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What Was the True Issue at Marburg in 1529?

A GLANCE AT ERASMUS, ZWINGLI, AND LUTHER, AS WELL AS TODAY'S ECUMENICAL PROBLEMS

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IT IS UNDENIABLE THAT WHEN Luther and Zwingli debated about the Lord's Supper at Marburg castle in 1529 their concluding disunity led to separate communion tables down to our own day. In describing the Marburg Colloquy and its results, historians and theologians have tended to judge Luther or Zwingli according to their private assumptions and beliefs. Much of this material has had little merit and has stood on a relatively low level of scholarship. Lately, however, an English scholar has reopened the problem in a manner which commands more than usual respect. Although we shall be obliged to take issue with this writer, in so doing we shall be led to point out some important factors which in the past have generally been overlooked, and simultaneously to correct the perspective regarding the issues which separated the Lutherans and the Reformed at Marburg, and which must remain divisive until they are solved.

In his valuable book, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (London, 1974), A. G. Dickens makes the judgment that Luther's determined adherence to the literal meaning of the words of institution in the Lord's Supper comprised a "curious doctrine" which "few even among the intellectuals grasped" (p. 60), and that "when in 1529 he quarrelled with Zwingli at Marburg" (p. 44), stubbornly clinging to his impossible position, his position "prevented the German Reformation from becoming a Germanic Reformation" (p. 74). Luther's obstreperousness at Marburg over a doctrine "which failed to commend itself to any other reformed Church" yielded a teaching which "had all the advantages of a dogma unintelligible to the common man." Dickens concludes: "There can be few such instances where the monumental conviction of a theologian has produced political and social effects of a comparable magnitude: yet these effects worked almost entirely to the advantage of Luther's Catholic opponents" (p. 75). Dickens here is subject to a number of misunderstandings.

In reply we offer the following points. (1) Latest historical research has shown that it was Luther who made the last bid for reconciliation at Marburg and Zwingli who refused.¹ (2) Luther's position was not an abstruse reinterpretation of the words, but a simple acceptance of them; as explained in his Small Catechism, the most unsophisticated person could understand them. (3) Those Protestants who rejected Luther represented a small minority compared to the large numbers who embraced Luther's teaching in Germany, Scandinavia, Finland, the free cities, and the Baltic territories. (4) Scholars who see Luther as a rebel seeking to bring about a schism in the Catholic Church (thus Dickens, pp. 1, 37, 40, 59,

et passim), or as a cool calculator who devised a doctrine which he could sell to the princes to engage their support, as is often assumed in secularistic interpretations of the Reformation,² are contradicting Luther's own words and other primary evidence, simply substituting their own opinions. The sources themselves point in the opposite direction.³ (5) Luther's position at Marburg must be understood within his much-praised affirmation of the article of creation, and as an insight into the unconscious Neo-Platonism of Zwingli. It is the latter point which we want to explore more thoroughly.

In his polemic against Luther, Zwingli tended to belittle material things and to emphasize the invisible. He clinched his case with this appeal to Scripture: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing" (Jn 6, 63). On the other hand, the "stubborn" Luther (!) had the bad manners to write on the table these words in chalk: *Hoc est corpus meum*. For he "came to Marburg in 1529 with a closed mind, wholly unprepared to consider seriously the Zwinglian commemorative and symbolic interpretations of the Lord's Supper" (Dickens, p. 74). Perhaps we should simply agree with Dickens that Luther's position is that of a stubborn and closed mind and that Zwingli's is that of a flexible and open mind. However, certain problems emerge upon a deeper consideration which simply cannot be dispelled by Dicken's adjectives, problems which suggest that the Swiss reformer's teaching was not so harmless, nor Luther's so unconsidered, as superficial first impressions might indicate.

Recent historical studies have established a close kinship between the two humanists in which Zwingli was the pupil of Erasmus.⁴ In his *Enchiridion* of 1503 Erasmus⁵ had referred to the "divinely inspired Plato" (EE, p. 44) in his doctrine of the antipathy between the material and the spiritual, the flesh and the spirit, the body and the soul, or the outer and the inner man (EE, pp. 42-51). Significantly, he asserted: "What the philosophers term 'reason' St. Paul calls either 'the spirit' or 'the inner man' . . .," and Erasmus set these in opposition to the "passions" which are "the flesh," "the body," "the outer man," or "the law of the members" (EE, p. 47f.). Having thereby adopted Plato's dualism between the spirit (-reason) and the flesh, Erasmus had set the stage for Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, although the older man refrained from drawing the consequences for his own sacramentology and later repudiated the Swiss reformer's position. Whereas Luther was to see the *arbitrium* (the will and reason) as opposed to the Christian faith, Erasmus and Zwingli were to give reason a prominent position: the Dutchman was to define free choice as the ability of the human will to apply itself to those things which led to eternal salvation (I b 10), and the reformer at Zürich was to employ it in his doctrine of the sacrament. In both cases, the influence of Neo-Platonism is hard to deny.

In his major dogmatic work, the *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525), Zwingli drew upon the teachings of the philosophers for his teaching that "to believe and to perceive by sense are essentially different." Luther's view of the Real Presence he scores as coming from those who ". . . have made [philosophy] the mistress and instructress of the word of God . . .," and he quotes

St. Paul (Col. 2:8) “. . . to be on our guard against philosophy . . .” Having accused Luther of following philosophy when Luther took the text literally, he now proceeded to follow the canons of his Neo-Platonic philosophy to prove that the literal meaning of the words was impossible! He saw flesh (-body) as diametrically opposed to the spirit (-sacrament or faith). He accordingly protested: It is “. . . not only crude but even frivolous and impious [to] 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.” In a reference to the philosophy of Parmenides, Zwingli summed up his argument: “If spirit is the one that has come into question, it follows by the law of contraries that body is not; if body is the one, the hearer is sure that spirit is not. Hence, to eat bodily flesh spiritually is simply to assert that to be body which is spirit.”⁶

For Luther, this was pure rationalism in a manner in which the human mind placed itself above Scripture. He could no more accept this kind of argument than he could affirm the freedom of the human will in salvation or the theology of glory, matters which Dickens considers acceptable in Luther (p. 73). Dickens very correctly notes that Luther was involved with, not withdrawn from, the world, and that in denying corrupt man “any share in his own salvation, Luther abounds in warm affirmation, in a genial solicitude for people as individuals . . .” (p. 78). Here he has pointed out a major aspect of Luther’s thought which Lutheran scholars commonly call the theology of the first article of the Creed. But Luther’s fundamental acceptance of the material world of creation stood of necessity in irreconcilable opposition to Zwingli’s spiritualistic reductionism of the sacrament. The reformer of Zürich insisted that bread and wine could not become vehicles of the body and blood of Christ because the finite could not contain the infinite. Once more, we are standing before the spirit of Greek philosophy as it sought to grasp the wonders of God within the confines of human reason. If God and his creation (man, bread) are incompatible, not only the sacramental real presence would have to be rejected, but also the incarnation itself.

How did this practice of squeezing God into the categories of finite and infinite enter Christian theology; It is not found in the Holy Scriptures, but it made its way from Greek philosophy (Anaximander, Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, Epicureanism) by way of early theologians (Origen, Athanasius)⁷ in a movement which culminated in Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350-428) and the monotheletic controversy. Werner Elert has commented on a treatise of Theodore as follows: “In this treatise the chief problem of Christology appeared to be the question of how the infinite could go through the needle’s eye of the finite, in order that God might become man. And since the ‘finite nature’ of man lacks the requisite capacity for the ‘infinite’ God, according to human understanding which is here appealed to according to the employment of those categories, the doctrine of the exinani-

tion offered a welcome solution.—The solution: The Son of God left behind so much of the infinitude of his divine nature as there would not be room for in the finitude of his human nature. Thereby there remained behind an *exō* (as the Antiochians called it) of his divine nature which did not unite with his human nature. Everyone knows where this *exō* (*extra*) celebrated its resurrection in the sixteenth century.”⁸ It is at once apparent that Elert has shown not only the source of the sacramental controversy of sixteenth century Protestantism but also the occasion for the Christological problems of the nineteenth century as well.

These lines were written not to belittle the book by A. G. Dickens but rather to provide a corrective at an important point. But how can historians such as Dickens be expected to interpret these matters correctly when theologians lack clarity? The search of the theologians for clarity, however, has been beclouded by certain tendencies stemming from the ecumenical movement. This has its own history. In the 1950's when the former ALC and ELC were discussing the propriety of membership in the World Council of Churches, it was stated by prominent supporters of the movement that Lutherans could enter the discussions not with the intention of surrendering their beliefs or endorsing unionism, but rather to give their unequivocal confession. After American Lutherans entered the institutionalized ecumenical movement and were honored with prominent appointments to study commissions, however, the typical American drive after a “success-story” seems to have prevailed. “The unity we seek” became “the unity we create” by managing the facts of history and theology. Marburg was revisited, and through a certain kind of reductionism aided by Barthian dialecticism, it was discovered that “is” and “is not” meant virtually the same thing. The Law of Contraries, used by Zwingli to deny the real presence, had now been suspended to prove that Zwingli really meant what Luther had said.

Similar success-stories have been reported in Germany. The first attempt (not counting the Prussian Union of 1817) may have been the Arnoldshain Theses, which claimed to have found the middle way between Lutheran and Reformed thinking; however, their effectiveness was diminished when the widely-respected Ernst Sommerlath who had refrained from resigning from the committee in protest, nevertheless at the end repudiated the results. In the thinking of persons who cannot appreciate the value of a negative outcome from ecumenical discussions, this was unheard of. Nevertheless, in the later Leuenberg Concord, a formula was reached. Many German Lutherans have joined the Reformed in a declaration that the issues are different than they were in 1529, that the positions of Luther and Zwingli can be harmonized, and that the hindrances to intercommunion which existed in the sixteenth century are no longer of any substance. However, this appears to be more wishful thinking than a reality, unless one regards it as a covert surrender on the part of German Lutherans. At any rate, as the Lutherans of Germany face the quadricentennial of the Formula of Concord in 1977, their ranks are so ridden with division over the problem that Leuenberg seems to mean more a Discord than a Concord. Perhaps the Crypto-

Calvinists cannot be confined to the sixteenth century, but still are abroad.

Over against all proposed formulas for uniting Lutherans and Reformed at the Lord's table, together with their well-intentioned declarations that the differences of the sixteenth century have been overcome, one must rid himself of the ambivalent language and return to the fundamental question. The true issue of Marburg in 1529 shall remain unchanged until the partners at the ecumenical discussions resolve this question: Have today's Reformed theologians declared their readiness to surrender the maxim of their forefathers that the finite cannot be grasped by the infinite (*finitum infiniti non capax*)? Until such a concession is made, "agreement" on the sacrament is meaningless, since the sacramental teaching of the Reformed fathers was but the application of their philosophy and their Christology. Whenever clarity on this point is lacking, not only the doctrine of the sacrament is in jeopardy, but also the doctrine of Christ and human salvation. On this matter there can be no yielding.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis; Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), pp. 217f., pp. 266-268.
2. A convenient collection of writers who have explained the Reformation on the basis of material causes is given in Lewis W. Spitz (ed.), *The Reformation: Material or Spiritual?* in *Problems in European Civilization* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1966).
3. The Lutheran reformers did not see themselves as rebels, nor their movement as a revolt. The tendency to see it as such stems either from polemical religious tendencies of their opponents or else from a misguided interpretation of the indulgence controversy in many cases. For a statement of the irenic catholicity of Lutheranism see the Augsburg Confession as a whole and especially the summary following Article XXI: "Tota dissensio est de paucis quibusdam abusibus, qui sine certa autoritate in ecclesias irrepserunt . . ." etc., and asserting agreement with catholic consensus. See also my article, "Erasmus, Luther, and Melanchthon on the *Magnus Consensus*: The Problem of the Old and the New in the Reformation," in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, XXVII, No. 4 (November 1975), pp. 364-381.
4. Without giving special attention to elements of Neo-Platonism in both men, the discipleship of Zwingli to Erasmus is discussed in Joachim Rogge, *Zwingli und Erasmus. Der Friedensgedanken des jungen Zwingli* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1962).
5. In *The Essential Erasmus*, ed. John P. Dolan (New York: The New American Library, 1964), pp. 28-93; abbreviated hereafter as EE. The *Diatriba* is cited according to Johannes V. Walter's paragraphing.
6. *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Harper, 1968), pp. 110-111.
7. Werner Elert, *Der Ausgang der altkirchlichen Christologie* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1957), pp. 37-43.
8. Werner Elert, "Über die Herkunft des Satzes *Finitum infiniti non capax*," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, XVI (1939-40), p. 502. Elert's reference to the appearance of the *exō* in the Sixteenth Century is, of course, an allusion to Calvin's *Extra-Calvinisticum*, namely, that in the incarnation not all of the Son became man; thereby at the death on Good Friday, the Holy Trinity was not rendered incomplete. Convenient as the explanation of Calvin may have been, it leaves part of the Son as *Deus absconditus* and relativizes the fulness of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself.