

# Examining Luther's And Zwingli's Understanding Of The Lord's Supper: A Theological Evaluation

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## **Abstract**

*Luther's and Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper is the main focus that forms the framework of this research. Before the Reformation, several divergent views had been expressed among scholars to resolve the controversy over the substance of the Lord's Supper. However, in the Marburg debate between Luther and Zwingli, the doctrine met the needed consideration in scholarship. Using a content analysis approach, the current study performed a comparative evaluation of the theology of Luther and Zwingli concerning the Lord's Supper. The purpose of the study is to compare and evaluate the views of the reformers, namely, Luther and Zwingli on the Lord's Supper, and to examine their influence on the theological enterprise and Christian denominations as a whole. Theologically, the study has revealed that the words of Jesus "This is my Body" should not be viewed in the context of its literal sense, but rather in a symbolic or figurative sense. The body of Christ has been crucified once for humanity and it makes no sense for Christ to be crucified again at the Lord's Supper. This can be discerned from the words of Jesus Christ "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). This fixes the biblical doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Thus, the bread is a figure (sign), which points to the death of Christ. Therefore, Christians celebrate this ordinance to commemorate the death of Christ. Significantly, the paper contributes to the ongoing exploration of the Lord's Supper, fostering a deeper understanding of its theological meaning and significance in contemporary theological discourse*

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## **I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The sixteenth century was a period marked by varied discussions on the major dogmas of the Church. The Reformation challenged the Western Catholic Church's hegemony over certain belief systems, which were considered non-biblical, papal supremacy, and clerical corruption. One of the sacraments that the Reformation confronted was the Eucharist. The Eucharist was a Christian commemorative ceremony of Christ's death (Luke 22:19),<sup>2</sup> which became a divisive debate among the reformers. The reformers abandoned the Catholic theory of *transubstantiation*, which designates a belief that upon the priest's consecration, the substance of the *Eucharist* is mysteriously changed into Christ's physiological bodily flesh.<sup>3</sup> The reformers, in contrast, denied this theory as non-scriptural and mystical. However, they [reformers] were divided among themselves concerning the substance of the Holy Communion.

In 1529, at Marburg, the reformers, namely, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli<sup>4</sup> met for the first time to resolve the theological controversies surrounding the Lord's Supper. Both Luther and Zwingli had divergent views concerning the substance of the Lord's Supper. This study elucidates the concept of the Lord's Supper in the theology of Luther and Zwingli. The study will further explore where the two theologians differed in their theological perspectives on the subject under discussion and where they concurred. What were their respective theological positions? These questions seem to have received not much attention from scholars, thus, it remains a theological conundrum that calls for further probing. Thus, the paper intends to compare Luther's and Zwingli's concepts of the Lord's Supper to ascertain its significance for the church today. This study will form part of the ongoing discussion regarding the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extract from Master thesis I did with the Theological Seminary of the Adventist University of Africa, Kenya.

<sup>2</sup> All the Bible references are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 130-133.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin could not attend this meeting because of ailment.

The study is mainly a comparative analysis. This research employed a critical content evaluation of the writings of Luther and Zwingli on the Lord's Supper to understand the underlying concepts of their theology of the Lord's Supper and to further decipher their point of departure or convergence. The information for this research was obtained by the use of relevant scholarly materials such as books, articles, journals, periodicals, and other relevant internet sources.

### **The Communion Service in the Reformation**

The significance of the Lord's Supper in both theological beliefs and practical observance is paramount when examining the Reformation's historical development.<sup>5</sup> Gordon A. Jensen asserts that the dispute surrounding the Lord's Supper was the "vulnerable point of the Reformation."<sup>6</sup> It was an era pregnant with experiments and change among the Reformers over the Catholic doctrine of the 'Real Presence of Jesus Christ, called *Transubstantiation*. In other words, this Catholic belief was subjected to a lot of change and modifications. Its nature appears to be both political and theological.

The attempt of the Reformers to shape the biblical meaning and purpose of their understanding of the Lord's Supper evolved progressively during this period, though they never agreed on a common position because of their theological perspectives and presuppositions. Martin Luther, following the Augustinian belief about the Lord's Supper, emphasized that faith centers around the idea that the Lord's Supper is a divine gift and a sacred gathering where believers come together in fellowship with Christ and one another.<sup>7</sup> He further argues for the literal interpretation of the words of Jesus, "This is my body". Luther in "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" condemns the notion of *concomitance*, thus the Church's position of denying and withholding the cup from the laity (common people), and the administration of the Lord's Supper in one kind.<sup>8</sup> He unequivocally stressed the need that the cup be drunk by all and not the priests only since Jesus gave it to all his disciples, hence its theological significance is salvation for all sinful human beings. Again, in "The Babylonian Captivity" Luther rejected the Church's position of transubstantiation and argued for the view called consubstantiation. He maintains that the body of Christ exists within, alongside, and beneath the substance of the bread.<sup>9</sup>

Philip Melancthon seems to agree with Luther. He emphasizes that "in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the physical body and blood of Christ is concealed beneath the outward elements of bread and wine."<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Zwingli contends that the elements are just signs and symbols, which theologically represent the spiritual truths or blessings that the believer receives through faith.

Notwithstanding, John Calvin seems to disagree with Luther and Zwingli. He distinguished himself from the traditional position of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the Lutheran view of consubstantiation, and Zwingli's symbolic or memorial approach to the Lord's Supper. He seems to maintain an intermediate position between Luther and Zwingli and tries to emphasize the real, though spiritual, presence of the Lord's Supper. Calvin further explains that the act of the Lord's Supper is an expression of God's gracious gift to man, and a divinely appointed means to strengthen the faith of the believer.<sup>11</sup> It appears that Calvin suggests Christ's spiritual presence experienced in the Lord's Supper,<sup>12</sup> though the elements remain unchanged. The above contributions of the reformers appear to suggest that each has his presupposition and perspective on the Lord's Supper, yet never agreed.

### **At Marburg in 1529**

The reformers could agree on so many things except on the issue of the Lord's Supper. This controversy led to the meeting of the reformers at Marburg in the year 1529. This was the first time the reformers met to resolve this theological issue and also to have a united front to protest against the Catholic

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<sup>5</sup> Collins D. Smith, "The Sacramental Theology of the Reformers," accessed March 2016, <http://www.colindsmith.com/papers/The%20Sacramental%20Theology%20of%20the%20Reformers.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon A. Jensen, "Luther and Bucer on the Lord's Supper," in *The Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, eds. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970), 127-131.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Three Treatises*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Kiesler, in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 602.

<sup>11</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 646.

<sup>12</sup> Allison, *Historical theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 653.

Church. Present were Luther, Zwingli, Philip Melancthon, Johannes Oecolampadius, and many others.<sup>13</sup> The German theologian Luther met in a heated argument with the Swiss reformer, namely Zwingli on the substance of the Lord's Supper.<sup>14</sup>

## II. Martin Luther's Theology of the Lord's Supper

According to Christian Helmer, Luther's Theology of the Lord's Supper has for several centuries been understood in the context of the German protestant perspective.<sup>15</sup> As a "paradigmatic reformer," says Helmer, Luther's significance extends beyond the confines of 16th-century Catholic doctrines about the Lord's Supper, encompassing geographical, theological, and historical limitations. His legacy catalyzes autonomy in a global setting.<sup>16</sup> Luther understood the theology of the Lord's Supper as *Consubstantiation*, a view that the divine real presence of Christ is present in, under, and with the elements. To explain his concepts, Luther integrates his position of the Lord's Supper in the context of three major areas, that is, *sign, significance, and faith*.<sup>17</sup>

Speaking of the communion as a sign, Luther believes that the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper was co-existent and as a result, it enjoins with the Bread and the Wine. Undeniably, this presence is because Christ possesses a divine attribute—omnipresence and, therefore, He could be *ubiquitous* (everywhere and in many places at a time), including the Lord's Supper. This presence of Christ found in the bread and the wine helps the communicants reflect on the life and passion of Christ and also motivates them to understand their personal experience as sinners. Luther seems to suggest that in the participation of communion, the communicants understand all are part of a unified spiritual body of Christ. Therefore, receiving the bread and the wine may mean nothing else than to receive a *sign* of fellowship and union with Christ when all saints gather at the table.

Secondly, the *efficacy* of the Lord's Supper should be interpreted considering Luther's understanding of sin, human fallen nature, and despondency. Thomas Aquinas contends that individuals openly admitting their sins should be prohibited from partaking in the sacrament of the Lord's table.<sup>18</sup> This appears that only those who are in the right relationship with the Lord deem it fit to come to the Lord's Table and receive the Lord's grace.

On the contrary, Luther unequivocally explained this in his *Works and Theology of the Eucharist*. In this book, he expresses that: "Though I am a sinner and I have fallen, though this or that misfortune has befallen me, nevertheless I will go to the *sacrament* to receive a sign from God that I have on my side Christ's righteousness, life, and sufferings."<sup>19</sup> The nature of sin was clearly defined and dealt with in the entire theology of Luther. He argues that sin besets us as long as we live.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, Luther posits that the ordinance of the Lord's Supper is to offer grace to the participants and to bring them in contact with Christ for eternal fellowship.<sup>21</sup> The above statement appears to mean, that since we all fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), there is a need for all sinners to come to the Lord's Table for strength and encouragement against sin. Even though Luther does not offer any direct answer as to how everyone can participate in the Lord's Supper, he does well to offer a positive approach towards the Lord's Table where everyone can find solace to participate in the Lord's Supper.

The third aspect of Luther's theology, which is so consequential in the Lord's Supper, is *faith*. Faith, for Luther, is one's existential trust in the person of Christ, an attitude often borne out of the believer's suffering or guilty consciousness.<sup>22</sup> In his assertion, faith is affirmed, and the believer is encouraged to trust in Christ's ability to overcome the conflict of sin when the believer sincerely comes to the Lord's Table.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the

<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Marburg Colloquy," accessed 25 July 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Colloquy-of-Marburg>.

<sup>14</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Marburg Colloquy," accessed 25 July 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Christine Elmer, "Introduction to Luther's Theology in Global Context," accessed March 12, 2016, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227679772> Introduction to Luther's Theology in Global Context.

<sup>16</sup> Christine Helmer, "Introduction to Luther's Theology in Global Context."

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works (LW)*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1960), 103.

<sup>18</sup> Dan A. Botica, "The Eucharist in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin," accessed 28 July 2016, <http://www.emmanuel.ro/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/P-8.2-2010-Dan-Aurelian-Botica-The-Eucharist-in-the-Theology-of-Martin-Luther-and-John-Calvin.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, 55.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> J. I. Packer, "Faith," *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 1: 401.

<sup>23</sup> Packer, "Faith," *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (EDT)*, 402.

ordinance of the Lord's Supper is a divine gift to be received in faith. Faith in Christ is the only thing the sinner needs to bring to the Lord's Supper.

### **Other Facets of Luther's Theology**

Another facet of Luther's theology of the Lord's Supper was based on the issue of the Eucharist as a new sacrifice and works protests against the Eucharist as promise and grace.<sup>24</sup> As Walter A. Elwell points out, Thomas Aquinas argues that the rite of the Lord's Supper is a *Mass of sacrifice* that has the power to free sinners from all punishment and provides satisfaction to the human soul.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, Luther contends that the promise of grace is given by the priest to the people. Luther believes that Christ's sacrifice, as mentioned in the Bible, occurred once, and therefore, there is no need for anyone else to sacrifice Him again at the table, rather, believers receive him by grace and not works. This act of believing ensures the sinner, forgiveness of sin, and the promise to evangelize.<sup>26</sup>

Here, Luther asserts that because Christ died and atoned for sin once and for all, and believers are justified through faith in that singular sacrifice, Christians do not require the Lord's Supper to replicate sacrifice, which has already been done on behalf of humanity.<sup>27</sup> Luther again rejects the idea of *Sacerdotalism*, a view that the presence of Christ's blood and body is felt through the action of the priest. He seems to differ from this notion, however, tries to argue that it is the power of Christ that brings that mystical change and not any human mechanism.<sup>28</sup> As a result of this, Luther advocated a concept called *Manducation*.<sup>29</sup> This concept of Luther suggests that Jesus' real body is consumed or taken during the Lord's Supper without the action or effort of the priest. He explains the statement "take and eat; this is my body" (Matt 26:26) to affirm his theological position on the Lord's Supper.

Luther again explains the words in Matthew 26:26 and John 6:53-56, thus, "those who partake of my flesh and drink my blood will attain eternal life. Luther opines that the phrase "My flesh signifies true sustenance, and my blood represents genuine nourishment," does not suggest some spiritual reception of Christ's body or wine, but it suggests the exact consumption of Christ's real body and wine. He grasped this idea due to his core principle of interpreting Scripture: he believed that a biblical text should be accepted in its literal sense unless there was a strong reason to interpret it differently."<sup>30</sup>

It appears that the elements (bread and wine) do not undergo any metaphysical change, rather, they remain the same only that they contain the true body and blood of Christ mystically. His interpretation argues that if one has to be faithful to the text and interpret it accordingly, it should be understood in a literal sense.

### **Evaluation of Martin Luther's Theology of the Lord's Supper**

This portion of the study summarizes and evaluates the theological positions of Luther on the Lord's Supper. A critical look into his theology suggests that:

1. Luther laid much emphasis on consubstantiation. This theology combines natural elements with Jesus's physical presence in the elements of the Lord's Supper. He identifies the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper to be co-existent with the bread and the wine.
2. The statement "This is my body" spoken by Christ should be understood and explained literally without giving allusion to any figurative or metaphorical perspective.
3. Scholasticism and nominalism of Erasmus and William Ockham might have influenced his theological positions on the Lord's Supper.
4. Luther's teaching on the Lord's Supper avoids exclusiveness due to his conception of universal grace to all human beings.
5. Faith in Christ is the only thing the Christian believer needs at the Lord's Table.
6. Communicants who partake in the Lord's Supper in faith, form an everlasting union with Christ, leading to the experience and assurance of Salvation, forgiveness, grace, and certainty of Christ's imminent return. Christ is physically present at the Lord's Supper because of His divine attribute, thus,

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<sup>24</sup> Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 127-136.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Luther, (LW), vol. 36, *The Misuse of the Mass*, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1959), 146. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Systematic Theology* (London, UK: T & T Clark International, 2004), 309; Pelikan, *Reformation of the Church and Dogma: The Christian Tradition*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1043.

<sup>28</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1044.

<sup>29</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1044.

<sup>30</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 126.

omnipresence. His concept that refers to Christ as *ubiquitous* (everywhere and in many places at a time) has influenced the theology of the Lord's Supper.

7. No human mechanism (effort of the Priest) is needed to transform the elements into the mystical physical body of Christ. Rather, the presence of Christ is enough to perform the duty of the priest mysteriously.
8. He stands in opposition to Catholicism, however, his position on the Lord's Supper appears to differ slightly from the Catholics. Thus, his concept of the Lord's Supper is almost like that of the Medieval Roman Church.
9. Luther rejected the idea that the Lord's Supper symbolized a new sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of participants' sins. He also disagreed with the notion that taking part in it was a good deed that contributed to atoning for sins.

### **III. Ulrich Zwingli's Theology of the Lord's Supper**

The conceptual framework of Ulrich Zwingli's theology regarding the Lord's Supper is viewed in the context of its symbolism or memorial approach to Christ's death.<sup>31</sup> Like his contemporary Luther, Zwingli held a contrary view to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, giving some arguments against it.<sup>32</sup> Zwingli argues against the concept of *ubiquitous* (Christ can be in several places at a time) and considers it a fallacy.<sup>33</sup> He indicated that Christ is locally present in heaven at the right hand of God (John 17:11). He has to be in a particular place in heaven because of its nature as a true body.<sup>34</sup>

Zwingli's conviction is founded on the premise that Christ's resurrection is a reality and for that reason, He may be in a particular place—heaven. M. E. Osterhaven seems to agree with Zwingli on the same point that "The physical presence of Christ's body can't be in multiple locations simultaneously, just like our bodies. Zwingli explained that Christ's true essence is seated naturally at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, while Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father, His body cannot simultaneously exist in the bread and wine. However, Christ is spiritually present for those who receive Him through faith."<sup>35</sup>

Zwingli grappled with a complex theological question: determining which body of Christ ascended to heaven and which one was present during the Lord's Supper. He distinguished between Christ's earthly body, His glorified body in heaven, and the mystical body (representing the Church). He argued that the phrase "this is my body" should be understood metaphorically.<sup>36</sup> He believed that this interpretation was the only one that rendered Scripture clear, straightforward, logical, and understandable to humans.<sup>37</sup> Zwingli contended that the sole way to receive Christ is through faith. This implies that participating in the Lord's Supper isn't just about consuming the bread and wine; faith is essential. The explanation suggests that Christ's presence is limited to a specific location. Consequently, Christ can't be simultaneously present in both heaven and the Lord's Supper. Based on this reasoning, Zwingli concluded that the Eucharistic elements cannot be transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ.

Another aspect of Zwingli's perspective regarding the Lord's Supper is the notion that it is a "sign" that "signifies" a sacred thing. As per W. Peter Stephens, Zwingli asserted that the Eucharist isn't a sacrifice but a symbolic representation, commemorating Christ's sacrifice. Zwingli stressed the difference between the ritual (the sign) and its significance. Thus, the Lord's Supper serves as a reminder of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

In his November 1524 letter to Matthew Alber, Zwingli interprets the word "is" in "this is my body" as meaning "signifies."<sup>38</sup> He argues that "this is my body" does not mean the real body of Christ, rather it signifies the bread (Christ's body crucified), symbolically shared among the communicants. Zwingli employed John 6:33, where Christ said "The flesh profits nothing but the spirit gives life," as a crucial insight to interpret Jesus' words in the context of the Lord's Supper.<sup>39</sup>

In his exposition of Zwingli, "The flesh profits nothing" indicates his adherence to Neoplatonist philosophy, emphasizing the distinction between the material and spiritual realms.<sup>40</sup> Flesh and Spirit dualism suggests that the physical eating of Christ's flesh cannot accomplish salvation. This is because the body dies, but

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 626-27.

<sup>32</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 653.

<sup>33</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 654.

<sup>34</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, 654.

<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey R. Elton, ed., "The Reformation: The End of the Middle Ages," in *The New Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1990), 2:102.

<sup>36</sup> Elton, ed., "The Reformation: The End of the Middle Ages," 103.

<sup>37</sup> G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 297.

<sup>38</sup> W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 254.

<sup>39</sup> Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 255.

<sup>40</sup> Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 257.

the spirit gives life. Zwingli at this point believes that God is spirit, and salvation involves a turning away from the physical, created world, to the realm of the purely spiritual. Therefore, to trust in anything created, like, for instance, the flesh of Christ is tantamount to idolatry. In agreement with Cornelius Hoen, Zwingli insisted that a better rendering of the words "this is my body" should be "this do in remembrance of me" (Luke 22: 19).

According to Zwingli, immediately Christ said "This is my body," He added "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). He explains that the bread is only a figure of His body to remind us in the Supper that the body was crucified for humanity. This is why the word "this is my body" cannot be taken literally because the bread is not and cannot be the body of Christ since it has been crucified once. Therefore, "this is my body" should mean the bread signifies "my body," or is a "figure of my body." Millard Erickson, sharing the same view with Zwingli, points out that:

As Jesus spoke the words inaugurating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, he focused attention on the relationship between individual believers and their Lord. On many of the other occasions when he addressed this topic, he used metaphors to characterize himself: "I am the way the truth, and the life," "I am the vine, you are the branches," "I am the good shepherd," "I am the bread of life," "I am the water of life." At the Last Supper, He used similar metaphors, reversing the subject and predicate nouns: "This [bread] is my body," and "This [wine] is my blood." In keeping with the figurative language, we might render Jesus' statements, "This represents [or signifies] my body," and this represents [or signifies] my blood.<sup>41</sup>

Undeniably, the intention of Jesus was not meant to create an impression that He was a door (way), a vine, or water, in a literal sense, but He used this approach in a figurative sense. Understanding these words in a literal sense would be ludicrous. Given this, Zwingli appears to suggest that the "sign" (Lord's Supper) and what it "signifies" (memorial of Christ's death) must be viewed symbolically.

Another spectrum of Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper is viewed under the parameters of its theocentric nature.<sup>42</sup> In his commentary on *True and False Religion*, Zwingli emphasizes that it is God who initiates the act of salvation and man just receives it by faith. He admits that salvation is not placed at man's disposal but God's. In an attempt to explain his point, Zwingli contrasted faith in God and anything other than God such as the Lord's Supper. In his view, having faith in anything besides God is regarded as polytheistic.<sup>43</sup> It deprives God of his honor. He further observes that saving faith is faith in Christ who died for us. It is not faith in his bodily presence in the Lord's Supper that saves us. Therefore, putting faith in something or someone other than God is an absurdity. It appears that the Lord's Supper at this point is recognized as a memorial, so the key to its observance is to be able to remember what Christ had accomplished on the cross, and this needs faith.

When he commented on John 6:47, Zwingli noted that "whenever we partake in the flesh and blood of Christ, it signifies believing in the sacrifice He made for our lives. Salvation doesn't come from physically consuming, seeing, or sensing Him, but from having faith in Him."<sup>44</sup> The above explanation of Zwingli suggests that the Lord's Supper does not bring Christ to the communicants, rather, the believers' faith brings Christ to the Lord's Supper.

Again, as the position on the Lord's Supper developed, Zwingli considered the ordinance as the pledge of believers, "demonstrating allegiance" to Christ in the Church. Borrowing an analogy from Cornelius, Zwingli presented the Lord's Supper as a pledge similar to a ring given by a groom to his bride as they marry. The ring is a sign of an indissoluble union and fidelity.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the Lord's Supper is a symbol of the friendship by which God is reconciled to the human race through the death of Christ. Christ as the groom offered an indispensable sacrifice to his bride (Church) as a sign of commemoration of his death at the Lord's Supper.<sup>46</sup> It behooves the believer's obedience to celebrate and continue with this eternal fellowship or union between God and man during the Lord's Supper. Zwingli from his humanist background maintained the memorial or the symbolic view.

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<sup>41</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1046.

<sup>42</sup> Donald J. Ziegler, ed., *Great Debates of the Reformation* (New York: Random House, 1969), 78.

<sup>43</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 172.

<sup>44</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 173.

<sup>45</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 174.

<sup>46</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 174.

### **Evaluation of Ulrich Zwingli's Theology of the Lord's Supper**

This section evaluates and summarizes the theological expositions of Ulrich Zwingli. His concept suggests that

1. Since Christ ascended to heaven and was seated on the right side of God, His human nature is confined, hence He cannot be present physically in the elements. His body cannot be in heaven and at the same time in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli does not exclusively deny Christ's divine presence but his human bodily presence at the Lord's Supper. This means Christ's omnipresence is communicated by His Spirit and not merely His physical bodily presence.
2. In the Lord's Supper, Christ's death is commemorated, not repeated, the elements are not a new sacrifice being made, but a symbolic sign that points to the real, thus, the death of Christ.
3. The efficacy of what Christ had already accomplished on the cross is received by faith. Therefore, at the Lord's Supper, the believer experiences the spiritual presence of Christ through faith.
4. Zwingli considered the ordinance, a sign that signifies the holy thing. That is pointing to the death sacrifice of Christ.
5. Zwingli again considered the ordinance to be a pledge that demonstrates the believer's allegiance to Christ.
6. Scholasticism and the humanism of Erasmus greatly influenced the theology of Zwingli on the Lord's Supper. These human-centered inclinations resulted in the rejection of several traditional approaches to the Church's theology regarding the Lord's Supper, as seen in the Patristic and Medieval periods. This shift enabled Zwingli to embrace a symbolic interpretation of the Lord's Supper.
7. His hermeneutical approach to the "this is my body" renders, "do this in remembrance of me." This symbolic interpretation is in sharp contrast to Luther's literalistic thinking.
8. His understanding of "the flesh profits nothing" is influenced by Augustinian and Neoplatonist views of dualism.

### **IV. A Comparative Study of Luther and Zwingli on the Lord's Supper**

The study conducted so far has brought out the theological positions of the two opposing medieval reformers, Luther and Zwingli with their respective views about the Lord's Supper. Therefore, this section will compare, contrast, and analyze their views on the Lord's Supper. It will seek to bring on board the areas of agreement and disagreement of the Lord's Supper, about what the Bible teaches.

To begin with the areas of commonality and agreements, both Luther and Zwingli got ideas from Erasmus on the need to reform the Medieval Catholic Church. They both questioned the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and came out with their respective approach which is consubstantiation and Symbolism respectively. Again, both agree in common, the divine perpetuity of the Lord's Supper, the spiritual presence of Christ, and its efficacy as the act of worship and communion with Christ. Furthermore, both on several occasions agree that the Lord's Supper is not a new sacrifice, but it reflects what Christ had already accomplished on the cross. Also, both agree that those who participate receive blessings through faith.

The dividing line between Luther and Zwingli lies in hermeneutical and philosophical perceptives. Their differences revolve around three aspects: how Christ is present (physically or spiritually), how people receive Him (through mouth or faith, leading to literal or symbolic interpretation), and who receives Him (whether everyone or only believers).<sup>47</sup>

First, the concept of Christ's presence during the Lord's Supper was a key focus for both Luther and Zwingli. Luther held the belief that Christ was physically present at His Table and was co-existent with the Bread and Wine because a mysterious change does take place as the Presence of Christ joins the elements. The change happens not by priestly consecration as in the doctrine of transubstantiation but by the power and word of God.<sup>48</sup> For Luther, the bread and the wine remain the same but there is a mystical real presence of the whole person of Christ in, with, under, and alongside the elements. This union according to him is incomprehensible.<sup>49</sup>

Luther again acknowledged that in the Lord's Supper, Christ, although physically present, was not confined by space and time, as His sinless flesh was uniquely intertwined with His divinity.<sup>50</sup> He contends that because the human and divine aspects are fused in Christ, it's impossible for the divine nature to be in one place while the human nature is in another.

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<sup>47</sup> David S. Dockery, "Martin Luther's Christological Hermeneutics," *Grace Theological Journal* 4 (1983): 189-203.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation* (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1907-1908), 1:335.

<sup>49</sup> Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, 1: 336.

<sup>50</sup> George E. Scwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1950), 703.

Arguing with Zwingli, Luther asserts that the concept of Christ being at the right hand of God does not imply a literal, confined space like a golden throne. Rather, it signifies the all-encompassing and omnipotent nature of God's power, which exists everywhere and nowhere at the same time.<sup>51</sup>

In furtherance to the above explanation, Luther posits for direct revelation of Christ's inherent essence, which implies that qualities assigned to Christ's divine essence can also be assigned to his human nature. Consequently, Christ could be omnipresent, existing physically in multiple places simultaneously (ubiquitous).<sup>52</sup> Therefore, claiming otherwise would mean dividing Christ's divine and human natures, leading to the error of Nestorianism.<sup>53</sup> From this background, he infers that the whole body of Christ (physical and spiritual) is capable of being everywhere including the Lord's Supper without any separation.

In his argument with Zwingli, Luther further explains that the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper are very important not to tamper with. Changing the text, through figurative meaning may introduce tropes, and apply injustice to the text. He considered this to be a perversion of "verba and inconsistency of *Claritas Scripturae*."<sup>54</sup> Given this, at the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, the communicant receives the actual historical body and blood of Christ. So in Luther's Christology, Christ cannot be confined to a particular place but everywhere including the Lord's Supper. Among theologians who share the same view as Luther is Philip Melancthon and Lutheran Churches.<sup>55</sup>

Zwingli on the other hand considered Christ's existence during the Lord's Supper to be spiritual. He perceived Luther's understanding of Christology as essentially *Eutychian*, involving a blending of Christ's divine and human natures.<sup>56</sup> As a result, he rejects the *ubiquity* of Christ's human nature.<sup>57</sup> For Zwingli, Christ cannot be in heaven and at the same time be in the Lord's Supper. He contends that a body that is located in a specific place and time is per definition necessary for being a human body; and, Christ with a human body is no longer amid the human realm.<sup>58</sup> However, Zwingli does not deny the divine spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper (Matt 18:20) because of His (Christ's) divine attribute (Omnipresence), but he completely denies the physical human nature of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper, the symbolic view has, for centuries, influenced many protestant denominations including Evangelicals, Baptists, Methodists, and many more.<sup>59</sup>

Certainly, the way in which believers receive the body and blood of Christ is crucial in understanding the differences between Luther and Zwingli regarding the Lord's Supper. Luther adheres to the concept of *manducatio oralis*, asserting that individuals partake in the elements of the Lord's Supper by physically consuming the actual body and blood of Christ "through their mouths", rather than simply appropriating them through faith.<sup>60</sup>

Luther argues for this assertion by alluding to the analogy of gold and prostitute. He explains that "gold remains gold even when festooned by a prostitute; Christ is present in the bread and wine even when taken by a faithless participant."<sup>61</sup> This according to Luther does not mean that exercising faith at the Lord's Supper is deemed insignificant. Rather, faith placed on the elements is considered vital, when taking the physical elements with the bodily mouth.<sup>62</sup>

Contrary to this view is Zwingli's understanding of faith during the Lord's Supper. Zwingli identified the symbolic eating body of Christ with faith and the trustful reliance of the believer on Christ's death. He believes that the communicant feels the spiritual presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper by faith and not the *manducatio oralis* as argued by Luther (Eph 3:17). For Zwingli, Christ dwells in us by faith (Eph 3:17) and, therefore, He is spiritually available to those who exercise faith in him.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Matthew W. Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper," accessed 3 June 2016, <http://www.theologian.org.uk/doctrine/Calvinonthelordssupper.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper."

<sup>53</sup> Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper."

<sup>54</sup> Mark D. Thompson, "Claritas of Scripturae in the Eucharistic Writings of Martin Luther," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60 (1998): 31.

<sup>55</sup> John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches: A reader in Christian Doctrines, from the Bible to the Present* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982), 36.

<sup>56</sup> Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper."

<sup>57</sup> Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper."

<sup>58</sup> Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper."

<sup>59</sup> Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Reformation Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 166.

<sup>60</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 652.

<sup>61</sup> John Dillenberger, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 235.

<sup>62</sup> Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper," accessed 3 June 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 653.



Conversely, Luther who was influenced by the scholasticism and nominalism of William Ockham argues that faith must be separated from reason, revelation from scientific exploration, and logic must be left out of theological discussion.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Luther understood the statement from Jesus, "This is my body," literally.

His influence on Ockham made him believe that a *metaphor* differs from an *analogy* in that it does not preserve the *ratio propria* (the inherent proportionality) of the original text.<sup>65</sup> For Luther, the Lord's Supper is more than a memorial feast; it is "the eternal food" of which Jesus spoke in John 6:33.<sup>66</sup> It is a pure gospel (grace) to sinful human beings even if it is taken by faithless communicants.<sup>67</sup> Participating in the Lord's Supper brings grace to the communicant.

Zwingli on the other hand, influenced by the humanism of Erasmus and the symbolism of Cornelius Hoen, considered the words of Jesus as symbolic.<sup>68</sup> Because of this influence from the above scholars, Zwingli believes that his God-given reason under the influence of the Holy Spirit must be applied to a text in a contextual way.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, for Zwingli, "this is my body" refers to a sign that signifies the real.<sup>70</sup> This means the bread and the wine were used by Christ in a symbolic term, pointing to His death on the cross. Zwingli argues that the correct rendition of the text is "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19) for this follows the words of Jesus immediately he said, "This is my body."

Another dividing line between Luther and Zwingli is the extent to which the Lord's Supper is intended, or for whom it is instituted. Luther stressed the need that the cup to be drunk by "all sinners" and not only believers.<sup>71</sup> In Luther's *Formula of Concord*, he argued that the true body and blood of Christ are received not only by regenerate Christians who approach the Lord's Supper worthily but also by those who are unworthy and lacking in faith.<sup>72</sup> His concept of universal grace to all sinners seems to avoid exclusiveness at the Lord's Supper. For him, the communicants exercise faith and experience the grace of the crucified savior at the Lord's Supper.

This act of receiving Christ ensures forgiveness of sin and the promise of his second coming. Not only did Luther disregard the idea of exclusiveness at the Lord's Supper, a way of promoting the "unworthy" to partake, he also opines that those who receive the elements without deserving them bring judgment upon themselves.<sup>73</sup> Here, it appears that Luther encouraged the need for "all sinners" to partake in the Lord's Supper, however, self-examination or conscience under the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit must be exercised (1 Cor 11:27, 29).

A contrary view is held by Zwingli on who is worthy to participate in the Lord's Supper. According to him, the Lord's Supper is intended for "only believers." Jesus administered it to His followers only, and those who believed in Him were baptized and continued in the fellowship (Acts 2:42-46). He believes that the Lord's Supper is a sign of being a Christian and continuing in the Christian life.<sup>74</sup>

It was the practice of the visible church. Therefore, all who believe in the saving grace and faith of Christ are eligible to participate. Zwingli's understanding of "who qualifies to participate in the Supper" suggests that outsiders cannot partake of it, since they are not believers. Another qualification that Zwingli also pointed out is self-examination.

Heidelberg in his Catechism agrees with Zwingli that true holiness comes through sincere repentance, faith in Christ's atonement, and a commitment to growing in faith and leading a holy life.<sup>75</sup> The discussions so far have shown that both Luther and Zwingli had different views concerning the doctrine of the Lord's Supper when they met at Marburg for the first time in 1529. While Luther maintained a literal view, Zwingli on the other hand, believed in the symbolic view.

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<sup>64</sup> Ben Witherington, *Making a Meal of It: Rethinking the Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 121.

<sup>65</sup> Herman Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Pub. House, 1977-1981), 93.

<sup>66</sup> John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996), 166.

<sup>67</sup> John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity*, 166.

<sup>68</sup> John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity*, 166.

<sup>69</sup> Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 59.

<sup>70</sup> Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 59.

<sup>71</sup> Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 656.

<sup>73</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (InterVarsity Press, 2000), 997.

<sup>74</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 997.

<sup>75</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 998.

## V. Implications of Luther-Zwingli Theology of the Lord's Supper

A critical look into Luther's perspective of the Lord's Supper results in conceptual difficulties. First, Luther's theology of *manducatio oralis* (those who partake of the elements of the Lord's Supper do so by eating and drinking the actual body and blood of Christ with the bodily mouth), seems to portray an idea of "cannibalism" if one takes the words of Jesus literally.

Luther's position, thus consubstantiation and its parameters *ubiquity* and *manducatio oralis* promote "spiritualism." His concept throws a challenge of how can human beings eat the flesh and blood of Christ physically. It sounds illogical and weakens the sixth commandment, "thou shall not kill" (Exod 20:13). Holding on to the physical presence of Christ or metaphysics change of the elements seems very strange or even untenable to the contemporary mind.

Therefore, embracing this concept of "spiritualism," "cannibalism" or literalistic thinking will thwart or contradict the exact meaning or the essence of Christ about the Lord's Supper. Again, a careful look into Luther's concept of the Lord's Supper suggests that faith is placed in the elements (bread and wine) rather than faith in Christ. Hence, the literalistic approach to the interpretation of "this is my body" possesses many difficulties. However, Luther maintains this position.

Second, believing that Jesus existed in two locations simultaneously contradicts the essence of the incarnation, which confined his human nature to one specific place, and denies the notion of His omnipresence. This means, that if the incarnation is questioned, then the death of Christ (salvation) to all humanity is also questioned. If salvation is questioned, then there is no hope for the future. These expositions devalue the essence that emanates from the concept of the Lord's Supper. Hence, it suggests that there is no need to commemorate the death of Christ (Lord's Supper).

Again, Luther's exposition on the Lord's Supper has a wide range of theological misconceptions that whenever Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper, Christ's physical body is mystically broken for them. According to this view, Christ is crucified again at every Lord's Supper. However, it must be noted that Christ was crucified once (Heb 9:28). The sacrament of the Lord's Supper does not serve as an alternate crucifixion; instead, it stands as a significant commemorative practice within Christian theology. Thirdly, it appears that Luther overlooks the spiritual nature of Jesus' message, wherein he used physical objects symbolically. In John 6:27-59, the context implies that Jesus referred to himself as the bread of life in a spiritual sense. However, Luther interprets this in a literal sense. This method of approaching scripture has tremendous negative effects on many Christian doctrines.

Looking at Zwingli's concept of symbolism reflects the intention of Christ's words of institution. Christ is always spiritually present whenever believers meet in his name (Matt 18:20; 28:18; 2 Cor 13:14; John 17:11; 16:28) including the Lord's Supper. His human body is no longer in the human realm since He ascended to heaven. Zwingli again, emphasized the memorial facet of the feast. Thus, in this supper, the believer is invited to experience God's redeeming activity in Christ. Therefore, the Lord's Supper should not be regarded as a regular feast meant to satisfy the participants' physical hunger but as a divine encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. The faith of the communicants is nourished at the celebration and this has a positive impact on Christian life.

The memorial feast itself doesn't confer grace to the participant but symbolizes the grace received from Christ. Communion signifies deliverance from sin, representing communal connection with Christ and the anticipation of His Second Coming. This perspective aligns with Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19), as indicated in a content analysis approach. Again, Zwingli's contribution relating to the Lord's Supper that it is a sign of being a Christian, and therefore it is intended for "only baptized believers" (Acts 2:42-46) contradicts Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:20-29. His view suggests "close communion" and thereby advocates exclusiveness.

In this passage, Paul makes a clear distinction between the elements in the Lord's Supper, representing the body and blood of Christ. He addresses the Corinthian Church's spiritual state, their relationship with God, and their attitude toward fellow believers during the communion service. Paul focuses on providing guidance, emphasizing self-examination, rather than promoting exclusivity or "close communion".

The researcher advocates for and endorses the practice of open communion, emphasizing its inclusivity by enabling individuals from both Christian and non-Christian backgrounds to partake in the Lord's Supper. This approach is contingent upon their willingness to participate, highlighting a welcoming and inclusive aspect within the religious context. Nevertheless, individuals must introspect and make spiritual preparations before attending the Lord's Supper. Again, they must also admit that they are sinners, who need the grace of God and therefore behoove them to come to the Lord's Supper to affirm and nourish their faith in Christ.

## VI. Conclusion

Considering the above discussions of Luther and Zwingli on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, it would be appropriate to suggest at least four biblical points to conclude the research. Firstly, the symbolic approach is very close to the intention of Jesus' words, "This is my body." It is a commemorative act of service to remember the death of Christ. Jesus used physical objects (bread and wine) to communicate spiritual truth (1 Cor 11: 23-16). Secondly, the communicants exercise faith in Christ and as a result, the spiritual presence of Christ is felt at the Lord's Supper. Faith is not found in the elements; faith in Christ's saving grace is the focus of celebrating the Lord's Supper. Thirdly, the Lord's Supper should be open to all, but attendees should self-reflect and spiritually prepare before joining the service. Finally, the Lord's Supper itself does not save. Rather, it is Christ who saves. Therefore, the whole act is a testimonial or remembrance of the death of Christ.

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