

THE BREAD AND THE LOAF:  
SCRIPTURE, UNITY, AND THE  
REFORMATION AT TÜBINGEN

by

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There is great irony in much of church history. On the birthday of the church, Pentecost after Easter, the sermon was preached by Simon Peter, who just a few weeks before had denied his Lord. The first great missionary to the gentile world was Paul, a narrow minded bigot who helped in the murder of a young Christian named Stephen. And the Reformation began as a call to the church to be faithful to its roots, to the ministry of Jesus Christ and the one church which is his body. But of course, the Reformation took a divided church, divided primarily East and West, and shattered that church into tens, then scores, now hundreds of fragments. The story of what happened at Tübingen is perhaps paradigmatic of what would happen to the church under the pressure of revolution disguised as Reformation. To say this is not to criticize the basic thrust of the Reformation, it is to say that there has been paid by the church a terrible price for its reforming, and in looking at the story of the Reformation we may be reminded that the church in its human dimension must be semper reformanda, always reforming.

The Reformation came to Tübingen through a rather circuitous and unexpected route, unexpected unless one remembers the peculiar history of the church. Tübingen was the site of the university of the Duchy of Württemberg, a substantial principality in the southwestern corner of the Holy Roman Empire. The Duke of Württemberg, Ulrich, had been ousted from power in 1519 by an enraged nobility supported by the Empire. Ulrich was apparently guilty of heinous crimes, but that which finally toppled him may have been his financial mismanagement. The Duchy was then under the rule of an Austrian Regency, led by Archduke Ferdinand of the House of Hapsburg. This was, of course, the same time as the early years of the Reformation. October 31, 1517, was the date of Luther's nailing of the Ninety-five Theses on the Castle Church door at

Wittenberg. In 1519 Luther debated John Eck and was forced to admit that only scripture could be trusted as the ultimate authority in matters of faith. His language in dealing with Rome became increasingly harsh. The church alternately threatened and cajoled. In 1519 another reformer began his work just to the south of Tübingen. In Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli preached the first of a series of sermons based on the Greek text of Matthew. By 1521 Luther was condemned as heretic and outlaw, and was in hiding, translating the New Testament into German. All the while more and more of some of the best and brightest minds of the day were coming to the support of Luther's evangelical cause.

By 1524 and 1525 there was division within the ranks of the reformers. Some of Zwingli's co-workers felt that he was not going far enough, and in early 1525 there were re-baptisms of those who believed that a confession of faith must be made prior to baptism, and therefore infant baptism was not an acceptable practice. Soon there were martyrs. And Zwingli and Luther quarreled, arguing over various theological points, most bitterly over the interpretation of the Table of the Lord, the place where the unity of Christ's body is celebrated in the one loaf and cup. Division spread. Angry words would not allow fence-sitting.

By the early 1530's there were several clearly defined parties among Christians. There were, of course, those who continued to be loyal to Rome. They fervently believed that the authority of Jesus resided in the Bishop of Rome, and to be disobedient to him was to be disobedient to their Lord. Then there were the radicals, themselves represented by several factions: some were communitarians; some were spiritualists; most all were willing to live outside of the mainstream of church and society. Some were led by saints; others followed the insane.

The two primary groups among the Protestants included those who looked to further an ultra and the

father of the Reformation. His power was great; his theological and religious sensitivity was profound; but his response to those who differed with him was harsh. He had risked so much; he believed so deeply in the cause; he was convinced that those who would steer him even slightly to the right or to the left were agents of the devil, even of the antichrist, and so he would lash out.

The other major Protestant party was composed of those who followed Zwingli, even though Zwingli had died on the battlefield, a war-axe splitting his skull, triumphant opponents quarreling and then burning his body. In Northern Switzerland and parts of Southern Germany, and down the Rhine valley were numbers of people who looked to Zurich and Basel and Strasbourg for guidance. But with Zwingli's death, there was not any one person who could hold those folk together, though Martin Bucer of Strasbourg tried. Nevertheless, this was a vibrant and creative side of Protestantism, and it would not be denied. Before the decade of the 1530's was out, these Reformed, capital R, Protestants would be giving careful attention to a young French refugee named John Calvin.

It was in this context that the Reformation came to Tübingen. Duke Ulrich had spent much of his exile since 1519 in Zurich. There he had been converted to the Protestant cause by Zwingli's co-workers (some would argue that he was converted even more fundamentally to Christianity, having lived as a pagan prior to this time). He was constantly looking for someone to help him re-capture his duchy. Meanwhile, his cousin Landgrave Philip of Hesse, a strong supporter of Luther, entered the picture. Hesse was one of the most powerful of the German princes. He was wealthy and intelligent. Philip was also deeply concerned about the divisions among Protestants. He was feared, rightly so, that as soon as the Emperor could get the French and the Turks out of his hair, he would turn with a vengeance on the Protestant princes and wage war in order to stamp out the Protestant movement. Emperor Charles V was a devout Catholic,

perhaps more devout than some of the popes of the period, and he also knew that if he could defeat the Protestant princes, his hold over the Empire would be much stronger.

And so, Philipp of Hesse was constantly scheming. He helped organize the League of Schmalkald, a Protestant defensive alliance. And in 1533 and 1534, he began to see a way to accomplish two goals at once. First, if he could get Ulrich back in Württemberg, that would strengthen the geographical connection between the strongly Protestant northern part of Germany and the Protestant areas of Switzerland and the Rhine valley. But secondly, if Ulrich were amenable, they could work together in making Württemberg into a joint Lutheran and Reformed state.

As it turned out, Ulrich was quite willing to try to bring Lutheran and Reformed together in Württemberg, especially if it would help him return to power. Meanwhile, Philipp received major financial contributions from the city of Strasbourg and also from the French King Francis I, who was perfectly happy to gain a diplomatic stronghold in Germany and at the same time strike a blow at the Hapsburg family, the family of Emperor Charles V. A brief but fierce skirmish near the town of Lauffen on the Neckar River on May 13, 1534, essentially settled the issue.

Two days later Ulrich was at the ducal court in Stuttgart proclaiming his intention to bring about a reformation of the church in Württemberg. The response of the Protestant leadership to Ulrich's plans was varied. Luther and his co-worker Philipp Melancthon expressed concern that the capture of Württemberg through military action and then the proclamation of the Reformation might give the impression that the Protestants wanted to change the church through force. On the other hand, Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito, both active in the reform in Strasbourg, wrote a congratulatory letter to Ulrich and offered advice on how best to bring about the Protestantization of Württemberg.

The people of Württemberg responded to the call for Reformation largely according to their previously held views. Protestantism had already grown to substantial proportions in the cities and towns, and both Lutheran and Zwinglian influences were to be found. Radical groups were also present.

Ulrich decided to call two ministers to carry out the work of reform in Württemberg. Ambrosius Blarer, active in Constance, to the southeast, was respected as a fine preacher-scholar, one whose views were appreciated in Zurich, but perhaps represented more the ironic middle position of Strasbourg. Martin Bucer had particularly recommended him to Ulrich. The other man called was Erhard Schnepff, who had strong personal and ideological ties with Martin Luther. Schnepff was described as a "strange Lutheraner," a strong Lutheran. Ulrich's chancellor, Knoder, delayed mailing the letter of invitation to Blarer for a few days so as to allow Schnepff to arrive in Stuttgart before Blarer and thus have the opportunity to capture the Duke's attention.

Ulrich's plan was for Schnepff to have responsibility for the northern half of the Duchy, and Blarer the southern half, including the town and University of Tübingen. When Blarer arrived in Stuttgart in early August of 1534, in order to receive specific instructions, he found Schnepff at work. A fundamental point of division between the Protestants related to Zurich and Strasbourg and those who followed Luther was the question of the nature of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Schnepff insisted that he could not work with Blarer until he was certain about the orthodoxy of Blarer's views about the Supper.

Schnepff and Blarer met together with Duke Ulrich on August 2, 1534. The Duke announced that there was to be no open division, and no public quarrelling between the two. The obstreperous Schnepff, however, stated that he could not cooperate with Blarer unless they were agreed on the Lord's Supper. The program of Reformation and unity within the duchy was at risk.

Blarer tried to settle the issue by making the simple statement that he believed that Christ is present in the Supper. Schnepff said that this was not sufficient, that it was ambiguous, and he wondered if that were not Blarer's intention. For his part, Schnepff confessed that the "Christ is truly, not just spiritually present in the supper, so that even the unworthy partake of him."

Blarer then offered to accept the doctrine of the Lord's Supper as set forth in the Augsburg Confession, the basic creed of the Lutherans. Schnepff refused even this, saying that Blarer might have a different interpretation of the words of the Confession than that of the Lutherans. Blarer then expressed willingness to accept the Marburg Formula, a statement presented by the Lutherans at the 1529 Colloquy of Marburg. This statement went further and more specific than that of the Augsburg Confession. In making this proposal Blarer was following the path of negotiation recommended to him by Martin Bucer of Strasbourg. Bucer was deeply committed to the cause of Protestant unity, and he seemed to understand how Schnepff would react to Blarer. Bucer was right. When Blarer stated his agreement with the Marburg Formula, Schnepff seemed surprised, and said, "If you can give up so much to me, I can demand nothing further!" Duke Ulrich, for his part, thundered, "This is God's will!" He ordered an agreement to be written and signed immediately, perhaps out of fear that one of the two might change his mind. This statement, the Stuttgart Concord, allowed Blarer to proceed with his work at Tübingen, theoretically as the co-worker of Schnepff.

Soon after his arrival in Tübingen, Blarer learned that Schnepff was proclaiming that Blarer had capitulated to the Lutheran position. He also heard that his Zwinglian friends were deeply concerned about the Stuttgart Concord, his part in it, and they generally rejected the statement as unacceptable. At the very time that Blarer was embroiled in very difficult and arduous negotiations with the faculty at the university, particularly the Roman Catholic

members of the theological faculty, Blarer found his energy constantly being spent on putting out fires over the issue of the Lord's Supper.

Meanwhile, Luther's old nemesis, John Eck, a vigorous Roman Catholic opponent of the Protestants, apparently wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Recantation of Ambrosius Blarer," in which he portrayed Blarer as a traitor to the views of Zwingli, as one who was a coward in the face of opposition and who too readily gave in to the Lutherans. Eck probably wanted to stir up more discord among the Protestants, and given the attitudes of the Protestants, it took very little to accomplish this purpose.

Martin Bucer intervened, and tried to help Blarer out of his predicament while also advancing the cause of unity. Bucer was involved in a series of negotiations which would result in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536. In these efforts Bucer was seen by many of the South Germans and Swiss as being too zealous to compromise, and Blarer was so frustrated with the criticism he received from friends and the lack of respect from the Lutherans that he began to avoid Bucer. At one point Bucer came to Tübingen to seek Blarer's support for the Lord's Supper negotiations, and Blarer tried to keep from seeing him. Bucer chided him, saying that he was not to be feared, that he didn't "pray to Satan."

For the next two years Blarer's work as the Reformer of Tübingen required his constant attention to a two-front battle. On one side were the Roman Catholic members of the faculty who were doing everything they could to impede the progress of the Reformation. As faculties historically have been, they were ingenious in finding ways to refer the most serious of issues to committees after committee, never to have them return for action! They found the conflict between the Lutherans and Reformed to be to their advantage, with so much of Blarer's time being spent in that way, he could not maintain the kind of pressure needed to deal swiftly with the faculty.

The Lutherans, meanwhile, seemed to consider Blarer and his Reformed associates to be more of a problem than the Catholics, and while on the one hand they kept up pressure on Blarer and his appointees on issues such as the Lord's Supper, they also kept the Duke informed of any and all delays in implementing the Reformation, noting the inability of Blarer to complete the task which had been given to him. Blarer's exasperation was great. Bucer reflected his pastoral concern when he empathized with Blarer, saying that he was well aware that the work of Reformation sometimes meant that "we must be crucified with Jesus." By the middle of 1536 Bucer would say, "From your academy one hears terrible things. If you could only do as you would desire!" He also noted that the Lutherans were boasting that due to the difficulties over the Lord's Supper and other issues they would soon be rid of the Reformed preachers. As for Blarer himself, despite all the vexations of his life, he could say, "As pressed as I am on all sides, I nevertheless also experience the grace of the Lord in rich measure."

Under Blarer's influence and leadership, several additions were made to the university faculty. Most came from the Reformed perspective, and even though several were in faculties other than theology, they were actively involved in the Reformation. In the years to come, however, those who taught theology were to be gradually weeded out by the Lutherans.

If the Lord's Supper was the center of controversy among Protestants, it was the Bible, and especially the place of the Bible in the curriculum of the Theology Faculty that symbolized the conflicts between Protestant and Catholic at Tübingen. In the fall of 1534 Blarer had been joined by Simon Grynaeus, a scholar from Basel, on loan for a year to help in the Reformation of the University. Blarer and Grynaeus wrote new ordinances for the university which were published in January of 1535. With these rules and regulations in place, the university took a major step towards full Protestantization under the control of

the state. There is no little irony that this basic Reformation of the university took place under the guidance and direction of two men of the Reformed tradition.

The previous curriculum, that issued in 1525, was itself a shift from the initial ordinances from the late fifteenth century. The 1525 Roman Catholic ordinances gave a place to instruction in scripture that was far more explicit than had been the case before. Nevertheless, the old scholastic approach of lectures and debates on the books of sentences by Peter Lombard continued to be a major part of the curriculum.

The new Protestant rules included three major changes. First of all, it was no longer necessary to be ordained in order to receive a degree. This meant that students with Protestant ordination, and those with no interest in ordination could receive a degree from the university. This had the effect of significantly reducing the power of the church over the university.

The second change was that no longer would Peter Lombard's Sentences be used at all. Scripture alone would be the basis for the theology curriculum. Third, groundwork was laid to allow for a time in the near future when all Biblical studies would be based on the original languages. This latter goal could not be achieved immediately because almost none of the students could handle either Greek or Hebrew.

These changes show the values of both Renaissance and Reformation. An early concern of Renaissance Christian humanism was a return to the original sources of ancient society, both in terms of documents, in this case the Bible, and in terms of the original languages. Add to this humanist value the Reformation belief that Christian faith and practice should be rooted in the Bible as the only reliable authority and the Reformation ordinances of the University of Tübingen fit right into place.

But in addition to a problem with students who were not yet trained in the biblical languages, there was also the problem of what to do about a faculty. All but one of the Roman Catholic faculty were gradually sent into retirement or otherwise encouraged to leave. The one who remained was perfectly willing to work with whoever was in power. And, since his field of specialization was patristics, Balthasar Käuffelin was able to contribute to the new program.

Duke Ulrich agreed initially to provide students with instructors in Greek and Hebrew, while temporarily allowing courses in the Theology faculty to continue working with the Latin text. But as soon as some students were prepared, in no more than a year or two, two additional faculty would be added to teach Old and New Testament in the original tongues.

Grynæus soon left Tübingen, even before his promised year of service was up. However, his fellow Basler, Paul Phrygio, replaced him both on the faculty and as co-worker in the Reformation. In addition Phrygio was to serve as minister of the primary church, the Stiftskirche, in Tübingen. Joachim Camerarius was added to the Liberal arts faculty to teach classical literature and languages. Camerarius was a very close friend of Philip Melancthon, and both were much committed to the Christian humanism of the age. To Camerarius would belong much of the responsibility to prepare students in the biblical languages, as his first appointment was to be professor of Greek.

The controversies at Tübingen continued to hamper the establishment of a Protestant church and university. Lutherans and South German Protestants argued and debated over the Lord's Supper, and also the question of images, paintings, sculptures, etc., in the church. Roman Catholics fought an effective rear guard action, often using the form and substance of concern for academic freedom, that is, the liberties of the university over against interference by the state.

The Lutheran factions saw the difficulties to be an

opportunity to advance their own cause. Philip Melancthon, Martin Luther's closest aide in the Reformation, and a brilliant scholar and diplomatic theologian, was an alumnus of Tübingen. He had even taught there while still in his teens, having earned his BA degree at Heidelberg at fourteen and his master's degree at Tübingen at the age of seventeen.

Blarer seemed to be as eager as the Lutherans for Melancthon to come. Melancthon, however, had no interest in leaving the stimulating world of Wittenberg for the in-fighting and often petty quarrels of university professors in Tübingen. Nevertheless, on the basis of friendship with Camerarius and perhaps out of concern for the success of the Lutheran party, Melancthon agreed to make an unofficial visit. Melancthon arrived in Tübingen on September 24, 1536, and during the next three weeks had a conference with Blarer and spent much time with Camerarius. He also conferred with some other professors and Duke Ulrich.

Melancthon made a number of recommendations to Ulrich about ways in which the Reformation of the duchy and especially the university could proceed. It seems that he was willing to sacrifice his old friend and former student, Blarer, in order to bring about a complete Lutheranization of the area. One of his first and most significant suggestions was that Johannes Brenz, the reformer of Schwäbisch Hall, spend some time at the university. Brenz's arrival in 1537 would spell the end of Blarer's role.

As for the university ordinances, Melancthon also wrote directly to the university his great admiration for their work, and noting that he had urged Duke Ulrich to raise their salaries. Having obtained the attention of the faculty, he then said that while the new ordinances were sound, and in fact needed to be enforced fully, he also wanted to see the school strengthened with the addition of faculty. In a letter to Brenz he expressed concern that new faculty be scholars of authority and professors whose doctrine



was sound, that is, thoroughly Lutheran. Brenz responded to the recommendation that he join the faculty by saying, "What? Can you . . . find a no more inept ass than myself!"

The revised ordinances that resulted from Melancthon's visit differed little from those devised by Blarer and Grynaeus, other than an increase in faculty size, and even that was anticipated in the earlier regulations. The more significant issue was that the new ordinances were clearly based on Melancthon's recommendations, and thus were seen to be Lutheran, thereby giving the Lutherans an apparent victory in Tübingen. Bucer and company in Strasbourg and other South German Protestants were deeply concerned about the arrival of Johannes Brenz, because they knew him to be an able adversary and a formidable advocate of the Lutheran cause over against the Reformed perspective.

The changes did mean that a professor of Hebrew would be brought in as a companion to the professor of Greek, and another person would be added to the theology faculty. The expressed hope was that very soon all lectures on the theology faculty would be based on the Hebrew and Greek texts of scripture.

There was one change in the curriculum that would have a long lasting impact on the studies at Tübingen, and that was that the Professor of New Testament was to lecture on the "complete sum of Christian teachings and articles of faith." Although based on the Bible, this was a beginning of systematic theology. It is not surprising that such a recommendation should come from Melancthon since he was the first Protestant systematizer of theology. What was intended was systematic theology grounded in biblical theology, certainly not systematic theology using scripture for proof-texting.

Brenz left after his agreed period of one year, during which time he had been successful in turning the university in a more Lutheran direction, in part because he had politically and effectively isolated

Blarer from participating in decisions. Brenz was replaced on the faculty by Johannes Forster, who formally joined the faculty in February of 1539. Forster was in the process of completing his doctoral degree, which he received at Tübingen, one of the first to be granted by the Protestant faculty in theology there.

Forster was a zealous Lutheran, as Brenz had known when he recommended him. Sometime after he arrived in Tübingen it was observed that Forster, a friend of Luther, was not attending communion services at the Stiftskirche, and questions were raised as to why. Was it because the city priest, his colleague on the faculty, Paul Phrygio, was a Swiss Reformed? It was soon learned that Forster was travelling to nearby Reutlingen, and sometimes as far as Stuttgart (although only 25 miles by modern roads, quite a trip just to attend church in those days) in order to receive communion in a Lutheran church.

Forster's activities came before a meeting of the university senate on September 20, 1540. This was seen in the broader context of a number of issues facing the university. It was noted that Forster sometimes expressed opinions in his lectures that could only be called divisive. There was a willingness on the part of some to ask the Duke that he be dismissed, since he was a "fraudulent and detrimental person." A special committee was assigned to look into the matter, and they returned a report which said that his actions were reprehensible and worked against the unity which should be present in the faculty. Upon recommendation by the committee, the senate agreed to ask Duke Ulrich to investigate.

Ulrich, even though under the strong influence of the Lutherans, had a great stake in peace and unity, and he had apparently thought that with the departure of Blarer the controversy over the Lord's Supper would be over in his realm. Yet here it was again, and the evidence indicated that it was Forster who was creating the problem. Thus, even though Forster was

vigorously supported by Camerarius in Tübingen and the Lutherans in Stuttgart, Forster was gradually forced out, departing by late 1541 or early 1542. Before long, Forster would join the faculty at Wittenberg.

If Forster's dismissal represented at least in part a victory of the Reformed party in the person of Paul Phrygio over the Lutherans, it was a short-lived victory. Later in 1542 Camerarius left Tübingen for newly reformed University of Leipzig. Then the plague struck, and Phrygio died in 1543. This meant that the language instructors and the only remaining Reformed professor were no longer there. For that matter, on the theology faculty, there were no more Lutheran faculty either. The sole remaining member was Balthasar Käuffelin, a "crypto-papist." This would not do. Brenz was summoned, but he refused. Duke Ulrich then turned to Erhard Schnepff, so that Paul Phrygio, Blarer's friend and theological comrade, was replaced by the very one who had opposed Blarer and his work from the first. By this action the question of the Lord's Supper was finally settled; Tübingen and all Württemberg became Lutheran. Other views would not be tolerated. Had the Reformed won, a similar result, favoring another party, would likely have occurred.

And so it was with the Reformation. The Book, the bread of life was returned to its rightful place in the life of the church. But the loaf of unity was perverted into a hardened, crusty club to beat away those who had differing ways of understanding the power, the presence, the holiness of that Table of the Lord. Nevertheless, there was some import to the attempt of Duke Ulrich and his agent Blarer to bring about a kind of unity in the Duchy of Württemberg. Despite the passions of the day, and the centuries thereafter, there have been some interesting developments: The Lutheran controversies of the 1560's and 1570's were settled in part by the Tübingen Lutherans who counseled moderation. And about the same time the theology faculty developed relations with the Greek Orthodox churches, an extraordinary accomplishment. In the nineteenth century, in 1817, a

Catholic faculty was returned to Tübingen, and in our own century the two faculties have found ways to witness to the gospel together, while maintaining the integrity of their respective views.

The Reformation at Tübingen was a moment when some Christian dreamers tried to return unity to the body. They failed. But they did begin a tradition of biblical study that has given the world new insight into the continued power of scripture. There is no shame in failing when on the right side of an issue, and while facing great odds. And as long as scripture is taken seriously, perhaps even the witness to Christian unity may someday receive its proper place.

For further information see:

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