1527), pp. 762-893. Luther's second reply to Zwingli, in which he insists that the doctrine of the Sacrament should not be reduced to the limits of human reason, and defends the plausibility of his position on theological grounds. 4) Vom Abendmahl Christi, Bekenntnisz (March 1523), pp. 894-1105. Luther's final summation of his Eucharistic thought, containing three parts: a) his final answers to all those who oppose his doctrine, b) a re-examination of all the important Eucharistic texts, and c) a general confession of his faith. In his irascible old age Luther took one final blast at his sacramental opponents in his Kurzes Bekenntnisz vom heiligen Sacrament wider die Schwärmer (September 1544), St. Louis Edition, XX, 1764-1791. Since this work is noted more for its venom than for any advance in theology it has not been considered in this study.

Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, trans. and eds., Luther's Correspondence and other Contemporary Letters, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1913-

1913) provides a well selected and well translated collection of Luther's letters. One of Luther's favorites among his own works, and an excellent general introduction to his theology is A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, ed. Philip S. Watson, trans. anon. (London, 1953). Hugh Thomson Kerr, Jr., ed., A Compend of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia, 1943) is a collection of excerpts from English translations of Luther's works arranged under various headings, intended as an introduction to the reformer's theology.

For the Roman Catholic position on the sacrament the following sources were used: Henry Benzinger, The Sources of Catholic Dogma, trans. Roy J. Deferrari (St. Louis, 1957), a chronological arrangement of excerpts from the papal decretals and decrees of the Church councils; and Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (Benzinger Bros., New York, 1947).

The usefulness of the St. Louis Edition of Luther's works is considerably enhanced by the fact that it also contains the major works of Carlstadt and Zwingli pertaining to the sacramental controversy. Carlstadt's two main works on the sacrament are found in volume XX: Dialogus oder Gesprächbüchlein von dem greulichen abgöttischen

Miszbrauch des hochwürdigen Sacraments Jesu Christi (August 1524), pp. 2312-2359; and Von den widerchristlichen Miszbrauch des Herrn Brod und Kelch (September 1524), pp. 92-109.

The author's discussion of Zwingli's doctrine of the Eucharist is based primarily upon three of the reformer's works: 1) Brief an Matthäus Alber (March 1525), St. Louis Edition, XVII, 1512-1529. (This is a German translation of the original Latin text). Zwingli's first statement of his mature doctrine. 2) Commentary on True and False Religion (March 1525), trans. Henry Preble, vol. III of The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli, ed. Clarence Kevin Heller (Philadelphia, 1929); the Eucharistic portions of the text are on pp. 198-233. In this work Zwingli attacks indirectly the position taken by Luther in Wider die himmlischen Propheten. 3) On the Lord's Supper (February 1526), in G. W. Bromiley, ed. and trans., Zwingli and Bullinger, vol. XXIV of The Library of Christian Classics (London, 1953), pp. 176-238. This was not one of the works which figured prominently in the dispute with Luther, but it is an excellent statement of Zwingli's general position. In addition to these works, volume XX of the St. Louis Edition offers Zwingli's replies to Luther's treatises of 1526-27-28, see pp. 1104-1473.

An excellent reconstruction of the debates at the Marburg Colloquy, based on eyewitness accounts, is found in Walther Koehler, "Das Marburger Religionsgespräch 1529; Versuch einer Rekonstruktion," Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte, Jahrgang XLVIII, Heft 1 (Nr. 148), (Leipzig, 1929), pp. 7-38.

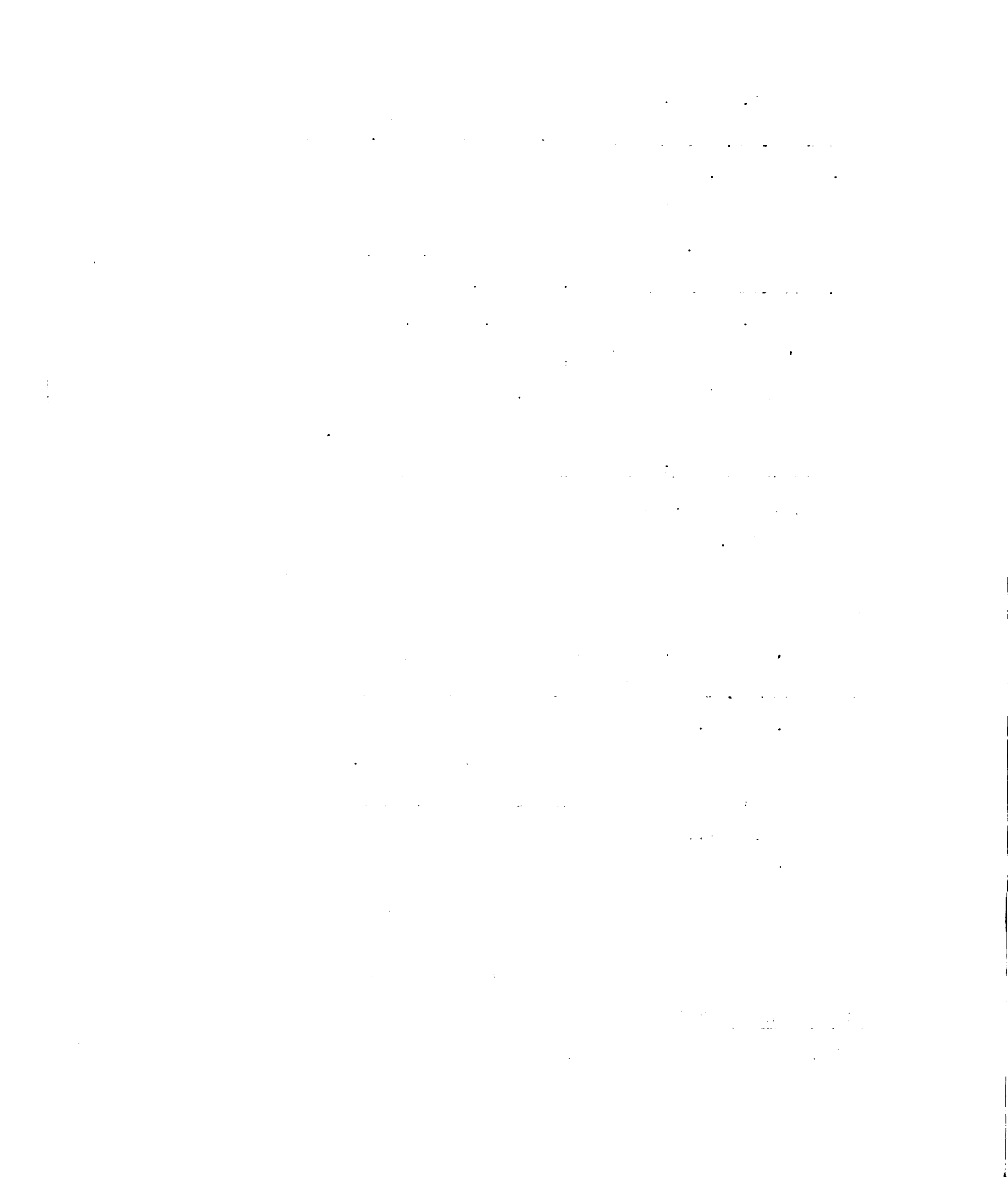
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Ernest G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times; The Reformation from a New Perspective (Saint Louis, 1950) is, in the author's opinion, the best biography of Luther available. It is sympathetic in treatment, and comprehensive in scope, covering all aspects of Luther's life and the movement which he led. Schwiebert's treatment of the theological issues involved, including that of the Lord's Supper, is particularly good. Less monumental in scope, but an extremely well written account of Luther's religious development is Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand; A Life of Martin Luther

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One of the finest interpretations of Luther's theology has been written by an English Methodist scholar, Philip S. Watson, Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther (Philadelphia, 1950). There is probably no better introduction for the interested beginner. Cyril C. Richardson, Zwingli and Cranmer on the Eucharist (Evanston, Ill., 1949) has an excellent summary of Zwingli's position and an analysis of the philosophical presuppositions which underlie it. Always a reliable source for the history of Christian doctrine is Reinhold Seeberg, Text-Book of the History of Doctrines, trans. Charles E. Hay, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1952).



Following is a list of several brief essays on Luther's view of the Lord's Supper by specialists in Lutheran theology. Although none of them is a comprehensive historical treatment, each contributed to the author's understanding of one or more of the specific issues covered in this thesis.

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