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## **The Eucharist and the Reformers Luther, Zwingli, Calvin**

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### **Abstract**

The early Church affirms clearly that it is the Lord's body and blood that the community partakes of at the Eucharistic gatherings of the Church. In subsequent centuries there was intense clericalization and elaborate ritualization of the Eucharist both in the East and in the West, but the basic nature of the Eucharist was never challenged till the ninth century. This challenge is to be understood against the background of the increasing popular piety, which was no more satisfied with mere symbols, but wanted more "substance" for their devotions. So a new theology was developed teaching that the Eucharistic symbols of bread and wine were not mere symbols but really the body and blood of Christ. The most significant challenges were developed by the reformers Luther, Zwingli, Calvin. This article tries to study the challenges posed by them and to respond to these challenges creatively.

### **Keywords**

Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, clericalisation of eucharist, ritualisation, presence of Christ.

The Eucharist as the memorial of the Lord's Last Supper was, from the beginning, the sacrament *par excellence* for Christians. But already in New Testament times there were misunderstandings about the real nature of the Eucharist to which Paul draws the attention of the community in Corinth (1 Cor 11:20-22). He affirms clearly that it is the Lord's body and blood that the community partakes of at the Eucharistic gatherings of

the Church. In subsequent centuries there was intense clericalization and elaborate ritualization of the Eucharist both in the East and in the West, but the basic nature of the Eucharist was never challenged till the ninth century. This challenge is to be understood against the background of the increasing popular piety, which was no more satisfied with mere symbols, but wanted more “substance” for their devotions, as a result of which there arose the widespread veneration of saints, icons, images, relics etc. In this context there developed also the teaching that the Eucharistic symbols of bread and wine were not mere symbols but really the body and blood of Christ, a view strongly advocated by Paschasius Radbertus (790-860). In 844 Radbertus published his *De corpore et sanguine Domini* in which he wrote that in the host is the same flesh that was born of Mary. It was the precursor of the transubstantiation theory of later times. His opponent, Hrabanus Maurus (780-856), the Archbishop of Mainz, said that Christ is present in the Eucharist in essence but not in appearance. Others joined him, like Rathramnus of Corbie and John Scotus. This controversy reappeared in the eleventh century when Berengar of Tours (d. 1088) revived it. He understood the consecration of the bread and wine in the Eucharist only symbolically, a view that was much criticized. In his *Rescriptum contra Lanfrannum* he accepted the real presence but denied that any material change in the elements is needed to explain it. Berengar’s position was never diametrically opposed to that of his critics and he was probably never excommunicated although his case was discussed widely.<sup>1</sup> But the controversy eventually led to the doctrine of transubstantiation theory of the IV Lateran Council (1215), which has found its classic formulation in the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas. At the Council of Trent the medieval doctrine was reaffirmed, which ultimately was the restatement of the position of Paschasius Radbertus.<sup>2</sup>

For the Reformers, not only the Eucharist but the entire sacramental system of the medieval Church had become an aberration and they mounted a sustained attack on the medieval understandings of the number, nature and function of the

sacraments. Why was this so? First, the theology of the sacraments was seen by many Reformers as representing all that was bad about medieval theology.<sup>3</sup> While the Scholastics saw the development of the intricate sacramental theology as a great achievement, the Reformers saw it as mere medieval additions to earlier and simpler versions of Christian theology. Secondly, the sacraments represented the public face of the Church, its only point of contact with ordinary people. And what it represented often was the ugly face of the Church. Very often celebration of the sacraments were linked to monetary benefits. The most important sacrament was the Mass. The Mass had become a pure ritual celebrated in a language that the people did not understand. It had become one of the “works” that the priest performed. Moreover, many Reformers had difficulty in understanding concepts like transubstantiation, which conveyed a purely magical understanding of the Eucharist which reinforced the predominant role of the priest and needlessly rationalized a mystery.<sup>4</sup> But in spite of having a common ground against the Catholic understanding of sacraments and especially the Eucharist, the unity of Protestantism was destroyed precisely on account of the Eucharist. We are not in a position to enumerate the various phases of this conflict within Protestantism, but will discuss the Eucharistic theologies of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, three important figures of early Protestantism.

### **Martin Luther**

The Word of God and outward signs are the centre of Luther’s sacramental theology. That applies also to the Eucharist where the Word of God and the material signs of bread and wine play a pivotal role. So in all his debates about the Eucharist the words of Jesus in the institution narratives are central. The forgiveness of sins which is especially stressed in the institution narratives must be available to human beings and must become relevant for their existence. The Word of God mediates this forgiveness. The grace actualized in the Christ event is mediated

through the Word of God and the action of the Holy Spirit. This is the foundation of Luther's understanding of the Eucharist.

One can identify four phases in Luther's teaching on the Eucharist. The first was till 1518 when Luther was basically still a Catholic. The second phase lasted till 1523 when Luther clearly departed from the Catholic understanding of sacraments. The third phase lasted till 1529, and this is the period of intense conflict between Luther and Zwingli and the left wing of the Reformation. The fourth phase covered the rest of his years, where he consolidated his teaching in clearly anti-Zwingli and anti-Catholic terms.

In the first phase Luther followed the teaching of Augustine. The Eucharist has a significative character in so far as it represents the cross. In this representative character the Eucharist leads to contrition and forgiveness of sin. The sacrament of the Eucharist is understood spiritually but the personal presence of Christ in it is taken for granted.<sup>5</sup> The transition from the first phase to the second was determined by Luther's understanding of the sacrament. The sacrament not only leads to Christ but it brings Christ to people. So the Eucharist is the sacrament *par excellence* which brings grace to people. In the second phase too Luther maintained that the Eucharist is not merely a spiritual representation of Christ but his real personal presence. Luther understands that this presence is in the elements of the bread and wine which are distributed to the faithful as the body and blood of Christ. These signs are the seal of the grace given by Christ. But he rejects the transubstantiation theory as pseudo philosophy based on Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> It is essential to appreciate that Luther did not criticize the underlying basic idea that the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. Luther's objection was not to the idea of the real presence but to one specific way of explaining that presence.

In the third period the main problem was the conflict with Zwingli and the left wing of the Reformation. Here Luther was forced to clarify his understanding of Word and faith. For him

the Word of God has absolute priority over faith.<sup>7</sup> The words of the institution show that Jesus is present in the bread and the wine in an unseen and hidden way. The body and blood of Christ are given to the believer and they make them partakers of the totality of Christ. So from the institution narratives which are the true Words of the Lord Luther derives the real presence of Christ in bread and wine.<sup>8</sup> That is the obvious meaning of biblical texts such as Matt 26:26: *hoc est corpus meum*. To deny this would be to challenge the clarity of scripture which he regarded as fundamental to his reforming programme. This was emphasized against the spiritualization of the Eucharist by Zwingli who said that the word “is” was simply a rhetorical figure of speech which really means “signifies” or “represents” and is not to be taken literally. For Luther this was simply a misreading of the text. Luther based his argument also on his Christology, where the union of the two natures of Christ is clearly stressed. Luther also maintained that the presence of God in this world is not to be understood by pure reason alone. So for Luther the real presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine was not a problem because in this revelation God has communicated bodily to the world and brought himself close to human beings.

The fourth phase was Luther’s consolidation of his teaching and its defence against all attacks especially from his enemies. The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is consistently emphasized. The main argument here is once again the institution narratives which Luther takes as Word of God and as true and that is the basis of his teaching on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. According to John 1:14 God had become incarnate in human flesh and so all matter is a medium for him. But the body and blood of Christ in bread and wine are not realities which are available to human reason. This is communicated to the believer in a hidden way. It could be believed because of the absolute dependability of God’s promises. Luther’s views on the real presence were regarded with disbelief by his reforming colleagues because they seemed to them as making too much concession to his Catholic opponents.

## Huldrych Zwingli

To understand Zwingli's views on the Eucharist, we must understand his views on sacraments. Originally he understood sacraments as signs of God's faithfulness to his people and his gracious promise of forgiveness. But soon he changed his understanding and said that it was the pledge of obedience and loyalty to one another. It is a means by which someone proves to the Church that he either intends to be or already is a soldier of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Sacraments are subordinate to the preaching of the Word of God. Preaching brings faith into existence; sacraments merely provide an occasion by which this faith is publicly demonstrated. From that point of view they have only symbolic value. The Eucharist is a memorial of a historical event leading to the establishment of the Church. *Hoc est corpus meum* spoken by Christ at the last supper signify the way in which he wished to be remembered by the Church. The celebration of the Eucharist is an occasion for the Church to remember what Jesus did for us. It is neither a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ nor the real presence of Christ. It is pure remembrance.

Zwingli rejected the sacrificial character of the Mass based on an exegesis of Hebrews 7 and 8. He rejected transubstantiation basing himself on the Platonic tradition that the earthly has no spiritual effect. This was not a dualism in the real sense because he also held that God in his activity can use earthly means in so far as they are mere signs. So he replaces the "is" in the institution narratives with "signifies." So there is no real presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. According to him it is inconceivable that the bread could be the body of Christ. Zwingli based his arguments on the location of Christ. Both scripture and the creed affirm that Christ is now seated at the right hand of God. So he cannot be present in the Eucharist. This was taking the primacy of the Word too far! For Zwingli it is also essential for the protection of the uniqueness and definitiveness of the work of Christ. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross cannot be repeated by the sacraments.<sup>10</sup> To support the real presence is also against

the true humanity of Christ. True humanity demands that it cannot be ubiquitous and therefore, there cannot be a substantial real presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. From all this Zwingli calls for a mere symbolic understanding of the Eucharist.<sup>11</sup>

It may be important to summarise the arguments of both Luther and Zwingli, since here the first major difference among the Reformers emerged and it led to the first division within Protestantism. Both rejected the medieval sacramental scheme. For Luther both the Word of God and the sacraments are inseparably linked. Both bore witness to Jesus Christ and both mediated his power and presence. For Zwingli it was the Word of God which created faith and the sacraments demonstrated that faith publicly. Luther was considerably traditional in his approach to the celebration of the Eucharist. He was prepared to retain the traditional title of Mass provided it was not understood to imply a sacrifice and authorized to celebrate it weekly. Zwingli abolished the title and said it should be celebrated three or four times a year. No longer was it the centre of Christian worship. Luther emphasized preaching within the context of the Eucharist, but Zwingli replaced the weekly Eucharist with preaching. The institution narrative was interpreted differently by both, based on two different ways of interpreting scripture. Both rejected the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation. Luther did so on the basis of its Aristotelian foundation and was ready to accept the reality, that is, the real presence. Zwingli rejected both the term and the idea. Zwingli rejected the real presence on the basis of Christ's location which Luther rejected as philosophically unsophisticated. For him Christ could be present without the limitations of space and time. Here Luther interpreted the scriptures metaphorically. The colloquy of Marburg in 1529 tried to mediate between the two positions but it was not successful because of the issue of the real presence.<sup>12</sup>

## John Calvin

Calvin has tried to develop a theology of the Eucharist both against Luther and Zwingli. For Calvin, sacrament is an external symbol by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good will towards us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith. They are gracious divine accommodations to our weaknesses. God knowing our weakness of faith, adapts to our limitations using earthly elements<sup>13</sup> which are made sacred through the Word of God. So the Eucharist is a sacrament where the promises of God are made manifest through earthly elements. He calls the sacrament of the Eucharist *verbum visibile*. The central debate between Luther and Zwingli concerned the relation between the sacramental sign and the spiritual gift which it signified. Calvin may be regarded as occupying a position roughly midway between the two extremes represented by them. In the sacraments there is such a close connection between the symbol and the gift which it symbolizes that we can easily pass from one to the other. The sign is visible and physical, but the thing signified is invisible and spiritual. The Eucharist comprises the sign, the thing signified and the promises of God. The thing signified is Jesus Christ in his person and in his work. This happens through the work of the Holy Spirit and it is manifested in faith. Bread and Wine only help make present the presence of Christ and help us to remember what he did for us. In this way Calvin also rejects a real presence of the human nature of Jesus in the elements of the Eucharist. But according to Calvin the Eucharist is necessary for the faith of the individual and the community. It is also the means of grace by which the promises of God come to us. Jesus is the real substance of the Eucharistic meal but his understanding of substance is that it is not a heavenly or earthly matter but a reality, the reality of salvation.

Like Zwingli Calvin also is concerned that the real presence of Christ in the materials of bread and wine in substance somehow endangers the true humanity of Christ which has implications for soteriology itself. Calvin speaks of a *carnis Christi praesentia in*



*coena*<sup>14</sup> but it is not bound to the bread. The way of presence of Christ in the Eucharist is ultimately a mystery. Calvin says that he cannot doubt the words of the Lord at the last supper<sup>15</sup> but it should be a parabolic understanding. It is a spiritual presence not material, a mysterious activity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

The Reformation tradition was united in its protest against the Roman Catholic understanding of sacraments with its upholding of the absolute primacy of the Word of God. But in the understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist this unity was lost. But the cause of the disunity lay also in the understanding of the Church, and the interpretation of scripture which eventually led even to exclusion of each other from each other's Eucharist. The Council of Trent gave the Catholic answer to the views associated with the Reformers in its seventh session which concluded on 3 March, 1547. It rejected all the views of the Reformers categorically. But a positive statement of the Eucharistic doctrine of the Catholic Church came in the thirteenth session which concluded on 11 October 1551 in which it vigorously upheld the real presence and the doctrine and the idea of transubstantiation.

The so-called Radical Reformers or the Left Wing of the Reformation who comprised mainly the Anabaptists and various other dissenting groups had no unified view on the Eucharist but a different view from the mainline Reformers. Caspar von Schwenkfeld's writings may be considered representative of this view. It inclines towards Zwingli in rejecting the real presence of the human nature of Jesus Christ in the elements of bread and wine but speaks of the presence of Christ in the heart of the believer when he receives communion. The Eucharist is a heavenly meal and needs no real connection with the external elements of bread and wine. They are mere representations of the elements which Christ used. He stood between Luther and Zwingli and rejected some aspects of the teachings of both. The sacrificial character of the Eucharist is also rejected.<sup>17</sup> The Anglican tradition is substantially influenced by Calvin. Elizabeth I had removed article 29 from the Forty-Two Articles in 1553

which contained some statements opposed to the teaching of Luther on the Eucharist. It was reinserted in 1571. Since then the Thirty-Nine Articles make up the doctrinal basis of the Anglican faith. Art. 28 formulates the teaching on the Eucharist thus: *Corpus Christi datur, accipitur, et manducatur in coena, tantum coelesti et spirituali ratione. Medium autem quo Corpus Christi accipitur et manducatur in coena, fides est. Sacramentum Eucharistiae ex institutione Christi non servabatur, circumferebatur, elevabatur nec adorabatur.* (The Body of Christ is given, accepted and eaten in the supper only in a heavenly and spiritual way. Faith is the medium through which the Body of Christ is accepted and eaten in the supper. By Christ's institution the sacrament of the Eucharist was neither preserved, nor carried around, nor elevated nor adored).<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The Christian churches differ in their understanding of the sacrament of the Eucharist. But in the changed ecumenical circumstances, sharing the Eucharistic table has become the touchstone of ecumenism. When the decree on ecumenism spoke of *communicatio in sacris* but not directly envisaging the Eucharist it says: "As for common worship, however, it may not be regarded as a means to be used indiscriminately for the restoration of unity among Christians. Such worship depends chiefly on two principles: it should signify the unity of the Church; it should provide a sharing in the means of grace. The fact that it should signify unity generally rules out common worship. Yet the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it." (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 8). A genuine tide of ecumenical activity did follow in the wake of the Council although at different levels between the various churches. Thus the Orthodox churches were treated on a higher level than the churches of the Reformation on account of the validity of Order in the Orthodox churches. But the conditions became stricter as years passed by.<sup>19</sup> There are fundamental questions to be asked in this context. Are the churches of the Reformation maintaining a totally untenable position on

the Eucharist scripturally and theologically? Have practical discipline and historical memories taken the upper hand over theology? Should sharing the Eucharist be seen solely as the seal of unity achieved or should it be seen also as a means to create that unity? “No community is perfect and no community’s Eucharist is a perfect symbol but all embody analogously Christian presence in the world.”<sup>20</sup> The recent Catholic doctrinal statements on the Eucharist<sup>21</sup> enunciate in terms of sacramental discipline an absolute, ahistorical idea of unity present in the Roman Catholic Church. In other words, the official position appears to express obliquely the “one true Church” claims of pre-Vatican II Catholicism and with them the former ‘one, true Eucharist’ claims.<sup>22</sup> The discussion seems to revolve around the manner of Christ’s presence in the world. Christ is present in the world when Christians live the values of the Gospel.

## Notes

1. F.L Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, 190-1.
2. For a detailed discussion see “Abendmahl III/2: Mittelalter” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Studienausgabe, Teil I), Band I, 89-106.
3. Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, Blackwell, Oxford, Cambridge, 1993, 159.
4. *Ibid.*, 160.
5. Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex auditu. Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther*, Neukirchen, 1958, 69ff.
6. “Abendmahl III/3: Reformationszeit” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Studienausgabe, Teil I), Band I, 111, in Luther’s *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium*, and *De instituendis ministris ecclesiae*.
7. *Wider die himmlischen Propheten* (1520).
8. *Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekenntnis* (1528).
9. McGrath, 171.
10. *Aktion oder Brauch des Nachtmahls* (1525).
11. “Abendmahl III/3: Reformationszeit”, 113-14.

12. McGrath, 178-181
13. Ibid., 182.
14. (Institutes IV 17,31)
15. Ibid., 17, 32
16. Ibid., 17, 33
17. “Abendmahl III/3” 114-5.
18. Ibid., 118.
19. See F.J. Laishley, “Unfinished Business” in Adrian Hastings, ed., *Modern Catholicism*, SPCK, OUP, London, New York, 1991, 226.
20. Ibid., 228
21. *Dominus Jesus* (2000), *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003) and *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004)
22. Laishley, 228-9.