

MARTIN BUCER'S "CALVINISTIC" DOCTRINE
OF THE
LORD'S SUPPER

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The importance of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Reformation of the church in the 16th century cannot be overemphasized. With *sola scriptura* and justification by faith alone, it was one of the doctrines that divided Rome and Protestantism. It was the one doctrine that divided Protestantism into Lutheran and Reformed churches. More ink was spilled over the Lord's Supper, and more horses were ridden to exhaustion attending conferences about it, than over any other doctrine. The attention paid to the Lord's Supper is reflected in the Heidelberg Catechism which devotes inordinate space to the Sacraments generally and to the Lord's Supper in particular. In its treatment of the Sacraments, as well as in its treatment of the Ascension of Christ, which became part of the debate over the Supper, the Catechism carries on all of the controversies of the 16th century.

The Supper-strife generated not only light, but also heat. The theologians from all quarters conducted the debate with passion--there was hot anger and name-calling. The doctrine of the Supper came near to dividing Lutheranism. Towards the end of Luther's life, Melanchthon feared that he would be driven from Wittenberg because of Luther's assault upon him as one who was leaning toward a symbolic view of Christ's presence in the Supper. Melanchthon's dying prayer to be delivered from the *rabies theologorum* was a prayer, in large part, for peace from the conflict over the Lord's Supper. Archbishop Cranmer lamented this state of theological affairs in a letter to Melanchthon on March 27, 1552: "It

is truly grievous that the sacrament of unity is become, through the devil's malice, food for disagreement and, as it were, the apple of contention."

Although one should never discount "the devil's malice" in the church's struggles, it is also true that basic doctrinal issues were involved in the controversy over the presence of Christ in the Supper. There was, first, the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Certain of Rome's teachings about the Supper, especially the sacrifice of the Mass, rested on tradition and the authority of the church, in keeping with Rome's doctrine that tradition, as declared by the church, is an authority alongside Scripture. For Luther, the refusal of his Protestant adversaries to agree with him on the Supper was due, at bottom, to their poor view of Scripture which enabled them to evade the plain force of Christ's words, "This is my body."

There were also the Christological doctrines concerning the natures of Christ and their relationship, especially after the Ascension. The doctrine of Christ was the crucial issue in the mind of Luther. This aspect of the controversy is highlighted in Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism--the Reformed confession concerning Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Ecclesiology was involved. On the one hand, Rome's teaching that the priests make God and sacrifice Christ for sin in the Supper bristled with her view of the power of the church. On the other hand, the teaching of the Anabaptists that the bread and wine are empty symbols was part of the Anabaptists' attack upon Protestantism's view of the instituted church, the official character of preaching, the vital importance of the Sacraments, and the offices in the church. No one will ever understand Luther's vehemence in defending a real presence of Christ in the Supper and his fury in raging against every symbolic view of that presence, who fails to keep in mind that Luther had his eye on the spiritualistic, separatistic Anabaptists, with their unbiblical doctrine of the church.

Not least, the Supper-strife concerned soteriology. At issue was the nature of the working of divine grace. A

fundamental question was, "How does the sinner receive the grace of God?" Another, inseparably connected, was, "Who receives grace in the Supper?"

The outcome of the controversy would have serious practical implications, as all the parties knew well. The unity of the church in its visible expression was at stake, particularly the unity of the church of the Reformation. None of the Protestant spokesmen was unmoved by the division of Protestantism so soon after the Reformation, especially in the face of the Roman Catholic charge that exactly this was the inevitable harvest of the bad seed of revolution against "holy mother Church." What sincere Protestant does not still today feel grief over the Marburg Colloquy where the contending Protestant parties, agreed in all else, could not find oneness in the doctrine of the Supper and where, at the end, Luther refused Zwingli the right hand of fellowship?

But it was not only the unity of the visible church that was threatened. The divisions among the theologians threatened also the political union of that day--the oneness of Germany and the unity of the Empire. This is difficult for us to appreciate, living as we do in a society whose political leaders regard theological differences much as did Gallio of Corinth, who drove the arguing theologians from his judgment seat with the words, "If it be a question of words and names, and of your law, look ye to it; for I will be no judge of such matters" (Acts 18:15). It was different then; and, therefore, politicians, including the most powerful among them, indeed the Emperor himself, played at the game of ecclesiastical conferences, whose purpose was doctrinal agreement. High on the agendas was the issue of the Lord's Supper.

For Protestant Christians in Europe, not only was their spiritual welfare at stake, but also their earthly peace and prosperity. Failure of the efforts to reach agreement on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper always threatened war.

In this doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and political uproar over the Lord's Supper, Martin Bucer, Reformed pastor at Strasbourg, took his place. His was a central place. The three

main figures within the Protestant camp were Luther, with Melancthon as ally (often a somewhat unreliable ally), Zwingli, and Bucer. Bucer was a veritable dynamo of activity. He wrote; exposition, confessions, polemics, and correspondence poured from his pen. He was indefatigable in calling and attending conferences. He preached. The result was that Bucer made a most significant contribution to theology, specifically to the Reformed faith; for to him, more than to any other man, we are indebted for the "Calvinistic" doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

History of the Development of this Doctrine

Dogma has a history; invariably that history is a history of controversy. The Holy Spirit of him who is the Truth is promised to the church as the Spirit of truth who will guide the church into all the truth (John 16:13). The church, therefore, moves along a way in finding and knowing the truth; nor are there lacking false guides who point her this way and that. Pernicious as heresies are, in the end the Spirit makes them serve a good purpose: "There must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (I Cor. 11:19). Heresies are made to show the approved doctrine.

So it was with the strife over the Supper. The doctrine of the Supper that we now know as the Reformed doctrine of the Supper, and that Reformed Christians confess in Lord's Days 25 and 28-30 of the Heidelberg Catechism and in Articles 33 and 35 of the Belgic Confession, did not spring full-blown from the heads of Bucer and Calvin. Rather, the doctrine developed. It was laboriously hammered out by certain of the Reformers in a history of controversy, which controversy drove these men to the Holy Scriptures in order, on the one hand, to test the spirits in the contending theories, and on the other hand, to get from the Bible the Word of God concerning the Sacraments in general and concerning the Supper in particular.

Both Luther and Zwingli had early come to see the monstrous error of the Roman doctrine of the Supper, specifically transubstantiation and the repetition of the sacrifice of

Jesus for sins, as well as such related teachings as the withholding of the cup from the laity. That left the Reformation, however, with the more difficult question, "What is the truth of the Supper?," particularly, "What is the truth about the presence of Christ in the Supper and about the reception of him by those who partake?" This question demanded to be answered in light of the words of Jesus at the institution of the Supper, "This is my body." We do well to appreciate the challenge faced by the Reformation at this point. It had no tradition to guide it; the tradition in the church was that of transubstantiation, which the Reformers repudiated. It had no creedal statements. The Fathers were unclear. All parties, Rome included, appealed to statements by the Fathers and could find in them support for their position. In his last work on the Eucharist shortly before his death, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, Bucer noted that appeal to the Fathers in the matter of the Supper was unhelpful and even dangerous:

In such lofty mysteries it is against my principles to use expressions not contained in the Scriptures, even on the authority of the holy Fathers. For we all lament the depths to which Satan and antichrist have brought us by such usages.¹

Besides, the people were trained to see and practice the celebration of the Supper according to the Roman Catholic explanation. The Reformers, therefore, were simply thrown back upon the Scriptures and upon the analogy of faith in the great Reformation doctrines of grace, recently recovered.

The Controversy

The controversy over the Lord's Supper within Protestantism was opened up by Carlstadt, at first a colleague of Luther in Wittenberg, but soon a defector to the Anabaptists and the "radical reformation." Certain men have the position, the abilities, and the disposition to do great damage to the cause of Christ in the world. Such a man was Andreas Bodenstein of Carlstadt. He wreaked havoc upon a unified Protestant confession of the Supper and upon Protestant

unity. During Luther's enforced absence from Wittenberg, at the Wartburg, immediately after the Diet of Worms, Carlstadt felt himself constrained to press the Reformation more radically in Wittenberg and, in typical radical fashion, to do so at once. Among the radical measures taken were such actions as the giving of the cup to the laity and Carlstadt's preaching that the bread and wine were merely symbols that remind believers of Christ's death. Carlstadt held that the Lord's Supper was nothing more than a recollection, passionate to be sure, of the death of Jesus in the past, similar to a memento by which one remembers a dear human friend:

If you had had to die on the gallows or wheel or in the fire and the sentence had already been spoken against you and you had to go to death and one came who would die for you and free you through his death, would you not be happy when his name was well spoken of? . . . And if at the end he left something for you that you were to use in remembrance of him, would you not use the same with fresh, passionate remembrance? . . . In the same way, we should also retain the remembrance of the Lord [in the Supper--DJE].²

He denied that the Sacrament is a means of grace:

Concerning the sacrament which forgives sins, no one has written. Concerning the body which would be hanged on the cross, Christ has also said to us that he was to pay for our sins. But no prophet, nor Christ, nor even any Christian brother has written that Christ forgives sins in the sacrament. . . . Let anyone show me one little letter of Scripture which indicates that the sacramental essence of the body and blood is useful to us in the sacrament for the forgiveness of sins.³

He condemned those who "teach thus: You shall believe that Christ is in the sacrament."⁴ Neither, according to Carlstadt, is "the sacrament. . . (a) pledge. . . of God."⁵ It does not give the believer who partakes worthily assurance of his redemption. Carlstadt thought that Paul

demolishes another commonly expressed statement, namely, that the bread and the cup of Christ are an assurance and certain voucher by which one can be certain and sure in himself that Christ's death has brought redemption for him.⁶

A sharp conflict ensued between Luther, who quickly returned to Wittenberg to save the Reformation from its "friends," and Carlstadt, resulting in Carlstadt's leaving Wittenberg for Orlamunde to become a leader of the Anabaptist movement.

However serious the effect of this conflict on Carlstadt, the effect on Luther was equally serious. First, it drove Luther, whose position on the presence of Christ in the Supper was by no means settled at this time,⁷ to the hard stand that there is physical presence and a physical eating of Christ in the Sacrament. Luther convinced himself that this was the only alternative to and safeguard against Carlstadt's doctrine of the Supper as an empty memorial. Angering Luther and making him forever suspicious of any attempt to "tamper" with the words "this is my body," was Carlstadt's foolish defense of his doctrine by the arbitrary exegesis that when Jesus said, "*this* is my body," he was pointing to his *body*, rather than referring to the bread:

Therefore, Christ said clearly: Eat the bread, for this body is the body which is given to you. . . my body, or this my body, is the very one which they all prophesied must be given for the world.⁸

From now on, the die was cast for Luther; he would never move from this stand. All of Bucer's subsequent efforts to persuade Luther were exercises in futility.

Second, the conflict with Carlstadt soured Luther on any view of the Supper that in any way was symbolic--all was tainted with Carlstadt's heresy. For Luther, there were three, and only three, doctrines of the Supper possible: Rome's, Luther's, and Carlstadt's.

Now Zwingli steps forward into the fray, a more redoubtable figure than Carlstadt, but advocating a doctrine of the

Supper not essentially different from Carlstadt's. Opposed to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the real presence and thoroughly convinced both of the centrality of this error in Roman Catholic worship and of its corruption of all true worship, Zwingli taught as the Protestant doctrine of the Supper what may rightly be called the doctrine of the "*vera absentia*" of Christ, as opposed to the Lutheran and Roman Catholic teaching of the "real presence." The elements of the Lord's Supper are merely symbols of the body and blood of Christ. "Is" in the words of institution means "signifies" or "is a sign of." These signs do not give what they represent--they are empty signs. All that happens in the Supper is that the minds of believers recall, vividly, Jesus' death. Christ's body cannot be present in the Supper because that body is in heaven, localized there at the right hand of God. Any doctrine of a real presence of Christ in the Supper (along the lines of one Martin Luther) is grave error. At best, it is a miserable failure to root out the last vestiges of the doctrine of Rome; at worst, it is a subtle re-introduction of Romanism into the fledgling Reformation. In his *Fidei Ratio* of 1530, Zwingli spoke of those "who look back to the fleshpots of Egypt." Luther's doctrine of a real presence is serious Christological heresy, confusing the two natures of Christ against the warning of Chalcedon. Zwingli charged Luther with teaching cannibalism--the carnal eating of Christ's flesh along the lines of the Jewish error expressed in John 6:52, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?":

I have now refuted, I hope, this senseless notion about bodily flesh. In doing that my only object was to prove that to teach that the bodily and sensible flesh of Christ is eaten when we give thanks to God is not only impious but also foolish and monstrous, unless perhaps one is living among the Anthropophagi.⁹

But Zwingli also rejected a spiritual eating and drinking of Christ in the Supper:

Nor do I think we have to listen to those who, seeing that the view mentioned is not only crude but even frivolous and impious, make this pronouncement: "We eat, to be sure, the true and bodily flesh of Christ, but spiritually";

for they do not yet see that the two statements cannot stand, "It is body" and "It is eaten spiritually." For body and spirit are such essentially different things that whichever one you take it cannot be the other.¹⁰

The Supper is not a means by which the believer partakes of Christ's body and blood. That the bread is "the communion of the body of Christ," as the apostle writes in I Corinthians 10:16, means only that the saints have fellowship with each other:

That is, when we break the bread with each other, do we not all, as many as are the body of Christ, mutually disclose and show to one another that we are of the number of those who trust in Christ?¹¹

The Sacrament is a memorial, nothing more:

The Lord's Supper, then, . . . is a commemoration of Christ's death, not remitting of sins. . . .¹²

For this reason, Zwingli preferred to refer to the Supper as the Eucharist--the ceremony of the church's thanksgiving.

Against Zwingli's memorial view, Luther hardened himself in the doctrine of a real, physical presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Supper. Without going into Luther's doctrine in detail (for our interest here is not Luther, but Bucer), the main features of Luther's doctrine were the following:

1. There is a real, essential, and substantial bodily presence of Christ in the bread and wine, amounting to a physical presence, so that the body is eaten with the teeth and received into the stomach.
2. This presence is due not to Rome's wonder of transubstantiation, but to the Word of promise, "This is my body."
3. Because of this presence, Christ's body and blood are eaten and drunk by unbelievers at the Table, albeit to their condemnation.

Luther grounded his doctrine, first, in what to him were the plain words of Scripture: "This is my body." Second, he argued the necessity of Christ's being present objectively in the Supper, i.e., by virtue of his own word of promise, and not merely because faith finds him there; regardless of the faith or unbelief of the participants, Christ is present in the Supper. Third, Luther thought this presence of Christ possible because of the ubiquity of the human nature of Jesus after the Ascension. At this point, the Christological aspects of the controversy came to the fore. Luther accused Zwingli of separating the two natures that had become inseparably joined in the Incarnation. For Zwingli, Christ is present in the divine nature where he is not present in the human nature. Luther wanted the one, entire Christ present in the Supper, human nature as well as divine. He supposed that he obtained this by his doctrine of the omnipresence of the human nature.

That Luther's view was that of a physical presence he himself made clear in two critically important places. In his definitive statement on the Supper, the *Confession Concerning the Supper*(1528), Luther wrote:

There is sacramental union of Christ's body and the bread in the Supper so that he who eats this bread, eats Christ's body; and he who crushes this bread with teeth or tongue, crushes with teeth or tongue the body of Christ.¹³

In 1536, before the beginning of the conference on the Lord's Supper at Wittenberg (at which Bucer would valiantly but vainly attempt to reconcile Luther and the Zwinglians), as pre-conditions to the conference Luther insisted that all must teach

that in the holy Supper the true body and true blood of Christ is truly had and received even by the mouth, and that no less by the wicked than the good.¹⁴

Forthright to a fault, Luther himself freely acknowledged these to be "hard terms."

Between Luther and Zwingli, the war raged. Marburg, in 1529, was the climax, and crisis, so far as Protestantism was

concerned. Thereafter, there are two separate and hostile branches of the church of the Reformation.

The Involvement of Dr. Bucer

In the middle was Martin Bucer. No mere spectator, Bucer actively involved himself in the controversy between Wittenberg and Zurich: he wrote; he travelled; he arranged and attended conferences. It was at the urging of Bucer that Philip of Hesse called the Marburg Colloquy to reconcile Luther and Zwingli. Bucer attended the Colloquy as delegate from Strasbourg. Rather than dampening Bucer's spirit, the failure at Marburg only stirred him up to greater effort on behalf of Protestant doctrine of the Lord's Supper. At the end of his life, Bucer could say regarding the doctrine of the Supper what Paul said concerning the work of an apostle: "I labored more than they all" (I Cor. 15:10).

His involvement was not that he sided first with the one and then with the other of the two opposing parties. This is how some have viewed Bucer. From holding Luther's doctrine in the early 1520s, he went over to Zwingli's position in the middle 1520s, only to revert back to the doctrine of Luther after 1528. This is indeed how Wittenberg and Zurich looked at Bucer, convinced as they were that their views exhausted all possibilities and blind to a third alternative. Luther, therefore, regarded Bucer with suspicion: at best, he was weak; at worst, he was a traitor.¹⁵ After the Wittenberg Conference of 1536 Zurich wrote him off as a Lutheran, referring to him as "Luther's Cardinal legate."¹⁶

Nor was Bucer's involvement that he was crushed between the upper millstone of a physical presence and the nether millstone of an empty symbol. Rather, in the good providence of God, the pressure of the upper millstone of Wittenberg and of the nether millstone of Zurich produced in Martin Bucer the solid meal and the exhilarating wine of a unique, biblical doctrine of the Lord's Supper. This was a doctrine that reckoned with all the concerns and emphases that were present in the ongoing Supper-strife. This doctrine did several things. First, it broke thoroughly with the Roman doctrine and practice. Second, it did justice to the good

concern of Luther that Christ be truly present in the Supper, as well as to the good concern of Zwingli that there be no physical reception of Christ. Third, it went beyond the conceptions of both Luther and Zwingli in a doctrine of the Supper that is thoroughly biblical--the doctrine that the Reformed churches have embraced (and that the Lutherans ought to have embraced) as the "Calvinistic" doctrine of the Supper.

Leaving aside Bucer's inexcusable deviations from his own doctrine in the interests of achieving union within Protestantism, we now consider Bucer's doctrine of the Supper.

Bucer's Doctrine of the Supper

Bucer's doctrine of the Lord's Supper was rich. By no means did he limit himself to the terms of the present controversy. On the contrary, he developed the covenantal nature of the Supper. He did this especially in a "confession" that he drew up in 1532 before the conference at Schweinfurt, the *Confessio Martini Bucerii in conventu Schweinfur-dico*. A Sacrament is a sign of the covenant. A Sacrament acts through faith for fellowship and union with God. The purpose of God with the Sacraments is at all times the salvation and blessedness of his elect. In a Sacrament, the covenant and the promise are the primary things:

The action of the Sacrament. . . is as a visible reminder and assurance of these promises and covenants; these external actions of the Sacraments are a sort of representation or an enactment of that which God promises and offers.¹⁷

Sacraments, therefore, are an "appendix" to the promises. In the Sacrament we, for our part, promise to live to God. Only after setting forth the full covenantal significance of the Sacraments did Bucer address, head-on the issue that divided:

With the bread and wine, the Lord gives us His true body and true blood, which is not, however, received by man's mouth or stomach, but by his faithful soul.

There is for Bucer a real presence of Christ in the Supper, although Bucer himself prefers to speak of Christ's "true presence." Although Christ's body is not in the bread, it is present with the bread, so that a worthy partaker truly eats and drinks the true body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament. In *The Apology of Martin Bucer* (1526), he wrote:

Whenever we discussed or celebrated Christ's Supper, we invariably and above all else taught and commended to Christ's flock. . .the spiritual presence and eating of Christ, which consists in faith in His death endured for our sake. . . .¹⁸

Also:

In fact we too assert that to the faithful the bread of the Supper is the bodily body of Christ, but spiritually and in a manner that conveys blessing.¹⁹

In *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, Bucer wrote:

And so I consider it settled that in the eucharist three things are given and received by those who rightly partake of the Lord's Table: the bread and the wine, which in themselves are completely unchanged but merely become symbols through the words and ordinance of the Lord; the very body and blood of the Lord, so that by their means we may increasingly and more perfectly share in the imparting of regeneration. . . ; and hence the confirmation of the new covenant. . . .²⁰

Concerning Christ's presence, it is important to note that his body is not present *in* the bread, or his blood *in* the wine, but that they are present *with* the bread and wine. Believers do not eat his body *in* the bread, but *with* the bread. "I acknowledge," wrote Bucer in his *Apology* of 1526, "that the faithful truly receive the body of Christ with the bread, (but I do not) confess that they receive it in the bread."²¹ This was a necessary distinction against the doctrine of a physical presence of Christ as taught by Luther who, in his powerful work of 1525, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, insisted upon the preposition "in": Christ's body is *in* the bread, and must

be eaten *in* the bread.

So it must follow that the body and blood of Christ are there in the bread and cup. . . .For had St. Paul not wanted to say that the body of Christ was in the bread-- he would not have attributed to the body of Christ the breaking. . . .Now, however, no one can disregard the fact that he joins the two together, and thus refers to the bread and calls it the broken body of Christ, so that in one breaking both bread and the body are broken, and we must confess that the body of Christ is there in the bread.²²

In confessing Christ's true presence in the Supper, Bucer rejected the memorial view of Zwingli (and, of course, of Carlstadt). Once, he described Zwingli's view this way: ". . . in the Supper only a memorial of the absent Christ is celebrated."²³ In his definitive work of 1550, Bucer wrote:

And because we are here not merely reminded of our Christ or of communion in Him, but also receive Him, I prefer to say, in accordance with the Lord's words, "Take and eat. . . ," that by the bread and wine the Lord's body and blood are given rather than just signified, and that the bread is here a presenting sign (*signa exhibitiva*) of his body and not simply a sign."²⁴

This presence of Christ is a spiritual presence, not a physical presence. Christ is present in the Supper by the Holy Spirit. Although with respect to his human nature Christ is in heaven, not on the earth, nevertheless, by the mysterious operation of the Holy Spirit the one and entire Christ who is both God and man is present in the Lord's Supper, with all his benefits.

For the presence of Christ in this world, whether offered or attested by the word alone or by the sacraments as well, is not one of place, or sense, or reason, or earth, but of spirit, of faith, and of heaven, in so far as we are conveyed thither by faith and placed together with Christ, and apprehend and embrace Him in His heavenly majesty. . . .The antichrists, however, persuade the simpler folk from these words that we receive and possess

Christ made present in some manner conformed to this world, either contained in or conjoined with the bread and the wine. . . . Therefore, let the teachable be taught that no presence of Christ is enjoyed in the eucharist unless it is rightly observed, and then only a presence both apprehended and retained by faith alone. . . .²⁵

“By faith alone!” In strict and necessary harmony with the spiritual presence, the manner of eating and drinking Christ in the Supper is by faith alone. The eating is a spiritual eating; there is no reception of Christ by the mouth of the body. This, as it is crucial to the truth of the Supper, was a basic theme of Bucer; over and over, in every discussion of the Supper, Bucer stressed that Christ is and can be received in the Supper only by faith. Accordingly, no unbeliever eats Christ’s body at the Table. The unbeliever receives only the signs. Since the believer eats Christ by faith, there is and must be the lifting up of the believing heart into heaven, where Christ is: we are “conveyed thither [to heaven--DJE] by faith and placed together with Christ, and apprehend and embrace him in his heavenly majesty.”²⁶ This is the Reformed “*sursum corda*.”

Thus, for Bucer, the Sacrament of the Supper is a means of grace. . . . with the bread and the wine given for eating and drinking by the mouth of the body, the very body and blood of the Lord are to be received through faith by the faithful alone, which means for the confirmation of the new covenant and the nourishing of eternal life.²⁷

In his *Confession* of 1550, Bucer wrote:

Accordingly, the Lord was pleased to use here these symbols of food and drink and to give his flesh to be eaten spiritually by means of the symbol of bread to be eaten physically. . . .²⁸

Explaining the words of the institution of the Supper, “this is my body,” he wrote:

So this is the meaning: “this that I give you by this sign is my body which is delivered up for you. . . .”²⁹

The key phrases expressing the unique understanding of the Reformed doctrine of the Sacrament are "by means of the symbol" and "by this sign." In the Supper there is a partaking of the reality represented by the signs. The partaking of the reality is not *along with* the signs, but a partaking *by means of* the signs. In 1536 Bucer wrote that both the Word and the symbols of the Sacraments are "the dispensation of salvation, *canales, vehicula, & instrumental Spiritus & gratiae.*"³⁰

The Grounds for his Doctrine

In coming to this doctrine of the real, but spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, Bucer was influenced, of course, by Luther. Not only was Luther instrumental in causing Bucer to reject the Roman Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation and of the repetition of the sacrifice of Christ for sins, but he also convinced Bucer that "this is my body" reveals a Supper that is far more than a memorial of an absent Christ. These words of the Lord demand a doctrine of the Supper in which the very presence of Christ is freely and joyfully acknowledged.

In his difference with Luther, namely, his teaching that this presence is spiritual, not physical, Bucer was influenced by the Frisian, Hinne Rode. Wherever there is theology, there is a Dutchman! Rode, a member of the Brethren of the Common Life, visited Bucer in 1524. Bucer himself spoke of Rode's influence upon him in the matter of the presence of Christ in the Supper in a letter to a third party:

This Rodius was my guest (in the autumn of 1524); and, Bible in hand, he conversed at much length with me on the question of the Lord's Supper, wherein I defended Luther's opinion against him with all my might. But I then discerned that I was no peer to this man's mind, nor equal to all his arguments; and that one can not consistently maintain, by the Scripture, what I desired to affirm. I had to waive the corporeal presence of Christ in the bread; albeit I still hesitated concerning the certain explanation of the words.³¹

In the all-important “explanation of the words,” Bucer broke new ground. He was guided simply by Scripture and by the analogy of faith in Scripture. He taught the spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, rejecting Luther’s physical presence, first, because this doctrine is biblical. It is biblical in that it does not violate the “self-consistency,” the logical character, of the Bible. If Jesus’ human nature is revealed to be in heaven, as the account of the Ascension in Acts makes plain is the case, his body cannot be present on earth in a physical manner. Wrote Bucer in a delightful passage which expresses a cardinal principle of Reformed hermeneutics:

Nothing, however, can be more self-consistent than the spoken word of God. Therefore, whatever Scripture declares about our receiving and eating Christ, his being with us, abiding, and dwelling in us, is bound to be in complete agreement and harmony with those assertions wherein his is stated to have left the world and to be in heaven, having a real body, and accordingly a body bounded and circumscribed.³²

Lutheran doctrine is erroneous because it is illogical and contradictory. To overcome this glaring contradiction (for also the mind of Luther, despite all his fulminations here against “reason,” could not find peace with a construction that has the body of Jesus both in heaven and on earth in the same manner), Luther was forced to the perilous extremity of deifying the human nature of Christ: the ubiquity of the human nature!

Bucer’s doctrine of the spiritual presence is also biblical in that it permits Scripture to interpret Scripture. Specifically, it allows John 6:63, “It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing,” in the context of eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking Jesus’ blood, to interpret Matthew 26:26, “This is my body.” “Is,” then, is “*is*,” not merely “signifies”; but it is “is” as a spiritual presence, not as a physical presence. Luther always felt the force of the argument from John 6 and would, therefore, never admit that John 6 had any bearing on the issue of the Lord’s Supper.³³ In addition, the spiritual explanation of Matthew’s “is” (in “this is my body”) is supported by the formula in Luke, “this cup is the

new covenant" (22:20), where no physical identification is even thinkable.

Besides, Bucer saw this doctrine to be biblical in that its teaching of Christ's presence in the Supper harmonized perfectly with the truth of Christ's presence in the preaching of the gospel. The Supper gives nothing that the faithful do not have also, and first, in the gospel. Christ is truly present to be eaten and drunk in the Word. But the presence and reception of the Lord in the Word is spiritual; nor is it even conceivable that he is physically present in the Word, to be received in a physical manner.

As the doctrine is biblical, so is it in accordance with the analogy of faith. Bucer argued for the spiritual presence from the spiritual nature of salvation; and he argued for a spiritual eating of Christ from the fundamental truth of the Reformation, acknowledged by all Protestants, Luther above all, that the way of receiving God's salvation in Christ is the spiritual way of faith, and faith alone. This is the clear testimony of John 6 on eating and drinking Christ: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not" (vss. 63, 64a). The ungodly are able to receive nothing of Christ in the Supper, or anywhere else. Nor ought the church to teach a doctrine that tends to cause men to look for salvation in some external activity, rather than in faith only. Even if the godly could eat Christ's body and drink his blood in a physical manner, such an eating and drinking would be profitless to them.

For though you drank even the very blood which dropped from the cross, you would nevertheless not be drinking the blood of the new covenant unless you believed that by that blood the new covenant was ratified.³⁴

Justification by faith alone gives the death-blow to the Lutheran doctrine of the Supper, as it does to the Roman Catholic teaching. The Roman Catholic bishop in England with whom Bucer carried on a controversy over justification by faith during Bucer's English period, Stephen Gardiner, saw this and stated it forcefully:

The force of that sophism [namely, justification by faith alone--DJE] drove Luther, for the sake of defending his consistency, to pervert the mysteries of the sacraments and fall away to the insane assertion of necessity. When he halted at the Sacrament of the Eucharist, there rose up not a few who assailed the timidity of the man because he did not dare to follow out the full force of that proposition to the end; viz., that he utterly abolish the Eucharist also, which cannot stand with that doctrine. . . .³⁵

Even more decisively than the doctrine of justification by faith alone, predestination rules out the Lutheran doctrine of the Supper, as it does the Roman Catholic doctrine. For Bucer the doctrinal issue at stake in the Supper-strife was not so much Christological as theological, not so much a matter of the natures of Christ as a matter of God's eternal decree of election. The point at issue here is the recipient of Christ in the Supper. If Christ is physically present in the bread and if he is physically eaten with the mouth, Christ is for all--for the reprobate ungodly, as well as for the godly. As a Reformed theologian, Bucer held that Christ is for the elect alone. In the Supper, therefore, Christ is for the nourishing, strengthening, and saving of the elect alone. W.P. Stephens points out the importance of predestination for Bucer's doctrine of the Supper in his work on Bucer's theology, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer*:

The doctrine of election gives rise to two emphases in the understanding of salvation. The one is restrictive--it is only the elect who will believe. The other is forward looking--the elect will be called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. Self-evident as these two consequences of a doctrine of election may appear, they need to be stressed, precisely because they affect Bucer's total theology. The restrictiveness of the doctrine of election affects, for instance, Bucer's understanding of word and sacraments, and excludes the possibility that they can be automatic bearers of the Spirit and grace of God to all who receive them.³⁶

The Significance of Bucer's Contribution

The doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ was essentially Bucer's doctrine of the Supper from the very beginning, as early as 1524, when he began to differ with Luther. There were times when, inexcusably, he deviated; but these were concessions offered from a blind zeal for unity, which zeal also blinded him to the fact that Luther would never settle for anything but a physical presence of Christ. There can be no question that Calvin derived his doctrine of the Lord's Supper from Bucer, who had set out in a writing the doctrine of the spiritual presence in all its main elements as the *tertium quid* between the view of Wittenberg and the view of Zurich, as early as 1526, when John Calvin was a lad of 17 years. So strongly was Calvin influenced by Bucer's doctrine of the Supper that Calvin even adopted Bucer's dubious distinction between two kinds of unworthy partakers of the Supper, those who are merely weak and therefore do receive Christ, and those who are ungodly and therefore do not receive Christ. Bucer invented this distinction in order to accommodate his doctrine to Luther's insistence that the unworthy also receive Christ in the Supper. In his commentary on I Corinthians 11:27 ("Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord"), Calvin accepts this distinction:

Now this passage gave rise to a question, which some afterwards agitated with too much keenness--whether the *unworthy* really partake of the Lord's body. . . . I acknowledge that there are some who receive Christ truly in the Supper, and yet at the same time *unworthily*, as is the case with many weak persons, yet I do not admit, that those who bring with them a mere historical faith, without a lively feeling of repentance and faith, receive anything but the sign.³⁷

If it is certain that the "Calvinistic" doctrine of the Supper originated with the pastor at Strasbourg, it is also certain that Calvin brought the doctrine to its fullest development and gave it its clearest expression. In fact, in 1549 Calvin achieved in part what Bucer sought so often and

so fervently, but in vain: agreement of Protestants in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In the *Consensus Tigurinus* (also known as the Zurich consensus), the non-Lutheran Protestants, particularly Zurich and Geneva, united in their confession of the Bucerian-Calvinistic doctrine of the Supper.³⁸ Calvin sent a copy of the *Consensus* to Bucer, now an exile in England, for his criticism. Bucer responded that he approved the document and that he was pleased that agreement had finally been reached with the Zwinglians.³⁹

The Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper as expressed in Lord's Days 28-30 of the Heidelberg Catechism and in Article 35 of the Belgic Confession is Martin Bucer's doctrine.

This was the doctrine that could and ought to have united Luther and Zwingli, the Lutherans and the Reformed, in the 16th century. They came close to each other at Marburg, closer than is usually realized. It was Martin Luther who, feeling keenly the wound of the division of the Reformation church there reached out on one occasion, to propose a union-formula that would have had the warring parties agree on the Supper by means only of the statement that Christ's body is "substantially present" in the Supper, no questions being asked concerning the manner of this presence. And it was Ulrich Zwingli who rejected the proposal, suspecting, no doubt correctly, that for Luther "substantially" meant "physically."

A real presence of the entire Christ, according to the Word of promise in the institution-formula; a spiritual food and drink, received by faith, for the support of the eternal life of the elect; the use of the elements, properly administered by the church, as a means of grace of the Holy Spirit! This doctrine avoided everything that Luther and Zwingli feared, provided all that their theology called for, and corrected what was deficient in their thinking, although neither of them saw it. They did not listen to Bucer!

This doctrine of the Lord's Supper would have to be the basis of union between Lutherans and Reformed, should Marburg ever be revisited. The first item of business for the

Reformed would then be to convince the Lutherans that a “*spiritual* presence” is a “*real* presence.” Hermann Sasse is mistaken when he writes that “we may look to Bucer for the origin of the custom of theologians to speak of a Real Presence when a Real Presence is not actually meant.”⁴⁰ His error is not that he supposes the Reformed churches to hold a real presence of Christ in the Supper, for these churches have made this doctrine their official confession in the plainest and strongest language possible:

Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ hath not enjoined to us the use of His sacraments in vain, so He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs. . . we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. . . This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself, and the merits of His sufferings and death. . . .⁴¹

Nor is Sasse mistaken in finding in Bucer the origin of the Reformed doctrine of the real presence of Christ. But he errs in assuming that a “real” presence must be a “physical” presence and in denying that a “spiritual” presence can be a “real” presence. Did not Christ himself teach us that it is in the Spirit of truth who dwells with us and is in us that “I will come to you” (John 14:16ff.)?

Another Marburg is a dream. The reality is that the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is a unique and vital aspect of Reformed theology, of Reformed worship, and of Reformed communion with God in the covenant-meal. For this doctrine we Reformed are indebted to Bucer of Strasbourg.

NOTES

1. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, in: *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, D. F. Wright, tr. and ed. (Appelford, Abingdon, Berkshire, England: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972) 392.

Hereafter: Wright, *Martin Bucer*.

2. Andreas Carlstadt, *Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*, in: *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate*, Ronald J. Sider, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) 80-81.
3. Andreas Carlstadt, *Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*, 82.
4. Andreas Carlstadt, *Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*, 83.
5. Andreas Carlstadt, *Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*, 87.
6. Andreas Carlstadt, *Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*, 87.
7. In his *Letter to the Christians at Strassburg in Opposition to the Fanatic Spirit*, in 1524, Luther wrote: "I confess that if Dr. Karlstadt, or anyone else, could have convinced me five years ago that only bread and wine were in the sacrament he would have done me a great service. At that time I suffered such severe conflicts and inner strife and torment that I would gladly have been delivered from them. I realized that at this point I could best resist the papacy. There were two who then wrote me, with much more skill than Dr. Karlstadt has, and who did not torture the Word with their own preconceived notions. . . ." *Luther's Works*, Volume 40 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958) 68.
8. Andreas Carlstadt, *Concerning the Anti-Christian Misuse of the Lord's Bread and Cup*, 78.
9. Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller, editors (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1981) 216.
10. Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 214.

11. Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 231.
12. Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, 228.
13. Martin Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 37 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961) 300.
14. Hastings Eells, *Martin Bucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931) 197.
15. Luther's genial greeting of Bucer at the Marburg Colloquy was, "You rogue!" Bucer had sorely provoked Luther by taking the liberty of inserting into Bugenhagen's *Psalms Commentary* and into Luther's *Church Postil*, books which Bucer had translated, the views of Bucer himself and of Zwingli regarding the Lord's Supper, by way of annotations and prefaces. Luther had vented his righteous indignation against Bucer at the end of his *This is My Body* (in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 37 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961,] 147ff.).
16. Bucer had given the Zwinglians good reason for this at the Wittenberg Conference. In his desperate effort to reconcile the divided Protestants and to satisfy the adamant Luther, Bucer had conceded every point of Lutheran doctrine concerning the Supper. This was inexcusable. The concessions did not represent Bucer's beliefs concerning the Sacrament.
17. Quoted by Frank H. Meadows, *The Early Eucharistic Theology of Martin Bucer* (unpublished thesis, Montreal: McGill University, 1965).
18. Martin Bucer, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 336.
19. Martin Bucer, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 338.
20. Martin Bucer, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 397.
21. Martin Bucer, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 330.

22. Martin Luther, in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 40 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958) 187, 210.
23. Quoted by Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 354.
24. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 398.
25. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 391.
26. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 391.
27. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1526 Apology* in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 326
28. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, in Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 396
29. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confessions in Aphorisms*, in Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 397.
30. Martin Bucer, "Preface" to the 1536 edition of the *Commentary of the Four Holy Gospels*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 347.
31. Quoted in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Volume X, Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed. (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls, 1911) 64.
32. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: 1550 Confession in Aphorisms*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 390.
33. For Luther's rejection of the appeal to John 6:63 by those who denied his doctrine of Christ's physical presence in the Supper, cf. his *This is My Body*, in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 37 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961) 78ff., and his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, in: *Luther's Works*, Volume 37 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961) 235ff. To this text Zwingli referred at Marburg when he said to Luther, "This breaks your neck." At this Luther affected to take umbrage, as though Zwingli had threatened physical violence, and growled that they were not now in

Zwingli's Switzerland where such goings-on were permitted, but in Germany, where theologians were protected.

34. Martin Bucer, *The Eucharist: The 1526 Apology*, in: Wright, *Martin Bucer*, 324.
35. Quoted by Constantin Hopf, *Martin Bucer and the English Reformation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946) 177.
36. W. P. Stephens, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970) 38.
37. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, John Pringle, tr., Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 386.
38. The Consensus Tigurinus rejects Luther's local presence of Christ's body in or under the bread (Art. 24); affirms a spiritual reception of Christ in the supper (Art. 9); declares that "God does not exert His power promiscuously in all who receive the Sacraments, but only in the elect. . . (so that) He causes only the elect to receive what the Sacraments offer" (Art. 16); denies that the "reprobate" receive the "verity" of the Sacraments (Art. 17); insists that "nothing is received in the Sacraments except by faith" (Art. 17); and states that, "among other ends [of the Sacraments--DJE] this one is chief, that by these Sacraments God attests, presents anew, and seals to us his grace," i.e., that the Sacraments are means of grace (Art. 7). This significant confession is not found in most popular collections of creeds. It appears as an "Appendix" in A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1879) 651 ff.
39. Ruefully Bucer noted the hostility of the Zwinglians to himself, which had made it impossible for Bucer to accomplish the concord just achieved by Calvin: "For I know the zeal of the Zurichers, though I admire them sincerely in the Lord, they would not allow themselves to be persuaded by me of anything, however right and

plain” (Hastings Eells, *Martin Bucer*, 405). *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* is in error in placing Bucer in Zurich in May of 1549, co-operating with Calvin and Farel in hammering out the Consensus Tigurinus (Volume XII, p. 536, “Zurich Consensus”). Bucer had arrived in England in April, 1549, having been forced out of Strasbourg by the Augsburg Interim.

40. Quoted in Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation* (London and New York: Longman, 1981) 174.
41. Belgic Confession, Article 35.