

The Marburg Colloquy—Ulrich Zwingli’s Report (October 20, 1529)

Abstract

In October 1529, Landgrave Philip of Hesse invited Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli to a colloquy at Marburg Castle, where they debated the correct interpretation of Christ’s words as regards the Eucharist. The following eyewitness account was penned by Zwingli, who was reporting the events to his friend Joachim Vadian (1484–1551) of St. Gallen (now in Switzerland). Accompanied by magistrates and preachers from Zurich, Bern, and Basel, Zwingli had come to Marburg via Strasbourg, where the preachers tended to support him. Strasbourg’s leading magistrates, however, sought Protestant unity and thus backed Landgrave Philip. Among preachers, Zwingli’s views also enjoyed broad support in the southern Germany cities. In the following text, the Zurich reformer describes the palpable mistrust between himself and Luther.

Source

Grace and peace from God.

I will now briefly recount what you desire to know.

After we had been brought to Marburg under safe conduct and Luther had arrived with his party, the Prince Landgrave determined that there should be preliminary private debates, without a judge, between Oecolampadius and Luther and between Melanchthon and Zwingli, meaning: they were to examine each other’s doctrines for anything that might lead to a peaceable agreement. Luther treated Oecolampadius in such a way that the latter came to me and complained secretly that it was like dealing with Eck all over again. Only share this with people who are discreet, though. But as for Melanchthon: he was so slippery and so transformed himself like Proteus that he compelled me to take up the pen and thus arm and dry my hand with salt, so to speak, in order to pin him down more firmly as he glided around in all sorts of escape and subterfuge attempts. Thus, I am sending you a copy of the record of some of the hundreds of thousands of statements he made, yet I am doing so on the condition that you only communicate them to the trustworthy, i.e., to those who will not use them to continue this tragedy. Be mindful that Philip [Melanchthon] has a copy as well. It was written by me in his presence and under his observation, and he even dictated some of his own words. We certainly do not wish to give rise to a new quarrel.

Philip and I engaged in conversation for six hours, Luther and Oecolampadius for three. On the next day, in the presence of the Landgrave and a number of judges—no

more than twenty-four—Luther and Melanchthon and Oecolampadius and Zwingli went into the arena and fought it out then and in three other sessions. For there were four sessions, in all, in which we fought successfully in front of the judges. We confronted Luther with the fact that he had propounded those thrice foolish statements: that Christ suffered in His Divine nature and that the Body of Christ is everywhere; and that he himself had interpreted the word from the Bible that “the flesh profits nothing” in a way that differed from his present interpretation. But the fine fellow made no reply, except that on the point of the flesh profiting nothing he said: “You know yourself, Zwingli, that the ancients constantly changed the way they interpreted biblical texts as the centuries progressed and as their powers of judgment grew.” Then he said: “In a corporeal sense, the Body of Christ is eaten and received into our

body; however, I'd like to reserve judgment on whether the soul, too, eats the body." And yet a little earlier he had said: "The Body of Christ is eaten corporeally with the mouth; the soul does not eat him corporeally." He said: "The Body of Christ is created by these words, 'This is My Body,' no matter how wicked the man who pronounces these words." He conceded that the Body of Christ is finite. He admitted that the Eucharist can be called a sign of the Body of Christ.

These and other innumerable vacillating, absurd, and foolish utterances of his, which poured forth tirelessly from him like water rippling on a beach, were refuted by us so successfully that the Prince himself is now on our side; although publicly, in the presence of certain princes, he pretended not to be. Almost the entire Court of Hesse has deserted Luther. The Landgrave himself gave permission for our books to be read with impunity. He will no longer allow that clergymen who agree with our teachings be deposed.

Prince John of Saxony was not present, but the Prince of Wittenberg was. We parted with the agreement that you will soon see in print.

Truth prevailed so clearly that if anyone was ever beaten, it was the impudent and obstinate Luther, who was beaten publicly, albeit only in the eyes of clear-sighted and just judges; may he scream as loudly as he wants that he remains unbeaten, etc. We have been able to achieve another victory, as well, in that the Papists can no longer hope that Luther will side with them after we have come to an agreement on the remaining doctrines of the Christian faith. As I write this I am weary from my journey; when you come to us you shall have the full report. I think I have brought back a few more ideas that must be realized for the safeguarding of religion and for protection against the absolute rule of the Emperor; I must share them with you at the appropriate time.

Meanwhile, farewell, and greet all friends.

Yours, Huldreich Zwingli

Source of English translation (of the Latin original): *Huldreich Zwingli. The Reformer of German Switzerland*, edited by Samuel Macaulay Jackson. New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901, pp. 319–22. Available online at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t31265544>. Translation edited by GHI staff.

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