



A BIBLE STUDY ON ULRICH ZWINGLI

The reformer from Zurich who would not believe in Christ's real presence in the Sacrament of the Altar



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“O LORD, WE PRAISE THEE”

(TLH 313; LW 238; LSB 617)

(1 Cor. 11:23–26; Matt. 26:26–28; 1 Peter 2:24)

**“In consecrated wine and bread/
No eye perceives the myst'ry dread;/
But Jesus' words are strong and
clear:/'My body and My blood are here.”**

— Matthias Loy (*The Lutheran Hymnal* 304:3)

Ulrich Zwingli was the leader of the 16th-century Reformation movement in Switzerland. Zwingli affirmed the Bible as the one true authority in the Christian Church, denounced the claim that the pope in Rome had God-given authority over all Christendom, preached salvation through grace alone and fought against immorality among church leaders. Many parallels can be drawn between Luther and Zwingli, but those similarities come to a clear end when it comes to the doctrines of the two natures of Christ and His bodily presence in His Supper. Zwingli was insistent that the “is” in Jesus' Words of Institution must mean “represents” or “is a symbol of.” The two reformers met in 1529 at Marburg after reacting to each other's writings on this important subject. Sadly, Zwingli would not believe that “is” means “is,” even when Luther exposed those clear words of Christ, which he had earlier written in chalk at the table where the two were sitting: “This is my body.” Luther would not play grammatical and philosophical games with the words of Christ. “We have two different spirits when it comes to understanding these words of Christ,” Luther told Zwingli.

Sadly, even though the Swiss reformer did much to correct the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church of his day, Zwingli believed in a real *absence* of Christ in the Holy Supper. However, we follow Luther, just as he followed the inspired Paul, Matthew, Mark and Luke in their faithful transmittal of the words of Christ. It is just as the Small Catechism teaches us: “What is the Sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink.”

STANZA ONE

O Lord, we praise Thee, bless Thee, and adore Thee, / In thanksgiving bow before Thee. / Thou with Thy body and Thy blood didst nourish / Our weak souls that they may flourish: / O Lord, have mercy! / May Thy body, Lord, born of Mary, / That our sins and sorrows did carry, / And Thy blood for us plead / In all trial, fear, and need: / O Lord, have mercy!

Our adoration of Christ and His gifts is nothing more than our faith-enabled response to the sure and certain words of Christ Himself. Our Lord announces: “This is My body; this is My blood.” And we trustingly say and sing back to heaven and to our neighbor: “This is Your body; this is Your blood.” If we cannot trust in the clear words of Christ, what can we trust in? We leave all our philosophical speculations at the door; God-given faith in Christ's Word simply replies, “Amen. Amen. Let it be so.”

1. The first stanza of this hymn goes back to the 1400s. Luther added two more stanzas and published the hymn in 1524. In some Lutheran congregations, it continues to be the one hymn sung every Sunday during the Distribution. How is the Bible's clear understanding of what's going on in the Sacrament (1 COR. 11:23–26) evident from the beginning of this first stanza? Why the obvious parallel between the language of this stanza and the scenes in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4? How difficult would it be for Zwingli — or anyone who unfortunately believes it is impossible for Christ to be bodily present in the Lord's Supper — to sing these words?

2. Humbly acknowledging the true presence of Christ by bowing or kneeling as the Lord comes “in, with and under” the bread and wine of the altar is something many Protestant Christians believe is only done by superstitious Roman Catholics. Unfortunately, they have been taught that Christ Jesus is in heaven, and therefore it's impossible for Him to be present in the Supper. What does St. Paul have to say about the bodily presence of Christ Jesus in the Sacrament of the Altar (1 COR. 10:16, 27, 29)? What other central teachings of Scripture do we believe, although they

don't make sense to the fallen logic of the world and our old, worldly nature?

3. What saving benefits of the Lord's Supper mentioned in this first stanza would be absent if Christ were truly absent in His Supper? How do we know for sure that Christ's presence in the Supper is "for the forgiveness of sins" (MATT. 26:28)?

STANZA TWO

Thy holy body into death was given,/Life to win for us in heaven. / No greater love than this to Thee could bind us;/ May this feast thereof remind us!/O Lord, have mercy!/ Lord, Thy kindness did so constrain Thee/That Thy blood should bless and sustain me./All our debt Thou hast paid;/ Peace with God once more is made:/O Lord, have mercy.

Faith not only sings of the realities of salvation history presented in the Holy Word of God; faith sings of its personal benefits. We confess not only that Christ suffered, died, was buried and rose from the dead — we confess that Christ suffered, died, was buried and rose from the dead for me and for an entire condemned world.

4. The Small Catechism teaches us that it is God-created and sustained faith alone that receives the saving gifts of the Sacrament. St. Paul drives home the same point when he reminds the Corinthians that "[the children of Israel] all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness" (1 COR. 10:3–5). What does the Small Catechism say about the importance of faith in receiving this Means of Grace?

5. What are the merciful gifts given to us in the Lord's Supper? How do these undeserved gifts evoke in us the response "O Lord, have mercy"? How should this refrain be properly understood?

STANZA THREE

May God bestow on us His grace and favor/That we follow Christ our Savior/And live together here in love and union /Nor despise this blest Communion!/O Lord, have mercy!/ Let not Thy good Spirit forsake us;/Grant that heav'nly-minded He make us;/Give Thy Church, Lord, to see/Days of peace and unity:/O Lord, have mercy!

Throughout this entire hymn, we see that our witness and response to the Lord's real presence in His Supper is a corporate one. We receive, we confess, we give thanks and praise, we ask for the Lord's continued grace, we plead for peace with our neighbor and unity within the organized Christian Church.

6. Are the gifts mercifully given at the altar only for the benefit of individual Christians? How does the liturgy surrounding the Lord's Supper proclaim both the holy communion we have with Christ and our heavenly Father through the Holy Spirit and the blessed communion we enjoy with other believers in Christ?

7. Zwingli was unable to prove that the Words of Institution faithfully presented by the apostles Paul, Matthew, Mark and Luke must be understood in a figurative sense. Martin Luther successfully argued that Christ, according to His divine and human nature, can be present to save in whatever way He deigns, and He has deigned to forgive and strengthen through His very body and blood in, with and under the bread and wine of the altar. In reflection, why is doctrinal agreement on the Lord's Supper central to true, Christ-pleasing unity in the Church? Why is it important when receiving the words of the Bible to allow faith and not human "reasonableness" to have the last word?