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The Curious Histories of the Wittenberg Concord

James M. Kittelson with Ken Schurb

Like many other confessional documents of the sixteenth century, the Wittenberg Concord has a curious history. In fact, it has two curious histories, because its *Entstehungsgeschichte* and its *Nachwirkungsgeschichte* appear to contradict one another. With respect to the one, Ernst Bizer (its most recent serious student) flatly calls the Wittenberg Concord a compromise between Luther and the South German reformers. With respect to the other, its most salient section was included *expressis verbis*, in the Formula of Concord!

One question naturally poses itself: how can a single, relatively brief document be at the same time a compromise with some of Luther's bitterest opponents in the Sacramentarian Controversy and still be enshrined in the one confession that most clearly marked Lutherans as distinct from all other anti-Roman reformers on just the issue in dispute? Oddly enough, the answer to this question must begin by affirming the truth of both parts of the apparent contradiction. The Wittenberg Concord *was* a compromise when it was signed in 1536. By the same token, it *does* have a rightful place in the Formula.

I. The *Entstehungsgeschichte*

There are a number of reasons for arguing that the Concord was a compromise. Perhaps the most powerful of these is that it comes as such a surprise in light of the Sacramentarian Controversy that preceded it. The bitterness that developed between Wittenberg and the South German/Swiss connection is legendary. While Luther and his colleagues engaged in condemnation of the "sacramentarians," as he called them, they in turn tried to restrain themselves in public. But in private they could be equally hostile. Wolfgang Capi'o from Strasbourg scornfully referred to Lutherans as "the 'breadifiers' of God" (*impanati Dei*) and, when Martin Bucer tried to bring the Swiss into the Concord, Heinrich Bullinger (Zwingli's successor at Zurich) replied by inventing a new Latin verb, *bucerisare*, which may be roughly translated as "to shilly-shally."²

Perhaps the tenor of relations between the two sides is best captured in the following exchange between Zwingli and Luther at Marburg in 1529.

Zwingli: It is for you to prove that the passage in John 6 speaks of a physical eating.

Luther: You express yourself about as poorly and carry the argument forward about as well as does a walking stick standing in the corner.

Zwingli : No, no, no! This is the passage that will break your neck!

Luther: Don't be so sure of yourself. Necks don't break so easily here. Remember you are in Germany and not in Switzerland.³

It is common these days for historians, theologians, churchmen, and even confessionally orthodox clergy to bemoan the violence of these exchanges and rightly so. (It is, after all, not necessary to engage in *ad hominem* attacks simply to defend one's own position.) This hand-wringing has also, however, led to an unfortunate tendency among the ecumenically-minded in particular—to overlook, downgrade, or distort the real theological differences that lay between the two parties. They were, in fact, in utter disagreement, and the more they talked the greater the disagreement became.

This fact of fundamental disagreement makes the Wittenberg Concord all the more surprising. The doctrinal gulf between the two parties deserves, therefore, to be emphasized. Although, as everyone knows, a person's understanding of the words of institution has many theological ramifications, just two issues will suffice to show how deeply the disagreement ran; these are the place of John 6:63 in understanding the little word "is;" on the one hand, and the doctrine of the incarnation, on the other.

John 6 in general and John 6:63 in particular provided *the* enduring bone of contention between the two sides. As is common knowledge, it was the centerpiece at the Marburg Colloquy. Luther began the proceedings by declaring that the burden of proof lay on Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and their party. They replied, in essence, by trying to shift the burden of proof back to Luther.

There is metaphor, such as "I am the vine," at other places, they said. Luther refused to be ensnared. There the debate at Marburg began and there it ended.⁴

But the argument about John 6:63 has a much more ancient lineage than just the exchanges at Marburg. It began, in fact, long before there was any such thing as a Sacramentarian Controversy, and it began on both sides. Indeed, the two rival positions were staked out before there was even a reform movement.

The South German side may be more interesting because it appears to reach back further in time than does Luther's. The tendency to spiritualize the words of institution is already evident in the late Middle Ages with figures such as Wycliffe and Hus and in the Northern Renaissance with Erasmus and many others. But it is also evident in one of the parties to the Sacramentarian Controversy. Conrad Pellikan, the eminent Hebraist, reported that he came to visit Wolfgang Capito in 1512 and found him in a state of near despair. Capito had read Wycliffe's condemnation of transubstantiation and found that he agreed with it. He could not escape the conclusion that the body and blood were spiritually "but not really, corporeally, or substantially" present in the bread and wine.⁵

Pellikan did not mention John 6:63 in his account. But it is no accident that the very first exchange between the Strasbourg theologians and Luther on this issue does. The goad was Andreas Carlstadt, who passed through Strasbourg after having been ejected from Saxony. Carlstadt's theology of the Eucharist was so aberrant as to be unworthy of study, but his visit—and the thirteen books he published on the subject—disturbed Bucer's and Capito's parishioners. They then wrote both Zwingli and Luther for clarification and advice. After rejecting Carlstadt's opinion, they described their own. Their words to Luther are most revealing: "The bread and the cup are external things and, however much the bread may be the body of Christ and the cup his blood, they nonetheless provide nothing for our salvation, seeing that the flesh, in sum is of no profit. But on the contrary, this is the only thing that brings salvation: to remember the Lord's death." Here is both the reference to John 6:63 and the view of the Lord's Supper as a memorial. And the fight had not even begun.⁶

Luther's position, too, was already well-formed. As early as 1519, when he found himself accused of being a Hussite or Bohemian, he remarked in passing that John 6:63 in no way applied to the declaration of Jesus, "This is my body," "This is my blood." In an *Explanation of Certain Articles on the Holy Sacrament* he insisted "that the Lord is saying nothing about the sacrament in this passage. On the contrary, he is talking about faith in the Son of God and the Son of man, who is Christ." A few lines later he declared, "These [particular] Bohemians I regard as heretics. May God have mercy on them!" Five years before his future opponents appealed to it, Luther had concluded that this very passage of the Scriptures could not be brought to bear upon the words of institution.

It might be argued that here Luther was merely trying to distance himself from Hus, even though he did not condemn all Hussites. Happily, he repeated himself in 1522, still two years before the Sacramentarian Controversy. His friend Paul Speratus asked him for an opinion about the teaching that the bread and the wine were only symbols of Christ's body and blood. Then (and again in 1523 when he responded to much the same question from Margrave George of Brandenburg-Ansbach) the issue was whether to venerate the consecrated bread and wine. On each occasion Luther gave the same answer. In their sacramental use the bread and wine were Christ's body and blood, but whether one venerated them was indifferent. No one was to be compelled to do so or not to do so. Nonetheless, he insisted, those who "contort the little word 'is' into 'signifies'" did so "frivolously and unsupported by the Scriptures."

The disagreement over the applicability of John 6 to the words of institution was, therefore, long-standing. At least for Luther, it also involved far more than what communicants received at the Lord's Supper. Oecolampadius, for instance, joined Zwingli in depending on John 6:63 for his understanding of the words of institution. But he added that, because Christ was resurrected and seated at the right hand of the Father, he could not be physically present in the elements of the Lord's Supper. To Luther, such an argument amounted to "mere physics." On the contrary, he replied, "the Word says first of all that Christ has a body, and this I believe; secondly, that this same body rose to heaven and sits at the right hand of God; this too I believe. It says further that this same body is in the Lord's Supper and is given to us to eat. Likewise I believe

this, for my Lord Jesus Christ can easily do what he wishes, and that he wishes to do this is attested by his own words.”

If nothing else, Oecolampadius convinced Luther that any argument against the simple meaning of the words of institution turned on assumptions that came from human logic. In addition, Luther saw that any of these assumptions could then be turned against other articles of the Christian faith, such as the incarnation. As he put it, “We hold the flesh of Christ to be very, indeed absolutely, necessary. No text, no interpretation, no use of human reasoning can take it away from us.”⁸

For Luther, the core issue in the Sacramentarian Controversy was the understanding of human flesh itself and the power of the Word to penetrate it. To his mind the great error came in the argument that, according to John 6:63, physical things could not, by their nature, carry spiritual benefits. In a work prepared for the Frankfurt book fair in spring of 1527, he insisted that “everything our body does outwardly and physically is in reality and in name done spiritually if God’s Word is added to it and it is done in faith. Nothing can be so material, fleshly, or outward but that it becomes spiritual when it is done in the Word and in faith. ‘The spiritual’ is nothing more than what is done in us and by us through the Spirit and faith, whether the object with which we are dealing is physical or spiritual.” By contrast, he argued, “Our fanatics. . . think nothing spiritual can be present where there is anything material and physical, and they assert that the flesh is of no profit [John 6:63].”⁹ For Luther, the incarnation itself was at stake in the debate over the words of institution.

The Sacramentarian Controversy therefore had roots that were both long and deep. There can be little wonder that it should be marked by real bitterness and profound suspicion. After the Diet of Augsburg, Bucer (who had come to think of it as a verbal misunderstanding) visited Luther at Coburg. Luther was so unforthcoming that all Bucer could report to his colleagues was that “we will have to swallow much from this man” for the sake of concord!¹⁰

But Luther had good reason to be suspicious of Bucer. In addition to certain unwelcome alterations he had made in Luther’s *Postil* and Bugenhagen’s *Exposition of the Psalms*, Bucer had not especially distinguished himself in the eyes of the Lutheran

participants at the Marburg Colloquy. Osiander's report on Marburg contains near-prophetic words on the Monday discussion he and Brenz had with Bucer and Hedio:

We brought Bucer to the point where he admitted that Christ's body was in the Lord's Supper and was given to believers in and with the bread; but [he said] it was not given to unbelievers, for this reason: Christ called only the bread which he gave to believers his body and did not at all mean the bread given to unbelievers. At this point we said a new controversy would arise, yet not as vehement as the previous one. We expected that because of this debate we would perhaps still reach an agreement. However, Bucer, after he joined his companions, was dissuaded from his point of view and again apostasized!¹

Considering that Bucer, even in his most conciliatory moment at Marburg, still would not grant that unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ, one must conclude that the Wittenberg Concord was an unlikely document.

II. The Compromise

The behavior of those who reached the Wittenberg Concord also suggests that it was a compromise. To summarize the events briefly, the two parties were to have met at a halfway point between Strasbourg and Wittenberg, but Luther kept pleading his age, weakness, and illness until finally the South Germans came all the way to Wittenberg itself. When they arrived, they learned that Luther would not receive them. Abruptly he did so, but then equally abruptly he terminated the first day's meeting. When the southerners at last had the opportunity to present their views, Luther turned to his colleagues, asked if they were acceptable, and then—abruptly once more—declared that they were in concord. Bucer and Capito wept.

The Wittenberg Concord was obviously a compromise from the South German point of view. In sum, the South Germans signed a confession that says not a word about the Lord's Supper as a memorial and that ignores the issue of what constitutes "the spiritual." It is also apparent that they wanted some sort of agreement far more earnestly than did the Wittenbergers. They made the initial approaches. They persevered over the six years that elapsed since Augsburg. And they made the long trip to Witten-

berg. More significantly, they signed an agreement that explicitly included the *manducatio indignorum*, and they ignored John 6:63 (perhaps studiously so) both in their oral presentation and in the written statement that everyone signed.

The text did speak of a sacramental union and even clarified what this term meant: “that is, they [Bucer and his associates] hold that when the bread is distributed [*porrecto*] at the same time the body of Christ is present and truly offered [*exhibere*].”¹² The Wittenberg Concord, then, followed Luther’s insistence in the preceding negotiations, namely, that what was done with the bread in the sacrament was likewise done with the body of Christ. The Concord maintained this thought by indicating that the bread was the body of Christ as it was *offered*, and before it was received!¹³ Most striking of all, though, were the words, “as Paul says, the unworthy also eat [*indignos manducare*]. Thus, they hold that the true body and blood of Christ are distributed also to the unworthy, and that the unworthy eat, where the words and institution of Christ are retained.”¹⁴

But Luther also compromised. Specifically, he did not insist that the South Germans explicitly disassociate themselves from their earlier interpretation of John 6:63. H. G. Haile, in his excellent recent study of the mature Luther, even suggests that Luther so wanted concord that he feigned intractability during the final months precisely in order to wring concessions from the other side!¹⁵ Interestingly, the reformer began the proceedings at Wittenberg by demanding that the South Germans expressly repudiate Zwingli, but he did not finally force them to do so. Rather, he satisfied himself with a condemnation of anyone who taught that the elements were “mere bread and wine;” a teaching that the Swiss never held.

Luther further compromised by agreeing to some phrasing with which many Reformed theologians later thought they could live. Specifically, he signed a confession that declared “that with the bread and wine the body and blood are truly and substantially present, offered, and received.” In this regard, it is important to note the word “with;” a word that would cause no end of trouble in the debate over the *Variata*. In addition, Luther signed a confession that failed to give a complete definition of “the unworthy.” It stated that these “partake for judgment” if they presented themselves “without repentance and faith.”¹⁶ The unanswered key question was, what did the respective sides mean by “faith”?

Bucer's public explanation of the Wittenberg Concord, which he delivered in Strasbourg on June 22, provides a starting point for answering this question. He distinguished three types of people: the "altogether godless" (who ordinarily would not even present themselves for the Lord's Supper, but would receive only bread and wine if they did), unworthy communicants, and worthy communicants. The second group stands out as the most interesting for present purposes. They

believe the words of the Lord, who here offers his body, and receive the sacrament with such faith as to receive likewise the sacramental object [*rem Sacramenti*], yet they do not worthily [*digne*] estimate this gift of God. By this indignity they render themselves guilty of the Lord's body and blood . . . and they do receive it because they embrace the Lord's words and institution; but they do not eat truly [*revera*], as Augustine says—i.e., they do not fully enjoy [*fruuntur*] this quickening food, which they do not let sink sufficiently into the mind.

Bucer said these unworthy communicants were like those who "hear the Gospel and appropriate the salvation in it, but as they do not sufficiently examine it or meditate upon it, but let it slip from mind, they rob themselves of the word."¹⁷

To Bucer, then, one could believe the Lord's words and thus "embrace" His institution, yet not be worthy because one did not show appropriate concern for God and salvation. It is important to note that Bucer was not simply trying to insist that faith in the sacrament should be genuine faith, as opposed to mere head-knowledge. In his written report on the Wittenberg negotiations he described the unworthy as those who "are possessed not merely of mind and reason—which of course recognize there nothing but bread and wine—but of faith also. But because they receive it without true dedication of heart, and therefore without that living and saving faith which appropriates for itself the boundless grace of God, they are consequently guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. . . ." How one responded to the gift of God was crucial. An inadequate response could not only destroy faith but also, in effect, distort the character of faith which was present.¹⁹

By contrast, for Luther the sacrament *was* the Gospel. One who believed the words of Christ's institution (especially "given and

shed for you for the forgiveness of sins'') was a Christian, no matter how weak his faith or how halting his response, for faith was, first and foremost, the empty sack into which God poured His blessings. But Bucer could declare that "a large number of those who exercise faith in the ordinance of the Lord fail to discern the Lord's body, and so receive the Lord's body in this sacrament unworthily."²⁰ The contrast between Bucer's and Luther's sacramental theology remained basic.

Great eagerness to come to an agreement nonetheless carried the day. It is worth reemphasizing that this eagerness was not unilateral. The Lutheran negotiators, if somewhat more careful, seemed as willing to come to terms as their South German counterparts. At one point Bucer had affirmed that communicants who had faith in the Lord's institution but failed to show "true and life-giving faith" did receive the body and blood. Bugenhagen then seized the opportunity and asked him, "So it could rightly be said that the unworthy receive the Lord's body?" Yes, Bucer happily responded, provided the words and institution of the Lord were observed.²¹ But this proviso meant something quite different to Bucer than it did to the Lutherans. There is no escaping the conclusion that both sides compromised by virtue both of what they did say and what they tacitly agreed not to say in the Concord.

III. *Nachwirkungsgeschichte*

How could a document like this—one that clearly leaves room for at least a certain sort of Reformed position—make its way into the Formula? Certainly, the Formulators wished to include everyone they possibly could. After all, they were seeking concord and not yet another fight, another round in the *rabies theologorum* of which Melancthon so bitterly complained. Still, as in the *condemnamus*, the Formulators were also willing to condemn contrary teachings and, in particular, those they ascribed to Calvin.

There is consequently far more to the Wittenberg Concord's place in the Formula than the Formulators' desire to be as inclusive as possible. The first factor is obvious. They pictured the Formula as a true elaboration of the Augsburg Confession, and they did so for political as well as confessional reasons. In turn, the *Invariata* is viewed as simply an elaboration on the three Ecu-
menical Creeds and therefore a summary of the Scriptures. Structurally, the Wittenberg Concord was therefore something of a skip-

step between the Augustana and the Formula. It was just a notch below the other documents that appear in the Book of Concord as separate entries. Perhaps it should be viewed as a further explanation of but one point of the Augustana.

The formulators had good reason to include the Wittenberg Concord in just this way. Perhaps its most important theological feature, to them, was the insistence on the *manducatio indignorum*, at least in form. As previously indicated, this had been a major concession on the part of the South Germans, particularly surprising in light of the conversation Osiander and Brenz had with Bucer at Marburg in 1529. Evidently, it was of such great moment to the formulators that it dwarfed other aspects of the Wittenberg Concord by comparison. For example, the Formula quoted the section of the Concord on the sacramental union, but not in full. The German text omitted the clarification cited above.²² Significant as agreement about the sacramental union was, the formulators apparently thought they could assert the standard Lutheran understanding of the real presence even more forcefully by hurrying on, as it were, to the most salient point of all: the *manducatio indignorum*.²³

Of course, Chemnitz, Andreae, *et al.*, were trying to demonstrate the consistency of the Lutheran position from previous years as a response to the crypto-Calvinists of their day. Luther's situation in 1536 was somewhat different. He faced the anything-but-hidden Bucer, and he had good reason to continue to be suspicious of him even after the ink was dry on their signatures. Such is also in the nature of a compromise. Yet relations between the two sides were warm, to say the least. Capito began shamelessly to court Katie Luther's favor, even to the point of sending her a golden ring. He also suggested that one of Luther's sons might be sent to Strasbourg to study theology under himself and Bucer. These two in fact sent one of their students—a certain Johann Marbach—to study with Luther and Melancthon. Capito and Bucer even announced plans to publish an edition of Luther's works from one of Strasbourg's many presses.²⁴ There is a sense in which the two sides exchanged hostages, or at least Strasbourg sent its share.

Secondly, Bucer was scrupulously faithful to the terms of the Wittenberg Concord, at least as he understood them. It is true that Luther had occasion to chide him about some of the word-

ing Bucer used in his desperate maneuvering to bring the Swiss into the agreement. Nonetheless, at least to his colleagues in Strasbourg, Bucer repeatedly insisted “that the body and blood of Christ are present, offered, and received with the bread and wine, and truly and substantially so.”²⁵ In so doing, Bucer did carefully underline that the body and blood were not locally included in the bread and the wine as “food for the body.” Third, Bucer was not only at pains to observe the Concord in Strasbourg. Nine months after the Wittenberg negotiations, Melancthon, in a letter he wrote from the famous theologian’s conference in Smalkald, noted that the Concord had come up briefly in the discussions there. “Bucer spoke plainly and clearly concerning the mystery, affirming the presence of Christ,” Melancthon reported. He added that Bucer’s testimony was so powerful that it satisfied everyone present, including the stricter brethren.²⁶

Perhaps Bucer was *merely* being scrupulous. If so, he was carrying out two other provisions of the agreement. One specified that “it is necessary on both sides to refer this matter to other preachers and authorities,” because “it is not allowable for us to come to terms concerning an agreement before we have referred it to the rest.” Then all concluded by declaring, “we have the hope that, if the rest, on both sides, would so agree, there would be complete harmony” among us.²⁷

The point is simple: Bucer was both being faithful to the Wittenberg Concord and beginning a work by which it captured Strasbourg for *all* the Lutheran confessions. To be sure, John Calvin came to the city shortly and left a few years later still unconverted. But he did leave with a profound distaste for Zwingli.²⁸ It must also be granted that those of the Reformed persuasion found a home in Strasbourg for years to come. But in 1563 the city drove Gioralomo Zanchi and Peter Martyr Vermigli, the originators of Calvinist orthodoxy, from the theological faculty of its Academy, and in 1598 it subscribed to the Formula of Concord. In sum, the Wittenberg Concord helped make Strasbourg officially Lutheran.²⁹

But how did it do so? One way was through Marbach, who was sent to Wittenberg to study, returned to Strasbourg, and became the president of the Company of Pastors until his death in 1581. His controversy with Zanchi between 1560 and 1563 is the major event in this story. There is no need to rehearse the

details of this conflict here.³⁰ The point is that the Wittenberg Concord played a very important role in Marbach's victory over Zanchi and, therefore, over Reformed conceptions of the Lord's Supper within Strasbourg. In just this regard most of the debate between the two seems odd from the perspective of a modern theologian and the student of the confessions. They staked out their respective doctrinal positions quickly and clearly and never moved from them. Instead (and in addition to the usual name-calling) the argument turned to who—Marbach or Zanchi—genuinely represented the true tradition of Strasbourg's Reformation. Consequently, they quickly began rummaging through the writings and documents left behind by the previous generation of reformers in much the way some scholars treat these very same documents today. The Wittenberg Concord was naturally one of the documents that came under scrutiny.

Why, it should be asked, did Marbach and Zanchi choose to debate the issues between them in this peculiar way? One answer to this question is that by now everyone knew the straightforward theological and biblical arguments by heart. Historical theology, therefore, provided the natural grounds for the struggle between the two traditions, just as (in many respects) it does today.

But there is also a more immediate answer to this question. It concerns the audience. In sum, Marbach and Zanchi were not really addressing one another or even other theologians. They were addressing the Senate and XXI, Strasbourg's highest ruling body. These men tended to think in terms of tradition and law; they made it abundantly clear on a number of occasions that they were not theologians and had no wish to become embroiled in theological arguments, which they regarded themselves as incompetent to judge. As a result, Zanchi was forced to have recourse to the *Confessio Tetrapolitina*, a confession whose writing almost no one celebrates.

The Tetrapolitana was the confession that Bucer and Capito were forced to compose at Augsburg in 1530, when Melancthon would not agree to their signing the Augustana. Now, over thirty years later, Zanchi was resurrecting this document, and Strasbourg's politicians found it acutely embarrassing. The wording of their final decree is eloquent on just this point: "By this confession [the Augustana] and by the Wittenberg Concord we wish to take our stand. We wish to hear no more about the Tetrapolitana Confession, whether praise of it or criticism." The Wittenberg Concord had won.

Explaining exactly why it won is more difficult than establishing that it did, in fact, carry the day. There is, however, a sentence in the decree just quoted that provides an important clue. The authorities began by declaring, “The Senate and XXI signed the Augsburg Confession in 1561,”³¹ that is, just as the struggle between Marbach and Zanchi was beginning. Indeed, they had done so when they subscribed to the Naumburg Declaration of that year. In the aftermath of this decision both Zanchi and Martyr were also forced to sign the *Augustana Invariata*, although they did so *ut pie* (or *ut recte*) *intellecta*. But all this information only leads to one more question: why, with the Augustana (to which Marbach repeatedly referred) to back them, should the authorities bother to declare that they were standing by the Wittenberg Concord too?

The answer to this question says something about the genius of the Wittenberg Concord. Its concluding section contains the following statement: “Since, however, all profess that in all articles they want to hold and teach according to the Confession and Apology of the princes professing the gospel, we are especially anxious that harmony be sanctioned and established.”³² In sum, Strasbourg’s theologians—not the politicians, but the theologians—had already subscribed to the Augsburg Confession nearly thirty years earlier. Moreover, given the date (1536), they had signed the *Invariata*. Therewith they themselves had, in effect, repudiated the Tetrapolitana. Unconsciously, they had also made it exceedingly difficult for Reformed theologians of the generation after Calvin to find refuge in the *Variata*, as Martyr’s and Zanchi’s discomfort well illustrates.

Conclusion

On the same day that the Wittenberg Concord was struck, Melancthon reported the proceedings to a friend. Little has been accomplished, he declared. Basic disagreements persisted.³³ In evaluating this judgment, it must be borne in mind that this same Melancthon is the one who would (inadvertently, I think) use the little word, “with,” in the *Variata*. He is the same man who would be accused (and perhaps rightly) of “Crypto-Calvinism” by the generation that followed. Is it possible that he saw that the Wittenberg Concord *was* a compromise? Is it possible—at least from the point of view of the Gnesio-Lutherans—that he was led astray by it?

At the moment (and pending further discussion and research) I think the answer to both questions is yes. But what about Luther? He was no fool. Surely he knew that the Concord was a compromise in terms of its literal wording. If he was a fool and if he did not know that the Concord was a compromise, then why did he watch Bucer so carefully after the agreement was reached? His feelings by no means matched the near euphoria that can be documented on the side of the South Germans. Rather, when he encountered Bucer at Gotha a year later, he chided the Strasbourg theologian for the concessions he was now apparently willing to make in order to bring the Swiss into concord. Luther knew that Bucer would *bucerisare*. But, of course, such things are the very essence of compromises.

Yet there was something else at stake, and Luther may well have known it too. The "something else" was tradition, of which Tevye so eloquently sings in "Fiddler on the Roof." At this very moment Luther was himself in the midst of creating tradition. He was creating it through his catechisms, through the visitations, through the newly-reinstituted disputations, through the pastors he was training, and—yes—through the Wittenberg Concord. In this document he had at least (until the present) stricken John 6:63 from Lutheran discussions of the Lord's Supper, and he had obtained agreement to the *manducatio indignorum* in so many words.

Luther certainly did not know that young Marbach (whose doctoral disputation he chaired) would become the president of the Company of Pastors in Strasbourg. He had no idea that the Augsburg Confession would become part of the German constitution after Passau in 1552, and that henceforth all the Reformed in Germany would struggle to be included within the terms of the Augustana. He did not know that Marbach, after consultations with Brenz that grew into the *Confessio Wirtembergica*, would become *the* Lutheran representative to the second sitting of the Council of Trent! But he did know in 1536 that he was getting old and that it was time to replace himself. Why else would he remark, "My head is like a knife with all the steel worn off. There is only iron left. It won't cut, and neither will my head"?³⁴ Luther, who regretted that he had not studied enough history, may well have guessed that tradition would secure a battle that sheer theological argumentation had not.

To summarize, the powerful place of tradition explains how the Wittenberg Concord could be both a compromise in 1536 and a bulwark in the creation and adoption of the Formula a generation later. It should be added, if only as food for thought, that tradition is not just something that floats in the air. It is something that is created and recreated by every generation. In Old Testament times it was created and recreated first by the spoken word, and this we call "oral tradition." Soon it was written down, and this was a written tradition. Now it is passed along by churches and seminaries in what is both oral and written tradition.

One final comment seems appropriate. Its purpose is to bring this treatment full circle and (perhaps) to set the tone for reflections that may follow. One of the bases for the ecumenical discussion today is a largely unstated assumption that debates such as the Sacramentarian Controversy are part of the past, belong to the past, and should not shackle the present. But the curious histories of the Wittenberg Concord reveal this to be a naive assumption. Tradition is not just something that is old, moldy, and bothersome. It is alive, present, and the means by which we define who we are. Here, I cannot avoid being reminded of words from one of the Basel theologians after the Concord was signed and in response to pressure from Capito to join in it. He wrote, "It is possible for the concord of the church to exist along with disagreement and a variety of words and symbols."¹⁵ Even the exhortation to set aside doctrinal differences has a long tradition. Doctrinal questions therefore remain matters of principle.

ENDNOTES

1. Ernst Bizer, *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits im 16. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt, 1962). Also see Walther Kohler, *Zwingli und Luther: Ihr Streit über das Abendmahl nach seinen politischen und religiösen Beziehungen*, II Band: *Vom Beginn der Marburger Verhandlungen 1529 bis zum Abschluss der Wittenberger Konkordie von 1536*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, Band 7 (Gutersloh, 1953), pp. 432ff. The most important part of the Wittenberg Concord can be found in FC SD VII 13-16 *BKS*, pp. 977-78 (Tappert, pp. 571-72).

2. See James M. Kittelson, *Wolfgang Capito: From Humanist to Reformer* (Leiden, 1975), p. 149. On Bullinger's comment, see Traugott Schiess, *Briefwechsel der Gebrüder Blaurer*, 2 (Freiburg, 1910): 308, cited by Wilhelm Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950), p. 89.
3. *WA* 30^{III}, 123; 145 (*LW* 38, 25-26, 64).
4. *WA* 30^{III}, 112-14 (*LW* 38, 16-17).
5. See Kittelson, *Capito*, pp. 19-20.
6. *WABr* 3, 383. Their words to Zwingli were likewise revealing. Since the flesh profits nothing, they said, bread and wine could suffice to constitute the sacrament (*ad sacramenti rationem*) in the Lord's Supper. They brought up the analogy of baptism, in which water is the sole element. *Corpus Reformatorum* 95, 247. Thus, Bucer and Capito were already conceptualizing "sacrament" as the controlling *genus* of which baptism and the Lord's Supper were mere *species*. Such a conceptualization became one of the standard Reformed responses to Lutheran assertions of the real presence and remained so long after the Reformation era.
7. *WA* 6, 80.
8. *WA* 30^{III}, 130 (*LW* 38, 44).
9. *WA* 23, 189; 193 (*LW* 37, 92; 95).
10. Cited by Johann Wilhelm Baum, *Capito und Butzer, Strassburgs Reformatoren* (Elberfeld, 1860), p. 474.
11. *LW* 38, 71-72 (*WA* 30^{III}, 150).
12. *CR* 3, 75. The Wittenberg Concord is translated in Henry E. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, vol. 2: *Historical Introduction, Appendixes and Indexes to the Book of Concord; or, the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia, 1908), pp. 283-87. Here, see p. 285.
13. See *WA* 38, 299. Edward F. Peters has contended that Bucer's formulation of the axiom "nothing has the character of the sacrament apart from the use" first made its way into Lutheran theology with the Wittenberg Concord. See his study, "The Origin and Meaning of the Axiom: 'Nothing Has the Character of a Sacrament Outside of the Use'" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1968), especially pp. 14ff.
14. *CR* 3, 76; Jacobs 2:285.
15. H. G. Haile, *Luther: An Experiment in Biography* (Garden City, N.Y., 1980), pp. 123-47.
16. *CR* 3, 75-76 (Jacobs 2:284-85). The *Variata* text may be found in *BKS*, p. 65.
17. Jacobs 2:289-90 (*CR* 3, 80-81).
18. *Commonplaces of Martin Bucer*, trans. and ed. by D. F. Wright (Appleford, England, 1972), p. 360. Hermann Sasse was trying to grasp Bucer's conception with a standard, and probably inadequate, tool when he characterized Bucer as ascribing mere *fides historica* to the *indigni*. More accurate is Sasse's formulation of a few lines earlier: that the unworthy, "though

- believing the words of Christ, do not have the real, saving faith.' Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis, 1959; revised ed., Adelaide, South Australia, 1977), p. 251.
19. The response of the communicant had been important to Bucer and Capito even when they wrote to Zwingli in November, 1524 (see note 6 above). They said, "If we rightly eat the bread, etc., thus we will have been so occupied in thinking of [Christ's] death so as not to have leisure [*vacaverit*] to think what the bread is or what is under it" (*CR* 95, 247).
 20. Bucer, *Commonplaces*, p. 361. For Luther's emphasis that the sacrament is the gospel, see Sasse, *passim*.
 21. D. F. Wright put it well: "Bucer's distinction here between unworthy believers and ungodly unbelievers . . . enabled an agreed statement to be reached between Luther and Bucer without an abandonment on Luther's part of his stress that the virtue of the sacrament did not depend on the worthiness of the recipient or a denial on Bucer's of his established insistence that apart from faith there is no reception of Christ's body and blood." Bucer, *Commonplaces*, p. 373, note 9. W. P. Stephens held that Bucer's central idea in connection with the "unworthy" was predestination. Bucer insisted "that only the elect (the pious) may consume the body of Christ; for he accepted that in the elect there were degrees of faith and that some might, for a period, lapse. The elect, therefore, could be unworthy but not impious." *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 255. G. J. van de Poll, *Martin Bucer's Liturgical Ideas* (Assen, 1954), p. 91, also emphasized predestination as Bucer's "starting point," one that went unrecognized by the Lutherans at Wittenberg.
 22. See above, the text corresponding to note 12. It does not appear that with this omission that the formulators were retreating from the idea that the body of Christ is present as the bread is offered and before it is received. They did quote these words of the Concord: "The body and blood of Christ are truly distributed [*dargereichet; porrigi*] to the unworthy. . ." (SD VII 16). The Formula further implied this understanding in its assertion that the "use" is the entire action of consecration, distribution, and reception (SD VII 86).
 23. The *manducatio indignorum* was just as sensitive an issue in the second half of the century as it had been in the first. The Formula of Concord quoted words of Beza and Vermigli who claimed that the *manducatio oralis* and the *manducatio indignorum* were "two hairs of a horse's tail and an invention of which even Satan himself would be ashamed." (Tappert trans., p. 582; SD VII 67.)
 24. Capito lost no time. He wrote his first "follow-up" letter on June 13 (*WABr* 7, 432-34).

25. CR 3, 78-79 (Jacobs 2:288). This is a repetition of the Concord's very words (see the text corresponding to note 16 above), which, Hermann Sasse noted, certainly implied the *manducatio oralis*, "for what else could 'offered, and received' mean?" Sasse was somewhat amazed that Bucer was willing to agree to this Lutheran formulation, but he concluded that Bucer must have agreed to the words in a "Lutheran" sense: "If Bucer did not understand them in that way, he should have demanded another formulation, as he did in the case of the *manducatio impiorum*" (Sasse, p. 250; compare p. 247.). Likewise, Bucer further explained, "when the Lord said while offering the bread, 'take and eat, this is my body,' etc., it is clearly evident that he commanded them to receive from him and eat with the bread also his own true body, not only a figure or imagining of it" (CR 3, 80; Jacobs 2:289).
26. CR 3, 292.
27. CR 3, 76 (Jacobs 2:285).
28. See the rather sympathetic description of Calvin's eucharistic theology and his Strasbourg period in Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 111-17, 251-54.
29. Interestingly, the Formula of Concord, occupied as it was with crypto-Calvinism, never extensively treated Bucer's concept of the "unworthy." It did touch upon the issue with its affirmation that those who are weak in faith are nonetheless worthy communicants (SD VII 69) and with its corresponding rejection of the idea that "true believers . . . who fail to meet their own self-devised standard of preparation, may receive this sacrament for judgment" (SD VII 125). The antitheses also rejected the positing of certain distinctions among the unworthy so as to deny that hypocrites received the body and blood of Christ (SD VII 123).
- The Formula also did not particularly address itself to the situation common today when church visitors present themselves for communion, namely, that they claim to believe in Christ as Savior but deny the real presence, i.e., they do not believe the words of institution. This is the opposite, as it were, of Bucer's idea that one could believe the words, but not be a true Christian. See Lowell C. Green, "Article VII: The Holy Supper," *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. by Robert D. Preus and Wilbert H. Rosin (St. Louis, 1978), p. 221, and the sources cited there.
30. For the aspect of the dispute on predestination, see James M. Kittelson, "Marbach vs. Zanchi: The Resolution of Controversy in Late Reformation Strasbourg," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 8 (1977): 31-44.
31. Procès verbaux des Senats et XXI (Archives municipales de Strasbourg): 1563, ff. 75v. . See Kittelson, "Marbach vs. Zanchi," pp. 41-42, note 33.
32. CR 3, 76 (Jacobs 2:285). Sasse said, "we can only wonder how Bucer could accept it [the Wittenberg Concord], especially since its acceptance included the acceptance of the Augsburg Confession" (p. 250). Hastings Eells,

Bucer's twentieth-century English language biographer, reached a similar conclusion. He, however, stressed that the Wittenberg Concord was a diplomatic victory for the Lutherans because it effectively drove a wedge between radical Zwinglian theologians and more moderate ones like Bucer. See Eells, *Martin Bucer* (New Haven, 1931), pp. 203-204.

33. CR 3, 81.

34. WATr 6, 301.

35. Cited by Kittelson, *Capito*, p. 161.

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