

**Defining the Boundaries of Evangelicalism in the 16th Century:
Luther and Zwingli at Marburg (1529)**

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Do Evangelicals like to fight? One would almost think so given the number of controversies that have marred the story of the modern Evangelical movement – Calvinists vs. Arminians, pre-millennialists vs. post, egalitarians vs. complementarians, and, of course, open theists vs. traditional theists. A moment's reflection, however, suggests that it is not a delight in polemics *per se* that has motivated all these folks through the ages and in our own times too but instead, ironically, something that they all have in common, viz., a commitment to truth. Evangelicals of all stripes believe that there is such a thing as *truth* in matters religious, and that it is important – so important that one is willing not only to contend for it in this life but also to stand upon it before the Lord in the next. For He who has revealed Himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life calls upon all of us to be faithful to His truth.

But if controversies among Evangelicals demonstrate one common commitment, can they reveal others? And if we are looking for the boundaries of the Evangelical movement, can analysis of past debates reveal parameters within which combatants were operating? To be sure, the Scriptures must ultimately determine what it means to be “evangelical”; but perhaps historical analysis can highlight characteristics of our movement that we might otherwise miss.

Obviously, we cannot here examine every controversy that occurred in the story of evangelicalism – although it might make a good book – but we can investigate at least one. And the one I propose to analyze will take us back to the Reformation, arguably the headwaters of the modern Evangelical movement. For contemporary Evangelicals are the

theological heirs of the Protestant movement of the 16th century, the earliest and most important leaders of which were Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. Unfortunately, however, these two evangelical “greats” engaged in a major controversy over the presence of Christ in the eucharist and could not reach agreement. Nevertheless, they met face to face – along with others – for extended discussions over four days on the issues that troubled them in October of 1529 at Marburg in Germany. That meeting and the circumstances surrounding it were important for defining the boundaries of the Evangelical movement in the 16th century. Perhaps the Marburg Colloquy will also prove helpful to Evangelicals in defining their movement in the 21st.¹

Naturally, historians have paid special attention to the issues that divided Luther and Zwingli, but we can also ask what, if anything, united them? Actually, quite a lot. In spite of the rather heated debate that characterized the meeting at times, the concluding statement – the Marburg Articles – consists of 14½ statements of agreement as well as a commitment to “show Christian love to the other side insofar as conscience will permit.” Clearly, the two sides had many things in common in addition to points of disagreement.²

Before commenting on the articles themselves, however, permit me to make a couple of preliminary observations that are directly pertinent to our theme of determining the boundaries; and the first of these is the

¹ The Marburg Colloquy has been studied frequently. The standard biographies of both Luther and Zwingli cover it, e.g., Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521-1532* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990), 325-34, and G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 316-32. There is a good introduction in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v. “Marburg, Colloquy of.” A monograph in English that is particularly useful on account of its efforts to reconstruct the debate as well as for its discussion of the issues is Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*, rev. ed. (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977).

² The Marburg Articles can be found in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 30^{III}:160-71 (hereafter cited as WA). Unless otherwise noted, the English translation in this essay is from Jaroslav Pe-

obvious but significant fact that Luther and Zwingli both came to the meeting at Marburg. In spite of all that had gone before in the form of extensive and heated polemics,³ these two were still willing to undertake the burden of travel for the sake of a meeting to discuss Christian doctrine. This represents not only their commitment to truth but also a commitment to Christian community, for the ultimate purpose of the colloquy was to unite Protestants of Germany with those of Switzerland and so create a common front against their opponents.⁴

Zwingli came out of conviction that an alliance was necessary for the preservation of the Reformation in Zurich, and Luther followed suit out of consideration for those princes upon whom the fate of his reforming movement in Germany depended.⁵ Without intending to exaggerate the significance of their decision to come to Marburg, it is nevertheless clear that each man recognized something more important than himself, and that was a community to which in some sense they both belonged. This community had claims on them to which they were prepared to yield much although not the slightest bit of God's truth.

The second preliminary observation has to do with their manner after they arrived in Marburg. By the fall of 1529, each man had spilled

likan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Phil.: Fortress Press, 1955-86) 38:85-89 (hereafter cited as LW).

³ For over three years, the two sides had written against each other rather vociferously on the question of the presence of Christ in the sacrament and related issues. See Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 181-98.

⁴ In order to counter the Habsburg, Imperial threat to the Reformation that seemed imminent especially after the Diet of Speyer (1529), Landgrave Philip of Hesse sponsored the meeting at Marburg for doctrinal discussions because the Lutheran party especially, led by electoral Saxony and Nuremberg, would not enter into an alliance with the Swiss or the Upper Germans (e.g., Strassburg) without doctrinal agreement. See *Oxford Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Philipp of Hesse." William J. Wright, "Philip of Hesse's Vision of Protestant Unity and the Marburg Colloquy," in Kyle C. Sessions and Phillip N. Bebb, eds., *Pietas et Societas: New Trends in Reformation History* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1985), 163-79, shows the importance of constitutional questions and of nationalism besides doctrine in separating the Protestant parties.

⁵ Potter, 316-23, and Brecht, *Shaping*, 325-26.

a lot of the other's blood in fierce polemical writings; and Zwingli had concluded with respect to his Wittenberg foe:

That rash man Luther keeps killing human and divine wisdom in his books, though it would have been easy to restore this wisdom among the pious. But since the heretics, that is, his followers, together with the wicked, have become so deaf to all truth that they refuse to listen, I was for a long time doubtful about expending this enormous labor which I knew would be vain....May I die if he does not surpass Eck in impurity, Cochlaeus in audacity, and, in brief, all the vices of men.⁶

For his part, Luther had reported to a friend regarding a letter that Zwingli had written that it was “worthy of his haughty spirit. [Zwingli] raged, foamed, threatened, and roared with such ‘moderation’ that he seems to be incurable, and [is] condemned by self-evident truth.”⁷

In spite of such acrimony, however, their conversations at Marburg as well as those of their companions were remarkably free of name-calling and were conducted in an almost friendly fashion. On occasion, when tempers flared on one side or the other, an apology was also forthcoming. So for example, in discussing the applicability of John 6 to the eucharist, things became so heated at one point that Luther accused Zwingli of “poor” logic, “the kind...for which a schoolboy is caned and sent to the corner.” To this, Zwingli responded, “This passage [John 6] is going to break your neck,” and Luther retorted, “Don’t boast too much. Necks do not break that easily here. You are in Hesse, not Switzerland.” At this point, our sources tell us, “other accusations were made and there was much shouting.” Nevertheless, Zwingli quickly apologized for the offending expression and the discussion continued.⁸

⁶ Ulrich Zwingli to Conrad Sam at Ulm, August 30, 1528, as quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, vol. 2: *The Reformation*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 391. For original, see *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, vols. 1- (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke, 1905-) 9:537.3-8, 537.17-538.2.

⁷ Martin Luther to Wenceslas Link, May 4, 1527, LW 49:164-65; WA Br 4:198.3-5.

⁸ Although no official minutes of the colloquy were recorded, some of the participants took notes or reported on the proceedings after the fact. Seven such reports on the colloquy, made by various participants, have been printed in WA 30^{III}:92-159 and trans-

At length, even though the conversations were winding down and each side was holding fast to its own position, the tone remained charitable. Luther commended Oecolampadius, the reformer of Basel, for having explained his views in a friendly manner. Recognizing that that had not been quite the case between himself and Zwingli, Luther suggested that they pardon each other for any harsh words that had been spoken. To this, Zwingli, almost in tears, replied to Luther that he had “always deeply desired his friendship” and still sought it even then. For Luther, however, that was a bit too much so he answered simply, “Pray God that you may come to a right understanding of this matter.”⁹

Nevertheless, the impression one gets from reading the reports is that it was a remarkably friendly debate even if both sides remained entrenched in their respective positions – an impression confirmed by the sponsor of the debate, Philip of Hesse, who wrote shortly after its conclusion that “the learned theologians dealt with all articles in a harmonious and Christian way and parted as friends”¹⁰ and by Luther who wrote to his wife on the final day of the meeting that it was an “amiable colloquy.”¹¹

Of course, Luther’s judgment proceeded not only from the manner in which the disputants conducted themselves but also from his impression, expressed in that same letter, that both parties were “in agreement on almost all points” with the noteworthy exception of the eucharistic presence.¹² But what were these other points upon which the two sides did agree? If we are going to talk about the parameters of Evangelicalism

lated in LW 38:15-85. The altercation regarding “neck breaking” is in the reports of Rudolph Collin (LW 38:57; WA 30^{III}:123.27-124.30) and Caspar Hedio (LW 38:25-26; WA 30^{III}:123.7-10).

⁹ Hedio’s report (LW 38:35; WA 30^{III}:143.12-144.4). Zwingli’s tears were also noted by Andreas Osiander (LW 38:70; WA 30^{III}:149.23-24)

¹⁰ Philip of Hesse to Siegmund von Boineburg and Georg Kolmatzsch, October 11, 1529, as quoted in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career, 1521-1530* (Phil.: Fortress Press, 1983), 653-54.

¹¹ Martin Luther to Catherine Luther, October 4, 1529, LW 49:236; WA Br 5:154.4. For the tone of the debate, see also Sasse, 212-13, and Wright, 177.

in the 16th century, we need to know the doctrines in which the Marburg participants expressed agreement.

At the end of the colloquy, so that all would not be lost, the host, Philip of Hesse, asked Luther to write up statements expressing the agreement and disagreement that had been evident at the meeting. He did so in fifteen articles, only the last of which treated the point at issue in the colloquy; and all the participants signed these Marburg Articles.¹³

Significantly, the first three articles reflect what had been debated and affirmed by the early Church, viz., the Trinity and the person and work of Christ, in a deliberate attempt to demonstrate the unity of the evangelicals with the Church catholic, as the first article states, “exactly as was decided in the Council of Nicaea and as is sung and read in the Nicene Creed by the entire Christian church throughout the world.”¹⁴ Clearly, one of the concerns of both sides was *not* to teach anything new, so each insisted that its position was the one that the Church had always taught.

This also explains why the discussions spent so much time on the evidence of the fathers, for how else to answer a charge of novelty than by quoting voices of the past that substantiate arguments of the present? When Zwingli and Oecolampadius sought to prove their position with evidence from both the Scriptures and the fathers, Luther requested only that they do so in an orderly fashion, Scriptures first and then the fathers. But neither he nor anybody else on his side of the debate thought it illegitimate to hear what the champions of orthodox Christianity in the first centuries had to say about the issues of their own times; and indeed, it seems that most of one whole day was devoted to a discussion of patristic evidence.¹⁵

¹² Martin Luther to Catherine Luther, October 4, 1529, LW 49:236; WA Br 5:154.4-6.

¹³ *Oxford Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Marburg Confession.”

¹⁴ LW 38:85; WA 30^{III}:160.14-17.

¹⁵ Osiander’s report (LW 38:64, 68; WA 30^{III}:145.14-19, 148.14-15).

On the other hand, both sides recognized the ultimate authority of the Scriptures; and the debate at Marburg was between two champions of absolute biblical authority in the Church. Although the final statement did not include a specific article regarding such authority, the thirteenth article does say that tradition or human ordinances may be freely kept or abolished in accordance with the needs of the people, “provided they do not plainly contradict the word of God.”¹⁶ Furthermore, most of the Marburg debate revolved about the meaning of specific Bible passages, since for both men, the doctrine of the eucharist had to proceed from the Holy Scriptures.

Both Luther and Zwingli had elsewhere affirmed the normative authority of the Scriptures apart from an official ecclesiastical interpretation. Zwingli, for example, in his *Archeteles* had promised, “We will test everything by the touchstone of the Gospel and the fire of Paul. Where we find anything that is in conformity with the Gospel, we will preserve it; where we find something that does not conform to it, we will put it out....Because one must obey God rather than man.”¹⁷ That “everything” to be tested included even the fathers, Zwingli made clear in that same work when he wrote, “Even with the Ancients one can find all kinds of things that differ from the evangelical and apostolic Scriptures, or even contradict them,” for “whatever springs from human wisdom can deceive us, even when it appears in brilliant splendour or adornment; but whatever proceeds from divine wisdom will never deceive.”¹⁸

Luther too at Marburg itself explicitly insisted on placing the witness of the fathers beneath the Scriptures:

Let us gladly do the dear fathers the honor of interpreting, to the best of our ability, their writings which they have left for us, so

¹⁶ LW 38:88; WA 30^{III}:168.1-8.

¹⁷ Quoted in Gottfried W. Locher, *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 155 note 40. For original, see *Zwinglis Werke* 1:319.6-11.

¹⁸ Quoted in Locher, 157. For original, see *Zwinglis Werke* 1:260.20-25. For Zwingli's attitude toward the fathers, see W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 52-55.

that they remain in harmony with Holy Scripture. However, where their writings do not agree with God's Word, there it is much better that we say they have erred than that for their sake we should abandon God's Word.

To this Oecolampadius responded, "Very well," maintaining only that the patristic evidence cited showed that the Swiss reformers had not come to their position "lightheartedly."¹⁹

Given the insistence of both sides that doctrine be based on the Scriptures, we can safely affirm that they accepted the Marburg Articles as expressions of biblical truth, even if in certain instances regarding the doctrines of God and of Christ they were pleased to cite also the testimony of antiquity.

Despite their solidarity on the question of biblical *authority*, one must nevertheless admit that the debates at Marburg revealed significant differences regarding biblical *interpretation*. As is well known, Luther refused to budge from a literal understanding of Jesus' words, "This is my body," but Zwingli insisted that the literal meaning was impossible. So why did they disagree?

The answer to that question deserves a monograph rather than just a paragraph or two, but in view of the articles of agreement that both parties subsequently signed, their most significant argument during the debate has to do with whether or not the literal interpretation violated the "rule of faith." Zwingli insisted that it certainly did, because – as he said – "the article of the Creed...demands [a figurative understanding]: 'He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father.' Otherwise it would be a great incongruity if, when Christ says he is in heaven, we should seek him in the Supper."²⁰

¹⁹ Osiander's report (LW 38:69; WA 30^{III}:149.1-9). See also the anonymous report (probably by one of Luther's friends) (LW 38:51-52; WA 30^{III}:141.20-142.24). For Luther's attitude to the fathers, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Phil.: Fortress Press, 1966), 338-41.

²⁰ The anonymous report (LW 38:43; WA 30^{III}:128.15-18). See also Hedio's report (LW 38:26-28; WA 30^{III}:124.1-126.14).

Zwingli's point, of course, is that Luther's understanding of the "real presence" resulted in the body of Jesus not only being in heaven but also on earth in the sacrament, wherever and whenever it was celebrated. This, Zwingli argued, involved an implicit denial of Christ's true human nature, an essential characteristic of which is to have a real human body, like ours, capable of being in only one place at a time.²¹ Luther, on the other hand, was quite willing to admit that Christ's body, different from ours on account of the personal union, could be in more than one place and, in particular, was present in the sacrament simply because Jesus had said so.²² In short, the debate over biblical interpretation revealed substantive differences in christology too.²³

This is why it is so interesting that the Marburg Articles begin as they do with statements that affirm traditional Christian dogma regarding God and Christ, most notably, in terms of the debate, both the personal union ("the Son of God the Father, true and natural God himself, became man...was altogether human with body and soul") and His real ascension into heaven ("this same Son of God and of Mary, undivided in person...ascended into heaven [and] sits at the right hand of God").²⁴ Whatever their differences regarding these important Christian truths, in the Marburg Articles the two sides signaled that the differences were occurring within the confines of classical orthodoxy.

In addition to issues raised in the course of the colloquy, the first three articles also address a concern that Luther had mentioned at the outset of the colloquy, viz., strange "opinions" ostensibly being promul-

²¹ "If in every way his body is like ours and he has also assumed our nature, and we cannot be in various places, then neither can he, since his existence is truly like ours." Zwingli, according to the anonymous report (LW 38:47; WA 30^{III}:135.19-21).

²² "The word [of God] says, first, that Christ has a body. This I believe. Furthermore, it says that this body ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. This I also believe. The word likewise says that this same body is in the Supper and is given to us to be eaten. This I also believe because my Lord Jesus Christ can easily do this if he desires, and in his words he testifies that he does desire to do it." Luther, according to the anonymous report (LW 38:44; WA 30^{III}:130.18-22).

²³ For discussion of these differences, see Stephens, 111-18, and Locher, 173-78.

gated in Zurich, Strassburg, and Basel regarding, among other things, the Trinity and the person of Christ. At the request of the Swiss, Luther agreed not to pursue these questions but to proceed to the main issue, the eucharist. However, when the colloquy – having failed to manifest agreement on the eucharist – was practically over, Jacob Sturm, lay representative from Strassburg, raised the earlier issues again and requested a judgment regarding the orthodoxy of Strassburg’s preachers on these other points. To this Luther initially refused, “Since you do not want to accept me or my doctrine [i.e., regarding the eucharist], I cannot allow you to be my disciples.” Nonetheless, by including such doctrines in the final articles, Luther not only affirmed his own orthodoxy regarding these pivotal doctrines but so did his counterparts on the other side when they agreed to the articles Luther had written.²⁵

Even more important perhaps than enabling everybody to affirm his orthodoxy, the first three articles also lay an absolutely necessary theological foundation for the more strictly speaking “evangelical” articles that follow (articles 4-11). Thus, for example, after the document describes original sin as “the kind of sin which condemns all men,” it goes on to insist that Jesus Christ alone can save us by his death and life – a statement that makes no sense unless we have earlier learned who this Jesus is, viz., “true and natural God himself, [who] became man through the working of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

So too with respect to the heart of the Protestant gospel, justification by faith, which the articles also clearly affirm. “Faith,” says Article 6, is a “gift of God,” which the “Holy Spirit gives and creates.” Here the divine omnipotence of the third person of the Trinity is clearly in view. And in Article 7, we read how it is that such faith saves us, “Through [faith] [God] delivers us from sin, death, and hell, receives us by grace

²⁴ LW 38:85-86; WA 30^{III}:161.5-12, 14-19.

²⁵ See the reports of Hedio, anonymous, and Osiander (LW 38:15-16, 36-37, 70-71; WA 30^{III}:111.2-112.5, 110.12-112.21, 149.30-39).

and saves, for the sake of his Son, in whom we thus believe, and thereby we enjoy and partake of his Son's righteousness, life, and all blessings." In other words, faith saves because it is faith in the only one who can save (for He is both God and man – see Article 2) and who has done what was necessary to save humanity (born without sin, died and buried, and rose again – see Articles 2 and 3). Justification by faith depends radically upon the doctrines of God and the person and work of Christ. The reformers knew it, and in the Marburg Articles they confessed it.²⁷

Besides a common commitment to the gospel as the good news of salvation from sin through faith alone in Jesus Christ (obviously directed against the papal party), these 16th century Evangelicals also agreed to articles directed against reformers more radical than they themselves, for in Article 12, they agree that "governing authorities" are a "truly good estate" in which a Christian can be saved "through faith in Christ, just as in the estate of father or mother, husband or wife." In Article 13, they agree that "human ordinances in spiritual or ecclesiastical matters" may be abolished or kept "in order to avoid unnecessary offense in every way and to serve the weak and the peace of all"; and in Article 14, both sides affirm that the "baptism of infants is right, and that they are thereby received into God's grace and into Christendom."²⁸

Undoubtedly, the 14 articles of agreement – because they were not thoroughly discussed at Marburg – ignore some real points of disagreement. For example, would Zwingli, like Luther, be content to class sacred images among the traditions or human ordinances that may be "freely kept"? That seems highly doubtful.²⁹ It is also unlikely that the two sides meant exactly the same thing about baptismal grace for infants.³⁰ Nevertheless, after more than three days of wrangling over the

²⁶ LW 38:85-86; WA 30^{III}:162.4-12, 161.5-12.

²⁷ LW 38:85-86; WA 30^{III}:163.7-14, 164.2-12.

²⁸ LW 38:87-88; WA 30^{III}:167.5-14, 168.2-11, 168.14-169.2.

²⁹ For their differences regarding images, see *Oxford Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Iconoclasm."

³⁰ Stephens, 211-12, and Sasse, 223-24.

sacrament of Christ's body and blood, they were still willing to affirm together these basic and evangelical truths as we have them in the Marburg Articles.

Even in Article 15, the one addressing the eucharist, the two sides admit to more agreement than they do disagreement, viz., communion in both kinds, an understanding of the eucharist as "as a sacrament of the true body and blood of Jesus Christ," the necessity of partaking "spiritually" of the body and blood, and the salvific use of the sacrament for the strengthening of weak consciences. Only on the question of the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus do the Marburg Articles admit to an impasse, "We have not reached an agreement as to whether the true body and blood of Christ are bodily present in the bread and wine." Even here, however, the articles include the qualifier, "at this time," thereby suggesting that subsequent discussions might overcome the remaining point of difference.³¹

Although in this regard, Article 15 appears overly optimistic in view of the intensive discussions that had just failed, in point of fact it was not – at least, not completely – since Martin Bucer, representative of Strassburg and allied with the Swiss at Marburg, persisted in negotiations with the Luther and the Lutherans and seven years later actually signed an agreement, the Wittenberg Concord (1536), on the reality of the presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, an agreement that effected intercommunion between his church and Luther's.³²

³¹ LW 38:88; WA 30^{III}:169.5-170.15.

³² Once again, there is doubt that the two sides meant the same things by their agreement, nevertheless Bucer, Melancthon, and Luther all agreed to a document affirming that with the bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus are truly and essentially ("*vere et substantialiter*") present, offered, and received - even by "unworthy (*indignis*)" communicants. See Sasse, 244-52, and Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993), 39-59. For the text of the agreement, see *Philippi Melanthonis Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. 3: *Epistolae, Praefationes, Consilia, Iudiciae, Schedae Academicae* (Halis Saxonum: C. A. Schwetschke, 1836), 75-78.

Regrettably, that did not happen with the two principals at Marburg, Luther and Zwingli, nor with their successors, so that Protestantism continued to develop along two paths (indeed more than two but that's another story) instead of just one. Nevertheless, the Marburg Colloquy and the articles that came out of it revealed that these two Evangelical parties of the Reformation period, however much and intensely they argued and disagreed both before and after 1529, did so within relatively narrow parameters. Not only did the two groups share a common commitment to the Scriptures and a common understanding of the gospel but also a fundamental agreement with the doctrinal consensus of the early Church regarding the person of Christ and the doctrine of God.

These commitments did not enable the two sides to resolve their difficulties regarding the eucharist, and the debates regarding the eucharist also revealed serious differences over the person of Christ, albeit within the confines of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. However, what the two sides had in common did provide at Marburg a basis for discussion and for mutual recognition, if not precisely as brothers who are one in the faith, at least as friends in Christ. For at the very end of the articles, each agreed to demonstrate Christian love to the other side “insofar as conscience will permit” and to pray for God to confirm them in “the right understanding” of the eucharist.³³

But now, what does all this mean for Evangelicals today? First of all, it shows the importance of commitment not only to the idea of truth but also to the content of truth, not only to Scriptural authority but also to what the Scriptures teach especially about salvation. For if the term “evangelical” is going to have any meaning at all, it must include an understanding of the gospel. But the Marburg Articles also suggest that one cannot separate the gospel from the doctrines of God and of Christ

³³ LW 38:88-89; WA 30^{III}:170.9-15. Wright, 177, comments that after the colloquy, “nasty reproaches of ‘anabaptist fanaticism’ versus ‘papism’ were not heard, nor did the sides a [sic] quarrel as much.”

and therefore, that major revisions of the latter will profoundly affect what is meant by the former. Moreover, Christianity is not a new religion; so like the Reformers, we should be wary of new teachings. If contemporary Evangelicals want to retain the 16th century gospel because it is taught in the Scriptures, Marburg instructs them also to retain classical christology and trinitarian dogma as part of the same biblical heritage.

Secondly, the Marburg Colloquy reminds us of the significance of the eucharist for Christians of all sorts, for on the night He was betrayed our Lord Himself instituted this sacrament of His “true body and blood” for us to do often in remembrance of Him. There is no ignoring it - the meaning of the eucharist is central to Christian theology. It was in the 16th century and remains so in the 21st. Therefore, if we identify with the Reformers regarding Scriptural authority and justification by faith, we should also as Evangelicals persist in their commitment to achieving eucharistic fellowship – not for the sake of resuming an old fight but for renewing an old conversation about what Christ has given us in His Supper. And, since we are no longer tied to the worldview and preconceptions of the 16th century, perhaps it will be possible for us to succeed where our forebears could not.

Finally, the Marburg Colloquy also shows Evangelicals how to conduct their debates – honestly, sincerely, with commitment and passion – and also how to conclude them. Searching eagerly for mutual understanding but compromising not one little bit regarding divine truth, Evangelicals today as then should show each other Christian love “insofar as conscience will permit” and promise “diligently to pray to Almighty God that through his Spirit he might confirm us in the right understanding” of His truth.³⁴

³⁴ Article 15, “Marburg Articles” (LW 38:88-89; WA 30^{III}:170.9-15).