Mending the Break:  
A Survey of the Colloquy of Marburg (1529)  
and the Events leading To the  
Resumption of Full Communion  
Between the Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America and  
the Reformed Churches  

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On October 4, 1998, over fifteen hundred people filled Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago to celebrate Holy Communion. What made this occasion special was that members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ took the Lord's Supper together for the first time in nearly five hundred years. This event marked the healing of a rift opened up at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529, where the Lutherans and the Zwinglians (predecessor body to the Reformed churches) broke off their relations after being unable to come to a common point of view on the presence of Christ in the body and blood of the Eucharist.  

The Landgrave Philip of Hesse initially proposed a religious colloquy to Martin Luther in 1527. Luther turned this down. He saw a split between the Lutherans and
the Zwinglians, and thought that nothing new could be presented to salvage this division. He saw in Zwingli’s theology the heresy of the early Nestorians, the separation of the divinity and humanity of Christ. He believed that there was a direct relationship between one’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper and one’s understanding of the salvation and activity of God in the world.2 On the other hand, Zwingli saw no obstructions to fellowship with Luther. Philip persisted in seeking a colloquy.

Early in 1529, the Second Diet of Speyer met. Philip, five other princes, and fourteen cities signed a protest against the Roman Catholic church. It was at this diet that the term “Protestants” came into being. After the Second Diet of Speyer, Philip saw an opportunity to expand his political alliance with the Swiss. He resumed his quest for a colloquy between the German Lutherans and the Swiss Zwinglians. Individual invitations were not sent out. Rather, Philip sought the attendance of the theologians in a rather convoluted, indirect manner. First he asked Melancthon to attend a debate between Luther and Oecolampadius. Next, he invited Zwingli to meet with Luther and Melancthon to discuss their theological differences. Philip made these plans without first inviting the proposed debaters.

Finally, Philip got the support of his ruler, the elector John, to invite Luther to a colloquy to be held at Philip’s castle at Marburg. Luther only thought that a meeting would worsen relations between the Lutherans and Zwinglians. He suspected that his opponents would use the colloquy to malign his, and thus opposed the colloquy and attempted to force it not to meet.3 Soon, however, he relented. The Wittenberg group, made up of Luther, Melancthon, Jonas, Cruciger, and Rörer, arrived at Marburg on September 30, 1529. They were preceded by the arrival of the Swiss delegation, of which the more notable members were Zwingli, Hedio, Bucer, and Oecolampadius, on September 26, 1529.4
The colloquy began on Friday, October 1, 1529, with private, man-to-man debates between Zwingli and Melancthon and between Luther and Oecolampadius. It was thought that allowing Luther and Zwingli to meet privately would be counterproductive. They both possessed volatile, fiery tempers and would likely have formed an even greater rift had they been paired off. Melancthon and Oecolampadius were asked to meet with Zwingli and Luther to balance the hot tempers with their more calm and gracious natures.

During these conferences, not only did Melancthon and Luther point out to Zwingli and Oecolampadius the latter’s denial of the real presence of Christ in the elements, they also pointed out several errors in their teachings. Oecolampadius and Zwingli countered, saying that they had the proper view. They believed that unlike the Lutherans, the Zwinglians taught their followers properly and that their writings and church were witnesses to this. Oecolampadius distinguished between Christ’s humanity and divinity. He saw Christ as one with God in his divinity, just as Christ is one with the people in his humanity. He agreed on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist according to his divinity. Despite these disagreements, the theologians did come to a consensus on a number of issues, which were included in the Marburg Articles written at the conclusion of the colloquy.

Relations between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians were tenuous at best. In one of his early writings, Luther had referred to Zwingli as an “insolent Swiss.” The poor relations were not solely attributed to theological factors. Zwingli was fascinated with the use of figures of speech. Luther believed that Zwingli’s interpretation of the Bible suffered at the hands of this fascination. Another contributing factor was their places of residence. Zwingli lived in a city led by a representative government, where he had to persuade the people and the leaders to go along with his reforms, explaining them in a fashion that would make sense to the people. Luther, on the
other hand, lived under the rule of a sympathetic, kind, benevolent price. He was able
to carry out his reforms with little or no persuasion of the government necessary.8

When the full colloquy began early the next day with all the theologians
gathered for discussion, Luther greeted Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Bucer with the
words “You are from the evil one.”9 After opening statements were made, Luther
wrote the words Hoc est corpus meum on his table. These words, Latin for “This is
my body,” served Luther as a constant reminder of his position.10 He held fast to
these words, refusing to sway from them. The Zwinglians held to John 6:63 (KJV), “It
is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing.”11

Both sides agreed that there was a spiritual eating involved in the Eucharist,
but Luther said that this did not leave out a bodily eating as well, whereas Zwingli
insisted that it did exclude the bodily eating.12 Oecolampadius stated that believing in
Christ’s presence in the bread was an opinion, not an act of faith.13

Zwingli expressed dismay at the thought that an unworthy person could cause
Christ’s body to be present in the Eucharist. He saw this as an absurdity. Luther then
countered that through the Word, God caused Christ to be present in the Sacrament.
He held the traditional position that the worthiness of the celebrant or priest did not
affect the efficacy of the sacraments.14 He also stated that the body was not produced
by our words, but by Christ’s words of institution.15 Luther saw a similar case in
baptism. The minister did not administer baptism on his own, but by the power of
God.16

The second day’s discussions centered on Zwingli’s argument that the body of
Christ occupied a space which existed locally. Luther contended that when the words
of institution were spoken, they provided the presence of Christ’s body in the bread.
Luther claimed that when the Word was spoken, something was added to the
elements of the Sacrament. Melanchthon and Zwingli believed that the words only
signified something. Zwingli played on his emotions in an attempt to sway Luther over to his point of view. He asked Luther to forgive him for his harshness, and said that their friendship was more valuable then than it had ever been. Luther replied that he prayed that Zwingli would “come to a right understanding of this matter.” Oecolampadius added that Luther too should pray for himself, for he was also in need of proper understanding of the matter at hand.

The colloquy closed on 3 October without the two sides having agreed on the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Philip asked smaller groups to meet the next day to try to establish fellowship between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians. Luther and his compatriots felt that since they could not reach an agreement with the Zwinglians on the presence of Christ in the bread and wine, the Zwinglians were outside the fellowship of the church, and they would not be recognized by the Lutherans as members and brothers in the Church.

After these meetings, Philip had Luther draw up a list of articles which stated the points on which the two parties agreed. Luther complied, and used the Schwabach Articles he wrote earlier that year as a basis for these new articles. The Lutherans and Zwinglians agreed on fourteen of the fifteen articles, and also agreed on five of the six points in the fifteenth article. Luther did not expect the Zwinglians to sign the articles, but they did because of a desire of political solidarity with the Lutherans.

The first three Marburg Articles agreed on points already included in the first two articles of both the Nicene and the Apostles’ Creed. The first article agreed that there was one triune god, consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The second stated that Christ was the son of God, not the son of the Father or the Holy Spirit, and that he became man through the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary without sin. The third article says that Jesus was crucified, died, buried, rose from the dead, ascended
to heaven, is seated at God’s right hand, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

The next three articles discussed the bridge between sin and faith. Original sin was inherited by all men from Adam. If Christ had not come, the people would not have received God’s kingdom and salvation. We are saved from sin if we believe in Christ. Apart from faith, we cannot save ourselves through our works, position, or religious order. This faith is a gift from Go, and it cannot be earned by works or by our own strength, but is given to us by the Holy Spirit when we hear the gospel.

The seventh, eighth, and tenth articles talk about faith and good works. For the sake of our faith, God sees us as righteous, godly, and holy apart from our works. Through this, God saves us from sin, death, and hell, received us by grace, and saves us for the sake of his Son. We therefore are to believe in the Son and to partake in his righteousness, life, and blessings. Luther elaborated on this point, stating that when monastic life and vows were seen as an aid to salvation, they were to be condemned. This is against Luther’s belief in salvation by the grace of God, not through one’s works and deeds. In the next article, he writes that the Holy Spirit does not give faith or gifts without preaching. Through and by the means of the oral word, faith is created where and in whom it pleases him. The tenth article agrees that through the work of the Holy Spirit, by which we became holy and righteous, faith does good works through us.

The ninth and fourteenth articles dealt with the sacrament of baptism. Luther writes in the ninth article that baptism is a sacrament instituted by God as an aid to faith. Because God’s promise and command are connected with baptism, it is not an empty word, but a sign of God by which we grow in faith and through which we receive eternal life. The fourteenth article stated that the baptism of infants was acceptable. Through this, infants are received into grace and Christendom.
The eleventh and twelfth articles concern confession and governing authorities. The confession of sins or the seeking of counsel from our pastor or neighbor should be free and unconstrained. This is helpful to those who are troubled, burdened, or with afflicted consciences because of the true absolution which is the consolation offered by the gospel. Luther goes on to state that the governing authorities are seen as good and not to be forbidden, as was taught by some Anabaptists and papists.

Luther wrote about the maintenance of tradition in the thirteenth article. According to the needs of the people, traditions in spiritual and ecclesiastical matters may be kept or abolished in order to serve the weak and to avoid unnecessary offenses, provided they do not contradict God’s word. Luther added a footnote to this, saying that the doctrine forbidding the marriage of clergy was a “teaching of the devil.”

The fifteenth article was the only one not fully agreed upon. This article dealt with the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Zwinglians and Lutherans came to a consensus on five of the six points covered in this article, leaving only the issue of the bodily presence of Christ in the elements not agreed upon.

It was agreed that communion was to be administered in both kinds, including both the bread and the wine. The mass was not to be seen as a means by which one could secure grace for someone else. The sacrament of the Altar was of the true body and blood. A spiritual partaking of the sacrament was necessary for every Christian, and that sacrament, like God’s word, was given by God so that weak souls could find faith through the Holy Spirit.

The only point of disagreement centered on the true bodily presence of Christ in the bread and wine. The articles concluded with an admonition by Luther for the Zwinglians and the Lutherans to show love to each other as much as their conscience would permit. Luther also asked the two bodies to pray that God would
bring them to a proper understanding through the Holy Spirit. It was this final point that had occupied the bulk of the discussions at the Colloquy of Marburg, and which ultimately led to the 469-year-long split between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians (later to be known collectively, after the formation of sub-denominations, as members of the Reformed tradition).

In 1962, representatives of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in the United States began discussions to reunite their church bodies in full communion. The first round of dialogue, held between 1962 and 1966, encouraged their members to look forward to full fellowship and intercommunion. They saw “no insuperable obstacles to pulpit and altar fellowship.” The second round of talks, held between 1972 and 1974, decided that fellowship should be acted upon a church-to-church body basis. In 1986, three years after a third session of discussion, representatives came to the conclusion that each church body should recognize the others’ ministries and Eucharist. They also recommended a process of reception into full fellowship.

Between 1986 and 1989, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, the American Lutheran Church, the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church in America, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) has all adopted Invitation to Action, the recommendations of the 1986 committee. They all saw the potential for success, based on the Europeans’ document, the Leuenberg Agreement, which led to full communion in the European Lutheran and Reformed churches. The Lutheran Church in America, however, asked for further discussion on the confessional nature of the Reformed churches and on the relationship between the dialogue and the liturgical and governing documents of the church bodies. Because of this diverging position, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), newly formed in 1988 from the Lutheran bodies involved in these discussions, chose to engage in further study with the Reformed churches, rather than declaring itself as a whole in full communion.
while neglecting the desires of the former Lutheran Church in America.

From 1988 to 1992, the Lutheran-Reformed Committee for Theological Conversations met to explore some key doctrinal issues and to plan the steps to take toward full communion. They found no “church=dividing differences” and unanimously recommended that the Lutheran and Reformed churches declare full communion with each other. Their report, A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today, required that the church bodies do the following:

(1) that they recognize each other as churches in which the Gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God;
(2) that they withdraw any historic condemnation by one side or the other as inappropriate for the faith and life of our churches today;
(3) that they continue to recognize each other’s Baptism and authorize and encourage the sharing of the Lord’s Supper among their members;
(4) that they recognize each others’ various ministries and make provision for the orderly exchange of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament;
(5) that they establish appropriate channels of consultation and decision-making within the existing structures of the churches;
(6) that they commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue in order to clarify further the common understanding of the faith and foster its common expression in evangelism, witness, and service;
(7) that they pledge themselves to living together under the Gospel in such a way that the principle of mutual affirmation and admonition becomes the basis of a trusting relationship in which respect and love for the other will have a chance to grow.22

The ELCA Church Council appointed a committee to facilitate the reception of this report. This work resulted in A Formula of Agreement, which formally stated the agreement of full communion between church bodies. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted in 1997 to accept and implement this, as did the Reformed churches at their assemblies that same year. The official text of A Formula of Agreement formalized the remarks put forth in A Common Calling. It also traces its formation through its predecessor documents.

Marburg Revisited, the document arising from the first and second dialogues,
affirmed that the Lutheran and Reformed traditions confessed the Gospel with justification by faith alone. They came to a consensus that when properly interpreted, the concepts and terms used when explaining the Lord’s Supper were more often complementary rather than contradictory.

The third dialogue, resulting in An Invitation to Action, concluded that while neither tradition explained how Christ was present and received in the elements, they would agree that Christ himself is the host at his Supper, and that he is fully present and received in the Supper. It also addressed the responsibility of all baptized believers to participate in the servant ministry of Christ. It pointed out God’s calling of ordained ministers to mediate grace through the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

A Formula of Agreement addressed three differing emphases related to full communion. It discussed condemnations, the presence of Christ, and salvation. It was decided that the past condemnations no longer were applicable to the churches’ presence in the Lord’s Supper.

The churches affirmed the mystery of the sacrament. They also confirmed Luther’s position that Christ is present in the bread and wine of communion, and that Christ gives himself without reserve to all who share in his supper. The concern was raised about the differences in each church body’s celebration of the Eucharist within the context of worship. This was seen not as an obstacle to fellowship but as a positive diversity within the Christian faith.

Both churches saw the saving power of the grace of God as central to their life and faith. They agreed that salvation relies solely upon God’s grace and not on human intervention. Despite these agreements, the churches did differ on the doctrine of predestination. Instead of insisting that an agreement on the be reached, they recognized that their current identities have been formed by the controversies of the past, and that these individualities were acceptable and welcomed.
The Lutherans and the Reformed concluded A Formula of Agreement by affirming their commitment to full communion. They pledged to remain faithful to the efforts of the past four decades and to pursue the sharing of the Lord’s Supper with one another. These many years of work were celebrated with a worship service in Chicago in 1998, where for the first time the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the members of the Reformed tradition communed together. The ELCA, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ look forward to an eternity of cooperation and fellowship with one another, working to the common goal of bringing the good news of Christ to the world.
Endnotes


7 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 29.


10 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 67.

11 John 6:63 (KJV).

12 Edwards, op. cit., p. 108.

13 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 54.

14 Edwards, op. cit., p. 108.


16 Lehmann, op. cit., pp. 41-42.


19 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 78.

20 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 88.


23 Lutheran-Reformed Proposal.
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