

# The Lord's Supper and the perspicuity of Scripture

## If the Bible is perfectly clear, why do Protestants still disagree?

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### Introduction

In spite of claims that the Scripture is so unclear that it needs an outside infallible interpreter, Martin Luther found some of its passages clear enough both to rely on them with complete confidence for eternal life and to shed light on many passages that are otherwise less clear. Although many individual texts lack clarity in themselves, simple trust in the straightforward texts makes the doctrine taught by Scripture, including every article of faith, completely clear.<sup>i</sup> Such texts are so lucid that they need no exegesis in the sense of clarification. No more open to different interpretations than ordinary human language, the clear passages make possible the understanding of many less clear passages, the unity of faith, and the rejection of false teaching. This is what it means for Scripture to interpret Scripture: many unclear passages of Scripture are clarified by passages of Scripture that need no clarification, neither from human interpreters, nor even from other Scripture.<sup>ii</sup> For example, the Ethiopian eunuch could not understand an unclear messianic prophecy without Philip's interpretation, now recorded as perfectly clear Scripture that interprets the less clear prophecy (Acts 8:30-35). Many of those who deny this doctrine of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture claim that divisions among Protestants result from different interpretations of Scripture passages, with each

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<sup>i</sup> By contrast, many American evangelicals in effect attribute the same clarity to each individual text of Scripture, leading to the arbitrarily selective literalism seen in millennialism and "creation science."

<sup>ii</sup> The rule "Scripture interprets Scripture" is misleadingly invoked when interpretations of unclear passages are used to call the teachings of clear passages into question, or when doctrine is derived, not from the clear passages of Scripture, but from a theological system supposedly constructed from the entire Bible by induction.<sup>1:1, pp. 9-15</sup> "Luther is unalterably convinced that God gave Holy Scripture such a form that the entire Christian doctrine is revealed and submitted in passages which need no 'exegesis' (exegesis in the sense of removing obscurities). He who would determine the meaning of the clear passages through still other passages engages in a work of interminable adjustments, makes the entire Scriptures uncertain and obscure, and converts them into an inextricable chaos. Yes, there is the rule: 'One passage must be explained by another,' but, as Luther adds immediately: 'Namely, a doubtful and obscure passage... must be explained by means of a clear and certain passage.'"<sup>2, pp. 363-364</sup> As a later Reformer explained, "For Scripture, especially when it treats of dogmas, because it is not of private interpretation, interprets itself either in the same passage or in other passages where the same dogma is touched on. Because of this, the same dogma is fully treated and repeated in various passages of Scripture in such a way that no one can dream up his own personal interpretation but must derive it from Scripture itself. For the same dogma is repeated on the basis of either the same or similar words which have the same meaning and set forth the same teaching, so that the simple, proper, and natural meaning of the passage may be confirmed... Or if something in one passage is too brief or obscure because of the puzzling nature of the figures of speech, Scripture will explain and interpret it in other passages where the same doctrine is repeated more fully, clearly, and openly, using proper, clear, natural, and commonly understood words."<sup>3, pp. 68-69</sup>

denomination claiming that its view is the one clearly taught by the word of God.<sup>iii</sup> The most notorious example is the difference in teaching about the Lord's Supper that kept the Reformed communion separate from the Lutheran communion.<sup>iv</sup>

As will be seen, confessional Lutherans do not attribute the division over the Lord's Supper to a difference in the interpretation of the words of its institution, as if those words left themselves open to misunderstanding, but rather to a difference in whether or not those words are believed. This brief study of the Lutheran response to the eucharistic position of Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin<sup>v</sup> illustrates Luther's view that doctrinal divisions in the church do not arise because the Scripture is unclear, but because the plain nature of its words is disregarded:

You see, therefore, that the controversy here is not about the text itself, nor is it any longer about inferences and similes, but about tropes<sup>vi</sup> and interpretations. When, then, are we ever going to have a text pure and simple, without tropes and inferences, for free choice and against free choice? Has Scripture nowhere any such texts? And is the issue of free choice to be forever in doubt, because it is not settled by any certain text, but is argued back and forth with inferences and tropes put forward by men at cross purposes with one another, like a reed shaken by the wind?

Let us rather take the view that neither an inference nor a trope is admissible in any passage of Scripture, unless it is forced on us by the evident nature of the context and the absurdity of the literal sense as conflicting with one or another of the articles of faith. Instead, we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man. For if everybody is allowed to discover inferences and tropes in the Scriptures just as he pleases, what will Scripture as a whole be but a reed shaken by the wind or a sort of Vertumnus? Then indeed there will be nothing certain either asserted or proved in connection with any article of faith which you will not be able to quibble away with some trope or other. We ought rather to shun as the deadliest poison every trope that Scripture itself does not force upon us.

Look what happened to that master of tropes, Origen, in his exposition of the Scriptures! What fitting objects of attack he provides for the calumnies of Porphyry, so that even Jerome thinks that the defenders of Origen have an impossible task. What happened to the Arians in that trope by which they made Christ into a merely nominal God? What has happened in our own time to these new prophets regarding the words of Christ, "This is my body," where one finds a trope in the pronoun "this," another in the verb "is," another in the noun "body"?

What I have observed is this, that all heresies and errors in Connection with the Scriptures have arisen, not from the simplicity of the words, as is almost universally stated, but from neglect of the simplicity of the words, and from tropes or inferences hatched out of men's own heads.<sup>6</sup> pp. 162-163 (cf. 1 Timothy 6:3-5)

<sup>iii</sup> Those calling for an infallible, extra-biblical interpreter are equally divided: the hierarchies of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches compete not only with each other, but also with innumerable cults as candidates that assert the role of ultimate authority. Any such candidate must bear not only the burden of demonstrating that it speaks with greater clarity than Scripture, but also that its claim to authority is just as clear.

<sup>iv</sup> Many who have been influenced by revivalism or relativism take offense at denominational divisions over an issue they consider relatively trivial. However, in placing high value on the Lord's Supper, the Reformers were in good company, as it took a central place in the first Christian worship services (Acts 2:42-46; 20:7-11).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>v</sup> In spite of their differences, Calvin fully agreed with Zwingli's reasoning that since Jesus' body is in heaven, he, in his human nature, cannot possibly be present on earth (Article 21 of the Consensus Tigurinus<sup>5</sup>). Calvin's mystical language notwithstanding, he taught that Christ was presented and received in the sacraments after the incarnation no more than in the sacraments before the incarnation (*Institutes*, §4.14.23).

<sup>vi</sup> In Luther's usage, a *tropum* is a figure of speech as opposed to plain, straightforward, everyday language that requires no explanation.

This passage from *The Bondage of the Will* was written in response to Erasmus, who, unable to support his synergistic doctrine of free will by any clear passage of Scripture, instead supported it by reading figurative language into Scripture. Luther saw the same approach at work not only in ancient heretics such as Arias, but also in the Reformed “prophets” such as Zwingli.

### Why the Reformed figuratively interpret “This is my body”

Certainly, Reformed believers would not want to deny the clarity of Scripture’s central teachings or to arbitrarily impose figures of speech on passages of Scripture meant to be taken more literally. Why, then, do they take the words of institution symbolically? One answer is that many uncritically follow the consensus of respected Reformed theologians as expressed in their confessions and reinforced in their seminaries and congregations. However, this explanation is incomplete, as it does not answer why the originators of Reformed eucharistic doctrine broke with centuries of tradition in the first place. They gave definite reasons for doing so, and in the following century Francis Turretin<sup>7</sup> compiled a daunting list of Reformed arguments against the position that communicants orally partake of Christ’s flesh and blood.<sup>vii</sup> In spite of all their differences in rationales, there is one argument that their most respected theologians have always put forth in various forms: since the oral consumption of his body is impossible, the words of institution must teach something else.

Prominent examples, from the origin of the Reformed Church to modern times, will explain this line of thought. Zwingli reasoned that since a body can only have one location at a time, the words of institution must be taken metaphorically:

I insist that there must be a trope in the Lord’s Supper... Otherwise, a great difficulty would arise, namely, that, while Christ says he is in heaven, we should seek him in the Supper. For one and the same body cannot be in several places at the same time.<sup>9, p. 200</sup>

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<sup>vii</sup> Already in the sixteenth century, Lutherans complained that Reformed books against their doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Supper “with great literary flourish present not only whole battalions of arguments but entire legions of them... But the question before us is not the matter of the gymnastics of the sophists in piling up the huge number of arguments, but it concerns the divine word expressly stated in those Scripture passages where the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is treated in its own setting.”<sup>3, pp. 197-198</sup>

The Lutherans responded to such arguments by noting that none was sufficiently convincing to cast doubt on the plain reading of the words of institution. For example, to the reasoning that “it is a perpetual and universal analogy which applies to all sacraments and signs that they speak of and deal with things that are absent,” Chemnitz replied,

... Baptism is the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. But not because the Holy Spirit is far distant or because, in His absence, regeneration is only signified; but as Christ Himself explains: ‘We are born again of water and the Spirit’... Thus the dove is a symbol, the flame of fire is a symbol, but the analogy between the sign and the thing signified is not that the substance of the Holy Spirit is far removed and separated from the symbols. The relationship and analogy of the sacraments therefore in no way effects or compels us to conclude that the sacramental presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper, which the proper and natural meaning of the words of institution affirms, must be denied and repudiated.<sup>3, p. 258</sup>

The symbolic nature of the sacraments does not relegate them to the role of mere symbols. Because the sacraments as symbols constitute the visible word of God, the Lutheran standards attribute to them the same effect as the spoken word of God, namely, the forgiveness of sins (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 13). In this way, the sacraments resemble the symbolically rich miracles of Jesus, e.g., the fact that washing with the water of Siloam symbolized washing away a man’s physical blindness in no way implies that the water was not also the means by which he was supernaturally washed (John 9:6-7; cf. Acts 22:16).<sup>8</sup>

Any force in this argument does not even require Christ's ascension to heaven since, as Calvin pointed out, the distribution of his body at the Last Supper would have required his body to be both visible at the table and invisible under the bread. According to his thinking, "all reason rejects" such a distribution.<sup>10, 17, 23</sup> Against Lutheran objections that God can accomplish what is otherwise impossible, Calvin defended Zwingli's view that not even the almighty power of God could enable orally eating the body of his Son while he is in heaven, as that would be a logical contradiction (*Institutes* §4.17.24). More consistent than most of his followers in limiting Jesus' body by the natural properties of a body, Calvin went as far as to find alternative interpretations for passages that seem to teach that Jesus moved through closed doors and that he became invisible (*Institutes* §4.17.29 on Luke 24:16 and John 20:19). The belief that the reception of the Lord's body by the mouth defies the definition of the word *body* has been followed by Francis Turretin and Charles Hodge, the authors of systematic theology classics taught in Calvinistic seminaries.<sup>7; 1:3, pp. 670-672</sup> Keith Mathison, although teaching a mysterious presence of Christ's body and blood in the transaction of the sacrament, repeated the main Reformed argument, that any reasonable definition of *body* makes the Lutheran position logically impossible:

The Lutheran Church shares with the Roman Catholic Church the difficulty of defining such terms as *body*, *corporeal*, and *flesh* in a way that is consistent with their doctrines of a corporeal bodily presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements... The difficulty is that neither church can even begin to explain precisely... They cannot explain how an intangible and invisible presence of Christ is distinguishable from a spiritual presence of Christ. They cannot do this because they cannot define *body* as opposed to *spirit*, ... The result is an utterly confusing and self-contradictory doctrine that renders human language virtually meaningless.<sup>11, pp. 259-260</sup>

Lutheran scholars express a different attitude toward such insistence on explanations and definitions: "Mysteries are never learned, understood, or defined, but they are encountered, received, and experienced—they are revealed."<sup>12, p. 170</sup>

Whatever new arguments it relies on, Reformed theology can never give up the philosophical argument that finds the Lutheran doctrine logically impossible. For conceding that point would completely discredit the Reformed position by admitting that although the fathers of the Reformed Church believed the true doctrine of the Supper, they did so for the wrong reason, perhaps because they did not have access to the results of modern scholarship. Thus, to make such a concession without abandoning the Reformed interpretation would call the perspicuity of Scripture into question. And yet whenever the Reformed use their reasoning about the natural properties of a body to shed light on the words of institution, in so doing they deny the clarity of those words. For the light of Scripture needs no outside illumination, and completely clear words need no clarification.

### **Why Luther saw no need to clarify "This is my body"**

While recognizing symbolic language in many biblical passages, Martin Luther saw the denial of the oral reception of Christ's body and blood as yet another heresy stemming from a lack of faith in the clear word of God. In Luther's mind, as quoted above, the Reformed imposition of a metaphor<sup>viii</sup> onto the simple words of institution,

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<sup>viii</sup> Calvin argued for a metonymy in the words of institution, following Zwingli's denial of the oral reception of the body and blood of Jesus. Other proposed figures of speech that remove the body and blood from the bread and wine include acted parable (symbolic action) and simile. For example, Jeremias found

“This is my body,” did not differ in principle from the Arian imposition of metaphors onto the simple assertions of the full divinity of Christ, nor from Erasmus’ imposition of metaphors onto those passages that teach unconditional election and monergistic regeneration. As Luther viewed it, doctrinal divisions resulted from a stubborn refusal to take God’s words as written, not from any lack of clarity of those words. If passages were not taken in their plain sense, if metaphors were arbitrarily introduced, no one could arrive at certainty in reading Scripture, as concisely explained by an author of the Lutheran confessions:

There is no doubt that there are many figures of speech in Scripture, but it is also certain that not all the figures of speech or tropes are in veiled language. Many in Scripture are very clear and can be treated and interpreted on their own terms or with the simple and natural meaning of the words. But there is not such a thing as freedom in the interpretation of a particular passage of Scripture to the degree that seems good to each individual so that we may either retain the proper meaning of the words or through the use of a figure of speech depart from the simple, proper, and natural meaning of the words according to each person’s own notions? ...if this were the case, all dogmas and all articles of faith could be so completely overturned and bypassed that all assurance of faith would be snatched away from consciences.<sup>3, pp. 67-68</sup>

The Reformed often object that not even Lutherans take the words of institution literally: just as those words do not say, “This is a symbol of my body,” neither do they say, “This has turned into my body,” or even, “This contains my body.” Indeed, Luther did not take the words as more literal than regular speech, but found a “synecdoche” in their most straightforward meaning:

This mode of speaking about diverse beings as one the grammarians call “synecdoche.” It is quite common not only in Scripture but also in all languages. For instance, if I point to or hand over a bag or purse and say, “This is a hundred gulden,” both the gesture and the word “this” refer to the purse. But since the purse and the money in some degree constitute one object, one lump, my words apply at the same time to the money. In this manner, I lay my hand on a cask and say, “This is Rhine wine; this is Italian wine; this is red wine.” Again, I take a glass and say, “This is water; this is beer, this is ointment.” In all these expressions you see that the word “this” refers to the container, and yet because the liquid and the container in some degree are one, it applies also and indeed principally to the liquid.<sup>13, pp. 301-302</sup>

In response to the charge at Marburg that his synecdoche, but not the metaphor of the Reformed, was novel, Luther explained why the former leaves the content of the text intact, whereas the latter changes the meaning through a figure of speech:

By synecdoche we speak of the containing vessel when we mean the content, or the content when also including the vessel, as, for example, when we speak of the mug or of the beer, using only one of the two to denote also the other. Or, to take another example, if the king tells his servant to bring the sword, he tacitly includes the sheath. Such understanding is required by the text. The metaphor does away with the content, such as when you understand the “body” as “figure of the body.” That the synecdoche does not do... In Holy Scripture you find it in John 1:33: “Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending.” The Baptist saw the dove in which the Holy Spirit was. Figurative speech removes the core and leaves the shell only. A synecdoche is not a comparison, but it rather says: “That is there, and is contained in it.” There is no better example of a synecdoche than “This is my body.”<sup>9, pp. 204-205</sup>

This observation is further supported by the undeniable use of a synecdoche in “This[cup] is my blood” (Matthew 26:27-28; Mark 14:23-24). Luther steadfastly refused to acknowledge a metaphor in addition to the synecdoche without some indication from Scripture. One of the four grounds on which he rested his stand on the words of

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applicable both the terms *simile* and *parable*.<sup>4, pp. 220-225</sup> The exact literary classification of the figure of speech employed does not affect the thesis of this essay, which synonymously uses the terms *trope*, *metaphor*, and *parable* broadly enough to include all Reformed interpretations.

institution was “that the Word of God is not false or deceitful.”<sup>13</sup>, p. 214 (cited in the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, §7.96).

Believing the words of institution teach exactly what they seem to teach, Lutherans see no need to add clarifying explanations to their eucharistic liturgy.<sup>ix</sup> For example, they do not tell communicants, “This is literally the body of Christ,” but simply, “This is the body of Christ” or “This is true body of Christ.” By contrast, Reformed pastors would cause confusion were they to say without explanation, “This is the body of Christ.” Lutheran pastors do not typically add interpretations, as they believe the words of institution are completely understandable, not only to scholars familiar with the details of the Jewish Passover as practiced in the first century,<sup>x</sup> but also to the ordinary man or woman in the pew. In this they follow the practice of the apostle Paul, who responded to abuses of the Lord’s Supper in Corinth by reminding the Corinthians of the words of its institution, as if they were clear in themselves, as if they required no mention of the Old Testament background or other aids that may be needed to interpret difficult passages (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Paul assumed that even those as spiritually immature and biblically ignorant as the Corinthians could comprehend the simple words, “This is my body,” etc. He dealt with their profanation of the Supper in the same way as he did with their unbelief in the resurrection: in both cases, he reminded them of the tradition handed down to him, and in both cases he found the words of the tradition so clear that he did not need to explain what they might really mean (1 Corinthians 15:1ff).

Similarly, Luther regarded the words “This is my body” as decisive refutation of the metaphorical interpretation, whereas the Reformed consider simple repetition of the words as begging the question. Luther’s emphasis frustrated even the Reformed of his day, as he noted in his meeting with Zwingli and their other leaders at Marburg:

It annoys you that I always stick to the words “This is my body.” I am not doing this without

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<sup>ix</sup> The bulletins of some Missouri Synod congregations, however, do have a brief explanation for the sake of Reformed visitors, but that explanation is not incorporated into the liturgy.

<sup>x</sup> Many modern commentators see such extra-biblical historical information as helpful if not essential to arriving at a correct interpretation,<sup>4:11</sup> but the application of such research is not always clear. For example, there is dispute as to whether eucharistic eating parallels eating the original Passover lamb, in agreement with really eating the sacrificed Messiah,<sup>12</sup>, pp. 166-170 or eating the subsequent Passover lambs, in agreement with merely eating a memorial of the sacrificed Messiah. If a Christian doctrine as central as the Lord’s Supper always hangs on the latest theological publication, then no teaching of Christianity can be known with certainty. A contemporary instance of inappropriate reliance on academia is the stir in some Calvinistic circles over “the new perspective on Paul,” the hypothesis that he never taught anything like Luther’s doctrine of justification, based on recent studies of second-temple Judaism. To rest one’s faith on academic trends is to be blown about by every wind of doctrine, as valuable as the vocation of the scholar is in its place. Another example may be the pull humanism had on Melanchthon:

The more the influence of humanism, which through the temporary influence of Luther had been pushed aside, again became operative, the more Melanchthon showed what human authorities, alongside the Word of God, meant for him. Where Luther cared only about the Word of God, answered the great questions of faith only on the basis of this Word, and rested only upon this Word in defiance of every contradiction of the world, there Melanchthon at the very least cast a side glance upon human authorities. It became more and more doubtful for Melanchthon the humanist that Scripture interprets itself, that its teachings with all their mysterious depth immediately illuminate the soul enlightened by the Holy Spirit. As for all humanists, so also for this professor of the ancient languages, exegesis of the Bible was a philological problem. But philologists are as disunified as scholars are accustomed to be. For the philologist, the question of the Supper, whatever else it may be for them, is also a problem of historical-philological interpretation, in which the subjectivity of the critic always plays a great role.<sup>14</sup>, p. 52

consideration. I confess that the body is in heaven, but I also confess that it is in the Sacrament. I desire to stick to these words that Christ is in heaven, and that he is in the Sacrament. I do not ask what is against nature, but only what is against the faith. If you regard the flesh as useless, you may do so as far as I am concerned; but we rely on God's Word. The Word says, first, that Christ has a body: that I believe. Furthermore, that even this body has ascended to heaven and sitteth on the right hand of the Father: that I also believe. The Word says in the same way that this body itself is in the Lord's Supper, and is given us to be eaten: this also I believe. For my Lord Jesus Christ can easily do it when he desires to, and in his words he testifies that he will do it. On these words I shall rely steadfastly until he himself, by another word, says something different.<sup>9, p. 202</sup>

## Discussion

When Reformed theologians implicitly demand that Lutherans explain how their doctrine is logically consistent, Lutheran theologians shift the burden of proof by pointing out that no one has yet been able to demonstrate any logical inconsistency in their teaching that *in some inexplicable, unrevealed sense, the communicant not only eats and drinks bread and wine, but also Christ's body and blood*. Thus, Reformed theologians reject the doctrine, not because they find a contradiction, but because the doctrine cannot be understood to their satisfaction. Were they completely consistent, they would also have to reject other mysteries of the faith, including the incarnation and the Trinity. (In fact, deists denied just those doctrines as well as the eucharistic mystery on the ground that understanding is necessary for belief.) The confessions of the Lutherans record their response to the Reformed:<sup>xi</sup>

Instead, we should accept the words as they stand, in their proper, clear sense, with simple faith and appropriate obedience and not permit ourselves be drawn away from this position by any objection or human counterargument spun out of human reason, no matter how attractive it may appear to our reason. When Abraham heard God's Word regarding the sacrifice of his son, he certainly had reason enough to debate whether this word from God should be understood literally or according to some more tolerable and acceptable interpretation. For this word obviously contradicted not only all reason and divine and natural law but also the most important article of the faith, regarding the promise seed, Christ, who was to be born of Isaac.<sup>16, Solid Declaration 45</sup>

To summarize the answer of the early Lutherans, "Against the objection that it was impossible for Jesus on the night of his betrayal to have distributed his body and blood to his disciples, [the Lutherans] emphasized that he himself said so! To the objection that a body cannot be present at the same time in many places, they retorted that Scripture says so!"<sup>17, p. 428</sup> Similarly, Jesus did not respond to the reasoning of Satan with complex

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<sup>xi</sup> An author of the cited confession had earlier discussed the relationship between the real presence and orthodox Christology:

But since the Son of God in the institution of His covenant has taught, promised, and affirmed the presence of His body and blood in His Supper wherever it is celebrated in the church on earth according to His institution, therefore the doctrine of the personal union [between the human and divine natures of Christ] shows... as the words of His testament declare in their simple, proper, and native sense that for the Son of God it is not only possible but even necessary for Him to will, to effect, and to manifest the presence of His body which is promised in His Word, not indeed according to the essential or natural properties of His body, and yet with its true nature unimpaired because of and by reason of its union with the deity.<sup>15, pp. 446-447</sup>

This was written in response to the reasoning that an invisible presence of Christ's body in the bread would take something away from his true humanity. That is not a separate argument, as it uses as a premise the conclusion of the main Reformed argument: not even God himself can make a true human body invisibly present in the bread.

exegesis, the traditions of the scholars, or clever counterarguments, but only with the words of Scripture.

Is this too simple a solution to an old, complex problem, one that requires mathematically precise reasoning about the definition of a body or that demands increasingly detailed historical-grammatical studies? If so, then average believers could not base their understanding on revelation alone, but would have to base it on the authority of selected historians and theologians.<sup>xii</sup> Church members would thereby be rendered unable to carry out the command to judge what they are taught on the basis of Scripture and to avoid false teachers (Romans 16:17-18). What Christian laymen need is not a word from other people, but a clear word from the Lord on the meaning of his Supper. Such a word is not to be found in any extra-biblical revelation or even in any Scripture that does not teach on the Supper, but in the words of institution:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

The Lord's answer, if universally believed, would be enough to end all argument and denominational division over what he gave in his Supper.<sup>xiii</sup>

For had he spoken so unclearly as to leave his words up to what each interpreter would find reasonable, then he purposefully authored the confusion and discord that separates his followers:

What stands behind [the famous historical struggles concerning the Supper] are not only intellectual conflicts between theologians and their schools, but also human bitterness, misunderstanding, and lovelessness, and grievous personal destinies! If we then ponder the effects of these eucharistic struggles on Christian congregations and entire churches, if we think only of the consequences of the difference in eucharistic doctrine for the relationship of the Lutheran and

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<sup>xii</sup> "How could a new ceremony and a new dogma not previously given to us, not known, not used in the church be understood if an unknown matter is delivered to us in imprecise, figurative, and obscure language? Further, there is no doubt that Christ willed that both this ceremony and this dogma be correctly understood, not only by the erudite who by reason of the gift of interpretation are able to penetrate into the depths of obscure points which are hidden in Scripture, but also by the whole church, the greater part of which are those who need to be said on the milk of the Word. Therefore He is undoubtedly speaking about this new dogma, not previously known, so that it can be understood by all; for He fully realized that attached to it is the guilt of judgment if the proper discernment does not take place."<sup>3</sup>, pp. 78-79 To reserve the interpretation of Scripture for professional theologians in principle reverses the Reformation: "Recently an essayist at a sectarian conference in St. Louis took occasion to assert that the layman could never be positively sure of the meaning of Scripture because the meaning of Scripture depended on the 'historical background' with which only that experts were familiar. There you have again the Roman fundamental article of the obscurity of Scripture; only instead of the Pope you have the experts in the Old and New Testament contemporary history..."<sup>2</sup>, p. 365

<sup>xiii</sup> "... the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper rests on the bare words of institution, not on added 'exegesis.'"<sup>18</sup>, p. 341 The study of the difference between the Reformed and Lutheran approaches to the Scripture lends support to this bold statement:

The thought common in our day that all church bodies stand on Scripture and differ only in their interpretation of it is not in accordance with the facts. The Roman Catholic Church does not stand on Scripture, but on the papal interpretation of Scripture. The Reformed Churches, as far as they differ from the Lutheran Church, do not stand on Scripture, but on Zwingli's, Calvin's, etc. interpretation of Scripture. The Lutheran Church, however, does not stand on interpretation of Scripture, but on Scripture itself. This is not a mere assertion. It can be proved by induction in the face of universal contradiction.<sup>2</sup>, p. 367



Reformed churches... If it is theoretically possible to pose such a question, must we lay the blame on *Jesus* himself? He could have avoided the entire struggle over the Supper, which was to rage through his church with more or less severity in all centuries from the very outset, simply by expressing himself more clearly and with less possibility for misunderstanding at the institution of the Supper. We must reply that it would indeed have been possible for him to prevent the Supper strife. He need only have said, "What I am doing is a parable. When I say, 'This is my body,' I actually *mean* only that the bread signifies my body. When I say, 'This is my testamental blood,' I don't mean that this is really what it is, but rather I am employing a figurative way of speaking." If Jesus had said this, if he had accompanied his action with the explicit explanation needed if it was in fact a symbolic action, then everything would have been clear... So, if Jesus did understand the Supper as a parabolic action, then he cannot be spared from blame for not speaking in a clearer way, less open to misunderstanding, and for obscuring the parabolic action with enigmatic words rather than explaining it with plain words. By enigmatic words we understand those words whose meaning is not expressed with the words, but which the hearer is rather to seek behind the words... [The fathers of the Lutheran Church] could not think that Jesus was capable of leaving his true meaning wrapped in ambiguity in this decisive hour for the whole future of the church.[After citing Luther's statement that he would rather be deceived by God than by men:] They neither would nor could make him responsible for the eucharistic conflicts that must necessarily arise if the Supper was in fact a symbolic action for which the Words of Institution offer only an obscure explanation, rather than a perfectly clear explanation. Jesus' lack of an explanation to ward off all misunderstanding, similar to his explanations of the parables,<sup>xiv</sup> is a sure sign that Jesus neither regarded this action as a parable nor intended the Words of Institution as symbolic discourse. If these words were not intended as a parable, but as an explanation of his action, to be understood in a realistic sense of his words, then Jesus could not in fact have expressed himself with greater simplicity and clarity...<sup>17, pp. 402-404, emphasis original</sup>

Indeed, when handing the bread to his disciples, had Jesus wanted to tell them that he was handing them his body to eat, what could have been more clear than "This is my body"? Equally straightforward is Matthew's account of the giving of the cup: "'All of you drink of it.' But what do we receive orally from the cup of blessing? He answers: 'This is my blood, which is the blood of the New Testament.'" <sup>3, p. 101</sup> It must be concluded with fear and trembling that "the cause of strife over the Supper does not lie in the Lord's words, but in the doubts of people who do not want to believe him in these words." <sup>17, p. 404</sup> The word of God is not bound by any human philosophy or tradition, but speaks with ultimate authority, perfect clarity, and inexpressible mercy.

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<sup>xiv</sup> The apostles were simple literalists when it came to the words of Jesus, so he clarified as needed (Mark 8:14-21; Luke 22:35-38; Acts 1:6-8). He even clearly explained parables they should have understood, including the simplest of the parables, which they failed to comprehend without his explanations (Mark 4:13-14, 34). If the Lord's Supper were an acted parable, it would have been the most important and yet least explained of the parables, but the clarity of Scripture requires that all of its central doctrines are clearly taught, if not in one passage, then in another. (With the possible exceptions of the gospel<sup>19</sup> and first letter of John, the Supper is only explicitly treated in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians.) As also noted in the Introduction, a sufficiently clear passage need not be explained; a passage in need of explanation in some way lacks clarity.

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