HERMENEUTICS AND EXEGESIS IN THE EARLY EUCHARISTIC CONTROVERSY

Amy Nelson Burnett

Translation, exegesis, and hermeneutics were closely intertwined in the sixteenth century.* If Scripture was the ultimate source of religious authority, it must not only be available in a language that was widely understood, but its contents must be explained correctly and in a way that accorded with the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. While all evangelicals agreed that the Bible should be translated into the language of the people, they did not necessarily agree either on the proper exegesis of specific passages or on the hermeneutical principles according to which that exegesis was done.

This disagreement is most obvious with regard to the Scripture verses related to the Eucharist. All participants in the debate over the Lord’s Supper could draw on a long exegetical tradition for those passages that concerned the sacrament, extending from the church fathers through the scholastic theologians of the late Middle Ages. Heretical groups such as the Waldensians, the Lollards, and various Hussite factions also cited Scripture to defend their understanding of the sacrament; their ideas circulated in Germany and Switzerland on the eve of the Reformation and were incorporated into the evangelical debate as well.1

---


Much of this exegetical debate is ignored, however, by the tendency of modern descriptions of the eucharistic controversy to focus on the public exchange between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli that began in the spring of 1527.\(^2\) This approach ignores the fact that by the time the two reformers first addressed each other, the controversy was already over two years old.\(^3\) Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt’s eucharistic pamphlets published in the fall of 1524 began the public debate concerning the presence of Christ’s body and blood in the bread and wine of the sacrament. Over the course of 1525–1526, authors on both sides published at least sixty-five works that directly addressed the question of Christ’s corporeal presence; other pamphlets took up the issue as a secondary topic. Since many of these tracts were printed more than once, the total number of pamphlets related to the eucharistic controversy published during this period was almost three times as high.

These figures make clear that Luther and Zwingli were not the only individuals involved in the eucharistic controversy. Luther published only seven contributions to the debate before 1527, the most important being his enormously influential Against the Heavenly Prophets, published in two parts at the turn of 1524/25 and frequently reprinted over the next year.\(^4\) During this same period Zwingli published a dozen treatises arguing against Christ’s corporeal presence in the elements, none of which was reprinted as often as Luther’s pamphlets. Other participants in the debate ranged from the well-known, such as Zwingli’s counterpart in Basel, Johann Oecolampadius, who published seven pamphlets, to the obscure, such as the pseudonymous Conrad Ryss zu Ofen, whose true identity is still debated by scholars.\(^5\) Looking only at the treatises of Luther and

---

\(^2\) This is especially true of accounts of the controversy in English. Hermann Sasse, for instance, looks at the earlier writings of the two reformers but covers the debates of 1524–1526 in only a few pages, This is my Body. Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar, Augsburg Press, Minneapolis, 1959, pp. 137–142.

\(^3\) Luther’s first major work aimed against Zwingli and all others who denied Christ’s corporeal presence, Daß diese Wort Christi “Das ist mein Leib” noch fest stehen wider die Schwärmeister, WA 23: 64–320, LW 37: 13–150, was published in time for the Frankfurt book fair in the spring of 1527, as were Zwingli’s Freundlich Verglimpfung über die Predigt Luthers wider die Schwärmer, Z 5: 771–794, and Amica Exegesis, Z 5: 562–758, HZW 2: 238–385.

\(^4\) The other contributions were the prefaces to two different translations of Johannes Brenz’s Syngramma...super uerbis Coenae Dominicae (WA 19: 457–461, 529–530), his open letters to Strasbourg (1524; WA 15: 380–397, LW 40: 61–71) and Reutlingen (1526; WA 19: 118–125) warning against the teachings of Karlstadt and Zwingli, and his Sermon von dem Sacrament...wider die Schwarmgeister (WA 19: 478–523; LW 36: 329–361) published in 1526 without Luther’s involvement.

\(^5\) Luther’s Das ander teyl widder die hymischen propheten vom Sacrament, which attacked Karlstadt’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper, was printed ten times in 1525.