

The Marburg Colloquy—Report by a Lutheran Eyewitness (1529)

Abstract

After the Lutherans raised their protest at the Imperial Diet of Speyer in 1529, thus giving rise to the name “Protestant,” the doctrinal quarrel between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) of Zurich escalated. In the late 1520s, this debate (and the campaign against sectarian groups) distracted Protestants from their attack on Rome and Catholicism. Landgrave Philip of Hesse (1504–67), anxious to restore unity and to form a Protestant military alliance, invited Luther, Zwingli, and others to a colloquy in Marburg in October 1529. Luther and Zwingli debated the correct interpretation of Christ’s words regarding the Eucharist—“this is my body”—with Zwingli taking a spiritualist line and Luther insisting on a literal interpretation. Their acceptance of a compromise document, the Marburg Articles, was brief and without influence. Andreas Osiander (1498–1552) sent this eyewitness report on the Marburg Colloquy to his masters, the city council of Nuremberg.

Source

Osiander’s Report

Astute, honorable, wise, gracious dear lords, Mr. Martin Pfinzing has informed me, among other things, about the order which you gave him for me. I learned with particular pleasure and gratitude that you, honorable and wise [sirs], desire a short account of the proceedings in Marburg, which I hereby send you, honorable and wise [sirs].

When Dr. Steffen (namely, Agricola) from Augsburg, Johannes Brenz from Halle, and I arrived in Marburg on Saturday afternoon and were announced at the court, we were soon sent for and taken into the prince’s chamber, where Luther was already debating against Zwingli and Oecolampadius. We were seated near Doctor Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon to listen and, if need be, to speak. Dr. Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, Justas Jonas, Friedrich Myconius, and Caspar Creuziger had arrived in Marburg on Thursday morning, and Martin Luther had spent Friday in closed consultation with Zwingli and Oecolampadius, but he said that it had not been fruitful so that a public, friendly, non-argumentative conversation (as they called it) had been planned for Saturday morning at six o’clock. The prince was personally present from beginning to end, as were the courtiers and the Hessian pastors who had come for that purpose and we who had been summoned extra by the prince for the colloquy. Otherwise no one was admitted, perhaps because of the deaths [the plague], for, as we only found out as we were leaving, the English sickness was raging. We diligently inquired of the others about what had been discussed on Saturday morning before our arrival: First the prince’s chancellor had talked about why the prince had called them together, reminded them of the importance of the topic, and beseeched them above all to strive for the glory of God, the common Christian good, and brotherly unity.

Then Luther talked briefly about how the other party had attempted to prove that the words of Christ, “This is my body...This is my blood...” [Matthew 26:26ff] permit and demand another interpretation than what we believe and teach. And when they admitted to this, Luther continued, saying that he expected to hear something [to prove their position], which had not yet happened. He imagined that it would also not happen in the future, but he wanted to hear their argument, and then he would briefly and amicably tell them its shortcomings. And also, for himself, he wrote the text, “This is my body,” etc. on the table with chalk.

In response, Zwingli and Oecolampadius offered proof of their position from the holy, divine Scripture and statements from the [Church] fathers. Thereupon Luther asked that they remain systematic and friendly and not mix their sources, but rather refrain from quoting the Fathers until the holy, divine Scripture had been dealt with. They agreed and adhered to this.

Zwingli thus began and cited the sixth chapter of John [ver. 63], the flesh is of no use; he was of the opinion that this proved his point, because if the body of Christ is of no use, Christ would not have given it [to the disciples] to eat. And when he clearly wanted to talk about the entire chapter, as he had done often in his booklets, Luther observed that that would lead to long, unnecessary, useless, and annoying blathering. He interrupted Zwingli and said he was amazed that Zwingli would bring up this passage, for he must understand that Christ was not speaking in that case of communion, but rather of faith, so that it had nothing to do with the present debate. Thereupon Zwingli answered that it is true. However, he wanted to use it to prove that the physical presence in communion was of no use, and he was not surprised that Luther did not want to hear it, for (Zwingli said with great defiance and arrogance) it would eventually break Luther's neck. Then Luther cautioned Zwingli amicably that they did not desire a quarrelsome dispute, but rather a cordial conversation. He asked him to avoid proud, defiant words until he had gone home to his Swiss [people], and, if he did not do so, then he [Luther] knew full well how to "deal him a blow to the face," so that Zwingli would regret having given him cause by initiating such a dialogue. Luther continued in this manner and Zwingli became quiet and withdrawn.

After Zwingli had presented the saying, "The flesh is useless," in a similar manner to that outlined in all his books, Luther answered him diligently without belligerence. First, he would not admit that Christ here spoke of his own body, but rather of our sinful and carnal nature, as is common in Scripture and as he [Luther] had meticulously taught and proven in his books. Second, even if Christ had been speaking of his own flesh, he did not claim that this leads to the conclusion that because the flesh is of no use, it is therefore not present. Otherwise if one sides with Zwingli, one must also conclude that the bread is of no use, and that therefore it is not present. The same could be said of baptism: the water is of no use and is, therefore, not there. Even Zwingli must understand that this is not a correct conclusion, but that rather the Word, which commands [us] to take and eat the body and blood, makes everything useful which would otherwise be useless, if the Word were not present, and which remains useless, if one is not conscious of the Word or of good faith, etc.

Thus half a day was spent on this passage, and, according to the opinion of many, including those of the other party, Luther successfully argued that the passage was not relevant to the question at hand and that they could not prove anything with it.

In the afternoon, however, when we were present, Zwingli presented a passage from the fifth chapter of Hebrews [actually 4:15]: "one who was tempted in everything just as we are, but was without sin." And he linked this to the eighth chapter of Romans [ver. 3], "He sent his son in the form of sinful flesh." And also to the second chapter of Philippians [ver. 7-8], "He took the form of a servant, became like another human, and was perceived to be human, etc..." He was of the opinion, based on these passages, that Christ was similar to us in all things, except that he was without sin. Our bodies, however, are limited to one spot; thus the body of Christ can also only be in one spot and not present in many locations in communion.

Luther answered this laughing [and said]: "So, if the word 'likeness' or 'form' can be stretched so far that it includes everything except sin, then that is peculiar to me indeed. For I have a wife, that is not sinful; thus, Christ must also have had a wife, etc. But I'll let that go. And instead I'll say that if it were true that Christ must be like us in all ways except sin, I still would not admit that the body can only be on one spot, for God is almighty. He can maintain my body with no place at all, so that it is nowhere [i.e. transcendent/beyond the physical realm]. He can also keep a body in more than one location, in one location, or in none at all, as he pleases." He then asked Zwingli with serious words to not think and talk

about divine majesty and God's omnipotence in such a childish manner. "For God can call that which does not exist into existence" [Romans 4:17].

Zwingli answered and acknowledged that God could indeed do so, if he wanted, but he did not, which he proved thus: Holy Scripture always portrays Christ in a particular spot: in the manger, in the temple, in the desert, on the cross, in the grave, to the right hand of the Father. Thus Zwingli believed that Christ always has to be in a particular location. To this I [Osiander] responded, saying, "With these passages one can prove no more than that Christ was in a particular location at the times mentioned. There is no proof in these passages that he is, or has to be, at a particular spot or fitting location forever and in eternity, instead of being transcendent or in many places, in a natural or supernatural manner, as they [Luther's party] suggest." Then Zwingli said, "I have proven that Christ was present in one location, you must prove on the other hand that he ever transcended physical space or was [simultaneously] in many locations." Luther answered, "You claimed in the beginning that you wanted to prove that it is not possible and that our interpretation is false. You are obligated to do so, and not to demand proof from us, because we are not obligated to do so."

Zwingli said that it is a disgrace that we adhere to such a serious article, teach and champion it, all without being able or willing to cite Scripture on this point.

Whereupon Luther lifted the velvet tablecloth and showed him the quote, "This is my body," which he had written with the chalk for himself, and said, "Here is our Scripture. You still haven't taken it away from us, as you claimed you would. We need no other."

Zwingli asked whether he had no other additional Scripture, argument, or proof.

Luther answered, "I do indeed have others, as you will hear, if you succeed in taking this one away from me. For as long as I have this certain word of God, which no one can wrestle from me, I do not need to let go of it and look for another. Topple this one, and you will hear the other arguments that I have."

Zwingli and Oecolampadius introduced this evidence from Holy Scripture and no more. Rather, they continued and wanted to investigate according to reason, how a body could be in many places or transcend place. Luther, however, did not want to permit this, saying that "reason, philosophy, and mathematics have no place here, for if we conclude thusly that a body can only be in one place, it would only prove that *according to the common course of nature*, the body can only be in one place. It would never be claimed, however, that God's almighty word has no other power beyond common nature, so that it would prove nothing here, etc." And he offered, if they were not convinced, that he would discuss the matter with them later [literally, outside of these dealings], an hour or two, a day or two, or even a whole month, etc. They asked where God had ever had one body that was not present or contained in a particular place, to which Luther replied, "God holds the largest body of all, which must include all other bodies, namely, the entire world, without a fixed place. Thus the world has no place in which it exists." On this point they were [then] all still.

As a result they did not present anything further from Scripture, which surprised us very much, but we had no doubt it was because they knew how they would be answered and that it would lead to more embarrassment than their silence. For if they had come with the Scripture, "He sits to the right hand of the Father" [Mark 16:19] and others with which they have blinded and misled the common man, they would have been beautifully [in an ironic sense] received, for then we would have been consulted and would have entangled them in their own answers. It would have been of no use to them, but they anticipated this and admitted themselves that the right hand of God is not a particular place or location but rather the omnipotence of God, from which it can be deduced how conscientiously they were negotiating.

Sunday morning and afternoon, Zwingli and Oecolampadius presented passages from the [Church] Fathers, namely one from Fulgentius and several from Saint Augustine, with which they tried to prove that a body must be in a particular place and that the bread in communion is a symbol of the body and blood of Christ. We listened to them talk about it for the whole day, while they searched for, read, and translated the passages [into German], which totally bored those who were listening.

Finally, Luther answered them so: “It is nothing significant [for the argument] that Saint Augustine calls the bread a sign of the body of Christ, for based [only] on that we cannot know whether it is his opinion that the body is present or not. For we ourselves hold and claim that it is a sign without discounting that the body is present. The passages, however, where he says that a body must be in one place, are in other contexts, not when he discusses communion. When he writes of communion, he speaks of the body and blood of Christ as we do.” Then Luther presented passages [from Augustine] and said: “Why should we ignore the passages from Augustine which deal directly with communion and turn to those which have nothing to do with communion? Furthermore, if we could be certain that Augustine intended to say what you claim, why should we be fixated solely on Augustine and not more so on Cyprian, Cyril, Ambrose, Jerome, and many others who have outlined our arguments in great detail? And even if all the Church Fathers were of your opinion, why should we forsake the Word of God in favor of following them? Saint Augustine himself commands us to read his books just as he reads the books of others, for he does not believe anything of anyone just because they believe it, no matter how righteous they might be, but only when they prove their point with Holy Scripture. As he does, let us do the dear Fathers the honor of interpreting the writings they have left us as best we are able, so that they remain consistent with Holy Scripture. But where their writings are not compatible with God’s Word, it would be much better for us to say, ‘they erred,’ than to dismiss God’s Word on their account.”

To this Oecolampadius responded, “Very well, but we have nevertheless provided enough to show that we did not reach our opinion frivolously or without cause or motivation.”

Luther answered, “We know all too well that you have significant reasons, but that does not make the thing better.”

Next they were asked whether they wished to present anything more. They said no, since the preceding [arguments] had not been accepted, they could only assume that anything else they would say would find even less acceptance. Luther replied, “Now you haven’t even tried, which is a testament to your own conscience” [i.e. confidence in your argument].

Then the chancellor interjected that they should look for methods and a path to an agreement. Luther said, “I see no other way except for them to honor the Word of God and adhere to our faith.” To which they replied that they could neither understand nor believe that the body of Christ is present [in the Eucharist]. Luther said, “Then we should let you leave and commend you to the just judgment of God. He will know well, who is right.” To which Oecolampadius replied, “As we leave you.” Zwingli, however, was teary-eyed, as many noticed.

Luther had, however, at the beginning [of the discussions] also said, “If we are to achieve unity, we must deal not only with the sacrament [communion], but with several other topics. For they, my opponents, do not teach a single tenet of Christian doctrine correctly, especially, as I was informed, those from Strasbourg, etc.”

[Now] Jacob Sturm stood up and remarked that he had been sent to make sure that the discord due to the sacrament be resolved, etc. He had come with the understanding that there was only one contentious article. If they were to find even more, he would be poorly received when he delivered this message at home. He asked that the teachings of his preachers be heard and demonstrated where they were right or wrong. This [request] was granted. Bucer spoke for them all, but not correctly, especially

not about baptism. He asked Luther to attest to the correctness of their teachings. Luther answered, however, “No, I don’t trust you. I am neither your Lord nor your judge, and since you accept neither me nor my doctrine, I cannot tolerate you as disciples. We have already seen that you desire to spread your doctrine under our name. I can well listen to you now, but I do not know if you teach the same at home or not, etc. Thus I cannot give you an endorsement and you may not claim it. For you claim everywhere that you have not learned from us. What use then is our endorsement? One can see all too clearly that you have learned nothing from us. Thus we would be loathe to have such disciples.”

Then Bucer requested that Luther tell them on which points he was displeased with their doctrine, to which Luther said, “I am not your Lord, not your judge, not your teacher. Our spirit does not harmonize with your spirit. Rather it is clear that we do not have the same spirit, for it cannot be the same spirit when in one place the Word of Christ is simply believed and in the other the same faith is ridiculed, disputed, denigrated, and attacked with any number of sacrilegious and blasphemous words. Thus, as I said before, we leave you to the judgment of God. Teach, however, if you think you can account for it before God.”

When it had become clear that they did not want Luther to help or advise them concerning the main article of the sacrament, the prince thanked us for coming to please His Grace, and asked that for now we should adjourn. Should His Grace need us again, either together or individually, we should not be inconvenienced. His Grace wanted to seek further advice, so that we did not have to leave each other like this, etc. Then he sent for each of us, one after the other, and asked for advice and a method to reach a compromise. He found in every case that if they would confess the part that the body of Christ is present in communion and not just a human commemoration, then we would dismiss the other questions and not pressure them whether this was a bodily or spiritual, natural or supernatural presence, with or without a fixed location. We would thus accept them as brothers and do everything that he [the prince] wanted. But (this is surprising to hear) they did not want to do so. The prince invited everyone from both parties to his table.

On Monday we were told that we should negotiate with each other on our own. Luther and Philipp [Melanchthon] thus dealt with Zwingli and Oecolampadius, Brenz and I with Martin Bucer and Hedio in secret. We brought Bucer so far that he admitted that Christ’s body is present in communion and that it is received in and with the bread by those who believe, but not the disbelievers. [He said this] because Christ had only called the bread he gave to the faithful his body, but had not meant that bread which was received by the disbelieving. Then we said that this would result in new disagreement, but not as vehement as the previous one. We thought that we could reach a compromise on this point. But when Bucer returned to his colleagues, they talked him out of it and he backslid.

Luther also negotiated diligently, but he made no progress on account of the sacrament. They asked us for the sake of God to consider them as our brothers [in faith] and allow their followers to receive communion with us; they in turn wanted to do the same. But this was denied to them for significant Christian reasons. Afterwards they requested that we should reach an agreement on the other contentious points. Luther agreed to this and made an effort. It was decided that he should outline the main tenets [of the faith], and wherever they did agree, they should make this known. If an agreement was reached, then everyone should sign. Luther was very careful; he would gladly have spared their weakness, but he did not want any damage to be done to the true, saving Christian doctrine. But finally he said, “I want to present them in the best possible way; they will not accept them anyway.” And he outlined them as I have had them printed.

In these negotiations it became clear that our opponents became more distant and more fearful of our doctrines the longer we negotiated. And they unfairly damned and bad-mouthed us, calling us cannibals, Capernaïtes, [and] Thyesteans, and [made] other slanderous claims that we worship a God of bread, a baked God, a gluttonous and drunken God. And yet they asked us to accept them as brothers! They

showed themselves to be unworthy of this, for if the slander and lies they directed at us had been true, they should not accept us as brothers, even if we asked them. It also became apparent that they doubt their own teaching, because they did not even introduce most of it out of fear that it would not withstand probing. It has also become clear that they erred because they secretly recanted on five articles of the agreement, which they had first held, taught, and written. Specifically concerning the indivisible union of the divine and human nature in one person in Christ, the doctrine of original sin, absolution [of sins], the fruit and use of the preacher's office, of baptism, and of the Last Supper of Christ our Lord, as everyone who has read many of their writings knows very well.

Finally, as they were departing, they requested that we refrain from and avoid severe, sharp written attacks on each other. This was promised, as long as they also do so and manage to keep their own [followers] from doing so. We wanted nothing except to deal with them amicably, as well.

Then the prince rode forth on Tuesday morning, and we also departed that afternoon with Luther. And we rode with him that day and Wednesday on the way to Schlaitz to address several questions about the unnecessary [parts] left of the mass and other ecclesiastical practices. On Thursday morning we set off on the most direct route to Nuremberg.

This is, honorable and wise, gracious dear lords, an approximate account of the negotiations in Marburg, everything that I remember. I wanted to relate it to you as you, honorable and wise [sirs], desired, and I hereby humbly commend myself to you.

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