

11-1-1949

Notes on Luther's Interpretation of John 6:47-58

John Theodore Mueller
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mueller, John Theodore (1949) "Notes on Luther's Interpretation of John 6:47-58," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 20, Article 66.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol20/iss1/66>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Notes on Luther's Interpretation of John 6:47-58

By JOHN THEODORE MUELLER

Christ's discourse in John 6:47-58 is no doubt one of the most striking and challenging appeals from the lips of our Savior that are recorded in the Four Gospels.

It constitutes the climax in a long and earnest address delivered by our Lord when His Jewish followers, impressed by the amazing miracle of the feeding of more than five thousand in the wilderness with five loaves and two fishes, came to Capernaum to take Him by force and make Him their King, not indeed because they believed in Him as the promised Messiah, but, as Jesus frankly told them, "Because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled" (v. 26).

The Jewish multitude desired "meat that perisheth" (v. 27), meat for the body, earthly blessings. So Christ rebuked their secularistic, materialistic spirit and exhorted them to accept Him as their spiritual Savior.

Accordingly, in John 6, Jesus inculcates faith in His divine person and work as the prerequisite of salvation. Everything He here does and says centers in the necessity of faith for obtaining eternal life. This paramount emphasis on faith is apparent from His words, stressed and re-stressed in the whole chapter: "Believe on Me"; as, for example: "This is the work of God that ye *believe* on Him whom He hath sent" (v. 29); again: "He that *believeth* on Me shall never thirst" (v. 35); or: "This is the will of Him that sent Me, that everyone which seeth the Son and *believeth* on Him may have everlasting life" (v. 40); and: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that *believeth* on Me hath everlasting life" (v. 47). When at last the unbelieving Jews had turned away from Jesus, and He had asked His disciples whether they, too, wanted to leave Him, He expressed His hearty approval of Peter's inspired whole-hearted confession of faith: "We *believe* and are sure that Thou art that Christ, the Son of the Living God" (v. 69). Peter's unqualified *credo* was the result of his being chosen by Christ (v. 10). In Peter and his ten fellow disciples God's election and calling were realized to His glory.

So, then, the entire discourse of Christ in John 6 is an

[802]

ardent plea for faith in Him as the only Savior of sinners. Faith in the Redeemer, as the absolute *necessarium* of salvation, is the keynote enabling us properly to understand this great chapter.

In a general way this fact has been readily admitted by exegetes of all times and denominations. Nevertheless, there remains the age-old dispute concerning the proper interpretation of John 6:47-58. Roman Catholics have commonly interpreted the words eucharistically, that is to say, they have referred them to the Lord's Supper and based upon them (as also upon others) their special doctrine of transubstantiation. Most Reformed theologians have correctly interpreted the passage figuratively as demanding faith in Christ; but on the basis of these words they have denied the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

Luther, on the one hand, rejected the eucharistic interpretation of the words; yet, on the other hand, he acknowledged in them a fundamental truth that must be heeded by those desiring to receive the Holy Supper worthily. It is around these two vital thoughts, which by no means are contradictory, though they are often confused, that we wish to group our notes in this article.

I

LUTHER REJECTS THE EUCHARISTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PASSAGE

1

As is well known, Luther consistently rejected the eucharistic interpretation of John 6:47-58. This important fact Dr. W. H. T. Dau, professor of Doctrinal Theology at Concordia Seminary, has convincingly proved in two excellent articles in the *Theological Quarterly*,¹ in which he treats the entire problem of John 6 from a larger point of view. We shall confine ourselves in this investigation to an evaluation of some of the statements by Luther which have a bearing on the subject.

The quotations from Luther in which he repudiates the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 cover the years of both his earlier and his later Scripture exposition. Luther, therefore, rejected the eucharistic interpretation not only as a be-

¹ Vol. XVIII (1914), No. 3, 159 ff.; Vol. XIX (1915), No. 2, 71 ff.

ginner in Scripture interpretation, but also as a mature theologian.

The Reformer, for example, rejected the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 in his *Operationes in Psalmos*, his interpretations of the first twenty-two Psalms, which were produced by him between 1519 and 1521, the time of his relatively early expository labors at Wittenberg. Luther had there begun his lectures on the Psalms in 1513 and concluded them in 1515. But moved by the numerous requests of his students, he resumed the expository work in the fall of 1518, continuing it until he left Wittenberg for Worms in 1521, by which time he had completed twenty-one Psalms. He finished the entire work at the Wartburg, after which the complete exposition was published, though parts of it had already appeared in 1519.²

Luther again repudiated the eucharistic interpretation in his *Church Postil*, in the editing and publishing of which four periods may be distinguished: 1524—1527, when Luther himself prepared his sermons for publication; 1527—1535, when the work of Rodt became prominent; 1540—1544, when Creuziger took an important part in the work; and after Luther's death in 1546, when his sermons were edited and published by various publishers at various times.³ The quotations regarding the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 are taken from various sermons of Luther, some of which belong to the earlier period and others to the later period.

Luther, moreover, denied the eucharistic interpretation in his "Exposition of Exodus," which he elaborated between 1524 and 1526.⁴

A most important series of sermons was preached by Luther in the City Church of Wittenberg from 1530 to 1532 (while Bugenhagen, the pastor of this congregation, was absent at Luebeck) on chapters 6 and 8 of John's Gospel. Also in these he rejects the eucharistic interpretation of John 6.⁵

An interesting repudiation of the eucharistic interpreta-

² *Die Hauptschriften Luthers in Chronologischer Reihenfolge*. Von P. E. Kretzmann, St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House. Cf. St. Louis Ed., IV:359; Erl. XIV, 145—147; Walch IV, 417—420; Weimar V, 610 ff.

³ Cf. Introduction to Vol. XI, St. Louis Ed., p. 5.

⁴ St. Louis Ed., III:853; Erl. 35, 213—216; Walch III, 1276—1279; Weimar XVI, 224 ff.

⁵ St. Louis Ed., VII:2239; Erl. 47, 280—283; Walch VII, 1955—1958.

tion of John 6 by the great Reformer is found in *Dr. Martin Luther's Letter Against Some Factious Spirits (Rottengeister) to Margrave Albrecht in Brandenburg, Duke of Prussia*, which originated in April, 1532.⁶

Luther's *Table Talk* is a relatively late publication of the great Reformer, the diary of Conrad Cordatus being dated 1537 and that of Anton Lauterbach 1538, both sources of Luther's *Table Talk*. Here, too, in a striking setting, Luther denies the eucharistic interpretation of John 6.⁷

Thus throughout a period of more than two decades Luther rejected the eucharistic interpretation of John 6. During this time he wrote important works pertaining to the Lord's Supper; as, for example, *Against the Heavenly Prophets Regarding Images and the Sacrament* (1525); *A Sermon Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ Against the Enthusiasts* (1526); *That the Words of Christ: "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Enthusiasts* (1527); *Dr. Martin Luther's Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper* (1528); his *Catechism* (1529); *Dr. Martin Luther's Letter Against Some Factious Spirits* (1532), mentioned above, and others, in which he points out the correct interpretation of John 6 and repudiates the false. In fact, Luther's *Brief Confession Concerning the Holy Sacrament Against the Enthusiasts* (1544) adds nothing new so far as his exposition of the prooftexts treating of the Lord's Supper and his refutation of erroneous interpretations by opponents are concerned. We may, therefore, say that Luther at no time in his ministry favored the eucharistic interpretation of John 6.

2

As we study Luther's rejection of the eucharistic interpretation of John 6, we find that, as usual, he first bases the aspects for his claims upon the text itself. According to his conception, the text itself teaches the spiritual eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood in all passages. That with him is a foregone conclusion.

Luther thus argues from the *sensus literalis* in an expository sermon on Exodus 12, in which he writes: "Faith is the eating, which preserves and strengthens us. . . . Hence

⁶ St. Louis Ed., XX: 1679 ff.; Erl. 54, 281—283; Walch XX, 2088—2090.

⁷ St. Louis Ed. XXII: 592.

such eating is nothing else than the true, right faith of the heart, which exists when you receive Christ with faith and know (acknowledge) that He has shed His blood for you and this is your comfort and strength in cross and affliction, because you believe it without any doubt of the heart: in such a way you eat Christ and digest Him in you . . . just as the Lord Christ says of this John 6:35: 'He that cometh to Me shall never hunger.' Here, too, you have the spiritual eating of the heart. For what a Christian receives with his mouth does not avail him for his Christianity (1 Cor. 8:8), but if the heart receives anything by faith, that helps; through that one becomes a rich, full Christian, so that everything pleases God that he does."⁸

Luther's reference here to John 6:35 is important because that passage teaches the spiritual eating and drinking in so many words. It reads (given in full): "I am the Bread of life: He that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst." Luther's interpretation is, therefore, textual and correct.

In his *Exposition of Ps. 22:4* Luther first refers to John 16:3 as stating the reason why the Jews rejected Christ, and then continues: "So also in John 6:53, when He said: 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you,' this was a 'hard saying' (v.60), so that also many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him (v.66). Why was this a hard saying? Because to eat this flesh and drink this blood means to become incorporated into Christ by faith and to take part in His suffering. But this the wicked mind and heart, corrupted by false opinions, abhors exceedingly much."⁹

The reference to John 6:35 here is seemingly accidental, but it shows that Luther takes the words "to eat Christ's flesh and to drink His blood" as signifying faith or, as He says, to "become incorporated into Christ by faith." That this is really in harmony with the scope of the text is clear from the words: "Except ye eat . . . ye have not life in you," which declare that there is no salvation without such spiritual eating by faith. Luther's exposition, therefore, satisfies the central thought of Christ's admonition (sc., the necessity of faith) also here.

⁸ St. Louis Ed., III:853 f.; Erl. 35, 213—216; Walch III, 1276—1279.

⁹ St. Louis Ed., IV:359; Erl. XIV, 145—147; Walch IV, 417—420.

In his sermon on John 6:49 Luther writes: "So, then, there begins a murmuring, and they ask: 'How can we eat Thy flesh?' But this is the explanation, namely, that He speaks of the spiritual flesh, that is, of spiritual eating. It is faith that eats Him, just as He Himself explains this when He says: 'He that believeth on Me hath everlasting life' (v. 47), that is, such a one eats rightly, for 'I am the Bread of life.' Faith is the one that eats; it eats and (so) believes in Christ. . . . So, then, when we hear that Christ is (the) Food and the Bread of heaven (it is necessary) that we cling to this (truth) in faith and hold on to it with appreciation and joy."¹⁰

Here again Luther proves his claim by referring to the clear words of Christ which demand that His hearers should believe in Him as the divine Savior.

In his "Sixteenth Sermon" on John 6:53-54, delivered on April 1, 1531, Luther writes: "Wherever, then, the Lord Christ is being preached that He has given His body into death for our sins and has shed His blood for us, and I heed it, firmly believe it, and cling to it, that it means to eat and drink His body and blood. *To eat* here means to believe. Whoever believes, he eats and also drinks Christ."¹¹

To this conclusion Luther is forced by Christ's words (v. 53): "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have not life in you," which Luther interprets thus: "Ye either eat My flesh and drink My blood, or you lose life and can nevermore be saved."¹² Because of this "either—or" the words must be interpreted in a figurative sense, meaning faith in Christ.

In his sermon on John 6:55-58, which was delivered on the Feast of Corpus Christi, perhaps in 1523, Luther writes: "That this is the correct understanding of the Gospel [the text on which he was preaching], namely, that it must be understood of the spiritual eating and drinking, the words show which the Lord speaks at the end of the chapter: 'It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing. The words that I speak

¹⁰ St. Louis Ed., VII:2321 f.; Erl. 47, 379—382; Walch VII, 2069—2071; Weimar XXXIII, 178. Luther here uses the word "Verstand" in the sense of "Verstaendnis," that is, understanding, or appreciation.

¹¹ St. Louis Ed., VII:2344; Erl. 48, 15—17; Walch VII, 2103—2106; Weimar XXXIII, 209 f.

¹² St. Louis Ed., VII:2343; Erl. 48, 12—15; Walch VII, 2100—2103; Weimar XXXIII, 208.

unto you, they are spirit, and they are life' (v. 63). With these words Christ means to say that the bodily eating of the flesh does not profit, but to believe that this flesh is God's Son, who came from heaven for my sake and has shed His blood for me, that is profitable, and that is life. For this reason to eat the flesh of the Son of God and to drink His blood means, as already said, nothing else than that I believe that His flesh was given for me and His blood was shed for me and that He overcame sin, death, the devil, hell and all (other) evil for me."¹³

As he concludes this sermon, Luther says: "This, then, is the true food. . . . Hence the eating must not be (understood as) an external eating, but (as) an eternal eating, which never ceases. And that is nothing else than to believe, as you have heard. This is demanded also by the passage which Christ addressed to the Jews (John 6:29): 'This is the work of God that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.' If, then, we believe firmly that Christ is the Son of God, sacrificed for us,¹⁴ then we have life (in Christ)."¹⁵

3

Luther, however, not only rejects the eucharistic interpretation because he honestly believes this to be at variance with the clear meaning of the text, but time and again he argues his claim also from other reasons.

He thus believed that the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 rests on a *prolepsis*, that is, on the assigning of an event to a period earlier than its actual date.¹⁶ The Lord's Supper actually was not instituted until a considerable time (perhaps a whole year) after the discourse at Capernaum was delivered. There is in John 6:51-58 no institutional command: "This do in remembrance of Me," as, for instance, in Luke 22:19 and other passages. Nor do we read anywhere in the New Testament that the Lord's Supper was celebrated immediately after the Capernaum discourse had been addressed to the Jews. Again, when Christ instituted the Holy Supper, He did this in

¹³ St. Louis Ed., XI:2253; Erl. 15, 371-373; Walch XI, 2998-3001; cf. Weimar XII, 580-584.

¹⁴ Luther: *fuere uns dargegeben*, lit., "given for us."

¹⁵ St. Louis Ed., XI:2257; Erl. 15, 375-377; Walch XI, 3004-3007; cf. Weimar XII, 580-584.

¹⁶ Cf. Dau, "The Eucharistic Interpretation of John 6," *Theol. Quarterly*, XIX, 81.

the Upper Room in the midst of His chosen disciples, and not in company with a vast multitude of believing and unbelieving Jews. Dr. Dau is right when he argues that all who find in John 6 a *sedes doctrinae* for the Lord's Supper must hold that the Sacrament was actually in existence before it was instituted.¹⁷

While Luther does not expatiate upon this argument, he, nevertheless, very clearly mentions it. He does this, for example, in his sermon on John 6:44-51, preached on Pentecost Monday at Wittenberg. Here he says: "For this reason¹⁸ I have said that we must not forcibly apply¹⁹ these words to the Sacrament of the Altar; for whoever interprets them in that way wrests the sense of the passage. There is in this Gospel not a single letter which mentions the Sacrament of the Altar. *Why should Christ here think of the Sacrament when it was not yet instituted?* [Italics our own.] So also the whole chapter from which this Gospel [this text] is taken speaks of nothing else than of the spiritual food, namely, of faith. For when the people ran after the Lord and again wanted to eat and drink, as the Lord Himself explains it, He utilizes the occasion of the bodily food, which they sought, and speaks throughout the entire chapter of a spiritual food, as He said: 'The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life' (v. 63). By this He wanted to show them that they should believe on Him, and as they enjoyed the bodily food, so also they should the spiritual."²⁰

In this passage Luther points out not only that the clear meaning of the words demand their spiritual interpretation, but also that the prolepsis involved is opposed to the eucharistic conception of the text. His argument: "Why should Christ here refer to the Sacrament, since it was not yet instituted?" is certainly well taken.

4

Again, Luther stresses the fact that the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 proves too much and, therefore, nothing at all.

¹⁷ Cf. *Loc. cit.*

¹⁸ A variant reading has this: "For this reason I would pray and remind you that you would not forcibly apply these words," etc.

¹⁹ Luther: "Dass man diese Worte nicht zwingen sollt auf das Sakrament des Altars."

²⁰ St. Louis Ed., XI:1143 f.; Erl. 12, 403-405; Walch XI, 1542-1544.

Luther uses the argument that the eucharistic interpretation proves too much very effectively in several ways. . .

In the first place, he shows that if Christ's words must be interpreted eucharistically, then the papists must administer the Holy Supper *sub utraque specie* and so give to the lay communicants not only the bread, but also the cup. This, however, they refuse to do and thus defeat their own argument.

Luther does this, for example, in the opening paragraphs of his sermon preached at Wittenberg on the occasion of the feast of Corpus Christi, to which we have already referred, in which he speaks very sharply and challengingly. He says:

"This Gospel (text) has (been given) a twofold interpretation. One Christ Himself has given to it; the other, the pope (gave to it) or rather the devil. The one, which Christ Himself gives, is suggested by the words at the beginning of the Gospel, where the Lord says: 'For My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me, and I in him' (v. 55 f.). That is a strong promise that whoever should eat this food must remain in Christ and live eternally. The other interpretation, which the pope has given to it (the text), is this, that he has applied (the words) to the Sacrament of the Altar, which interpretation must stultify us if we use it.²¹ And if we wish to understand this Gospel as referring to the bread of the Altar (Lord's Supper), we place a sword into the hands of the Bohemians (the Hussites) so that they might cleave our heads.²² For from this Gospel they argue very stoutly against us and the whole chapter that we must receive and use both kinds (bread and wine) contrary to the order and institution of the pope. For thus reads the text of this Gospel: 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you' (v. 53). . . . So it goes when we want to resort to an interpretation that is forced upon Scripture."²³

This, then, is Luther's argument: If some interpret the words eucharistically (as do the papists), they must give to the communicants both the bread and the cup, as the followers

²¹ Luther: "*Welches Verstandes man doch mit Schanden brauchen muss.*"

²² Luther: "*Dass sie uns durch die Koepfe hauen.*"

²³ St. Louis Ed., XI:2248 f.; Erl. 15, 367-369; Walch XI, 2993-2996; cf. Weimar XII, 580, 584.

of John Hus demand. But since they refuse to do this, they cannot maintain their eucharistic interpretation. They prove too much by their eucharistic interpretation, for they themselves decline to do what the text in that case demands.

In the second place, Luther shows that the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 proves too much from another point of view, which is ably set forth by Dr. Dau in the aforementioned article as follows: "Where the three evangelists and St. Paul present the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, they speak of an eating and drinking of the body and blood of the Lord which may bring damnation, viz., to an unworthy communicant, 1 Cor. 11: 29. Such a possibility is not even remotely considered in John 6. On the contrary, we are told in vv. 54, 56 that the eating of His flesh and the drinking of His blood, of which the Lord speaks in this place, is always salutary; it is always to the end of obtaining eternal life. Those who appeal to John 6 as a *sedes doctrinae* for the Lord's Supper must grant, in order to hold their own ground, that no person can commune unworthily."

Luther, in his sermon preached on the feast of Corpus Christi, puts the argument thus: "Therefore, since here you clearly read: 'If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever' (v. 51), the text forces us that it must be understood of another eating. It must be another food which the Lord gives than the Sacrament of the Altar, to which the Pope refers it. For we can use the Sacrament to our great detriment. We cannot silence St. Paul²⁴ when he says 1 Cor. 11: 27: 'Wherefore, whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord,' and soon afterwards (vv. 29-30): 'For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep. All these words declare that we can receive the Sacrament unworthily, but the food of which the Lord here speaks we can nevermore receive unworthily. Therefore this Gospel does not apply to the bread of the Altar, for there is in it too clear a promise.'"²⁵

²⁴ Luther: "Man kann je nicht St. Paulo das Maul verstopfen."

²⁵ St. Louis Ed., XI: 2249 f.; Erl. 15, 367-369; Walch XI, 2993-2996; cf. Weimar XII, 580-584.

With a slightly different application Luther uses the same argument also in his "Sixth Sermon" on John 6, which he preached on December 10, 1530. Here he says in exposition of John 6:36: "To eat of His flesh and drink of His blood that means firmly to believe on Him. And here He does not speak of the Sacrament, but of those who should live eternally. For many run to the Supper of the Lord and, nevertheless, die eternally of hunger and thirst. But here the matter is quite different, so that he who eats the body shall neither hunger nor thirst. So Christ here speaks of the matter which means to believe. For He says: "You see Me and hear Me, and yet do not believe."²⁶

With great force and effect Luther uses the argument also in his *Letter Against Some Factious Spirits to Margrave Albrecht in Brandenburg, Duke of Prussia* (April, 1532). Here he writes: "Such eating and drinking (as mentioned in John 6) can well take place outside Baptism and the Sacrament, alone by faith and through the preached Word of the Gospel. And no wicked person can so eat, just as little as a wicked person can believe and at the same time remain wicked. For He there says (John 6:51): 'If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever.' And again (v. 35): 'Except ye eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you.' For this reason all must believe who eat according to John 6, for they shall have life, as Christ says.

"And let it be said as in a sum: 'Whoever believes in Christ shall be saved.' But in the Lord's Supper both the worthy and the unworthy can eat, as St. Paul clearly shows 1 Cor. 11:27-29: 'For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.' For this reason not all (communicants) can eat unto life, as they must eat according to John 6. And so there is a great difference between John 6 and the Lord's Supper. For the former is a spiritual eating without a bodily eating, but here in the Lord's Supper there is a spiritual eating, however, only by believers; and, besides this, there is a bodily eating, which is common to both believers and unbelievers."²⁷

Luther, then, argues thus: Since the eating and drinking

²⁶ St. Louis Ed., VII:2239 f.; Erl. 47, 280—283; Walch VII, 1955—1958.

²⁷ St. Louis Ed., XX:1678 ff.; Erl. 54, 281—283; Walch XX, 2088—2090.

mentioned in John 6 is always salutary, which cannot be said of the sacramental eating and drinking, the eucharistic interpretation of Christ's words in the chapter defeats itself, since it proves too much.

5

There is yet another argument which Luther uses against the eucharistic interpretation of John 6. It is this: While the eating and drinking of which Christ speaks in John 6 is always necessary for salvation, the sacramental eating is not absolutely necessary, so that believing children and adults can be saved even though they do not receive the Lord's Supper. This truth is embodied in the age-old axiom: "Not lack of the Sacrament, but contempt of it condemns." Since, however, Christ in John 6 insists upon the absolute necessity of eating His flesh and drinking His blood (John 6:53), He there cannot speak of the sacramental eating, but must have in mind the spiritual only.

Dr. Dau very nicely puts the argument thus: "In John the Lord speaks of an eating and drinking that is absolutely necessary for salvation: 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you,' v. 53. But of the eating and drinking in the Lord's Supper Paul says 1 Cor. 11:28: 'Let a man examine himself, and so let him,' etc. Hence persons who are not capable of self-examination are not admitted to the Lord's Supper. Those who appeal to John 6 as a *sedes doctrinae* for the Lord's Supper are forced to believe, if they will be true to their own arguments, that all believers who have not communed will be damned."²⁸

Luther, too, at various times used this argument with great force. When, for example, Luther was asked whether the Hussites did right in administering the Lord's Supper to little children on the plea that the grace of God belonged to all men and that since they were to be saved, they also must use the venerable Sacrament as do the adults, the Reformer replied:

"It is wrong on their part to regard it necessary for the salvation of children to administer to them the Sacrament, though it may not be sinful, since St. Cyprian also did this. But since the passage John 6:53: 'Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man,' etc., which they adduce, does not belong to

²⁸ *Theol. Quarterly*, Vol. XIX, 81.

the Sacrament, but to faith, there is no need for administering the Sacrament to small children."²⁹

According to Luther, therefore, the sacramental eating is not absolutely necessary for salvation, while the spiritual eating, that is, faith in Christ, the divine Redeemer, is absolutely necessary.

In his sermon delivered on John 6:55-58 at Wittenberg on the feast of the Corpus Christi (1523) Luther writes with reference to v. 55:

"This eating and drinking is nothing else than to believe in the Lord Christ, who gave His flesh and blood for my sake, in order that He might redeem me from sin, death, the devil, hell, and all (other) evil. Such faith can never take place without (giving) life; for he who believes must live and be justified, as Habakkuk 2:4 declares: 'The just shall live by his faith.' So the eating takes place in the heart and not with the mouth. The eating in the heart never deceives, but the eating with the mouth (in Holy Communion) that does (may) deceive. The eating with the mouth ceases, but the other continues forever without ceasing. For the heart feeds and nurtures itself by faith in Christ. So, then, you see clearly that these words must not be understood with reference to the Sacrament of the Altar."³⁰

Hence, according to Luther, the sacramental eating is not necessary for salvation, while the spiritual eating, of which John 6 speaks, is absolutely necessary for salvation, so that it must be the latter to which our Lord refers.

6

There is yet another argument which Luther emphasizes against the eucharistic interpretation of John 6. It is this: While in the words of institution Christ promises His body and blood to eat and to drink in, with, and under the bread and wine, He mentions no external elements in John 6, so that also this very fact proves that He was not thinking in terms of the Holy Supper, when He addressed the Jews at Capernaum.

Dr. Dau, in his fine article, puts the argument thus: "In John 6 our Lord speaks of His flesh and blood, but names no

²⁹ St. Louis Ed., XXII:591 ff.

³⁰ St. Louis Ed., XI:2252; Erl. 15, 371-373; Walch XI, 2998-3001; cf. Weimar XII, 580-584.

external elements by means of which these are to be taken, while those elements are named and exhibited in the words of institution of the Lord's Supper. Those who appeal to John 6 as a *sedes doctrinae* for the doctrine of the Sacrament must do one of two things: either they must eat the flesh of Christ and drink His blood without any external means like the anthropophagi, or they must admit that the words 'eating' and 'drinking,' likewise the words 'flesh' and 'blood,' in John 6, cannot be taken literally, but must be understood figuratively, viz., for believing in the atoning sacrifice of Christ and those feasting on His merits with the mouth of faith."

Luther urges this matter especially in his *Letter Against Some Factious Spirits to Margrave Albrecht in Brandenburg*, in which he writes:

"It is true that in John 6 Christ does not speak of the Lord's Supper. Nor does He do anything with His hands. He also does not impart any bread or wine to His disciples, as He does in the Lord's Supper, but He preaches indiscriminately both to His disciples and the non-believers at Capernaum faith in Himself, which faith holds that He is true man with flesh and blood and that He gave them both for us (in death). This properly means to eat His body spiritually and to drink His blood spiritually. And He calls Himself the spiritual bread, which gives life to the world."³¹

This difference between John 6 and the passages that describe Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper, the former teaching an eating without elements and the latter with definite elements, is important for the right understanding of what Jesus meant to tell the Jews at Capernaum who desired to make Him their King. To them He meant to preach faith in Himself as the promised Messiah, who had come to procure for them eternal life. To His disciples in the Upper Room, when He instituted the Holy Supper, Christ meant to seal the forgiveness of sins which they already possessed by their faith in Him as the Light and the Life of the world.

7

Dr. Dau shows in great detail how not only the Roman Catholic theologians, but also the confessional writings of the Reformed churches and the writings of Reformed dogmaticians

³¹ St. Louis Ed., XX:1678; Erl. 54, 281—283; Walch XX, 2088—2090.

are full of references to John 6 as a eucharistic text.³² However, with respect to the Westminster Confession (XXIX, VII), he quotes the exposition by Shedd, in his *Dogmatic Theology*, II, 565, and then remarks: "Shedd and the Westminster Confession would agree with the Lutherans in understanding the eating and drinking in John 6 as an act of faith; both accept the spiritual signification of these terms. They would disagree in their application of this text to the Eucharist."

This explanation of Dr. Dau is most important, for while practically all Reformed divines have explained John 6 as referring to the spiritual eating of Christ's flesh, most of them sought in this great text some reference to the Lord's Supper to prove that in the Sacrament of the Altar there could be only a spiritual and no sacramental eating and drinking. Dr. Dau quotes Zwingli's *Fidei Ratio*, in which, to refute the papistic doctrine of transubstantiation, he says: "Christ Himself showed [the error of this belief] when to the Jews who were quarreling about the corporeal eating of His flesh He said: 'The flesh profiteth nothing,' namely, as regards natural eating; however, it profiteth very much as regards spiritual eating; for it gives life."³³

Dr. Dau in his article offers much other valuable *dogmengeschichtliches* material which the student might study in this connection. We quote only one remark of his: "Hodge correctly claims to be in harmony with the Lutherans in this view of John 6 [the spiritual eating and drinking]. But Hodge knows of no other eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ than that which he has explained from John 6; for in the next paragraph he declares: "To receive the body and blood as offered in the Sacrament, or in the Word [!], is to receive and appropriate the sacrificial virtue or effects of the death of Christ on the Cross.'" ³⁴

It might interest the reader that J. Wilbur Chapman's *New Testament with Notes*, which the writer used for his *Concordia New Testament with Notes*, has this note on John 6:53: "Eat the flesh — drink the blood: not literally, but spiritually, as the food and drink of the soul; thus, by a living

³² *Theol. Quarterly*, XVIII, 163 ff.

³³ Quoted by Dau from Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Reformatis Publicatarum*. Lips., 1840, pp. 27, 29.

³⁴ *Systematic Theology* III, 611, 648 ff.

union with Him through faith, receiving from Him forgiveness, sanctification, and eternal life. The Savior has in mind the gift, which He is about to make on the cross, of His flesh and blood for the life of the world. The view which He here gives of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, is the same that underlies the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, afterwards instituted by Him." (Italics our own.)

It is, therefore, true that the principal interest which Reformed divines had in the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 was that of finding in it some "proof" that in the Lord's Supper there could not be any sacramental eating and drinking. Theirs was a fallacy of *metabasis eis allo genos*; in other words, they used Scripture passages to "prove" a doctrine which these passages simply do not teach.

In his *Elementa Theologiae Dogmaticae* the Belgian Jesuit and teacher of theology Francis Xavier Schouppe takes his first proof for the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament from John 6; his second, from the words of institution; and his third, from 1 Cor. 10 and 11. He writes (translated from the Latin):

"First Proof I. *From the words of promise* which are set forth in John 6. For if Christ then really promised to give His body and blood to be manducated orally, it is absolutely certain, that the same Christ in the Eucharist is truly, really, and substantially present," etc.³⁵ This certainly is unanswerable logic if the premise could be granted!

8

In his article on the subject (Vol. XVIII, p. 162) Dr. Dau has an important footnote, which is to this effect: "Those exegetes who favor the eucharistic interpretation of John 6 and nonchalantly substitute for the 'flesh' of John 6 the 'body' of the words of institution, might appeal to Luther's remark in his *Bondage of the Will* (December, 1525): 'At this place one could say body for flesh.'" ³⁶ Luther refers to v. 63: "The flesh profiteth nothing." But he does not speak of the flesh of Christ. Compare, moreover, Luther's remark in his treatise

³⁵ *Elementa Theologiae Dogmaticae*. Francisci Xaverii Schouppe, S. J., Tom. II. Ed. *Vigesima Prima*, Delhomme et Briguet, Editeurs, Paris 13, Rue de l'Abbaye, 13.

³⁶ St. Louis Ed., XVIII:1877; Erl. VII, 287, 291; Walch XVIII, 2354 to 2358; Weimar XVIII, 735.

That These Words Still Remain Unshaken, etc. (April, 1527):
 "Flesh cannot be understood of Christ's body."³⁷

When the student of Luther consults the references given here, he will find that Luther is very careful in allowing the "flesh" of John 6 and the "body" of the words of institution to stand. He never uses the terms interchangeably; nor does he allow anyone to declare: "The *body* profiteth nothing." In fact, he proves at great length against the enthusiasts that the body of Christ is indeed exceedingly useful, both when it died on the Cross and when it is offered to the communicants in the Holy Supper.

It might be noted, too, how very faithful Luther is in his loyal adherence to the text of Scripture, whenever in his four great monographs on the Lord's Supper, directed against the Sacramentarians, he speaks of the *materia coelestis*, that is the celestial element, which the communicant, no matter whether worthy or unworthy, receives in, with, and under the bread and wine. Luther never adds to nor subtracts from the words which Christ Himself used in the words of institution, but uses consistently the words "body" and "blood." Nor does he, as did the papistic and Calvinistic opponents, substitute anything else for the body and blood, such as the "entire Christ," "the divine nature of Christ," "the divine efficacy of the body of Christ," etc. He readily admits that the whole Christ is truly present in the Sacrament by reason of His promise, which never fails, but what the communicant receives in the Sacrament with the bread and wine is no more and no less than the body and blood of Christ, the body that was given into death and the blood that was shed on the Cross. Nor does Luther rationalize the words of institution: To him the body is not a "pneumatic body" nor "the Christ according to the divine nature," nor "the effects of Christ's death," etc. It remains simply the "body and blood, given and shed for the remission of sins." To go beyond that, to try to define the body and blood of Christ more precisely, would have seemed unbearable arrogance to Luther in a mystery of godliness so vast that it in every way surpasses human comprehension.³⁸

³⁷ St. Louis Ed., XX: 840.

³⁸ For modern substitutes for body and blood cf. Pieper, F., *Christliche Dogmatik*, Vol. III, 415 ff. St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1920.

9

Doubts have been expressed whether or not the Formula of Concord of the Lutheran Church in all respects reproduces the thoughts of Luther with reference to the Holy Supper. It is manifest that the later developments of the Eucharistic Controversy, especially those after Luther's death, had much to do with the special formulation of the dogma as we find it set forth in Article VII of the Formula of Concord (*De Coena Domini*). But the doctrine is essentially that of Luther and reproduces the truths which the Reformer defended in his four great monographs against the Sacramentarians.³⁰

There is a passage in Article VII of the Formula of Concord which in this connection deserves careful study, namely, the one which well describes the twofold eating of the flesh of Christ. It sums up very nicely what the excerpts from Luther which we have quoted have set forth. We read:

"There is, therefore, a twofold eating of the flesh of Christ, one *spiritual*, of which Christ treats especially John 6: 54, which occurs in no other way than with the spirit and faith, in the preaching and meditation of the Gospel, as well as in the Lord's Supper, and by itself is useful and salutary, and necessary at all times for salvation to all Christians; without which spiritual participation also the sacramental or oral eating in the Supper is not only not salutary, but even injurious and damning [a cause of condemnation].

"But this spiritual eating is nothing else than *faith*, namely, to hear God's Word (wherein Christ, true God and man, is presented to us, together with all benefits which He has purchased for us by His flesh given into death for us, and by His blood shed for us, namely, God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life), to receive it with faith and appropriate it to ourselves, and in all troubles and temptations firmly to rely, with sure confidence and trust, and to abide in the consolation that we have a gracious God, and eternal salvation on account of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

"The other eating of the body of Christ is *oral* or *sacramental*, when the true, essential body and blood of Christ are also orally received and partaken of in the Holy Supper by all who eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine in the

³⁰ Cf. F. Bente, *Historical Introduction to Article VII in Concordia Triglott*, 172 ff.

Supper — by the believing as a certain pledge and assurance that their sins are surely forgiven them, and Christ dwells and is efficacious in them, but by the unbelieving for their judgment and condemnation, as the words of the institution by Christ expressly declare, when at the table and during the Supper He offers His disciples natural bread and natural wine, which He calls His true body and true blood, at the same time saying: *'Eat and drink.'* For in view of the circumstances this command evidently cannot be understood otherwise than of oral eating and drinking, however, not in a gross, carnal, Capernaïtic, but in a supernatural, incomprehensible way; to which afterwards the other command adds still another and spiritual eating, when the Lord Christ says further: *'This do in remembrance of Me,'* where He requires faith [which is the spiritual partaking of Christ's body]."⁴⁰

Here, then, we find Luther's distinction between the spiritual and the oral or sacramental eating clearly and sharply stated. The spiritual eating occurs wherever the Gospel is being proclaimed and applied to men, both in the Sacrament and without it; the sacramental occurs only in the Sacrament.

In his Small Catechism Luther says: "It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them [not the oral eating and drinking], but the words here written, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins'; which words, beside the bodily eating and drinking, are as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins."

Here again we have Luther's clear distinction between the spiritual and oral eating of the Lord's body, both of which occur in the Sacrament, but so that it is the former which renders the partaker a "worthy communicant." Of this we shall speak later in greater detail. We quote the words here to show how highly Luther valued the spiritual eating, though he sharply distinguished between the spiritual and the sacramental eating.

10

When the question is raised why Luther so greatly emphasized the value of the spiritual eating in the Sacrament, we must recall his fundamental tenet that, properly speaking, it is the Word, and more properly still, the Gospel, which is

⁴⁰ Thorough Declaration, VII, 61—65. *Concordia Triglot*, p. 995.

the divinely appointed means of grace, the instrument by and through which God offers us His grace, procured by Christ Jesus. In opposition to the *ex opere operato* doctrine of Romanism and the immediate-operation doctrine of Zwinglianism, Luther invariably stresses the Gospel as the means by which faith is engendered and strengthened in the human heart. To Luther even the *materia coelestis* of the Sacrament, the body and blood of Christ, *per se* does not convey the sacramental blessing; in fact, it even may be received unto condemnation. The *materia coelestis* is merely the pledge and seal affixed to the Word, so that the Holy Supper is distinguished from other means of grace not merely by its individual communication (for that is true of absolution), but above all by its special conveyance of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation with and under the pledge of Christ's body and blood. But, properly speaking, not the body and blood, but the Word, that is, the Gospel, makes the Sacrament a true means of grace.

This doctrine is very simply stated in Luther's Large Catechism, where he says: "The Word must make a Sacrament of the element, else it remains a mere element."⁴¹ Again: "For it (the Sacrament) is not founded upon the holiness of men, but upon the Word of God. . . . For this reason we go to the Sacrament, because there we receive such a treasure, by and in which we obtain forgiveness of sins. Why so? Because the words stand here and give us this."⁴²

Or: "But now the entire Gospel and the article of the Creed: *I believe a holy Christian Church, the forgiveness of sin, etc.*, are by the Word embodied in this Sacrament and presented to us. Why, then, should we allow this treasure to be torn from the Sacrament when they must confess that these are the very words which we hear everywhere in the Gospel, and they cannot say that these words in the Sacrament are of no use, as little as they dare say that the entire Gospel or Word of God, apart from the Sacrament, is of no use."⁴³

Thus, according to Luther, it is the Word that makes the Lord's Supper a Sacrament, and because of this there must be in the Sacrament the spiritual eating, that is, faith.

⁴¹ *Concordia Triglot*, p. 755.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 757.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 759 f.

II

CHRIST'S WORDS IN JOHN 6 ASSERT A MOST
WEIGHTY TRUTH CONCERNING WORTHY
COMMUNING

1

The quotations from Luther which we appended last introduce a most important truth which the great Reformer stresses constantly: Christ's words in John 6 assert a most weighty truth concerning worthy communing. Although in John 6 Christ does not speak of the Holy Supper, He nevertheless points out the only way in which we can receive His spiritual blessings of pardon, life, and salvation, both outside and in Holy Communion, namely, the way of accepting His given promises by true faith. This is, of course, a well-known truth, though often it is left out of consideration.

Luther's conception of the Sacrament is that of the *verbum visibile*, that is, the divine Word, or the Gospel, illustrated to us in its full graciousness by a sacred external action. In the final analysis the *visible* does not matter so very much; but what is essential is the fact that the Sacrament is properly nothing else than the *verbum Dei*, or the *evangelium Christi*, applied to the communicant under the pledge of Christ's body and blood. And this message must be believed by the communicant if he is to obtain the divine gifts which Christ offers in the Sacrament, so that there can be no worthy or beneficial eating without faith. In other words, while Luther fights hard for the Scriptural doctrine of the Real Presence, he also emphasizes, from the practical point of view, as the most important thing in the Sacrament, the spiritual eating and drinking.

Luther does this not only in the words of the Small Catechism, quoted above, in which he says: "It is not the eating and drinking, indeed, that does them, but the words here written, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins'; which words, beside the bodily eating and drinking, are as the chief thing in the Sacrament; and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins," but also in the following: "Fasting and bodily preparation is, indeed, a fine outward training; but he is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.' But he that does not believe

these words, or doubts, is unworthy and unprepared; for the words 'for you' require all hearts to believe."

Faith in the words of Christ, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," or the spiritual eating of Christ's body, according to Luther, is therefore absolutely necessary for obtaining the blessings of the Sacrament. While faith does not constitute the essence of the Sacrament, that is to say, while the faith of the recipient, or that of the celebrant, does not make the Supper a Sacrament (for the Sacrament exists by virtue of Christ's institution), the faith of the communicant is, nevertheless, necessary for receiving the benedictions which the Sacrament offers. The Gospel in the Sacrament is the conferring means, while faith is the receiving means.

This weighty truth Luther stresses more fully in his monograph against Zwingli and his adherents, *That These Words Still Stand Firm Against the Enthusiasts*, in which he writes:

"Again I ask: What, if I eat Christ's flesh in the Lord's Supper in a bodily manner (that is, orally or sacramentally) in such a way that I at the same time eat it also spiritually, will you then not concede that Christ's flesh in the Lord's Supper is indeed very profitable? But how can that be? Thus: I will eat His body with the bread in a bodily way, and in my heart I will also at the same time believe that it is the body which was given for me for the remission of sins, as the words declare (Luke 22:19): 'This is My body, which is given for you,' which you yourselves call a spiritual eating.⁴⁴ If, then, spiritual eating takes place, the bodily eating can do no harm, but must be profitable on account of the spiritual eating.

"But you reply that we separate the spiritual eating from the bodily. . . . When have you ever heard us say that we eat the Supper of Christ in such a way, or that we teach that it should be so eaten, that there be only an external, bodily eating of the body of Christ? Have we not taught in many books that in the Lord's Supper two things must be noted? The one is the highest and most necessary; namely, the words: 'Take, eat; this is My body,' etc. The other is the Sacrament or the bodily (sacramental) eating of the body of Christ. No one can receive the words through the mouth into the body; he must receive them into the heart through his ears.

⁴⁴ The St. Louis Ed. here has Matt. 26:26, which, however, does not give the words of institution as Luther quotes them.

But what does he receive into the heart through the words? Nothing else than what the words say, namely, 'the body (is) given for us,' which is the spiritual eating. And we have added to this that whoever eats the Sacrament without such words, or without such spiritual eating, to him it not only does not profit, but to him it is even harmful, as Paul says, 1 Cor. 11:27: 'Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.'"⁴⁵

Here, then, Luther emphasizes the spiritual eating or the communicant's faith in the sacramental promise as the chief thing in the Sacrament. This thought is repeated and applied in all the controversial monographs on the Lord's Supper.

We find it, for example, in his *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper*, written in 1528. Here Luther says (just to quote but one of his many statements): "Therefore we say that there is forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper not because of the eating, or because Christ there merits or procures forgiveness of sins, but on account of the Word, by which He distributes the forgiveness which has been procured, saying: 'This is My body, which is given for you.' There you hear that we eat the body as the one given for us, and as we eat, we heed and believe this. For this reason that forgiveness of sins is there (in the Sacrament) imparted which was secured on the Cross."⁴⁶

In his *Large Catechism* Luther speaks of the spiritual eating, that is, he connects faith in the sacramental promise again and again. We quote only one brief paragraph:

"Now we must also see who is the person that receives this power and benefit. That is answered briefly, as we said above of Baptism and often elsewhere: Whoever believes it has what the words declare and bring. For they are not spoken or proclaimed to stone and wood, but to those who hear them, to whom He says: *Take and eat*, etc. And because He offers and promises forgiveness of sin, it cannot be received otherwise than by faith. This faith He Himself demands in the Word when He says: *Given and shed for you*. As if He said: For this reason I give it and bid you eat and drink that you may claim it as yours and enjoy it. Whoever now accepts these words

⁴⁵ St. Louis Ed., XX:830 f.; Erl. 30, 85-87; Walch XX, 1035-1038.

⁴⁶ St. Louis Ed., XX:925; Erl. 30, 182-184; Walch XX, 1155-1158.

and believes that what they declare is true has it. But whoever does not believe it has nothing, as he allows it to be offered to him in vain and refuses to enjoy such a saving good (und nicht will solches heilsamen Gutes geniessen). The treasure, indeed, is opened and placed at everyone's door, yea, upon his table, but it is necessary that you also claim it and confidently view it as the words suggest to you."⁴⁷

2

Christ's words in John 6:47-58 thus teach a weighty truth with regard to worthy communing, namely, that as Luther time and again points out, there can be no worthy communing unless the communicant does that very thing which Christ demands in this important passage; that is to say, unless He eats Christ's flesh and drinks His blood spiritually, that is, unless he believes in Christ as the divine-human Savior who has died for his sins and now offers to him in the Sacrament the very forgiveness which He secured for him personally by His vicarious suffering and death.

For the pastor in his practical ministry this weighty truth is of the greatest importance; for it must be his aim so to prepare his communicants for the reception of the Holy Supper that they believe not merely that Christ has died for the sins of the world in general (*fides generalis*), but that He died for the sins of each individual communicant and that He now offers to him personally under the pledge of the body and blood, imparted with the bread and wine, complete pardon with life and salvation (*fides specialis*). In other words, John 6:47-58 must be made so real to them that they confidently trust in the Savior, who offers to them with His body and blood all the blessings which He procured for the world by giving His life and shedding His blood for their salvation. Luther in his writings on the Lord's Supper very earnestly and emphatically calls attention to this fact, as he always keeps in mind the *usus practicus* of the Holy Communion.

3

But there remains still another question. If indeed Luther so earnestly inculcated the spiritual eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood, both outside and in the Holy Supper,

⁴⁷ "The Sacrament of the Altar" in the *Concordia Triglot*, p. 761, 33-35.

why did he so vehemently insist upon the Real Presence over against the Reformed? He himself answers this question at various places in his monographs on the Lord's Supper. Again we quote only a few of his statements. Luther, for example, writes:

"For this reason we must everywhere regard the Word and honor it. For with it God, as it were, takes and clothes the creatures, and there must be a difference between the Word and the creature. As, for example, there is bread and wine in the Sacrament of the Altar, and there is water in Baptism. These (bread, wine, water) are creatures, but are comprehended in the Word. And as long as the creature is comprehended in the Word, so long it works and effects what is promised in the Word. . . . In the Sacrament of the Altar there is, besides the promise of the forgiveness of sins, also this, that with the bread and wine there are truly given the body and blood of Christ. For so Christ says (Luke 22:19, 20): 'This is My body, which is given for you.' 'This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you.'" ⁴⁸

In these words Luther expresses his great reverence for the Word of God, which, as he says, we must regard [in German: *auf das Wort sehen*] and honor. It is the divine Word which makes Baptism and the Lord's Supper true, efficacious Sacraments. In the Holy Supper the Word or promise of Christ offers forgiveness of sins in addition to His body and blood. Luther, then, contends for the Real Presence, because Christ's words of institution very plainly teach the Real Presence.

In his *Letter of Warning Addressed to Ministers at Frankfurt on the Main Asking Them to Beware of the Zwinglians and Their Doctrine* (written December, 1532, and published January, 1533) Luther writes:

"With this their talk [the Zwinglians, who denied the Real Presence] the words of Christ are set aside, so that they believe unwarrantedly (*frei hin*), without the Word, in the air, according to their own thoughts. But I want to have the words [of Christ] and upon them place my faith as they read [*wie sie lauten*] so that I do not want to believe the body which Christ means outside and without His Word, but the body which His words signify, just as they stand and read. For that

⁴⁸ Exposition of Gen. 3:23-24: St. Louis Ed., I:279 ff.; Erl. 1, 289 to 291; Walch I, 418-421.

is His true meaning, and He has told and indicated to us His meaning in the words and through the Word. Outside His Word and without His Word we know of no Christ, much less of Christ's meaning, for the "Christ" who pretends to give us his meaning without Christ's Word is the damnable devil out of hell, who uses Christ's holy name and under it sells his hellish venom."⁴⁹

Here again, against the Zwinglians, Luther insists upon the Real Presence for the simple reason that it is taught in the simple and clear words of the institution of the Holy Supper.

In his *Letter to a Good Friend Regarding His Book on the Silent Mass* (1534) Luther writes:

"And such body and blood of the Son of God Jesus Christ not only the saints and worthy, but also the sinners and unworthy truly take and receive in a bodily manner (orally), though invisibly. . . . That is my faith. That I know, and that no one shall take from me. For I confess it not only for the reason that I for myself have often and on many occasions received great comfort from such faith in the Sacrament in my deep and great anxieties and troubles . . . but also for that reason that I desire to stand by the clear, perspicuous (oeffentlichen), sure text of the Gospel with my witness (as much as I possibly can) against all other errors, both old and new, and (against all) heresy."⁵⁰

Here Luther declares that He defends the Real Presence as the clear teaching of Scripture, from which he has often received consolation and which, therefore, he means to defend against all ancient and modern heresy on the point.

In his writing *That These Words of Christ: "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Enthusiasts* Luther declares:

"We stand firmly and immovably upon this statement: 'This is my body,' which is altogether lucid, sure, and clear, so that it can be made obscure and uncertain by no art or might of the Enthusiasts."⁵¹

In his *Large Catechism* Luther writes: "Now here stands the Word of Christ: *'Take, eat; this is My body; drink ye all*

⁴⁹ St. Louis Ed. XVII:2015; Erl. (2) 26, 378—380; Walch XVII, 2443 to 2446.

⁵⁰ St. Louis Ed., XIX:1290; Erl. 31, 382—384; Walch XIX, 1573—1575.

⁵¹ St. Louis Ed., XX:841; Erl. 30, 96—98; Walch XX, 1048—1051.

of it; this is the new testament in My blood, etc.' Here we abide, and would like to see those who will constitute themselves His masters and make it different from what He has spoken. It is true, indeed, that if you take away the Word or regard it without the words, you have nothing but mere bread and wine. But if the words remain with them, as they shall and must, then, in virtue of the same, it is truly the body and blood of Christ. For as the lips of Christ say and speak, so it is, as He can never lie or deceive."⁵²

4

To sum up: 1. Luther defends the Real Presence because he believes it to be a doctrine clearly taught in Holy Scripture. 2. He rightly maintains that John 6:47-58 must not be interpreted in a eucharistic sense, since that is contrary to the clear meaning and scope of the text. 3. Nevertheless, these words inculcate the spiritual eating of Christ by faith, and just that is what benefits the communicant, whereas the unbelieving, impenitent communicant, though he receives the true body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine, "eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (1 Cor. 11:29). 4. Luther recognizes no *ex opere operato* action of the Holy Supper. Hence John 6:56: "He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me and I in him," must not be applied to the sacramental eating and drinking, but to the spiritual eating and drinking by faith, by which the believer through the Gospel, in and outside the Eucharist, is so intimately united with his Savior that there exists a mutual indwelling which passes understanding. From this point of view John 6:47-58 certainly is of the greatest importance to all who desire the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, which are offered to all communicants in the Holy Supper.

St. Louis, Mo.

⁵² The Sacrament of the Altar in the *Concordia Triglot*, p.755 f., 12-14.