

At the Table of the Lord: To Zwingli's View on the Lord's Supper

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Introduction

Whoever studies the history of the Reformation, will undoubtedly come across the controversy between Zwingli and Luther over the Lord's Supper. Usually one learns that Luther was of the opinion that Christ is present in the elements of the Lord's Supper in a mysterious but real physical manner. Zwingli, however, argued against such a presence. For him, the elements of the Communion bread and wine are only signs. They do not bring the body of Christ with them.

This depiction is often linked with a critical view of Zwingli: Luther emphasized that God became man, and in this sense, also claimed the "real" presence of Christ, the man, in the Communion service. Zwingli, however, was influenced by Platonic thought and "spiritualized" the communion service, and as a consequence, for him Christ was not "really" present. Already in the sixteenth century, the polemical expression was common, that in Zurich, the elements bread and wine are mere "empty signs".

Many books and articles have dealt with this topic. However, the starting point of most of them was the controversy around 1529. But: It is not possible to see the big picture of Zwingli's teaching on Communion when the context of his differences with Luther about the interpretation of the Communion elements of bread and wine serves as the main angle. There exist not only wrong answers, but wrong questions as well.

About the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, Zwingli says: "I believe that Christ is truly in the Supper, nay, I do not believe it is the Lord's Supper unless Christ is here". And he continues: "Proof: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there will I be in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20)".¹

Obviously, Zwingli's answer to the question of where Christ is when his Church is gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper is completely biblical: A body that is located in a specific time and place is per definition necessary for being a human being; and, Christ with a human body is no longer amid his disciples. Nevertheless, Christ had promised to be "in the midst of

¹ Zwingli, *Fidei expositio* (Huldrych Zwingli Werke, ed. by E. Egli et al., Zurich 1991 [= Z], VI.5, 90), English translation: *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, vol. two, ed. By W. J. Hinke, Philadelphia 1922, 285.

them". In the light of such biblical texts (and others like Matth. 28:20; John 16:28; John 17,11 which Zwingli quotes in this context) the late medieval metaphysics of substance which still dominates Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper is not Zwingli's primary concern. As an Old Testament scholar and a humanist, Zwingli already realized to an astonishing degree that the idea of linking the presence of Christ with the elements of the Lord's Supper has more to do with ancient mystery cults and a magical worldview than with the tradition of Hebrew thought (cp. the Pessach/Passover) which shaped the New Testament authors and Jesus himself. Instead, for the Zurich Reformer, it is the Lord's Supper table on which bread and wine are standing, ready to be shared, which now plays an important role. The center of Zwingli's theology of the Lord's Supper was, that the present congregation, gathered around the Lord's table, hears the "living invitation of God" and therefore will be at the right place, to get a living experience of the presence of God and of salvation.

Let's have a look at Zwingli's Communion liturgy, which he developed in 1525, titled: *Aktion und Brauch des Nachtmahls (Action and Use of the Lord's Supper)*.

The Introduction of the Lord's Supper in Zurich

Since the beginning of his preaching in Zurich, Zwingli pointed to the Scriptures as the only source for Christian truth, and to Christ as the center of it. For him, the message of Christ was a force that invites people to individual faith, and at the same time, motivates society and the church as a whole to change.

The verse from the Bible that Zwingli set on the title page of many of his writings is well known to be Mat. 11:28-30:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest... For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

The invitation that Christ speaks there is to be understood as a word of freedom in two senses: It concerns both, the freedom of conscience from the misery of sin, and freeing people from the burden of churchly rites and traditions.

But what should the suffering people do, suppressed by an inner and by an outer yoke? They should follow Christ's invitation. And what does this mean concretely?

Now we have arrived at the theme of the Lord's Supper.

Indeed, since the disputation of 1523 in Zurich, the decision supporting Zwingli and his constituency had been made. Despite this, quite some time passed before the city council was willing to make a valid decision concerning the liturgy. On 11 April 1525, Zwingli together with his colleagues Leo Jud from St. Peter and Mark Engelhard from Frau Munster came before the council of two-hundred and demanded a complete abolition of the mass and the inauguration of a Communion service according to the biblical texts and to Christ's invitation. Zwingli called it the *Nachtmahl*: the Lord's Supper.

Already the next day, on 12 April, the Large Council voted: A narrow majority voted for Zwingli's wish. The following day, on 13 April 1525, it was Thursday before Easter; the first Reformed Communion service in the Swiss Confederation took place.² The liturgy, drafted by Zwingli himself, was approved by the Council in a slightly modified form. The title of the printed text was as mentioned: *Aktion und Brauch des Nachtmahls*.³

The Lord's Supper: A Celebration of Reconciliation

The theological foundation for Zwingli's teaching on the Lord's Supper, on which his Communion liturgy is also based, is his doctrine of reconciliation. The eighteenth of his sixty-seven theses that Zwingli had developed for his first Zurich Disputation of 29 January 1523 reads:

That Christ, having sacrificed himself once, is to eternity a certain and valid sacrifice for the sins of all faithful, wherefrom it follows that the mass is not a sacrifice, but is a remembrance of the sacrifice and assurance of the salvation which Christ has given us.

Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper begins here and is conceived as an antithesis to the mass of the late middle ages as it was defended by his Roman Catholic contemporaries, e.g. the Bishop Hugo of Hohenlandenburg.

In the *Interpretation and Justification of the Theses* that was also written in 1523, Zwingli exactly explicates his Christological rationale for rejecting the doctrine of a sacrificial mass.⁴ There he says: Christ is "the only high Priest in eternity," "who brought nothing as an offering but himself." Christ's sacrifice is:

² See *Heinrich Bullinger Reformationsgeschichte*, ed. by Johann Jakob Hottinger und Hans Heinrich Voegeli, 3 Bde., Reprint of the edition Frauenfeld 1838, Zürich 1985, Bd.1, 263-265.

³ Z IV, 13-24.

⁴ Z II, 112-122.

Such a perfect offering, that he, offered but once, completed or absolved everyone who believes in him for all of eternity.⁵

Given this, the Lord's Supper must be arranged, so that this truth is not darkened, but rather that it is validated: It must celebrate the past and valid reconciliation event, and it must be celebrated as an act of faith, because faith is the only human activity left to the people.

Reconciliation is nothing to be accomplished or repeated in the Lord's Supper. Instead, it is to be brought to mind again. Zwingli names what happens during the Lord's Supper, a "realization" or an "assurance" of the reconciliation of the person with God. The Lord's Supper is thus a celebration of an event that has occurred and is therefore essentially a thankful, joyful and confessional meal. Zwingli's liturgical blueprint *Aktion und Brauch des Nachtmahls* is an attempt to put this theological idea into a liturgical form.

The Lord's Supper: A Church Service According to Christ's Commandment

The title of his work already makes it clear that Zwingli sees the Lord's Supper first of all from the perspective of a church service. According to Zwingli, Christ called his church to act in a certain manner after his death, namely, to celebrate Communion continuously until the eschatological meal at the accomplishment of his kingdom (Luke 22:30).

The restoration of the Lord's Supper according to the will of Christ, therefore, must aim for this service to be practiced as an act of the church and also understood as such. In this case, the ritual of the Lord's Supper must be spatially at the *center* of the church. Communion is no longer an enacted celebration in the chancel, on an elevated platform, but it takes place in the "*Gefletz*." With this expression, Zwingli denoted the front, empty part of the nave. The Lord's Supper takes place literally at the level where the congregation is seated. An altar built into the wall and situated several steps higher than the nave is not suitable for the chalice and bread: If the pastor turns toward it, he turns his back to the congregation, and reversed. Whoever stands in the middle between the bread and wine on one side and the congregation on the other claims the liturgical function of a mediator. So, in the Reformed tradition inaugurated through Zwingli, altars – and in this case also the Communion table adjoining the wall – are impossible. Altars in the Zurich Gross Munster could not be converted nor reinterpreted; they simply had to be demolished.

⁵ Z II, 114,14-17.

(It was Bullinger who was more tolerant at this point. In his eyes, also an altar could serve the right aim, if correctly interpreted. It can be assumed to be a fruit of the connection to the English Reformation).

Zwingli's practical instructions prescribed that the bread and wine were visible in the nave of the church already during the sermon. After the sermon and a reading of the Lord's Supper pericope from 1 Corinthians 11:20-29, the bread and wine were passed around in the church.⁶

Because Christ gave the entire church the command to celebrate the meal, Zwingli tried to realize this so that the entire church was involved in the act of Communion. While the entire church did not have space at one table, they remained seated on the banks and ate the meal there. This was a concession to the practical implementation that still reminded of the ideal –a seated table fellowship. Not only the celebration with both elements bread and wine, also that the bread was passed around in a wide bowl, so that everyone could break off a piece "with his own hand" was a revolution when compared to the late medieval mass, but also in comparison to the tradition inaugurated by Luther.

In addition, the pastor spoke to the church as "beloved brothers."⁷ He is always turned to face them, even when he intercedes for them in a prayer request to God. The Lord's Supper is not an act for the congregation; it is an act of the congregation, of which one person is in charge of leading the ceremony.

The Lord's Supper: A gathering at the Table of Christ

At the liturgical level, the church is the active subject. The congregation celebrates the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Christ, according to Christ's command.

However, on the theological level, Christ alone is the acting subject, inviting his disciples to his table. And this must be taken seriously in the liturgy: The Lord's Supper as a response to

⁶ »Und so die predig beschicht (geschieht), wirt man ungeheblet (ungesäuertes) brot und wyn zu vorderst im gefletz (leerer Raum im vorderen Kirchenschiff) uff einem tisch haben, und demnach den vergriff (Bedeutung) mit öffentlichen (klaren), verstentlichen, tütschen worten – wie härnach volgt – erzellen, unnd demnach durch verordnete diener das brot in höltzenen, breiten schüßlen harumbtragen von einem sitz zu^o dem anderen, und da einen yeden mit siner hand lassen einen bitz oder mundvoll abbrechen unnd essenn, ouch demnach mit dem wyn glycherwyß harumbgan, also, das sich nieman ab sinenm ort mu^oß bewegen. Unnd so das beschähen (geschehen) ist, wirt man mit offnen hällenn worten gott lob und danck sagen mit hoher verstentlicher stimm. Da so dann die gantze mengy (Menge) unnd gemeynd zu^o end deß beschluß (Schlussteils) ‚Amen‘ sprechen.« Z IV, 16,1-13.

⁷ Z IV, 21,22.

an invitation from Christ. In a special way, it stands under Christ's call: "*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*"

In Zwingli's *Versuch über den Messkanon*, a first draft of an Evangelical mass of 1523, Christ's words from Mathew 11:28 should be read immediately after consecrating the elements.⁸ In *Aktion und Brauch des Nachtmahls*, printed on 6 April 1525 by Froschauer, the words of Matthew 11:28 appear on the title page. In the liturgy itself, the invitation of Christ appears in the form of another biblical text, which was to be read from the pulpit immediately before or during the distribution of the Eucharistic elements: John 6:47-63. Here Christ speaks about himself. He describes himself as the true spiritual "bread of life," and in the "I" form invites people to come to him. It is Christ's intention to give peace to the "weary and heavy-laden." Therefore, eating and drinking the elements occurs under the "promise of peace" from the host – Christ. The church is invited to come to the table that Christ has prepared, just like the beggars in the parable of the dinner (Luke 14:15-24).

Perhaps one could say somewhat pointedly: The sacrifice was standing in the middle of the 16th century Roman ritual mass. Luther turned this around radically and consequently taught that the Lord's Supper was to be understood as God's offering to the people. Zwingli, however, begins from a different vantage point –his own. He understands the Lord's Supper from the basic principle of the banquet. The resurrected Jesus Christ extends an invitation to table fellowship with him, just as he invited the tax collectors and sinners as an earthly person. But the table fellowship is a symbol of close community and friendship throughout the Bible, *and* a symbol of reconciliation.

Therefore the Lord's Supper does not only remind of Christ's death, but rather the entire life of God's Son among and with people: A life of caring for the "tax collectors" and "sinners."

Hence, in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Christ's death for the sins of the world, Christ's earthly deeds and his care for the poor, sick and lost, and the outlook at the kingdom of God are present.

According to the New Testament, the last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples was a real meal. The bread was consecrated during the meal and words consecrating the chalice were spoken at the end of the meal (compare Luke 22:17-20).

⁸ Z II, 607,37f.

In the Lord's Supper, interpreted as a banquet, the individual promise of forgiveness for sin that was so central to Luther, and which was oriented on the practice of absolution from the middle ages, is less strongly emphasized. But it is integrated without any restrictions.

However, the imagery of an invitation to the table of fellowship contains more than what can be said with a simple forensic metaphor: It simultaneously implies a starting relationship with the host, which demands to be deepened, and it also pertains to the relationships between the table companions. It is no coincidence that in Zwingli's liturgy, not only the famous few words consecrating the Lord's Supper are provided. The whole passage, where Paul outlines a "Christian Order for the Lord's Supper" in 1st Corinthians should be read.

Let's have a closer look at Zwingli's Lord's Supper from the perspective of a scenario:

When the table fellowship, including the pastor, are all sitting around a table together, it is hard to imagine this visual representation of God's relationship with people as a sacrificial act. It is also difficult to recognize it in this context as a gift to the individuals, because it is the table that sets the stage for the celebration. The table corresponds best with the image of corporate participation in the body and blood of Christ, and as sharing.

Even the role of the pastor is special because he is, according to the imagery of *Aktion und Brauch des Nachtmahls*, virtually sitting at the table: He sits in the circle of community around the same table as the church members. In this manner, he cannot be the one who mediates between God and the people. Those who sit at the table of the Lord do not stand between Christ and the church. He cannot bring an offering in the name of the church.

But, it is also difficult to "administer" the elements of bread and wine to the other church members at the table, and thus, to symbolically speak the grace of God to each individual. Because, in order to do that, he would have to leave the table and take on the role of a waiter. He does not need to and cannot do it either, because the meal, bread and wine, are already standing on the table. As one who sits at the table just like all of the other church members, and who lives from the same bread and wine, at the most, he can lead and organize the celebration. This is his only task.

In this way, the Lord's Supper becomes the place where Christ's entire life and work is present as a scene: His earthly life, his suffering on the cross, his being at the right of the Father, promising to celebrate the meal again in the future kingdom.

Likewise the entire life of the church of Christ is present as a scene: The church lives from hearing the word of God as a congregation, a congregation of sinners and beggars sitting at the same table – and Christ as their host in the middle.

Proclaiming Christ, strengthening faith, thanksgiving and confession, sanctifying the heart and moral conduct come together here. In the preface to *Aktion und Brauch des Nachtmahls*, Zwingli articulated that the Lord's Supper is:

(...) Necessary and helpful in no small way, for the spiritual memory of the death of Christ, to strengthen faith and brotherly loyalty, for improving life, and for protecting Christians from the vices of their own heart.⁹

As mentioned before, it was a revolution that in Zwingli's liturgy the bread was not given by the pastor to each believer; instead it was hand around in the congregation. In his justification of this practice, Zwingli points to the fact that due to this practice, cases of real reconciliation between persons sitting next to each other in the church had occurred. The collective memory of the reconciliation in Christ leads to a reconciliation between beggars sitting at his table, because it is celebrated in the imagery of a banquet.

In his writings against Eck, Zwingli could appeal to the Spirit of Christ and its multi dimensional effects in the sacrament. I quote, the sacraments:

Preach the salvation given by God and lead the human senses towards this salvation; at the same time; they spark faith, a faith which is also promised to your neighbor, and they lead to brotherly charitable love. And this is all effectuated, when it occurs, by the one and the same spirit.¹⁰

A real living experience of God's salvation cannot be produced by men, neither by bishops nor by Reformed church leaders. But it can be expected, where it is promised. The aim of Zwingli's liturgy of the Lord's Supper was exactly this. And the table was the point where the vertical, spiritual dimension, and the horizontal, human dimension, could meet. The reproach of "spiritualizing" the Lord's Supper may be correct in some cases, but certainly not in the case of Huldrych Zwingli.

⁹ »zu^o geistlicher des tods Christi gedächtnuß, zu^o merung des gloubens und bru^ederlicher trüw, zu^o besserung des läbens und verhu^etung der lastren des menschen hertz etlicher maß ze reitzen fürderlich und geschickt ...« Z IV, 14,12-15.

¹⁰ Z VI.3, 271.