

A Review of Article VII of the Formula of Concord

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The lands of the Reformation from 1530-1580 saw a young church body struggle in its infancy. Hundreds of years of tradition were being challenged. Long-standing doctrines of the church were being questioned. It was a time marked by political intrigue, confrontation, and attempts at compromise. Yet through these shark-infested waters, by the grace of God, the Lutheran Church moved forward.

Prior to this time, although the church still struggled, one knew who the enemies were. There were two systems of belief: the Church of Rome with its rules taught by men versus the followers of Martin Luther and their emphasis on the truth of Scripture. But after the signing of the Augsburg Confession in 1530 (and even more so after Luther's death in 1546), it became increasingly difficult to figure out just whose "side" everyone was on. Before, the attacks had come from outside Lutheran circles; now they came from within.

The purpose of this paper is to review Article VII of the Formula of Concord. We will review the chief controversy itself, the historical events that led to the writing of this article and the individuals who played significant roles. We will marvel at how God kept his word true, in spite of attempts by many to bring it down. And finally, we hope to discuss the impact this article has on the church today.

The Chief Controversy

Article VII of the Formula of Concord deals with the Lord Supper. The Lutheran Church, led by Luther, correctly taught the Doctrine of Real Presence. We believe and confess that Christ's body and blood are really present together with the bread and wine. We base our belief on the Word of God. We have the words of institution, (Jesus said) "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26,27; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19,20; 1 Corinthians 11:24,25).

We believe that in the Lord's Supper we receive four elements: bread, wine, Christ's body, and blood. The Apostle Paul makes this quite clear when he writes, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Luther himself went on to write:

Let a hundred thousand devils, with all the fanatics, rush forward and say, "How can bread and wine be Christ's body and blood?" Still I know that all the spirits and scholars put together have less wisdom than the divine Majesty has in his little finger. Here we have Christ's word, "Take, eat; this is my body." "Drink of it, all of you, this is the new covenant in my blood," etc. Here we shall take our stand and see who dares to instruct Christ and alter what he has spoken. It is true, indeed, that if you take the Word away from the elements or view them apart from the Word, you have nothing but the ordinary bread and wine. But if the words remain, as is right and necessary, then in virtue of them they are truly the body and blood of Christ. For as we have it from the lips of Christ, so it is; he cannot lie or deceive. (Large Catechism, 1529)¹

¹ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, 1529.

Luther also wrote, “Of the sacrament of the Altar we hold that bread and wine in the Supper are the true body and blood of Christ, and are given and received not only by the godly, but also by wicked Christians” (Smalcald Articles, Article VI, 1537).²

Luther also spoke and wrote extensively about the errors in the Church of Rome in their teaching of transubstantiation—the belief that the bread and wine “change” into Christ’s body and blood. He spoke and wrote against the veneration of the host, only giving the lay people one of the elements (bread) in the Lord’s Supper, etc.

Luther also spoke and wrote against the new doctrine, as taught by Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), the founder of the Swiss Reformed Church. Zwingli said that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper merely represented or symbolized Christ’s body and blood. Luther publicly refuted Zwingli’s teachings at the Colloquy of Marburg, 1529. He was not, however, able to lead Zwingli to see his error.

The Lutheran Church boldly confessed its acceptance of the scriptural teaching of the Lord’s Supper in the Augsburg Confession (1530). Philip Melanchthon wrote in Article Ten, “It is taught among us that the true body and blood of Christ are really present in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine and are there distributed and received. The contrary doctrine (transubstantiation) is therefore rejected.”³ This belief was reaffirmed in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531).

A Fifty-Year Struggle (1530-1580)

Prior to the writing of the Augsburg Confession, it was self-evident that there was disagreement among Catholics, Lutherans and the Reformed in regard to Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. Each knew where the others stood on the subject, but the confession also marked the beginning of a fifty-year struggle that began within the Lutheran Church and spread to the Reformed. The two individuals who were mainly responsible were Philip Melanchthon and John Calvin.

John Calvin was born July 10, 1509 in Noyon, France. He began his studies in Paris in 1523. He was a well-educated man, becoming a Doctor of Laws in 1533. Because of his growing humanistic beliefs, he broke from the Church of Rome. As he began to publish his beliefs, he often found himself on the run, traveling from city to city seeking safe haven. In August of 1535, he published the first edition of his famous work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This proved to be a work in progress as five more editions were added. Eventually he found a home in Geneva where he was invited to stay and serve the gospel with the pen. From 1541 until his death in 1564, he ruled Geneva with an iron hand.⁴ He is considered to be the founder of the Reformed Church in France.

Calvin was greatly influenced by the German reformation. By this time, Luther had already fought many of his great battles. Calvin had, no doubt, read most of Luther’s great reformation treatises such as *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, *To the Christian Nobility*, *The Bondage of the Will*, his catechisms and his *Great Confession on the Lord’s Supper*. Calvin freely acknowledged his debt to Luther and openly expressed his admiration for him. He called him a “preeminent servant of Christ.” In 1532 or 1540 he signed the Augsburg Confession at Strassburg and was generally considered to be a Lutheran. He did, however, disagree with Luther’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper—not openly at first, for he had signed the Augsburg Confession—but later, when he came more under the influence of Zwingli and Ballinger. He also did not hesitate to ridicule those who believed in the “God in the bread” as Luther did.⁵

Luther also had respect for Calvin although they never met. In a letter addressed to Martin Bucer dated October 14, 1539, he sends respectful greetings to Herrn Johann Sturm and Johann Calvin, “whose books I have

² Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article VI, 1537.

³ Philip Melanchthon, *The Augsburg Confession*, Article X, 1530.

⁴ John J. Sullivan, “Luther versus Calvin’s Teaching,” presented to the Pastoral Conference, Dakota-Montana District at James Valley Ev. Lutheran Church, Jamestown, North Dakota, April 12-14, 1983.

⁵ *Ibid.*

read with special pleasure.” However, Luther was not uncritical of Calvin, as his remark recorded in the *Tischreden* reveals, “Calvin is a learned man, but very suspect of error with regard to the Sacrament. Oh, hear God, keep us in Your Word.”⁶

What Calvin ended up doing was taking the teachings of Zwingli regarding the Lord’s Supper and putting them into words and phrases often used by Lutherans. This proved to be nothing more than a mask. Once unveiled, Calvin’s teachings were nothing more than Zwinglian. But the damage was done. Calvin’s teaching on the sacraments gained respectability and acceptance in much of the Lutheran Church in Germany after Luther’s death. Unbelievably, Wittenberg, the stronghold of Lutheranism, became a headquarters for Calvinistic teachings. And it was Melanchthon who allowed it to happen.⁷

Philip Melanchthon was a tremendous gift to the church. His help during the reformation was invaluable. There is considerable evidence however, that he was also a huge disappointment who brought dissension and discord into the church. Melanchthon was always looking to compromise in order to avoid disunity. He constantly altered his writings as time and circumstances presented themselves.

No doubt, in an effort to bridge the growing gap between Lutherans and Calvinists in regards to the Lord’s Supper, Melanchthon published his *Variata* (altered Augsburg Confession) in 1540. He writes, “Concerning the Lord’s Supper they [that is, the adherents of the Augsburg Confession] teach that with the bread and wine the body and blood of the Lord are truly exhibited to those who eat and drink in the sacrament” (CT: 16). In the context of the controversy, the word exhibited instead of given sounds like an attempt to soft-pedal the real presence.⁸

Although Calvin signed the Augsburg Confession at Strassburg, he would later deny that he was in agreement with the Lutheran teaching of the Lord’s Supper. In 1557, he stated in a letter to Martin Schalling that he had subscribed “in the sense in which the author himself (Melanchthon) has interpreted it,” namely, in the *Variata* of 1540.

Pastor John J. Sullivan wrote a comprehensive paper detailing the teachings of Luther and Calvin. Permit me to quote from the paper a section that does an excellent job of pointing out Calvin’s true teachings.

Calvin did attempt to express his doctrine in Lutheran-sounding terms, but, as Bente writes: “In fact, Calvin’s doctrine was nothing but a polished form of Zwingli’s crude teaching, couched in phrases approaching the Lutheran...terminology as closely as possible. Even where he paraded as Luther, Calvin was but Zwingli disguised (and poorly at that) in a seemingly orthodox garb and promenading with several imitation Lutheran feathers in his hat.”

“In this Sacrament,” Calvin says, “we have such a full witness of all these things (Christ’s blessings), that we must certainly consider them as if Christ here present were Himself set before our eyes and touched by our hands. For His Word cannot lie or deceive us: ‘Take, eat, drink; this is My body, which is given for you; this is My blood, which is shed for forgiveness of sins.’”

This is as close as Calvin comes to the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament. Taken by itself such a statement could be understood to say that we really receive Christ’s body and blood with the bread and wine that we eat and drink in the Supper. But Calvin forbids such an understanding of his words.

The body and blood of the Lord are “represented under bread and wine,” Calvin says. His basic Zwinglianism is in a spiritualized form.

Calvin considered the words of institution to be nothing more than a figure of speech.

He taught that Christ’s body could not be present in the bread because his ascended body was confined to heaven. Calvin wrote, “Peter says that Christ must be received or embraced by heaven until He comes again,” referring to Acts 3:21 — “These men” — the Lutherans — “teach

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James Fricke, *Formula of Concord*, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, p. 62.

that He is everywhere in space but without form. They object that it is wrong for the nature of the glorious body to submit to the laws of common nature.” But, Calvin objects, “it is the true nature of a body to be contained in space, to have its own dimensions and its own shape. Away then, with this stupid fiction which fastens both men’s minds and Christ to the bread.”

Calvin, for all his pious phrases, tried to force the Word of God and the Person of Christ (Article VIII) into the narrow confines of human reason and logic. As a result, he lost the gracious God revealed in Scripture.⁹

Calvin and Philip Melanchthon were on friendly terms. They had met at the colloquies of Frankfurt (1539), Worms (1540) and Regensburg (1541). They corresponded with each other on a number of occasions. Their relationship was so close that Calvin considered he and Melanchthon to be one. In his last *Admonition to Westphal* of 1557, Calvin publicly claimed Melanchthon to be his ally, and implored him to give public testimony “that they [the Calvinists and Zwinglians] teach nothing foreign to the Augsburg Confession.” “I confirm,” Calvin here declared, “that in this course concerning the Lord’s Supper] Philip can no more be torn from me than from his own bowels.”¹⁰

There is little doubt that Melanchthon’s firm belief in real presence as seen in the Augsburg Confession began to falter. The *Variata* opened the door for the “Crypto-Calvinist” debate. His public silence in the following years added more fuel to the fire. He was the one man who could have put this debate to rest. His silence will forever leave him open to conjecture.

The man who led the charge against Calvin’s attempt to push his Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper by using terminology and phrases similar to Lutherans, was Joachim Westphal. In 1552, he wrote a paper entitled, *Medley of Confused and Mutually Dissenting Opinions on the Lord’s Supper, compiled from the books of the Sacramentarians*. The debate continued for several years. But the alarm had been sounded. Soon other orthodox Lutherans joined the fray.

There was a significant setback for the Lutheran cause when Bremen and the Palatinate fell to Calvinism. Shortly thereafter, the elector of Saxony followed suit. Elector August’s chief advisers were secret Calvinists who appeared as genuine Lutherans. They became known as “Philippists” because they had followed the aberrations of Melanchthon. Eventually they were unmasked for what they were. In 1573, a work entitled *Perspicuous and Almost Complete Explanation of the Controversy Concerning the Holy Supper* was published anonymously. The purpose of the work was to banish Lutheranism forever from Saxony.¹¹ The outcry from orthodox Lutherans was enough to finally get the elector’s attention and Lutheranism was restored. Chemnitz, Andreae, and Selnecker became advisors to the elector, who in turn became the leader of the larger movement for settling all of the controversies distracting the Lutheran Church, which finally resulted in the adoption of the formula of Concord in 1580.¹²

Article VII – A Brief Overview

The article begins with a brief explanation of the controversy involved with the Lord’s Supper. The term “Sacramentarians” is given to those who oppose the Lutheran teaching of real presence. It further divides the Sacramentarians into two types. One kind clearly states that the bread and wine represent Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament (Zwinglians). The second kind are those who pretend to believe that Christ’s body and blood are present in the bread and wine but only in a “spiritual” fashion (Calvin).

⁹ John J. Sullivan, “Luther versus Calvin’s Teaching,” presented to the Pastoral Conference, Dakota-Montana District at James Valley Ev. Lutheran Church, Jamestown, North Dakota, April 12-14, 1983.

¹⁰ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 179.

¹¹ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 189.

¹² *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 192.

The article then very clearly outlines the Doctrine of Real Presence. Much of what is said can be understood from the first two statements.

1. We believe, teach, and confess that in the Holy Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and essentially present, and are truly distributed and received with the bread and wine.
2. We believe, teach, and confess that the words of the testament of Christ are not to be understood otherwise than as they read, according to the letter, so that the bread does not signify the absent body and the wine the absent blood of Christ, but that, on account of the sacramental union, they (the bread and wine) are truly the body and blood of Christ.

The Doctrine of Real Presence is difficult to understand, humanly speaking. It is difficult to understand how Christ's body and blood are present in the bread and wine. Human reason suggests that representation makes more sense. The Sacramentarians spent a lot of time and energy trying to prove just that. What they failed to do, however, as Luther pointed out earlier, Jesus didn't say that the bread and wine "change into" Christ's body and blood. Neither did he say that the bread and wine "represent" Christ's body and blood. He said, "Take and eat; this is my body." "This is my blood" (Matthew 26:26,27).

I do not fully understand how Christ's body and blood are present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. My sinful human mind is unable to comprehend that mystery. I do however believe it to be so. The words of institution as recorded in Scripture (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and 1 Corinthians 11) make it quite clear. Paul's reference to four elements being present (1 Corinthians 10:16), as mentioned earlier, support real presence. The danger comes in when the Sacramentarians, or anyone else for that matter, try to make Scripture agree with human reason. I am reminded of a Latin phrase learned at the Seminary, *unis simplex sensus*, "one simple sense." Jesus expressed himself clearly. We are to take his words in the simple sense that they were given.

In an effort to convince the Sacramentarians of their error, the authors appeal to the very thing the Sacramentarians used so liberally—human reason. They make the point that when the Lord's Supper was instituted, does it not stand to reason that Jesus would want to express himself clearly so that his words would not or could not be misconstrued? Think about it. Jesus gave his first disciples and his followers of every age a command that they were to follow. The Lord's Supper continues to be a tremendous blessing that Christ intended for his Church. It offers forgiveness of sins, new life, and salvation. Does it not stand to reason that Jesus would want to express himself in such a way that there can be no doubt?

Other Concerns in a Nutshell

The article maintains that the words of institution are not to be taken figuratively, as the Sacramentarians suggest. The words are not to be omitted but publicly recited.

The article maintains that the body of Christ is present in the bread by the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. The Sacramentarians maintain that Christ's body is contained in heaven and cannot be in more than one place at once.

The article condemns the "Capernaite" idea that Lutherans are eating the body of Christ in a cannibalistic way. It maintains that the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood is done in a supernatural way that defies human comprehension.

The article disagrees with the Sacramentarian teaching that only the worthy recipients actually receive Christ's body and blood (although they maintain in a "spiritual" sense). The unworthy recipient receives nothing more than bread and wine. The article maintains that Christ's body and blood are truly received in the sacrament by both worthy and unworthy. The worthy—for their blessing. The unworthy—for their judgment.

The article also touches on several concerns of the Catholic mass. Included is the rejection of the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, the veneration of the host, that it is the word of the presiding minister that

causes the bread and wine to change into Christ's body and blood, and the practice of only giving the bread to the laity. All such false teachings are rejected.

Article VII of the Formula of Concord—As It Applies To Today

As I began my study of this article, it necessitated a review of the Doctrine of Real Presence. This proved to be a blessing. We can only thank God that he has preserved his word of truth. We thank God for those who recognized the false doctrine being taught, spoke out against it, defended the truth of Scripture, and restored Lutheranism to its former position. We can only thank God that her 150 years the WELS has taught the Doctrine of Real Presence as revealed in Scripture. Knowing that Christ's body and blood are really present in the bread and wine is my personal assurance that he died for me, my sins have been forgiven, and that I now have the promise of eternal life.

Unfortunately, the Doctrine of Real Presence is not grasped by all of Christianity. The doctrines of Transubstantiation and Representation continue to be taught as truth in heterodox churches. But at least we know where these church bodies stand. Our greater threat continues to come from within the Lutheran Church itself. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has gained headlines as of late with their overtures to the Roman Catholics and their practice of altar fellowship, as well as their joint declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Just like the Sacramentarians within the Lutheran Church of the 16th century, these Lutherans of today have confused many and led them to stray from the truth of Scripture. Some who speak heretically are easy to spot. But when fellow Lutherans use terminology and phrases similar to ours, but speak from a different spirit, it becomes much more difficult not only to spot errors, but to refute them. And it doesn't have to be just in the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper, but in anything. "Oh, hear God, keep us in your word!"

The more I studied this article, the more I kept coming back to our practice of "close" or "closed" communion. What a blessing it is to commune with those who believe as we do! Every time we come to the Lord's altar, we share a common belief that Christ's body and blood are really present in the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. We have the opportunity to enjoy mutual encouragement. At the same time, we have the opportunity to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), to those who are not in agreement with us. We do not want someone to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner and bring judgment on themselves. As Paul said, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27).

As called servants of Christ, we have been given the charge to "hold to all of his teachings" (John 8:31,32). We are the ones who have been called to be faithful. We have been given a trust (1 Corinthians 4:2). Therefore may we continue to pray that the Holy Spirit might open our hearts and minds and keep us in the truth of God's word not only for those we serve now, but also for future generations. May God grant it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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