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Eucharist then, Scripture now: How Evangelicals can Learn from an Old Controversy

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OVER the past 15 years or so, it seems that the 'battle for the Bible' has evolved in such a way that *within Evangelicalism* one can discern the emergence of a conservative group, a moderate sector and a liberal constituency that vaguely resembles the parities of the old Fundamentalist era.[1] Expectedly, the three can be partially identified by their respective views on Scripture, whether divine or human traits are emphasized and in what ways. Of course, not all in each category agree with each other and there are always borderline cases, but in terms of allegiance it seems to me that, perhaps subconsciously, evangelicals are more concerned with identifying themselves by who they are *not* rather than who they *are*.

In this essay, I suggest that the pattern of this disagreement and subsequent delineation of parity follows that of many other disagreements in church history. The pattern I have in mind involves the unsuspecting collusion of a painful searching for God in the midst of a changing culture and a concomitant quest for social and ecclesial belonging. These two factors can overwhelmingly compel believers to take positions that are overly rigid and unusually insistent. This is how many have learned to avoid being 'guilty by association'. Unaffected by spiritual disquiet or social displacement, believers might otherwise pursue more nuanced positions, but burdened by these pressures, nuance can easily give way to a preoccupation with niceties. A simplistic description of contemporary intra-church disputes

1 'Liberal' evangelicals have called themselves the 'Evangelical Left' or 'Post-Evangelical'. Likewise, some liberals have moved on to become 'Post-liberals'.

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illustrates the pattern: Fundamentalists do not want to be mistaken for moderates; moderates for liberals or fundamentalists; liberal evangelicals for either of the others, even though, theoretically, all comprise the same body of Christ. Such concern over self-identification may stem from many factors, but charitably we proffer the widespread belief that 'one's fellowship is indicative of where one's heart is'.[2]

To help understand this pattern, it may prove helpful to compare the current situation with a controversy that arose during the Reformation over the Eucharist. That the Eucharist meal from its very institution would be a perpetual source of division amongst and within Christian churches is evident as early as Paul's attempt to explain the meal in his first letter to the Corinthians. As many church historians have remarked, the ramifications of the fact that the Lord Jesus had never given his followers a prescriptive manual for church government, practice and discipline continue to beleaguer Christendom. To this day, a variety of opinions persist regarding the Lord's Supper with respect to its status as a sacrament, its purpose, its efficacy, its frequency, its manner of presentation and distribution, its constituency (i.e., who can rightfully partake), and so on. Although it is difficult to apprehend adequately the differences between the times of the Reformation and the present, we shall revisit one side of the Eucharist controversy—that which centres upon Martin Luther—in an attempt to gain some perspective on squabbles that persist even today over the place and nature of Scripture and, more importantly, the need to discriminately identify believers.

1. A Medieval Harbinger

It is fascinating to observe how concern over what can or cannot be believed is always at least tacitly defined by what competing groups believe or disavow. Personal spiritual predicaments and socio-ecclesial relations have an often underappreciated impact upon what Christians believe. Martin Luther's view of the real presence in the Lord's Supper proves no exception when examined in light of his painful existential plight, his consequential insistence upon the Word and the socio-political order that were for him embodied in the rival views of the Roman church and those of the other Reformers. Perhaps, the most peculiar feature of Luther's Eucharistic view is better understood through medieval categories.

The Lutheran view of the Eucharist is known as consubstantiation. The *Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology* defines 'consubstantiation' as 'the coexistence of the Real Presence of Christ's Body and blood and the bread and wine'.[3] However, *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* points out that definitions such as these are

2 B. Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage: A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), p. 108.

3 John Henry Blunt, editor, *Dictionary of Doctrinal and Historical Theology* (London, Oxford and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1871), p. 151.

incorrect, or at best misleading, insofar as they might imply that it is *upon consecration* that the elements are joined with the Real Presence. *The Encyclopedia* clarifies that only upon reception does the joining occur.[4] This idea of consubstantiation is sometimes associated with Martin Luther himself. Although one might be tempted to view Luther in light of modern day Evangelical Lutheranism, it will prove more helpful to trace the contours of the argument from the other direction.

In the ninth century C.E. there was a dispute involving two Benedictine monks at Corbie. One monk, Radbertus, had written a book that explicitly argued that 'through the consecration of his sacrament by his invisible power, [God] effects (*operatur*) in the substance of the bread and wine the flesh and blood of Christ'.[5]

As Everett Ferguson has pointed out, throughout the early church two main strands of thought with regard to the Eucharist had coincided without apparent conflict.[6] Ferguson considers Ambrose and Augustine to be representatives of the two dominant understandings of the Lord's Supper in the early church: the former emphasized an actual 'metabolism' and the latter focused upon symbolism. Without subjecting Ferguson's interpretation of the history of this sacrament to scrutiny,[7] it can be granted that Radbertus sought 'to combine the religious conceptions of the church at large with the theory of Augustine'.[8] In other words, Radbertus conjoined metabolism and symbolism. He asserted that there was a reality present in the elements, the reality of the body of Christ, and that 'this body is in substance the same body in which Christ was born, suffered, rose from the dead, and which he still possesses in heaven'.[9] At the same time, Radbertus emphasized that the elements of the sacrament were symbols of a greater reality in that although the bread and the wine never cease to appear, feel and taste like bread and wine, a spiritual effect is exacted:[10]

> They are called sacraments either because they are secret in that in the visible act divinity inwardly accomplished something secretly through the corporeal appearance, or from the sanctifying consecration, because the Holy Spirit, remaining in the body of Christ,

4 J. Bodensieck, editor, *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965).

5 *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* 3.4 as cited in R. Seeburg, *The History of Doctrines*, 2.41.2, (trans. Charles E. Hay; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978).

6 'The Lord's Supper in Church History: The Early Church Through the Medieval Period' in *The Lord's Supper: Believers Church Perspectives* (ed. Dale R. Stoffer; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1997), pp. 21-45.

7 See, e.g, Thomas Cajetan's nuanced perspective in 'Errors on the Lord's Supper—Instruction for the Nuntio, 1525' in *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy* (ed. and trans. Jared Wicks; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1978), pp. 153-173, p. 172.

8 Seeburg, *History*, 2.41.2.

9 Seeburg, *History*, 2.41.2, citing *De Corpore* 1.2; 4.3; 21.9.

10 This view later developed into the metaphysical theory of transubstantiation.

> latently accomplishes for the salvation of the faithful all these mystical sacraments under the cover of things visible.[11]

We should point out here that, among other things, Radbertus' two emphases introduce an underlying tension between the ordinary workings of the natural world and the extraordinary workings of the divine realm.[12] The tension was such that another monk, Ratramnus, who was from the same order, was asked to respond to Radbertus' theory.[13] Ratramnus isolated two points in his response. He addressed the manner in which Christ was present in the sacrament and the relation between his presence in the Eucharist and his historical presence in his earthly body.

Radbertus, as we saw above, identifies Christ's presence in the sacrament with his historical, earthly body. Ratramnus, for his part, agreed with Radbertus insofar as he (Radbertus) held that the Lord's Supper 'exhibits one thing outwardly to the human sense and proclaims another thing inwardly to the minds of the faithful'.[14] This distinction in Ratramnus' mind, however, called for a further distinction between the body of Christ as it was present in the elements and the historical body of Christ that actually walked the earth. On this latter point the two Benedictine monks differed in their opinions.

The outcome of the dispute[15] is of less interest to us here than the observation that there were competing understandings of the relation between an ordinary natural world in which things happen in accord with a certain order and an extraordinary divine realm in which the given order of things can be superseded. This is not to suggest that medieval theologians (or the Reformers) entertained some version of naturalism *vis-à-vis* supernaturalism, but the observation does broach an ongoing discussion concerning the relation between what was later brought to the fore by Gabriel Biel in terms of God's *potentia absoluta* and God's *potentia ordinata*.[16] As Oberman points out, these terms became formative in theological discussions begin-

11 *Corp* 3.1, quoted in Ferguson, 'Lord's Supper', p. 36.

12 The present author cannot help but be reminded of the parallel between current day arguments over the place of the human and the divine in Scripture.

13 For a brief overview of the affair, including its broader connections to Carolingian hermeneutics and ecclesiology, see Willemien Otten, 'Carolingian Theology' in *The Medieval Theologians* (ed. G. R. Evans; Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 65-82 of which pp. 73-76 pertain to the present topic. Ratramnus' book, incidentally, had the same title as that of Radbertus.

14 Ratramnus, Corp 9, quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1100)*. The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), pp. 76-77.

15 The dispute had not been as grievous as later theologians, especially the Reformers, have made it out to be. See Otten, 'Carolingian Theology'.

16 See Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

ning with Duns Scotus;[17] however, the concepts were present much earlier and touched upon everything from Christology to Mariology to ecclesiology.[18]

In any event, many of the disputes that broke out later during the Reformation are illuminated by the historical observation that the church had for some time been arguing over how to relate the manner in which God *has chosen* to work with the fact that God *is able* to work in ways other than those which he has chosen.[19] In other words, what does the fact that God *has chosen* to operate in a certain fashion indicate about how God *is able* to operate and what does the fact that God *can* operate in any fashion that he pleases ramify with respect to how God *has* chosen to operate? Or again, in what ways, if any, has God bound himself to do things in accord with the means that he has chosen? And in what ways do God's absolute freedom, authority and power relativise, diminish, or minimize those means by which he has chosen to accomplish his will?

A reader who is familiar with the literature on the Reformation debate over the Eucharist knows that scholarly discussions revolve around the several understandings of symbols and the relations that these have with the realities signified. We have opted to pursue another point of departure in order to connect the Reformation dispute with those among present day evangelicals. The relation of the two orders (*ordinata* and *absoluta*) will provide us with a helpful vantage from which to perform our proposed comparison.[20]

2. Luther's Theological Concerns

As with every doctrinal disputant, Martin Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper cannot be fully understood in isolation from his personal theology, from the political and social climate of the time, or from his personal, existential angst that was effectively dispelled in his 'tower experience'. We shall here briefly outline the Reformer's theology in light of his personal emotional and spiritual struggles. The political and social climate will be considered in the next section.

In 1545, Luther reflected upon a powerful conversion experience that he underwent some twenty-five or so years earlier. He recounts:

> Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God

17 Oberman, *Harvest*, p. 36.

18 See, for example, Pelikan, *Medieval*, pp. 66-80. Oberman (p. 473) mentions that the medievals offered this distinction solely to aid theological discourse and not as an attempt to describe what actually exists.

19 See, for example, St. Anselm's *Why God Became Man* and *On the Incarnation of the Word*.

20 In this way, Pelikan's application of the two orders to the dispute over the virgin birth is very suggestive.

> and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!' Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.[21]

The despair that had overcome Luther during that time was such that although the German monk maintained a very strong belief in God and all that God had purposed to accomplish in the cross of Christ, yet his belief involved a terrible God before whom Luther felt all but condemned. 'For I hated that word, "righteousness of God", which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness… with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.'[22] One can easily detect in these words an intense awareness of God's holiness and righteousness; however, the God that Luther knew was so glorious that the Reformer found himself 'raging with wild and disturbed conscience' over the fact that there seemed to be no hope of sinners escaping his holy wrath.

Luther never lost sight of this holy God, but he did manage to complement his understanding with a second perspective. For example, in Luther's *Table-Talk* appears the following anecdote: 'When one asked, where God was before heaven was created? St. Augustine answered: He was in himself. When another asked me the same question, I said: He was building hell for such idle, presumptuous, fluttering and inquisitive spirits as you.'[23] For Luther, God was the same damning God who so troubled his conscience earlier; however, Luther could now continue:

> After he had created all things, he was everywhere, and yet he was nowhere, for I cannot take hold of him without the Word. But he will be found where he has engaged to be. The Jews found him at Jerusalem by the throne of grace (Exod. xxv). We find him in the Word and faith, in baptism and the sacraments; but in his majesty, he is nowhere to be found.

The majestic God who so troubled Luther earlier is still one who is beyond the reach of sinners; however, Luther had since discerned a way in which God can be known and worshipped by Christians. As Vilmos Vatja points out, Luther believed that

> God indeed is present everywhere, but he cannot be found everywhere,

21 *Luther's Works* 55 Vols. (eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955-76). (*LW*) 34:336-337. Compare *LW* 54:193-194, 308-309. *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther* (trans. William Hazlitt; Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, n.d.)

22 *LW* 34:336.

23 *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther.* (trans. William Hazlitt; Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, n.d.) lxvii. Compare *LW* 54:377. Augustine, in fact, does give Luther's response in *Confessions* 11.12.

> at least not as the God of love and mercy. There is a significant difference between his omnipresence and his 'presence-for-us'. The latter is a presence in the Word. God can be found only where he adds the Word to his work.[24]

It is interesting to note that the same mediatory role that the Word plays in so many of Luther's writings seems to be that which Scripture plays in the writings of contemporary evangelicals. Perhaps, and without being unfair, a difference can be found in that in many ways the incarnated Christ himself and his historical plight played a noticeably stronger role in Luther's theology. For example, in his *Larger Catechism*, Luther explained:

> These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and separate us Christians from all other people upon earth. For all outside of Christianity, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, although they believe in, and worship, only one true God, yet know not what His mind towards them is, and cannot expect any love or blessing from Him; therefore they abide in eternal wrath and damnation. For they have not the Lord Christ, and, besides, are not illumined and favored by any gifts of the Holy Ghost.[25]

According to Luther, those who 'have not the Lord Christ' are subject to God's wrath.[26] In the *Table-Talk*, we read,

> he that does not take hold on Christ by faith, and comfort himself herein, that Christ is made a curse for him, remains under the curse…for where he is not known and comprehended by faith, there is not to be expected either advice, help, or comfort, though we torment ourselves to death.[27]

Only in relation to Christ could anyone rightfully set aside their fears of God exacting his judgment upon them.[28]

Reminiscent of widespread evangelical belief, Luther's Christ is available only through the Scriptures:

> I know nothing of Jesus Christ but only his name; I have not heard or seen him corporally, yet I have, God be praised, learned so much out of the Scriptures, that I am well and thoroughly satisfied; therefore I desire neither to see nor to hear him in the body.[29]

Thus, we see that the Word, i.e., the Scriptures, takes on for Luther a very

24 *Luther on Worship: An Interpretation* (trans. U. S. Leupold; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 87.

25 Article III.

26 Apparently, Luther counted himself among these until he began to study the book of Romans and the Psalms. See LW 34:336 and also Philip Melancthon, 'The History of the Life and Acts of Luther. 1548', prepared by Dr. Steve Sohmer 1996. Translated by T. Frazel 1995. Cited 10 April 2003. Source: http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/melan/lifec-01.txt

27 *Table-Talk* CCI.

28 For a warm expression of his understanding of Christ's nature, see *Table-Talk* CXXXI.

29 *Table-Talk* CXXXII. Compare XLVIII.

integral role with regard to his relation to Christ.

Since it is impossible to do justice to Martin Luther's understanding of the gospel, not to mention its development throughout the course of his life, in this article, we shall raise only one last point here. The place of the creeds in theological formulation and construction during the history of the church, including the Reformation can hardly be overestimated. It had long been believed in line with the creeds that the life of Christ began when he was born of a virgin and ended when he ascended into heaven. Luther, however, did not see Christ's ascension as the termination of his earthly ministry.[30] He seems to have welcomed the gospel (and, especially, the incarnation) so openly and heartily that he refused to view Christ's ascension as the end of a wonderful ministry that purposed to set sinners free. When the incarnate Christ came into the world, so did the gracious gospel; conversely, if the incarnate Christ were to leave the world, then so would Luther's precious gospel.

After all the life-changing soul-searching that Luther had done, he was not about to let the gospel get away from him, or any of God's people for that matter. He understood that Christ's humanity was crucial to the gospel's validity and efficacy. He also understood that when Christ promised that he would be with his disciples always—even to the end of the age—and that he would be in the midst of two or three that gather in his name, he was not claiming that he would be present in some spiritual way only, but that Christ as incarnate Christ, *the Christ that the disciples knew*, would somehow be there in accordance with his promise.

It must be pointed out that the same anxiety that overtakes Luther at the thought of an Incarnate Christ not being present to him in the sacrament is very similar to that anxiety that seems to overwhelm evangelicals when they consider the thought of an inerrant or infallible Bible not being available to them. The former was not about to relive his Tower Experience; perhaps the latter are not about to give up their own spiritual niche and be swept away by cultural and moral pluralism.

In sum, we have highlighted three salient features found in Martin Luther's personal theology. First, Luther understood that the God of the Bible had determined judgment for all persons and that this judgment could not be averted by humans. Second, he understood that Christ the Lord had brought good news (i.e., the gospel) to the effect that he was making a way for sinners to receive forgiveness of sins and blessings from God. Third, he saw a crucial connection between the duration of the earthly incarnation and the efficacy and availability of the proffered gospel. With these three points in mind we shall review Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper. Certain aspects of his position will be cast in light of his disposition towards his contemporaries and then his doctrine of the real presence will be considered in light of a handful of critics.

30 For this point see, David C. Steinmetz, 'Scripture and the Lord's Supper in Luther's Theology', *Int* 37 (1983) pp. 253-265, p. 262.

3. Luther's View of the Eucharist

As remarked earlier, most studies that investigate the various views of the Lord's Supper that were held during the Reformation typically begin with a discussion regarding theories of signs and how and whether they actually relate to what they signify.[31] The present inquiry, by contrast, will, as far as possible, omit such discussion, intentionally endeavouring rather to detect eventually the relation between God's *potentia ordinata* and God's *potentia absoluta* in Luther's position and in those of his opponents. This will allow our parallel to contemporary disputes. We shall forego, therefore, the customary prefatory introduction.

Socially and politically, it should be said from the outset, Luther initially identified himself over against two groups of people. The first is mentioned early in his writings, for example in his *Letter to Pope Leo X* (1518), and is comprised of corrupt Roman Catholic priests.[32]

> There was just one means which they used to quiet opposition, to wit, the protection of your name, the threat of burning at the stake, and the disgrace of the name 'heretic.' It is incredible how ready they are to threaten, even, at times, when they perceive that it is only their own mere silly opinions which are contradicted… I am not much moved, however, by the fact that they envy me the privilege granted me by the power of your Holiness, since I am unwillingly compelled to yield to them in things of far greater moment, viz., when they mix the dreams of Aristotle with theological matters, and conduct nonsensical disputations about the majesty of God, beyond and against the privilege granted them.[33]

Luther is disgusted with a prevalent misuse and outright abuse of priestly authority along with a disproportioned co-mingling of Aristotelian philosophy and theological construction and reflection.

The second group over against which Luther identified himself was one whom he commonly branded 'Radicals', 'Evangelicals' or 'Heretics'. Perhaps, a genuine fear can be detected in certain of Luther's writings that reveals just how seriously he wished to dissociate himself from this broad and, in his mind, hetero-Christian movement. His rationale is understandable

31 E.g., B. A. Gerrish, 'Discerning the Body: Sign and Reality in Luther's Controversy with the Swiss', *Journal of Religion* 68 (1988): pp. 377-395; J. Stephenson, 'Martin Luther and the Eucharist', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): pp. 447-461; K. R. Craycraft, Jr., 'Sign and Word: Martin Luther's Theology of the Sacraments', *Restoration Quarterly* 32 (1990): pp. 143-164.

32 This group, of course, eventually expanded to include the entire Roman Catholic infrastructure, not least the pope himself.

33 This English translation is taken from Martin Luther, 'Letter to Pope Leo X, Accompanying the "Resolutions" to the XCV Theses 1518' in *Works of Martin Luther* (trans. and eds. Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, et al.; Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), 1:44-48. Cited 10 April 2003 http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/nine5-pope.txt

considering the political associations that attended the more extreme ranks within the group. Martin Luther's volatile relationship with his one-time colleague, Andreas Karlstadt, is well-known.[34] As Euan Cameron writes: 'It is impossible to separate the strife of ideas over the Eucharist from the context and the personalities which produced it.' He continues:

> Luther, already disgusted with Karlstadt because of his precipitate moves in altering worship at Wittenberg and his tactlessness, despised him yet more on this issue. When Luther heard that Karlstadt's ideas were gaining adherents in Switzerland he was at once predisposed to listen no further.[35]

According to Cameron, Luther associated a whole family of ideas pertaining to the Eucharist with Karlstadt. His disdain for the man attached itself to his ideas and, in one fell swoop, extended to all who entertained or promulgated ideas that bore even the slightest semblance to his, whether they had been influenced by him or not. One major reason for this was what culminated in Karlstadt's personal involvement in the Peasants' Revolt of 1524/5. For this uprising and the social and political attitudes that incited it, Luther had nothing but the strongest contempt:

> For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the Gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who, of their own free will, do what the apostles and disciples did in Acts 4 [:32-37]. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others—of Pilate and Herod—should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, want to make the goods of other men common, and keep their own goods for themselves. Fine Christians they are! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure.[36]

Clearly, though, after his return to Wittenberg in 1522, Luther had already begun to despise Karlstadt. Violence, iconoclasm, and extreme mysticism had earlier proved (at least theoretically) appealing to Karlstadt, who had, in Luther's judgment, 'devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all'.[37] Luther's former colleague had allowed a dangerous subjectivism to obscure and gradually overtake his sense of judgment.[38] Karlstadt, of

34 For a brief biography, one might start with Alejandro Zorzin, 'Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486-1541)' in *The Reformation Theologians* (ed. Carter Lindberg; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 327-337.

35 Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 163-4; for Karlstadt's ill-timed reforms, pp. 210-214. See also Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1972), pp. 50-62.

36 *LW* 46:51-52.

37 *LW* 40:83.

38 One example is related in the *Table Talk*: 'Our burgomaster here at Wittenberg lately asked me, if it were God's will to use physic? for, said he, Doctor Carlstad has preached, that whoso falls sick, shall use no physic, but commit his case to God, praying that His will be done.' (DXCIII)

course, was not the only one who had developed and accepted the opinions of the 'radicals' nor was he the most radical.

Others, notably Thomas Muntzer,[39] also emphasized the immediacy of the Christian experience, innovatively stressing individualism, egalitarianism and other mandatory social justices in the name of the Holy Spirit. He asked: 'What possible chance does the common man ever have to welcome the pure word of God in sincerity when he is beset by such worries about temporal goods?'[40] But as it became more and more clear that the followers of these Christian activists had set themselves to the institution of their reforms by violently upsetting the civil and social order, Luther began to associate the leaders' theological schemas with the populace's anarchic activity. His abhorrence of both the former and the latter went hand in hand and often conflated in his mind.

Luther's un-nuanced grouping of his opponents into stark Roman or Radical categories was unfortunate (e.g., identifying a Karlstadt with a Muntzer). Inevitable inconsistency in this regard is evident in his close friendship with Melanchthon, for example. Such black-and-white thinking helped Luther reduce matters in a way that made the theological and political landscape appear naively uncomplicated. For example, Luther writes: 'Anyone who has failed to grasp the faith may thenceforth believe whatever he likes, it makes no difference. Just as when someone is on the point of drowning, whether he drowns in a brook or in the middle of a stream, he is drowned just the same. So I say of these fanatics: if they let go of the word, let them believe whatever they like…' He acknowledges 'that six or seven sects have arisen over the sacrament', but he repeatedly and categorically dismisses them as one.[41]

Luther, then, sought to articulate his understanding of the Eucharist along the trajectory set by his broader theological program. However, his formulation had to bear in mind those that were offered by the two groups mentioned above (the 'papists' and the 'radicals'): the social and political dynamic was such that in order for Luther's Reformation to succeed he could not be mistaken for either group. In other words, Luther was forced in many ways to react to transubstantiation as well as the Radicals' symbolic understanding of the sacrament. The former could be interpreted as the Roman insistence upon the appropriation of Aristotle and the legitimacy and cruciality of the priesthood and papacy; the latter a forthright repudiation of the Word and a devilish desire

39 Karlstadt apparently did not initially endorse Muntzer's radicalism; however, they eventually joined in common cause (at least in a manner of speaking) in the so-called Peasants' War. For an overview of the series of outbreaks, see Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, pp. 202-209.

40 *The Collected Works of Thomas Muntzer* (trans. and ed. Peter Matheson; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), p. 151, cited in Gottfried Seebass, 'Thomas Muntzer (c. 1490-1525)' in *The Reformation Theologians* (ed. Carter Lindberg; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 338-350, p. 346.

41 *LW* 36:336-337; 34:162, 379.

to commune with God immediately and directly, i.e., without the Word (understood as the Scriptures and, of course, Christ) and without priests (understood as any type of church leadership, i.e., anarchy).

Luther, for his part, developed his own theology of the sacraments in keeping with his broader theological emphases, but always in light of his opponents' positions. For example, he complains: 'Now that [Satan] sees he cannot subdue us from the left side, he rushes over to the right side. Formerly he made us too papistic; now he wants to make us too evangelical. But God commanded us many times in the Scriptures to keep on the straight path and not to turn either to the right or to the left.'[42] Interestingly enough, it has been reported that Luther went as far as to say: 'The reading of the Bible would never have lead me to the understanding I have unless I had been instructed by the actions of my adversaries.'[43]

One main point for Luther involved the vital role of the Word in God's dealings with his people. The Radicals claimed that on account of believers' possession of the Holy Spirit, it was not always necessary for the Word to play such a central role in the Christian's life, much less clergymen.[44] For its part, Rome had annexed, centuries before, an entire sacramental system to their understanding of how God mediated Christ to believers, that seemed to relegate the Word to the periphery of Christian worship and living. This had the effect of elevating (even if inadvertently) the position of the priests. For Luther, however, the Word was absolutely crucial to any interaction with God; he also appropriated the Word in a way that sought a balanced role for the ministry of clergymen. It is very important to keep this in mind when discussing any of Luther's beliefs.[45]

Luther, in many religious matters, was content to leave decisions up to individual consciences. For example, though Luther believed that all believers were entitled to partake of both elements of the Eucharist, he thought it fitting neither to compel parishioners to partake of one without the other, nor to require that they partake of both. He only demanded that the church offer both to the laity in order that they could partake in accordance with their conscience. He also appealed to the conscience of a believer with regard to the adoration of the sacrament. This can be seen through his encounter with the Bohemian Brethren, for example.[46] Luther even went so far as to permit churchgoers to retain their beliefs in transubstantiation if they preferred to do so. He writes:

42 *LW* 36:237; Compare 54:43.

43 *LW* 54:274.

44 *LW* 54:97. Of course, not every Radical promulgated this view, but in Luther's mind, a Radical was a Radical.

45 Unfortunately, many scholars tend to preoccupy themselves with Luther's peculiarities with respect to the Eucharist at the cost of his broader theological concern. There are, of course, exceptions, e.g., Thomas J. Davis, '"The Truth of the Divine Words": Luther's Sermons on the Eucharist, 1521-28, and the Structure of Eucharistic Meaning', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999): pp. 323-342.

46 *LW* 36:271-305.

> My one concern at present is to remove all scruples of conscience, so that no one may fear being called a heretic if he believes that real bread and real wine are present on the altar, and that every one may feel at liberty to ponder, hold, and believe either one view or the other without endangering his salvation.[47]

Martin Luther upheld Christian liberty to the greatest extent that he could. He, however, would not tolerate those views of the Eucharist that in some way denied the bodily presence of Jesus Christ.[48] He adamantly insisted: 'So we say, on our part, that according to the words Christ's true body and blood are present when he says, "Take, eat; this is my body."'[49] Luther held this to be no 'minor matter' on which Christians were free to disagree since 'God's Word is God's Word'. Neither reason nor experience could dissuade Luther of his position.

Though he regarded one particular argument to be 'the strongest of them all', Luther could not change his mind even on account of the fact that his doctrine might become 'burdensome to the people' in that 'it is difficult to believe that a body is at the same time in heaven and in the Supper.'[50] Luther believed that 'philosophy understands naught of divine matters' and that reason was 'mere darkness' if not 'in the hands of those who believe'.[51] Difficulty of belief, after all, was not a test of truth. In any event, Luther was always suspicious of a 'spirit [that] will not believe what the Word of God says, but only what he sees and feels'.[52]

In all fairness to Luther, it is improper to focus exclusively or even predominantly on Luther's understanding of the bodily presence of Christ in the bread and the wine.[53] After all, 'up to now I have not preached very much about the first part [what one should believe about the sacrament], but have treated only the second [its proper use], which is also the best part', wrote Luther in 1526.[54] In other words, Luther's understanding of the real presence, though crucial, was not considered by him to be the most significant part of his doctrine and not one with which he would ordinarily occupy himself during preaching. Luther continued: 'But because the first part is now being assailed by many…so that in foreign lands a large number are already pouncing upon it and maintaining that Christ's body and blood are not present in the bread and wine, the

47 *LW* 36:30.

48 Luther's contempt for Zwingli, for example, is famous. While considering how Zwingli had died with weapon in hand, he is reported to have remarked, 'If God saved him [Zwingli], he has done so above and beyond the rule' (LW 54:152).

49 *LW* 37:25.

50 *LW* 37:74-75. See also LW 54:91-92; 54:284.

51 *Table-Talk*, XLVIII; LXXVI. Compare *LW* 54:183-184; 54:377-378.

52 *LW* 40:216.

53 On the other hand, it is understandable since Luther's understanding of the sacrament underwent several changes throughout his career. Yet the real presence is one of the few features that remained constant. Furthermore, it was the real presence against which so many of his critics focused their energies.

54 *LW* 36:335.

times demand that I say something on this subject also.'[55]

In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther's 'first captivity of the sacrament' was the fact that 'the sacrament does not belong to the priests, but to all men'.[56] The second 'captivity' referred to the real presence and 'is less grievous as far as the conscience is concerned'. Luther then claimed that the third 'captivity' (that the mass was a sacrifice) was 'by far the most wicked abuse of all'. Granted, this was one of his earliest works to address the sacrament, yet, as Quere points out, 'even though it changed its place in the structure, the function and power of the Word remained the same' throughout the Eucharistic controversy.[57] It is well known that Luther's view of the Eucharist changed with time. Yet Quere makes a good point: 'While I tend to agree with Althaus that the real presence had no significant theological function in the early 1520s, it might be more accurate to say that it had a clearer place in the new structure in the late 1520s.'[58]

Why did Luther retain the Word as the core of his sacramental theology throughout his career? Because, as we saw above, there is no other way to commune with God but through the incarnate Christ, according to Luther. Or as Davis puts it: 'If one would know God, one must know Christ; what's more, one must know Christ in his humanity.'[59] Therefore, whether Christ's body and blood were considered by Luther (as they were during various times throughout his career) as the sign, the res, the vehicle, or the vessel of the Church's incorporation into the body of Christ and/or of the Church's forgiveness of sins,[60] without the real presence of Christ he would not have been able to teach, for example: 'Here my Lord has given me his body and blood in the bread and wine, in order that I should eat and drink. And they are to be my very own, so that I may be certain that my sins are forgiven, that I am to be free of death and hell, have eternal life, and be a child of God and an heir of heaven.'[61]

This section aimed to show that Luther was heavily influenced by his personal spiritual journey and the positions of rivalling factions as he constructed his Eucharistic theology over the years. It is always easier to see such influences in other people than in ourselves. Therefore, before rendering a brief comparison between the Eucharistic dispute and that amongst evangelicals, let us consider how Luther dealt with certain competing arguments.

55 *LW* 36:335. This particular work was originally a sermon. Luther's absolute insistence upon the real presence of Christ in the sacrament is demonstrated, for example, in his inordinacy on the subject during the ecumenical venture of Philipp of Hesse (1529).

56 *LW* 36:27, written 1520.

57 R. W. Quere, 'Changes and Constants: Structure in Luther's Understanding of the Real Presence in the 1520's', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985): pp. 45-76, p. 75.

58 Quere, 'Changes and Constants', p. 74. See also, Davis, 'Luther's Sermons'.

59 Davis, 'Luther's Sermons,' p. 338. He continues, 'There is no other God for us, Luther stated, than the one who comes in "swaddling clothes".'

60 Quere, 'Changes.'

61 *LW* 36:350-351.

4. Luther's Critics' Chief Argument

The controversies in which Luther found himself enmeshed primarily arose on account of how he could hold that the elements of the sacrament are both the body and blood of Christ and the bread and wine at the same time. We have endeavoured to show that though this was crucial for Luther it did not comprise the core of his teaching of the Eucharist. Nevertheless, the real presence had achieved such attention from his opponents that he contended fiercely for its validity as more and more theologians inveighed against him. We shall consider here what Luther deemed the 'strongest [argument] of all': it was a burden to the people.

That the real presence of Christ is too difficult for the ordinary person to believe is indeed the chief argument against Luther, especially given his sensitivity to the consciences of believers. The argument is actually a family of arguments that regards the belief's affront to simple, everyday reasoning. One version of the argument that Luther credits to 'the subtle Wycliffe and the sophists' maintains 'that two distinct beings cannot be one, nor can one being be confused with the other'.[62] Another, quoted earlier, complained of the difficulty in believing that Christ was both in heaven (at the right hand of the Father) and on earth (in the bread) at the same time. We shall examine these criticisms in light of the concepts of God's *potentia ordinata* and his *potentia absoluta,* introduced above.

Whether a theologian would charge another that his belief in the real presence is absurd could be said to depend in great measure on that theologian's understanding of the relation between God's *potentia ordinata* and his *potentia absoluta*. An interesting question to ask is what did a particular theologian seem to think with regard to what God could do (but did not opt to do) and what God did do. For example, Cajetan explained:

> It is first clear that in the words 'This is my body,' the pronoun 'this' indicates neither the bread nor the body of Christ, since an indication of the bread would go against the truth of what is. Then the sense would be that this, this bread, is my body—which is patently false. This bread is not the body of Christ, neither at the end of the words, nor afterwards, nor before, since bread is never the body of Christ. However, once the sacrament is confected and while it continues to be, it is true that what was bread is the body of Christ. Nonetheless it is never true that bread is the body of Christ.[63]

Cajetan's wording is very interesting. Luther's understanding of the Eucharist is not 'absurd' (as Zwingli charged) but rather 'goes against the truth of what is'. Perhaps Cajetan is intimating that since God can do all

62 *LW* 37:299.

63 'Errors on the Lord's Supper—Instruction for the Nuntio, 1525' in *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy* (ed. and trans. Jared Wicks, S.J.; Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1978), pp. 153-173, p. 166.

things,[64] the Lutheran sacramental view is not impossible for God: it is simply not the way that God has chosen to constitute the sacrament.

Zwingli, by way of contrast, may[65] have considered Luther's version of the real presence as logically impossible and therefore without both God's *potentia ordinata* and his *potentia absoluta*. Zwingli might have thought along these lines:

> [I]f the finite humanity of Christ is at the right hand of God, then it cannot be in the eucharistic elements. Christ stands at the right hand of God to intercede for the church. But if he is there, he cannot be here. *It is not possible for a finite body to be in two places at the same time*.[66]

Oecolampadius seems to have reasoned in a similar fashion. Against him, Luther writes:

> Since God can do more than we understand, we must not say without qualification, simply on the basis of our own deduction and opinion, that these two propositions are contrary to each other: Christ's body is in heaven, and in the bread. For both are God's words.[67]

It is apparent, at least from Luther's vantage, that Oecolampadius' stumbling block was his misidentification of the real presence as a logical impossibility and therefore without God's *potentia absoluta*.

Luther, for his part, saw the matter very differently. In fact, Luther argued not only that the real presence was within God's *potentia absoluta*, but that given the way that Christ was able to appear at will where he willed upon his resurrection, [68] the real presence was indeed within God's *potentia ordinata*. How does one distinguish between what God *did* do and what God *can* do: that is a big part of the question. Not only that, but what *others* think about it is perhaps an even bigger part of the question. Without denying the primacy given to arguments from Scripture to each of these theologians, the relation of God's *potentia ordinata* and his *potentia absoluta* with respect to the Eucharist and also with respect to the positions held by opponents played important roles in the continual formulation of Luther's position on the Eucharist.

5. Application

It was said above that we would not occupy ourselves here with arguments over the relation between 'signs' and 'signifieds'. Rather, we took great

64 In other words, this need not entail a logical contradiction. For the medieval resolution of the apparent contradiction that attends the real presence, see Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, pp. 271-280; Steinmetz, 'Scripture and the Lord's Supper', pp. 260-261.

65 Though see *LW* 37:156; 37:171.

66 Steinmetz, 'Scripture and the Lord's Supper', p. 260 (emphasis mine).

67 *LW* 37:276. Luther sees no contradiction 'just as it is no contradiction that Christ sat with his disciples after his resurrection, Luke 24 [:44], and yet at the same time was not with them, as he himself says, 'These things I spoke to you, while I was still with you.' Here we find 'with you' and 'not with you,' and yet there is no contradiction…'

68 Steinmetz, 'Scripture and the Lord's Supper', p. 261; Compare *LW* 54.92-93.

pains to incorporate arguments over the relation between God's *potentia ordinata* and his *potentia absoluta*. In this way, the above account may prove relevant to current disputes over the nature of Scripture.

Could God arrange for a Scripture without error? Would not most evangelicals—even the most liberal say, 'Yes, there must have been a way for God to do that'.[69] There is not much dispute here on this question among evangelicals. Did God inspire Scripture in this way? The answers to this question are what divide. 'Yes, I think he did' might be said to be the answer of both fundamentalists and moderates. The difference between them can be explained by virtue of whether God's doing so was on account of his *potentia ordinata* or his *potentia absoluta*. Fundamentalists would categorize the inspiration of Scripture with the former and moderates with the latter. Liberals, for their part—perhaps not all—would answer, 'No, though he might have done things this way, he did not choose so to inspire the Scriptures.'

Viewed in this way, the break among the three camps is not as severe as commonly depicted since all answer, 'Yes', to the first question. That said, on account of the personal and spiritual journeys which colour discussions and decisions bearing upon the topic of Scripture, it may not prove easy to live comfortably with these familial resemblances. For example, fundamentalists may be so scared of what they categorically denounce as 'liberalism' that they refuse any (or allow only limited) interaction with either of the other two camps, even though they are both evangelical. Moderates, on the other hand, may not be taken seriously by either of the other two groups, being mistaken by the others for that camp that lies on the opposite end of the spectrum. Lastly, so many 'post-evangelicals' happen to be former moderate evangelicals or former fundamentalists—non-evangelical liberals incidentally often fall into this category—and have no desire for any thing that even smells of the burdens of their pasts.

Surely there is much to learn from the Eucharist controversy by way of how intra-church disputes unfold. To believe that 'whatever the Bible ultimately says is what I believe'—irrespective of whether it was the predominant rhetoric of the Reformers—does not wholly describe the motivation and rationale for why Luther believed what he did. To believe that Luther was true to this sort of creed is a mistake that bespeaks untold consequences for Christ's church. Evangelicals should go further and consider that if it was not the case that 'whatever the Bible ultimately says is what I believe' for Luther, it most certainly is not the case among evangelicals. In precisely the same manner, evangelicals can be influenced to believe certain things on account of other deeply held religious beliefs, political and socio-ecclesial pressures, and personal, existentially relevant issues. May God grant grace to his churches as we try to live with ourselves!

69 Contemporary crusades against 'methodological naturalism' or the older, 'secular humanism' may overlook the fact that many Christians, evangelical and otherwise, are often very willing to concede that God *could* have done things a certain way; he simply chose not to do so.