

Consensus Tigurinus

The Consensus of Zurich. A.D. 1549.

Introduction – from Philip Schaff's *“Creeds of Christendom” Vol. I, §59*

In the sacramental controversy – the most violent, distracting, and unprofitable in the history of the Reformation – Calvin stood midway between Luther and Zwingli, and endeavored to unite the elements of truth on both sides, in his theory of a spiritual real presence and fruition of Christ by faith.¹ This satisfied neither the rigid Lutherans nor the rigid Zwinglians. The former could see no material difference between Calvin and Zwingli, since both denied the literal interpretation of 'this *is* my body,' and a corporeal presence and manducation.² The latter suspected Calvin of leaning towards Lutheran consubstantiation and working into the hands of Bucer, who had made himself obnoxious by his facile compromises and ill-concealed concessions to the Lutheran view in the Wittenberg Concordia (1536).

The wound was reopened by Luther's fierce attack on the Zwinglians (1545), and their sharp reply. Calvin was displeased with both parties, and counselled moderation. It was very desirable to harmonize the teaching of the Swiss Churches. Bullinger, who first advanced beyond the original Zwinglian ground, and appreciated the deeper theology of Calvin, sent him his book on the Sacraments, in manuscript (1546), with the request to express his opinion. Calvin, did this with great frankness, and a degree of censure which at first irritated Bullinger. Then followed a correspondence and personal conference at Zurich, which resulted in a complete union of the Calvinistic and Zwinglian sections of the Swiss Churches on this vexed subject.³ The negotiations reflect great credit on both parties, and reveal an admirable spirit of frankness, moderation, forbearance, and patience, which triumphed over all personal sensibilities and irritations.

The first draft of the Consensus Tigurinus, from November, 1548, consists of twenty-four brief propositions drawn up by Calvin, with annotations by Bullinger, to which Calvin responded in January, 1549. They assert that the Sacraments are not in and of themselves effective and conferring grace, but that God, through the Holy Spirit, acts through them as means; that the internal effect appears only in the elect; that the good of the Sacraments consists in leading us to Christ, and being instruments of the grace of God, which is sincerely offered to all; that in baptism we receive the remission of sins, although this proceeds primarily not from baptism, but from the blood of Christ; that in the Lord's Supper we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, not, however, by means of a carnal presence of Christ's human nature, which is in heaven, but by the power of the Holy Spirit and the devout elevation of our soul to heaven.⁴

¹ See § 57, pp. 455 sqq

² Chew food; to bite and grind with the teeth.

³ See the details in Ebrard, Pestalozzi, and Stähelin, who speak in the highest terms of the truly Christian spirit which characterized the two leaders of the Swiss Reformation.

⁴ Opera, Vol. VII. pp. 693 sqq.

In the month of March Calvin sent twenty Articles to the Synod of Berne,⁵ but in this canton there was strong opposition to Calvin's rigorism, which subsided only after his death.⁶ In May, 1549, he had, in company with Farel, a personal interview with Bullinger in Zurich at his cordial invitation, and drew up the Consensus as it now stands, in Twenty-six Articles. It was published in 1551 at Zurich and at Geneva.⁷ It contains the Calvinistic doctrine, adjusted as nearly as possible to the Zwinglian in its advanced form, but with a disturbing predestinarian restriction of the sacramental grace to the elect.⁸ The truth of the Zwinglian view is fully acknowledged in opposition to transubstantiation and consubstantiation, but the real life union with Christ in the sacrament is as clearly asserted, and made still more plain in the 'Exposition' of the Consensus which Calvin wrote four years afterwards (1554). 'The Sacraments,' he declares, 'are helps and media (*adminicula et media*), by which we are either inserted into the body of Christ, or being so inserted coalesce with it more and more, till he unites us with himself in full in the heavenly life. . . . The Sacraments are neither empty figures, nor outward badges merely of piety, but seals of the promises of God, attestations of spiritual grace for cherishing and confirming faith, organs also by which God efficaciously works in his elect.'⁹

The Consensus was adopted by the Churches of Zurich, Geneva, St. Gall, Schaffhausen, the Grisons, Neuchatel, and, after some hesitation, by Basle, and was favorably received in France, England, and parts of Germany. Melancthon declared to Lavater (Bullinger's son-in-law) that he then for the first time understood the Swiss, and would never again write against them; but he erased those passages of the Consensus which made the efficacy of the sacrament depend on election.

While the Consensus brought peace and harmony to the Swiss Churches, it was violently assailed by Joachim Westphal, of Hamburg (1552), in the interest of the ultra-Lutheran party in Germany, and became the innocent occasion of the second sacramental war, which has been noticed in the section on the Formula Concordiæ.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid. pp. 717 sqq.

⁶ See Hundeshagen, and Stähelin, Vol. II. pp. 125 sqq. Calvin complained on his deathbed of the ill-treatment he had repeatedly received from the government of Berne.

⁷ *Opera*, Vol. VII. pp. 733 sqq. These Twenty-six Articles alone are given, with Calvin's Exposition of 1554, in Niemeyer's *Collectio*, pp. 191–217.

⁸ Art. XVI. '*Præterea sedulo docemus, Deum non promiscue vim suam exserere in omnibus qui sacramenta recipiunt: sed tantum in electis. Nam quemadmodum non alios in fidem illuminat, quam quos præordinavit ad vitam, ita arcana Spiritus sui virtute efficit, ut percipiant electi quod offerunt sacramenta.*' Yet this is qualified in Art. XVIII. '*Certum quidem est, offeri communiter omnibus Christum cum suis donis, nec hominum infidelitate labefactari Dei veritatem, quin semper vim suam retineant sacramenta: sed non omnes Christi et donorum ejus sunt capaces. Itaque ex Dei parte nihil mutatur: quantum vero ad homines spectat, quisque pro fidei suæ mensura accipit.*' See the lengthy discussion of Ebrard, l.c. pp. 503 sqq. He fully adopts the doctrine of the Consensus with the exception of the predestinarian restriction, which, however, is inseparable from the Calvinistic system, as formerly held by Ebrard himself.

⁹ '*Sacramenta neque inanes esse figuras neque externa tantum pietatis insignia, sed promissionum Dei sigilla, testimonia spiritualis gratiæ ad fidem fovendam et confirmandam, item organa esse quibus efficaciter agit Deus in suis electis, ideoque, licet a rebus signatis distincta sint signa, non tamen disjungi ac separari,*' etc. Niemeyer, p. 204.

¹⁰ See pp. 279 sqq. A full account of the controversy of Calvin with Westphal is given by Ebrard, Vol. II. pp. 525 sqq., and by Nevin in the *Mercersburg Review* for 1850, pp. 486 sqq.

The Consensus Tigurinus

John Calvin (1549) translated by Henry Beveridge

Notes and updated language by William Gross – Colorado Springs CO 2009

Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments Between the Ministers of the Church of Zurich and John Calvin, Minister of the Church of Geneva. Now published by those who framed it. MDLIV

Article 1. The Whole Spiritual Government of the Church Leads us to Christ.

Because Christ is the end of the law, and the knowledge of him comprehends in itself the whole sum of the gospel, there is no doubt that the object of the whole spiritual government of the Church is to lead us to Christ -- because it is by him alone that we come to God, who is the final end of a happy life. Whoever deviates from this in the slightest degree, can never speak duly or appropriately of any ordinances of God.

Article 2. A True Knowledge of the Sacraments comes from the Knowledge of Christ.

Because the sacraments are appendages of the gospel, only the one who begins with Christ can aptly and usefully discuss their nature, virtue, office, and benefit; and that is not done by referring cursorily to the name of Christ, but by truly contending for the end for which Christ was given to us by the Father, and for the blessings he has conferred upon us.

Article 3. Nature of the Knowledge of Christ.

We must hold therefore that Christ, being the eternal Son of God, and of the same essence and glory with the Father, assumed our flesh to communicate to us by right of adoption what he possessed by nature: namely, to make us sons of God. This is done when engrafted by faith into the body of Christ, and that is by the agency of the Holy Spirit – we are first counted righteous by a free imputation of righteousness, and then we are regenerated to a new life;¹¹ thus, being formed again in the image of our heavenly Father, we renounce the old man.

Article 4. Christ a Priest and King.

Hence Christ, in his human nature, is to be considered our priest who expiated our sins by the one sacrifice of his death, put away all our transgressions by his obedience, provided a perfect righteousness for us, and now intercedes for us, so that we may have access to God. He is to be considered a repairer who, by the agency of his Spirit, reforms whatever is vicious in us so that we may cease to live to the world and the flesh, and so that God himself may live in us. He is to be considered a king who enriches us with all kinds of blessings, governs and defends us by his power, provides us with spiritual weapons, delivers us from all harm, and rules and guides us by the scepter of his mouth. And he is to be considered in this way, so that he may raise us to himself, the true God, and to the Father, until the fulfillment of what is finally to take place, which is that God will be all in all.

Article 5. How Christ Communicates Himself to Us.

Moreover, so that Christ may thus exhibit himself to us and produce these effects in us, he must be made one with us, and we must be engrafted into his body. He does not infuse his life into us unless he is our

¹¹ This is not referring to the enabling or illumining of the Holy Spirit prior to faith; it refers to the birth of the new man which follows faith. That is, the translation of the Latin word for “new birth” is meant to be descriptive, not doctrinal.

head, and from him the whole body, fitly joined together through every joint of supply, according to his working, causes the body to grow in the proportion of each member.¹²

Article 6. Spiritual Communion. Institution of the Sacraments.

The spiritual communion which we have with the Son of God takes place when he, dwelling in us by his Spirit, makes all who believe capable of all the blessings which reside in him. In order to attest this, the preaching of the gospel was appointed to us, and the use of the sacraments was committed to us, namely, the sacraments of holy Baptism and the holy Supper.

Article 7. The Purposes of the Sacraments

The purposes of the sacraments are to be marks and badges of Christian profession and fellowship or fraternity; they are to incite us to gratitude and to exercises of faith and a godly life; in short, they are to be contracts binding us to this. But among other purposes, the principal one is that God, by means of them, may attest, represent, and seal his grace to us. For although they signify nothing other than what is announced to us by the Word itself, yet it is a great matter, first, that living images of a kind are submitted to our eye. This makes a deeper impression on the senses by bringing the object directly before them, in a way, while bringing the death of Christ and all his benefits to our remembrance; this is so that faith may be better exercised; and secondly, it is a great matter that what God has announced is confirmed and ratified by these seals.

Article 8. Gratitude.

Now, seeing that these things which the Lord has given as testimonies and seals of his grace are true, he undoubtedly truly performs inwardly by his Spirit what the sacraments represent to our eyes and other senses. In other words, we obtain possession of Christ as the fountain of all blessings, in order that we may be reconciled to God by means of his death, and be renewed by his Spirit to holiness of life – in short, we obtain righteousness and salvation – and also in order that we may give thanks for the blessings which were once exhibited on the cross, and which we receive daily by faith.

Article 9. The Signs and the Things Signified are Not Disjoined but Distinct.

Therefore, although we distinguish (as we should) between the signs and the things signified, yet we do not disjoin the reality from the signs; rather, we acknowledge that all who in faith embrace the promises offered in them, receive Christ spiritually, with his spiritual gifts, while those who had long been made partakers of Christ continue and renew that communion by them.

Article 10. The Promise which is Principally to be Looked to in the Sacraments.

It is not proper to look to the bare signs, but rather to the promise annexed to them. Therefore, to the extent that our faith in the promise offered there prevails, the virtue and efficacy of what we are speaking about will display itself. Thus the substance of water, bread, and wine by no means offers Christ to us, nor does it make us capable of his spiritual gifts. Rather, we look to the promise whose function is to lead us to Christ by the direct way of faith – faith which makes us partakers of Christ.

¹² Eph 4:16

Article 11. We Are Not to Stand Gazing on the Elements.

This refutes the error of those who stand gazing on the elements, and who attach to them their confidence of salvation; the sacraments, separated from Christ, are only empty displays; a voice is distinctly heard throughout proclaiming that we must adhere to none but Christ alone, and seek the gift of salvation from none but him.

Article 12. The Sacraments Effect Nothing by Themselves.

Besides, if any good is conferred upon us by the sacraments, it is not owing to any proper virtue in them, even though you should include in this the promise from which they are distinguished. For it is God alone who acts by his Spirit. When he uses the instrumentality of the sacraments, he does not infuse his own virtue into them, nor does he take away in any respect from the effectual working of his Spirit. Rather, adapting to our weakness, he uses them as helps in such a way that the whole power of acting remains with him alone.

Article 13. God Uses the Instrument, but All the Virtue Is His.

This is why Paul reminds us that neither he that plants nor he that waters is anything; but it is God alone that gives the increase. So it is also to be said of the sacraments that they are nothing, because they will profit nothing unless God makes them effectual in all things. They are indeed instruments by which God acts efficaciously when he pleases, yet in such a way that the whole work of our salvation must be ascribed to him alone.

Article 14. The Whole is Accomplished by Christ.

We conclude then that it is Christ alone who in truth baptizes inwardly, who makes us partakers of himself in the Supper, who in short fulfils what the sacraments represent, and uses their aid in such a way that the whole effect resides in his Spirit.

Article 15. How the Sacraments Confirm.

For this reason, the sacraments are sometimes called seals and are said to nourish, confirm, and advance faith; and yet the Spirit alone is properly the seal, and also the beginner and finisher of faith. For all these attributes of the sacraments sink down to a lower place, so that not even the smallest portion of our salvation is transferred to creatures or elements.

Article 16. All Who Partake of the Sacraments Do Not Partake of the Reality.

Besides this, we carefully teach that God does not exert his power indiscriminately in all who receive the sacraments, but only in the elect. For just as he enlightens unto faith only those whom he foreordained to life, so by the secret agency of his Spirit he makes the elect receive what the sacraments offer.

Article 17. The Sacraments Do Not Confer Grace.

This doctrine overthrows the fiction of the sophists which teaches that the sacraments confer grace on all who are not guilty of mortal sin. Besides holding that nothing is received in the sacraments except by faith, we must also hold that the grace of God is by no means annexed to the sacraments in such a way that whoever receives the sign also gains possession of the thing signified. For the signs are administered to reprobate and elect alike, but the reality only reaches the elect.

Article 18. The Gifts Offered to All, but Received by Believers Only.

It is true indeed that Christ with his gifts is offered to all in common, and that if the unbelief of man does not overthrow the truth of God, the sacraments always retain their efficacy; but all are not capable of receiving Christ and his gifts. Therefore nothing is changed on the part of God, but in regard to man each receives according to the measure of his faith.

Article 19. Believers Before, and Without the Use of the Sacraments, Communicate with Christ.

Just as the use of the sacraments will confer nothing more on unbelievers than if they had abstained from it, or worse, is destructive to them if they partake, so without their use believers receive the reality which is represented there. Thus the sins of Paul were washed away by baptism, even though they had been previously washed away. So likewise baptism was the basin of regeneration to Cornelius, even though he had already received the Holy Spirit. In the same way, Christ communicates himself to us in the Supper, even though he had previously imparted himself and perpetually remains in us. Since each is enjoined to examine himself, it follows that faith is required of each before coming to the sacrament. Faith is not without Christ; but to the extent that faith is confirmed and increased by the sacraments, the gifts of God are confirmed in us, and thus Christ in a way grows in us, and we in him.

Article 20. The Benefit is Not Always Received in the Act of Communicating.

The advantage which we receive from the sacraments should by no means be restricted to the time at which they are administered to us, as if at the moment the visible sign is brought forward, it brings the grace of God along with it. For those who were baptized when mere infants, God regenerates them in childhood or adolescence, and occasionally even in old age. Thus the utility of baptism is open to the whole period of life, because the promise contained in it is perpetually in force. And it may sometimes happen that the use of the holy Supper will do little good at the time, because of thoughtlessness or slowness of heart, but afterward it bears its fruit.

Article 21. No Local Presence Must Be Imagined.

We must guard particularly against the idea of any local presence. For while the signs are present in this world, and are seen by the eyes and handled by the hands, Christ, regarded as man, must be sought nowhere else than in Heaven, and in no other way than with the mind and eye of faith. Therefore it is a perverse and impious superstition to enclose him under the elements of this world.

Article 22. Explanation of the Words "This Is My Body."

We repudiate as preposterous interpreters those who insist that the formal words of the Supper, "This is my body; this is my blood," are to be taken in what they call the precisely literal sense. For we hold it is beyond question that they are to be taken figuratively; the bread and wine receive only the name of what they signify. Nor should it be thought that it is a new or extraordinary thing to transfer the name of things figured by metonymy¹³ to the sign; similar modes of expression occur throughout the Scriptures, and by saying so we assert nothing but what is found in the most ancient and most approved writers of the Church.

¹³ Substituting the name of an attribute or feature for the name of the thing itself (as in 'they counted heads')

Article 23. Of the Eating of the Body.

When we say that, by our eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood, which are represented here, Christ feeds our souls through faith by the agency of the Holy Spirit, we do not mean that any mingling or transfusion of substance took place; we mean that we draw life from the flesh once offered in sacrifice, and the blood once shed in expiation.

Article 24. Transubstantiation and Other Follies.

In this way, we refute not only the fiction of the Papists concerning transubstantiation, but all the gross figments and futile quibbles which either take away from Christ's celestial glory or are in some degree repugnant to the reality of his human nature. For we deem it no less absurd to place Christ under the bread, or couple him with the bread, than to transubstantiate the bread into his body.

Article 25. The Body of Christ Locally in Heaven.

And so that no ambiguity may remain when we say that Christ is to be sought in Heaven, the expression implies and it is understood by us to intimate distance of place. For though, philosophically speaking, there is no place above the skies, yet just as the body of Christ bearing the nature and mode of a human body, is finite and is contained in Heaven as its place, it is necessarily as distant a place from us in point of space as Heaven is distant from Earth.

Article 26. Christ is Not to Be Adored in the Bread.

If it is not lawful to affix Christ to the bread and the wine in our imagination, it is much less lawful to worship him in the bread. For although the bread is held forth to us as a symbol and pledge of the communion which we have with Christ, yet as it is a sign and not the thing itself; and it does not have the thing signified either included in it or affixed to it. Those who turn their minds towards it with the view of worshipping Christ, make an idol of it.