

Article

Eating the Gospel: Sacramental Mediation and the Failure of Eucharistic Unity at Marburg

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Abstract

This article reinterprets the Eucharistic controversy at the Marburg Colloquy as a conflict over sacramental mediation and the communication of the benefits of the gospel, rather than merely a disagreement over the mode of Christ's presence. Focusing on Luther and Zwingli, it argues that their failure to achieve Eucharistic unity emerged from competing understandings of how the benefits of the gospel are communicated, remembered, and embodied through ritual eating. Luther construed the Supper through the logic of *gratia extra nos*, in which Christ gives himself through the external promise attached to bread and wine. Zwingli, by contrast, understood the Supper through communal remembrance, confession, and Spirit-enabled participation directed toward the exalted Christ. By reading the controversy through the categories of embodied grammar, sacred temporality, and ecclesial boundary, the article shows why shared eating became the visible limit of Protestant unity. The Marburg dispute thus reveals that the Eucharist functioned not only as a doctrinal question but also as an embodied practice of worship through which Protestant communities imagined communion, authority, and participation in Christ.

Keywords: Marburg Colloquy; Eucharist; sacramental mediation; Luther; Zwingli; Protestant unity; ritual eating; ecclesial boundary

1. Introduction: Why Did They Fight over Eating?

Why did a disagreement over eating prevent Protestant unity at Marburg? To modern readers, the intensity of this dispute may seem disproportionate: why should eating bread and drinking wine determine the possibility of Christian fellowship? For the Reformers, however, eating was never merely a ritual act. It was the embodied mode by which the gospel was believed to be communicated, received, and shared within the church.

In October 1529, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and their respective colleagues convened at Landgrave Philip of Hesse's invitation and reached agreement on fourteen of the fifteen Marburg Articles (LW 38:85–89; [Burnett 2019](#), pp. 292–97; [Brecht 1993](#), pp. 325–34). Yet they failed to achieve unity on the fifteenth article, which concerned the Lord's Supper. The collapse of the Marburg Colloquy was not merely a political failure, nor simply a doctrinal disagreement over whether Christ's body was corporeally present in the bread and wine. At stake was a deeper question of how the benefits (beneficia) of the gospel become present and effective for believers in the Eucharist through the embodied act of eating. This article describes this process as "sacramental mediation," the concrete structure through which word, sign, body, memory, and communal practice communicate and enact the saving benefits of the gospel.



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Previous scholarship has interpreted the Marburg Colloquy primarily through debates over Christ's presence, sacramental union, symbolism, remembrance, and ecclesial identity (Gerrish 1982; Sasse 1959; Stephenson 2008; Davis 1999; Stephens 1994). German-language Luther scholarship, represented here by scholars such as Oswald Bayer and Berndt Hamm, has further illuminated the broader theological and historical contexts of Luther's and Zwingli's Eucharistic theologies. More recent scholarship has also explored the ritual, material, and cultural dimensions of the Eucharist, particularly through the work of Lee Palmer Wandel, Miri Rubin, and Amy Nelson Burnett, demonstrating how sacramental practices shaped communal identity and religious culture (Wandel 2006, pp. 1–11; Rubin 1991, pp. 1–11, 164–287; Burnett 2019). These studies have significantly enriched our understanding of the Marburg Colloquy and Reformation Eucharistic theology. Yet they have generally examined Luther's and Zwingli's positions in terms of doctrinal content, symbolic practice, or ecclesial identity rather than asking how each understood the sacrament as the mediation of the gospel's saving benefits. It is this question of sacramental mediation that provides the organizing framework for the present study.

The present article builds upon these contributions while shifting the analytical focus from the doctrinal content of their Eucharistic positions to the distinct theological grounds from which they criticized the medieval Eucharistic tradition. It argues that the disagreement becomes clearer when viewed from this perspective: Luther and Zwingli challenged the medieval Eucharistic tradition at fundamentally different points because they understood the mediation of the gospel differently. Their conflicting sacramental theologies therefore emerged not only from divergent accounts of Christ's presence but also from distinct conceptions of how the gospel becomes present and effective in the church.

Luther sought to preserve the Eucharist as the present communication of Christ and the benefits of the gospel through Christ's promise, whereas Zwingli feared that strong associations between grace and material elements risked reproducing the logic of Roman sacramentalism. The disagreement, therefore, was not simply about whether Christ was present in the Eucharist. It concerned the very logic by which the gospel's saving benefits reach the believer in the act of sacramental eating. These competing structures of sacramental mediation became most visible in what each reformer identified as the primary danger of the other's position. Luther charged that Zwingli's position reduced the life-giving body of Christ to a bare sign, thereby evacuating the Supper of the gospel's present, concrete reality (LW 37:299–303). Zwingli countered that Luther's insistence on bodily presence in the elements restored the very logic of material and priestly mediation—what he regarded as a renewed captivity of the sacrament to creaturely means—that the Reformation had sought to dismantle (Zwingli 1981, pp. 178–81, 197–204). Their conflict thus emerged not merely from doctrinal disagreement but from incompatible understandings of how the benefits of the gospel are mediated through the embodied practice of eating.

This article approaches the controversy through what may be called the embodied grammar of the gospel. By embodied grammar, I mean the patterned ways in which bodily practices communicate, receive, and sustain theological meaning within a community. Eating is never merely biological; it is a practice through which memory, identity, and communal belonging are embodied. In the Eucharist, sacred time, gospel benefits, and ecclesial belonging converge in a single ritual act. This perspective allows the Marburg dispute to be read not only as a doctrinal controversy but also as a conflict over the ritual conditions of Protestant fellowship.

To develop this argument, the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 constructs a conceptual framework for understanding eating as sacramental mediation, drawing on the categories of embodied grammar, sacred temporality, participation in Christ, and ecclesial boundary. Sections 3 and 4 examine Luther and Zwingli, respectively, not simply as

opposing Eucharistic theologians but as reformers shaped by divergent diagnoses of sacramental danger. Section 5 returns to the Marburg Colloquy itself, arguing that the failure of Eucharistic unity emerged from incompatible understandings of how the benefits of the gospel are communicated, remembered, and embodied within the Christian community. The controversy at Marburg was thus not merely about the presence of Christ in the bread and wine. It was, more fundamentally, about the conditions under which Christians could share the same table and thereby recognize one another as members of the same Protestant community.

The primary contribution of this study is to shift the analytical focus from Eucharistic doctrine itself to sacramental mediation, arguing that Luther's and Zwingli's critiques of the medieval Eucharistic tradition were shaped by fundamentally different understandings of how the gospel is communicated through the sacrament. Rather than reconstructing sixteenth-century liturgical practice, this study examines the theological logic that shaped Reformation debates over sacramental mediation.

2. Eating as Sacramental Mediation: A Conceptual Framework

2.1. Eating Time: Ritual Memory and Sacred Temporality

This section proposes that the Reformation Eucharistic controversy may be reread not merely as a doctrinal dispute concerning Christ's presence, but as a conflict over how the church **bodily inhabited the time of salvation** through ritual eating. The issue at stake was not only what Christians believed about the Eucharist, but how the saving reality of the gospel became communally remembered, embodied, and enacted through repeated acts of eating together.

Human beings do not merely measure time; they inhabit it bodily. Across cultures, ritual meals bind food, memory, and communal identity through repeated bodily practice. In Korea, the New Year's custom of eating rice cake soup (*tteokguk*, 떡국) ritualizes the passage of time—Koreans traditionally speak of “eating one's age” (*naireul meokda*, 나이를 먹다)—while foods associated with ancestral rites (*jesa*, 제사) and seasonal transitions embody communal rhythms of remembrance and continuity. Thanksgiving meals in the United States similarly ritualize collective memory within a national and familial framework (Pleck 1999, pp. 773–89). These examples differ significantly in origin, scale, and theological meaning, and no simple equivalence is intended. Their relevance for the present argument is structural: they reveal a recurring anthropological pattern in which communities bodily inhabit time through the practice of ritual eating.

As Paul Connerton has argued, communal memory is preserved not only through texts and cognitive representations, but through what he terms “incorporating practices”—habitual bodily actions through which the past is sedimented in gesture, posture, and repeated performance (Connerton 1989, pp. 72–104). While Connerton does not systematically theorize ritual eating as a distinct category, his framework applies with particular force to communal meals, in which memory is transmitted not primarily through verbal instruction but through repeated bodily acts of ingestion, sharing, and commensality. On this account, ritual eating functions as a privileged site where communal time is, as it were, carried within the body itself.

Passover, however, embodies what this article refers to as sacred time—a qualitatively different mode of temporality in which God's saving promise is liturgically enacted rather than merely remembered. Unlike civic commemorations such as New Year's Day or Thanksgiving, Passover does not simply recall a past event but enables the worshipping community to participate bodily in God's covenantal promise through the prescribed act of eating. Through the prescribed foods of the *Seder*—the unleavened bread (*matzah*), the bitter herbs (*maror*)—and through the liturgical recitation of the *Haggadah*, the Exodus is

not merely narrated as a past event but communally re-inhabited as the founding saving event that constitutes Israel's identity as God's covenant people (Exod. 12:8, 13:8). The significance of Passover for the present study lies not in a typological progression toward the Eucharist—a move that risks supersessionist readings—but in the scriptural and liturgical conviction, shared by both Jewish and Christian traditions, that the worshipping community bodily participates in God's saving act through the act of eating.

The Eucharist emerges within this wider world of embodied sacred memory. Christ's command, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24–25), points not merely to cognitive recollection but to *anamnesis*—a communal performative representation through which the saving event of Christ becomes repeatedly inhabited within the life of the church through eating and drinking. As Joachim Jeremias argued, Pauline and Lukan *anamnesis* formulas carry a participatory force that exceeds the category of simple memorial (Jeremias 1966, pp. 252–55).

Read in this light, the Reformation Eucharistic controversy concerned more than the mode of Christ's presence in the elements. It concerned how the church participated in the saving reality of the gospel through ritual eating. Sacred time was not merely proclaimed or recalled; it was enacted at the table. The question dividing Luther and Zwingli was therefore not simply what the Eucharist meant, but how the saving reality of the gospel became present and effective within the life of the Christian community.

2.2. Eating Life: Mortality, Dependence, and Eternal Life

Eating belongs to the condition of creaturely existence. Human beings eat because life is finite, dependent, and unable to sustain itself from its own resources. The recurring need for nourishment discloses a fundamental condition of creaturely life: existence is received rather than self-generated. As Rowan Williams suggests, the Christian account of creaturely life resists fantasies of autonomy by locating human existence within dependence, receptivity, and gift (Williams 2000, pp. 68–75).

Within the biblical tradition, eating is associated not only with the preservation of mortal life but also with the promise of divine life. The manna in the wilderness (Exod. 16:4–15) already establishes a pattern in which God sustains Israel's bodily existence through the gift of food, disclosing that creaturely life is upheld by the word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3). This logic reaches its christological intensification in the Johannine Bread of Life discourse, where Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger" (John 6:35). The identification of Christ with bread articulates a theological grammar in which creaturely need and divine promise converge through the act of eating: the one who eats receives not merely sustenance but the life of God.

The Eucharist emerges within this horizon of creaturely dependence and divine promise. Christ's words at the Last Supper, "Take, eat; this is my body," (Matt. 26:26, cf. Mark 14:22; 1 Cor. 11:24), join bodily need and divine gift within a single ritual act. The Eucharistic meal addresses human beings precisely as mortal, dependent creatures who are promised a life that exceeds their own capacities. Read in this light, the Eucharistic controversies of the Reformation concerned not only the ontological status of sacramental signs but the soteriological question of how the life-giving benefits of the gospel are received through bodily eating. As will be shown in the following sections, Luther and Zwingli offered profoundly different answers to this question—answers that would ultimately make Eucharistic unity impossible at Marburg.

2.3. Eating for Union: Communion and the One Body

Eating together is never merely the simultaneous consumption of food by multiple individuals. Shared meals create bonds of belonging because commensality joins bodies

to a common life. Through repeated acts of eating together, human beings are drawn into relationships of participation, memory, and mutual dependence. As Georg Simmel observed, the shared meal transforms the purely physiological act of eating into a social form in which communal identity is constituted at the table (Simmel 1994, pp. 345–51).

Within the Christian tradition, this logic reaches its fullest expression in the Eucharist. Eucharistic eating is not merely social fellowship or symbolic association; it is participation (*koinōnia*) in a common life that constitutes the church as one body. Paul's declaration, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (1 Cor. 10:17), articulates the principle that Eucharistic communion is not merely expressive but constitutive: the Supper does not reflect a pre-existing unity but actively forms and sustains the church as the body of Christ through the shared act of eating. The Eucharistic meal therefore functions as the ritual enactment of communion—union with Christ and with one another through participation in the benefits of the gospel.

This communal dimension helps explain why disputes concerning the Supper became so severe during the Reformation. Shared eating is never neutral. To eat together is to acknowledge participation in a common life; conversely, refusal to share the table signifies a rupture in communion itself. Already in the apostolic period, Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14) demonstrated that table fellowship was inseparable from the boundaries of ecclesial communion. Eucharistic disagreement during the Reformation therefore became disagreement concerning ecclesial unity and the conditions under which Christians could recognize one another as participants in the same body.

Read in this light, the Eucharistic controversies of the Reformation emerge as conflicts not only over sacramental theology in *abstracto*, but over the embodied conditions of ecclesial communion. Competing understandings of how believers participated in Christ through ritual eating entailed competing visions of where the boundaries of the Protestant community could be drawn. It is precisely this convergence of sacramental mediation and ecclesial boundary that the Marburg Colloquy would make unmistakably visible.

The preceding discussion provides the theological framework for the following analysis. Rather than treating the Marburg Colloquy simply as a disagreement over Eucharistic doctrine, the following discussion argues that the controversy reflected two fundamentally different understandings of how the gospel is mediated through the sacrament. This perspective clarifies why Luther and Zwingli challenged medieval Eucharistic theology in fundamentally different ways.

3. Luther: Eating Life Through Promise

3.1. Presence, Promise, and the Present Gift

Late medieval Christianity developed a sacramental structure deeply intertwined with temporality. Salvation was commonly experienced within a prolonged process mediated through penitential acts, sacramental procedures, and the gradual remission of both guilt (*culpa*) and temporal punishment (*poena temporalis*). Purgatory intensified this temporal structure by extending the consequences of sin beyond death itself, while indulgences offered mechanisms through which the burden of temporal punishment could be reduced, transferred, or commuted. It must be acknowledged, however, that this characterization reflects above all Luther's own polemical reading of the late medieval sacramental system. Later historiography has significantly complicated this picture: scholars such as Eamon Duffy and Thomas Tentler have demonstrated that late medieval penitential culture was far more pastorally complex—and far less uniformly oppressive—than the Reformation polemic suggested (Duffy 1992, pp. 53–87; Tentler 1977, pp. 3–27). Nevertheless, Luther's experience of the system as a structure of perpetual deferral was decisive for understanding his Eucharistic theology.

Luther's protest against indulgences cannot be understood apart from this temporal structure of salvation. His criticism was directed not merely against financial corruption or ecclesiastical abuse, but against a sacramental economy in which the assurance of salvation appeared continuously deferred into an uncertain future (Oberman 1989, pp. 151–74). The central theological question for Luther was whether the promise of God could truly be received as present reality. Increasingly, Luther came to understand the gospel not as information about salvation but as God's performative promise (*promissio*)—a divine speech-act through which Christ himself is given to believers in the present. As Oswald Bayer argues, Luther's reformational breakthrough consisted precisely in the recognition that divine promise is not merely doctrinal content awaiting fulfillment, but an effective word (*verbum efficax*) that accomplishes what it declares (Bayer 2008, pp. 33–60). This insight illuminates why the *verba testamenti* became the irreducible center of Luther's Eucharistic theology. If God's word accomplishes what it declares, then "this is my body" does not merely describe a reality but gives what it names.

This concern decisively shaped Luther's Eucharistic theology. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther writes: "I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ, and clinging simply to his words, firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread and wine, but that the bread is the body of Christ" (LW 36:35). For Luther, the central issue was not the metaphysical explanation of Christ's presence but the trustworthiness of Christ's promise. For this reason, Luther rejected attempts to subject the words of institution to philosophical speculation, including the Aristotelian framework of transubstantiation. The decisive question was not whether human reason could explain the mode of Christ's presence, but whether believers could trust the speaking Christ who gives himself—and with himself the benefits of the gospel—through the sacramental word. Accordingly, the question was not whether the sacramental meal itself rendered time sacred, but how God's saving promise, proclaimed in the Word, is communicated through sacramental mediation.

More decisively still, the words of institution—*hoc est corpus meum* ("This is my body")—functioned for Luther not merely as liturgical formulae, but as the concrete enactment of divine promise (*promissio*). In the *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), Luther insisted that Christ's body and blood are truly given with the bread and wine, so that the sacrament cannot be reduced to an act of symbolic recollection or memorial activity (LW 37:299–300). Accordingly, Luther rejected every attempt to reduce the Eucharist to symbolic recollection or memorial activity. The sacramental meal remained the place where Christ gave himself through the promise attached to the word. As argued above in the discussion of eating and creaturely dependence (Section 2.2), the sacramental meal addressed finite creatures who live within mortality and need. The Eucharist was precisely the site where such creatures received the life they could not generate from their own resources—not as a promise deferred into an uncertain future, but as a present gift bestowed through the word.

Although Luther first articulated the certainty of God's promise through the words of absolution in the sacrament of penance, his mature Eucharist theology extended the same theology of divine promise to the Lord's Supper. In both absolution and Eucharist, God's promise is not deferred to an uncertain future but given in the present through the external Word.

Luther's Eucharistic theology must therefore be understood not only in terms of the ontological reality of Christ's sacramental presence, but also in relation to the restructuring of salvific time itself. As discussed in Section 2.1, communities bodily inhabit time through ritual eating; the question at the Reformation was which time the sacramental meal made present. Where the late medieval penitential system often associated assurance with satis-

faction and purgatorial expectation, Luther relocated certainty in the immediacy of God's promise proclaimed through the external Word. In the Eucharistic meal, the divine word accomplished what it declared: it gave Christ, wholly and presently. The Lord's Supper thus became one of the principal external means through which Christ's promise was given in the present, interrupting the temporal logic of delay and uncertainty and communicating the present gift of the gospel to believers. The implications of this theology for the act of sacramental eating—and for the question of what, precisely, the believer receives through eating—will be developed in the following section.

3.2. Eating Life: Manducatio, Extra Nos, and the Reception of Christ

Luther's Eucharistic theology was fundamentally structured by a logic of *gratia extra nos*—grace that comes to believers from outside themselves through external means (*media externa*): preached word, baptismal water, bread, and wine. The certainty of salvation therefore rests not upon inward spiritual experience or human worthiness, but upon Christ's external promise (*promissio*), which comes from outside the believer. This does not mean, however, that all communicants receive the sacrament's saving benefit alike. According to Luther's doctrine of *manducatio indignorum*, both the worthy and the unworthy truly receive Christ's body and blood. Yet only those who receive Christ's promise ("given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins") in faith receive the sacrament unto salvation; those who receive the same body and blood without faith receive it unto judgment. For Luther, the Eucharist was not primarily an occasion for human remembrance or spiritual reflection, but the concrete, bodily act in which Christ objectively gives himself to communicants through the sacramental word (Bayer 2008, pp. 33–60).

This conviction explains why Luther rejected both scholastic transubstantiation and symbolic reduction, positioning his Eucharistic theology on a distinctive middle path. On the one hand, Luther refused the Aristotelian attempt to explain the sacrament through the categories of substance and accident. Bread did not cease to be bread, nor wine cease to be wine; later tradition would sometimes describe this position as "consubstantiation," though Luther himself never adopted the term and would likely have rejected it as yet another philosophical imposition upon Christ's words. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther sharply dismissed philosophical speculation concerning the mode of Christ's presence: "What does it matter if philosophy cannot fathom this? The Holy Spirit is greater than Aristotle" (LW 36:31–33). If Christ declares, "This is my body", then faith clings to that promise rather than to philosophical explanation or allegorical reinterpretation. What mattered was not a philosophical explanation of Christ's presence but the trustworthiness of Christ's words of institution, through which believers truly receive Christ's body in the sacramental meal.

For this reason, Luther insisted upon *manducatio oralis*—the actual bodily reception of Christ's body and blood in the sacramental meal. The Eucharist was not merely an inward act of spiritual memory, but an external and visible means (*medium externum*) through which Christ gives life to embodied creatures. This is why Luther maintained that the Holy Spirit works not by bypassing external means but precisely through them: in his polemic *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), Luther argued that God has bound the Spirit to the external word and sacrament, so that the same Christ who speaks in the preached word gives himself in the Eucharistic meal (LW 40:146–48). *Manducatio oralis* therefore expressed not a crude materialism, but Luther's theology of the external word (*verbum externum*): the benefits of the gospel come from outside the self and are received through visible and bodily means (Bayer 2008, pp. 48–56).

This insistence on bodily reception was deeply connected to Luther's understanding of human creatureliness. As argued in Section 2.2, human beings are finite and dependent

creatures who live by reception rather than self-generation. Luther's sacramental theology extended this anthropological conviction into the heart of the Eucharistic act: the sacrament addresses believers precisely as embodied creatures who cannot produce salvation from within themselves but must receive it through external means. In the Eucharistic meal, the creaturely condition of dependence and the divine movement of *gratia extra nos* converge: finite creatures receive the life of Christ not as a deferred possibility but as a present gift enacted through the promise attached to bread and wine. The anthropology of creaturely reception and the theology of divine bestowal thus form an indissoluble unity in Luther's Eucharistic thought.

The same logic also explains Luther's controversial doctrine of *manducatio indignorum*—the teaching that even the unworthy, those who receive the sacrament without faith, nevertheless truly receive the body and blood of Christ (LW 37:303–18). The difference lies not in whether Christ is received, but in how he is received: believers receive the sacrament unto life (*ad vitam*), while the unworthy receive it unto judgment (*ad iudicium*), as Paul himself warns: “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). The reality of the sacrament therefore does not depend upon the inward spiritual condition of the recipient but upon Christ's promise, which stands independent of the worthiness or unworthiness of the communicant. For Luther, this was not a peripheral corollary but a necessary consequence of the *extra nos* structure of the gospel itself: if the efficacy of the sacrament were contingent upon the faith of the recipient, then assurance would once again be relocated from Christ's word to the uncertain interiority of human subjectivity.

It was precisely at this point—the doctrine of *manducatio indignorum*—that Luther's position appeared most deeply problematic to Zwingli. The divide between them concerned not only the mode of Christ's presence, but the fundamental directionality of grace in the sacramental act. Luther's Eucharistic theology preserved an *extra nos* structure in which Christ gives himself objectively through external means, irrespective of the recipient's subjective disposition. Zwingli, by contrast, increasingly interpreted the Eucharist in relation to the believer's inward faith and commemorative response directed toward the exalted Christ (*sursum corda*). From Luther's perspective, this shift threatened to relocate the ground of certainty from Christ's external promise to what he regarded as the unstable interiority of human belief. From Zwingli's perspective, however, Luther's insistence that even unbelievers truly received Christ's body appeared to bind divine grace so closely to material eating that it risked replicating the very sacramentalism the Reformation had sought to overcome. The Eucharistic controversy thus emerged not merely from disagreements concerning Christ's presence but from fundamentally incompatible understandings of how the benefits of the gospel are given to finite creatures through bodily and external means.

3.3. Luther's Perception of Sacramental Danger

Luther's Eucharistic theology was shaped not only by doctrinal conviction but also by a deep concern for the certainty of God's grace, a concern resonant with his broader experience of *Anfechtung*, the existential struggle over the certainty of God's grace (Oberman 1989, pp. 151–74). What Luther feared was not merely an incorrect interpretation of the sacrament but the loss of Christ himself from the sacramental act. In his polemic against “fanatics,” Luther repeatedly accused his opponents of transforming the Eucharist into an empty sign detached from Christ's real self-giving. The danger, from Luther's perspective, was that the sacrament might cease to be a concrete gift of grace and become instead—as he perceived it—a merely human act of remembrance grounded in inward spirituality alone.

This anxiety became increasingly intense during Luther's conflicts with Andreas Karlstadt and other radical reformers in the early and mid-1520s. Karlstadt's reinterpretation of the words of institution—arguing that *touto* ("this") referred not to the bread but to Christ's own body as he gestured toward himself—represented for Luther a paradigmatic instance of how exegetical ingenuity could sever the sacramental sign from Christ's self-giving (Burnett 2011, pp. 41–68). In *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), Luther responded by insisting that spiritualizing interpretations of the Eucharist ultimately threatened to remove Christ from the sacrament itself: "If you take the word away from the elements, there is nothing left but bare bread and wine" (LW 40:146–48). The issue was not merely exegetical disagreement. Luther believed that once Christ's bodily self-giving through the elements was relativized, the certainty of grace would inevitably collapse into the fragility of human subjectivity. What appeared to his opponents as theological clarification appeared to Luther as the displacement of Christ from the very place where he had promised to give himself.

For Luther, the Eucharist could never be reduced to inward memory or subjective religious consciousness. Certainly, remembrance (*anamnesis*) remained an essential dimension of the sacramental act; Luther never denied that the Supper involved the church's thankful recollection of Christ's saving work. Yet remembrance did not create the reality of the Eucharist but responded to Christ's promise already given. The decisive movement of the sacrament was therefore not humanity's ascent toward God through spiritual contemplation but Christ's descent to believers through external, material means. Accordingly, relocating certainty from Christ's external promise to believing remembrance would compel believers to seek assurance within the fragility of the self rather than the reliability of the divine word. For Luther, this was not a minor epistemological adjustment but a soteriological catastrophe.

This concern explains why Luther could not relinquish the doctrine of *manducatio indignorum*, even when it became one of the most divisive issues among the Protestant reformers. For Luther, the doctrine safeguarded the objectivity of the *promissio*. If the sacrament ultimately depended upon the inward disposition of the communicant, the *promissio* would no longer stand as an objective divine act but would become contingent upon the uncertain quality of human faith. For Luther, this would dismantle the *extra nos* structure of the gospel at the Lord's Table. What his opponents regarded as a necessary safeguard against sacramental magic, Luther experienced as a fatal evacuation of divine promise from the sacramental act.

The emotional and theological intensity of the conflict became unmistakably visible at the Marburg Colloquy in October 1529. Luther's famous judgment at Marburg, often summarized as "You have a different spirit," expressed more than theological disagreement over Eucharistic doctrine. According to the Marburg reports, Luther concluded that "our spirit is different from yours" and that the two parties did not possess the same spirit (LW 38:70–71). This was not merely personal hostility or rhetorical excess. As Volker Leppin has argued, Luther's refusal to grant ecclesial fellowship at Marburg reflected his conviction that the Eucharistic controversy concerned the very reality of Christ's self-giving in the sacrament (Brecht 1993, pp. 325–34; Burnett 2019, pp. 292–97). The theological basis of this conviction becomes clearer in Luther's defense of the doctrine of *manducatio indignorum*.

The conflict therefore became unavoidable because both sides perceived genuine theological danger at the heart of the Eucharistic act. Luther feared that the Supper might be emptied of Christ and reduced to inward memory or subjective faith. His opponents feared that Luther's insistence on bodily reception bound divine grace too closely to material mediation, thereby risking a return to the very sacramental structure the Reformation had sought to dismantle. Beneath the Eucharistic controversy lay two fundamentally

different visions of how believers participate in Christ: whether the benefits of the gospel descend through external means as divine gift, or whether believers ascend through Spirit-enabled faith toward communion with the exalted Christ. It was this unresolved tension—not merely doctrinal but structural and affective, touching the very embodied grammar through which the gospel was enacted at the table—that the two reformers would bring to Marburg in October 1529. The following section examines how Zwingli constructed an alternative vision of sacramental mediation grounded in precisely the ascending logic that Luther most feared. The argument now turns to Zwingli’s alternative account of sacramental mediation.

4. Zwingli: Eating Memory Through Communal Confession

4.1. *Sursum Corda*: Faith Directed Toward the Exalted Christ

If Luther feared that Christ might be removed from the sacrament, Zwingli feared that Christ might be wrongly confined to it. The Eucharistic controversy therefore did not arise simply from disagreement concerning the meaning of Christ’s words of institution, but from fundamentally different understandings of how the risen and ascended Christ relates to believers after the ascension (Acts 1:9–11; 3:21; Zwingli 1922, pp. 49–52). For Zwingli, the central theological danger was not the loss of Christ from the sacramental act but the collapse of Christ’s heavenly exaltation into what he regarded as an illegitimate material localization of the glorified body.

Zwingli’s Eucharistic theology was decisively shaped by the conviction that the risen Christ reigns bodily at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Christ’s human body, precisely because it is truly and integrally human, cannot be physically present in multiple locations simultaneously; to assert otherwise would compromise the reality of the incarnation itself (Zwingli 1922, pp. 248–49). The ascension therefore carried profound sacramental consequences: for Zwingli, to locate Christ’s body within the elements was not a faithful extension of Christ’s promise but a Christological confusion that violated the integrity of Christ’s humanity. Zwingli articulated this concern through his distinctive use of *alloeosis* (ἀλλοίωσις), a rhetorical exchange of predicates between Christ’s two natures that allowed predicates of one nature to be attributed to the person of Christ without implying an ontological transfer between the natures themselves (LW 37:214; Drake 2021, pp. 57–69). Luther, by contrast, appealed to a stronger account of the *communicatio idiomatum*—what later Lutheran theology would describe in terms of the *genus maiestaticum*—to defend the possibility of Christ’s bodily presence in the elements (LW 37:214–31; *Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VIII). This Christological disagreement, as will be discussed in Section 5, would prove irresolvable at Marburg.

This Christological conviction helps explain why Zwingli’s Eucharistic theology may be characterized by the logic of *sursum corda*—“Lift up your hearts”—faith directed upward toward the exalted Christ (Zwingli 1922, pp. 248–49). Whereas Luther emphasized the divine promise given through external means, Zwingli stressed the Spirit’s work in directing the faithful toward the One who reigns in heaven. The Eucharistic act was therefore fundamentally anabatic: an upward movement of Spirit-enabled faith rather than a downward movement of sacramental presence.

Within this framework, remembrance (*anamnesis*) was not merely intellectual recollection of a past event. It was a communal act of confession through which the church publicly acknowledged and proclaimed the saving work of Christ. The Eucharist did not communicate Christ’s body through material eating; rather, it gathered believers into a shared remembrance of Christ’s saving work and directed them toward participation in the benefits of that saving work through faith. The sacrament therefore functioned not

primarily as a means by which divine life was materially conveyed, but as a communal enactment of faith, thanksgiving, and obedience.

For Zwingli, the question was not whether believers participated in Christ, but how such participation occurred. Communion with Christ was effected not through the local presence of Christ's body in the sacramental elements but through faith awakened by Christ's life-giving Word and made effective by the Holy Spirit. Rather than locating the saving reality of the Eucharist in the bodily presence of Christ within the bread and wine, Zwingli grounded it in the living Word of Christ, received through faith and rendered efficacious by the Spirit (Jones 1994, pp. 134–46; Park 2023, pp. 263–91).

This theological orientation is reflected not only in Zwingli's doctrinal writing but also in his liturgical practice. In *Action or Use of the Lord's Supper*, immediately after the congregation confesses Christ as the one "seated at the right hand of the Father," the minister reads John 6:47–48, 63: "I am the bread of life... It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." The liturgical sequence itself is theologically significant. The congregation is first directed to the exalted Christ at the Father's right hand and is then immediately confronted with Christ's own declaration that his words are "spirit and life." Rather than inviting believers to seek Christ's bodily presence within the sacramental elements, the liturgy directs them to Christ's life-giving Word as the means by which they participate in his saving work. This pneumatological emphasis is reinforced in the accompanying prayer, which gives thanks that God, "by your Spirit," has made believers "one body in the unity of faith," enabling them to offer praise and thanksgiving together (Zwingli 2009, pp. 271–78). The Eucharist thus appears not as the localization of Christ's bodily presence in the elements but as the communal confession and thanksgiving of those whom the Holy Spirit has united through faith. Zwingli's Eucharistic theology therefore should not be understood as separating salvation from Christ but as locating participation in the living Christ through the life-giving Word, proclaimed in the gospel, received through faith by the Holy Spirit.

4.2. *Anamnesis: Memory as Communal Confession*

For Zwingli, Eucharistic remembrance was not an inward recollection, but a public act of praise and thanksgiving enacted by the gathered community of believers (Zwingli 1953, p. 234). The command, "Do this in remembrance of me", directed the church toward a communal act of proclamation, thanksgiving, and obedience. The Supper therefore functioned as a visible confession of faith through which the church declared whose death had formed it and whose lordship it acknowledged.

This understanding of *anamnesis* followed directly from Zwingli's theology of the ascended Christ. Because Christ reigns bodily at the right hand of the Father in heaven (Zwingli 1922, pp. 248–49), believers do not possess him through material consumption. Rather, they participate in his saving work through faith, remembrance, and confession. Yet this remembrance was not a bare mental recollection. The Holy Spirit gathers the community, awakens faith, and enables believers to participate in the saving reality of Christ (Zwingli 1922, pp. 49–52). The Eucharist therefore functioned not as the bodily localization of Christ within bread and wine, but as the Spirit-enabled participation of the church in the saving work of the exalted Lord.

Zwingli's own language reflects the fundamentally communal character of this remembrance. In *Commentary on True and False Religion*, Zwingli defines the Eucharist as "the thanksgiving and common rejoicing of those who declare the death of Christ," that is, those who "trumpet, praise, confess, and exalt his name above all others" (Zwingli 1981, p. 200). The Eucharist thus possessed a fundamentally ecclesial character. To eat and drink together was to identify oneself publicly with the community gathered under Christ's lord-

ship. The meal marked the visible boundary of communal belonging and expressed the shared faith of those who confessed Christ together.

It was this understanding of the Supper that Zwingli defended at Marburg (LW 38:65–75). What he regarded as faithful remembrance and ecclesial confession, Luther continued to regard as insufficient to secure Christ's self-giving in the sacrament. The controversy therefore concerned not only how Christ is present to believers, but also how the church itself is constituted through the Eucharistic meal.

4.3. *Zwingli's Perception of Sacramental Danger*

Zwingli's Eucharistic theology was shaped not only by exegetical conviction but also by a profound perception of sacramental danger. His concern was not that Christ would be absent from the church, but that Christ's bodily presence would be wrongly localized within the sacramental sign. Because the risen Christ reigns bodily at the right hand of the Father, Zwingli denied that Christ's human body could be enclosed within earthly elements or received through material eating. Communion with Christ was no less real for Zwingli than for Luther; the difference concerned the mode of participation rather than the reality of participation itself. It was effected through faith and the work of the Holy Spirit rather than through the local or corporeal containment of Christ's body in bread and wine (Zwingli 1922, pp. 49–52, 248–49; 1981, pp. 179–81, 188, 197–204).

This fear was sharpened by Zwingli's broader critique of late medieval sacramentalism. In his view, the medieval church had encouraged Christians to treat visible rites and consecrated objects as though saving power were attached to them in themselves. The Reformation, therefore, required not only the correction of particular abuses but a reordering of the relation between sign and thing signified. Bread and wine remained indispensable signs because Christ had instituted them, but their function was to direct faith toward Christ rather than to contain him materially. The danger of Luther's position, as Zwingli perceived it, was that it seemed to preserve precisely the kind of object-bound mediation from which Reformation faith had to be freed (Zwingli 1981, pp. 179–81, 197–204).

This concern was inseparable from Zwingli's understanding of the ascended Christ. The Supper does not bring Christ down into the bread; rather, it gathers believers before the exalted Christ through faith, remembrance, thanksgiving, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Zwingli therefore did not deny communion with Christ. He denied that such communion required Christ's bodily presence within the elements. The danger, as he saw it, was that the church might mistake the visible sign for the saving reality of the gospel to which it points. The sign exists to direct believers toward Christ; it must not become the locus in which Christ is locally or corporeally contained.

For this reason, Zwingli's Eucharistic theology should not be reduced to a theology of absence. It was an attempt to safeguard a different account of presence: Christ is truly present to believers through the Spirit and faith, but not locally or corporeally enclosed in the elements. The visible sign is therefore not empty; it is ecclesially and pedagogically necessary. Yet its necessity lies in directing the gathered community toward Christ's saving work, not in becoming the material site of Christ's bodily containment. What Luther defended as the objectivity of Christ's promise, Zwingli perceived as a dangerous confusion of sign and reality and a return to what might be called sacramental captivity.

Zwingli's concern was also ecclesiological. If the church is constituted through faith, confession, and obedience, then the Eucharist must serve the formation of that community rather than replace it with devotion to a localized sacramental object. To eat and drink together was to confess Christ publicly, to give thanks for his saving death, and to mark one's belonging to the community gathered under his lordship. The disagreement therefore concerned not only Christ's presence, but also the manner in which the church itself

was constituted through Eucharistic practice. It was this perception of sacramental danger that Zwingli carried to Marburg (LW 38:65–75).

5. Marburg and the Failure of Eucharistic Union

5.1. *When Two Sacramental Mediations Met*

The Marburg Colloquy brought Luther's and Zwingli's competing accounts of sacramental mediation into direct confrontation. The preceding sections examined their Eucharistic theologies separately; this section now considers why these two accounts proved irreconcilable at the Lord's Table. The central issue was not merely whether Christ was present in the Eucharist but how the benefits of the gospel were communicated through the sacrament and, consequently, how ecclesial communion itself was constituted.

Against this theological background, the Marburg Colloquy of 1529 was convened in the hope of securing Protestant unity at a moment of growing political and religious uncertainty. Under the patronage of Philip of Hesse, Luther, Zwingli, and their colleagues gathered to establish common ground among the emerging Protestant movements. In many respects, the meeting appeared successful. The participants reached substantial agreement on central articles of Christian faith, including the Trinity, Christology, original sin, justification, baptism, Scripture, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet agreement collapsed at the Lord's Table (Brecht 1993, pp. 325–34; Burnett 2019, pp. 292–97; LW 38:83–85).

The significance of Marburg lies precisely in this paradox. Agreement proved possible on nearly every major doctrinal issue, yet Eucharistic fellowship remained impossible. The Marburg Articles reveal this tension with particular clarity (LW 38:85–89). While the participants jointly affirmed the importance of the sacrament and the obligation of Christians to receive it according to Christ's institution, they could not agree on what occurred in the sacramental act itself. Their final appeal to mutual Christian love therefore acknowledged both genuine theological fellowship and the limits beyond which conscience would not permit sacramental unity.

The disagreement, however, extended beyond the question of Christ's presence in the bread and wine. It concerned two fundamentally different understandings of sacramental mediation. Luther and Zwingli did not merely offer competing explanations of the Eucharist; they understood differently how the gospel reaches believers through the sacrament and how participation in Christ establishes the church as a visible communion. Consequently, what one regarded as the necessary condition for Eucharistic fellowship appeared to the other as a threat to the integrity of the gospel itself.

Marburg therefore revealed more than an unresolved dispute concerning sacramental doctrine. It exposed two distinct theological logics governing the relationship between gospel, sacrament, and church. The Eucharistic table became the visible point at which these competing visions encountered one another, making the failure of Eucharistic fellowship not an accidental historical outcome but the inevitable consequence of incompatible understandings of sacramental mediation. The following comparison examines these competing structures in order to clarify why agreement proved possible on so many doctrines while remaining unattainable at the Lord's Table.

5.2. *Competing Structures of Sacramental Mediation*

The conflict at Marburg cannot be explained adequately as a disagreement concerning the mode of Christ's presence alone. Interpretations that reduce the controversy to the opposition between "bodily presence" and "symbolic remembrance" fail to account for why the dispute resulted not merely in doctrinal divergence, but in the breakdown of Eucharistic fellowship itself. The controversy emerged because Luther and Zwingli operated with fundamentally different structures of sacramental mediation. These structures

shaped not only their understanding of Christ's presence, but also their understanding of sacred temporality, the communication of the benefits of the gospel, and the constitution of ecclesial communion (Gerrish 1982, pp. 118–30; Burnett 2019, pp. 19–20, 292–97).

For Luther, the Eucharist was the external means through which Christ gives himself to believers. Grace descends through visible and material mediation because human beings, as finite and dependent creatures, receive salvation from outside themselves (*gratia extra nos*). The sacrament therefore functioned as the present enactment of Christ's promise. Sacred time became the present moment of divine self-giving, and Eucharistic communion depended upon Christ's objective action in the sacramental act (LW 37:294–303; LW 40:146–48; Bayer 2008, pp. 48–56).

For Zwingli, by contrast, the Eucharist was the Spirit-enabled act through which the gathered church participated in the saving work of the exalted Christ. Because Christ reigns bodily at the right hand of the Father, the sacrament could not be understood as the localization of Christ within the elements. The Eucharist therefore functioned as communal remembrance, thanksgiving, and confession directed toward Christ through faith. In this sense, its movement was anabatic: not because believers ascended by their own power, but because the Spirit directed faith toward the exalted Lord. Sacred time was inhabited through the church's participation in the once-for-all saving work of Christ, and Eucharistic communion emerged through shared faith and communal confession (Zwingli 1922, pp. 49–52, 248–49; 1953, p. 234; 1981, p. 200). The competing structures of sacramental mediation that shaped Luther's and Zwingli's understandings of Christ's presence, sacred temporality, the communication of the benefits of the gospel, and ecclesial communion are summarized in (Table 1).

Table 1. Contrasting Structures of Sacramental Mediation in Luther and Zwingli.

Category	Luther	Zwingli
Theological Logic	Christological mediation	Pneumatological participation
Sacramental Movement	Descent	Ascent
Mediation	<i>Gratia extra nos</i> / External promise	<i>Sursum corda</i> / Spirit-enabled faith
Sacred Temporality	Present sacramental giving	Participation in Christ's saving work
Communication of the benefits of the gospel	Received through Christ's sacramental self-giving	Participated in through faith and Spirit
Communion	Christ gives himself through the sacrament	Union through shared faith and communal confession
Ecclesial Boundary	Shared sacramental confession	Shared faith and communal participation

The impossibility of agreement at Marburg arose because these two structures of sacramental mediation generated different understandings of what it meant to “eat the gospel”. What divided Luther and Zwingli was not simply the interpretation of *hoc est corpus meum* but competing understandings of how the benefits of the gospel are communicated, how the church is constituted, and how Christian communion is recognized. The Eucharistic table became the visible site at which these competing structures of sacramental mediation confronted one another directly (LW 38:70–71, 85–89). The contrasting movements reflected what may be described as Luther's fundamentally promissory and

Christological account of sacramental mediation and Zwingli's more pneumatological account of participation in the exalted Christ.

6. Conclusions

This study argued that the Marburg controversy is best understood not simply as a disagreement concerning the mode of Christ's presence but as a conflict between competing structures of sacramental mediation. Luther and Zwingli differed not only in their interpretation of the Eucharist, but also in their understanding of how the benefits of the gospel are communicated, how sacred time is inhabited, and how ecclesial communion is constituted. The failure of Eucharistic fellowship at Marburg emerged because these competing structures generated fundamentally different accounts of participation in Christ through the embodied practice of eating.

By approaching Marburg through the categories of sacramental mediation and the embodied grammar of the gospel, this study has sought to move beyond the conventional opposition between "bodily presence" and "symbolic remembrance". The controversy reveals that Eucharistic theology functioned not merely at the level of doctrinal formulation, but at the level of ecclesial practice, communal identity, and the recognition of Christian fellowship. At a deeper level, the dispute reflected the tension between Luther's account of sacramental mediation grounded in Christ's external promise and Zwingli's pneumatological account of participation in the exalted Christ. What divided them was therefore not simply a theory of Christ's presence but rival understandings of how divine life is communicated and embodied within the church.

This interpretation also opens several avenues for further research. Calvin's doctrine of spiritual participation may be understood as a significant attempt to mediate between these competing structures of sacramental mediation, while the legacy of Marburg continued to shape later Protestant confessional formation and subsequent ecumenical discussions. The categories developed in this study may therefore provide a useful framework for examining broader questions concerning sacramental theology, ecclesial identity, and Christian unity within the Reformation tradition.

The reformers could fight together, but they could not eat together. The Eucharistic table remained the place where the emerging Protestant movements most deeply desired unity and most painfully encountered the limits of their communion. In this sense, the Marburg Colloquy was not merely a dispute over bread and wine but over the conditions under which Christians could recognize one another as participants in the same gospel. The enduring question of Marburg is therefore not simply how Christ is present at the table but how the gospel itself becomes a shared reality within the communion of the church.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

LW Luther's Works, Luther (1959, 1961, 1971, 1958)

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