

# Ulrich Zwingli

## *On True and False Religion*

1525

*Zwingli made his most systematic theological statement in his 1525 book, On True and False Religion. This work dealt with God, human nature, sin, grace, church, sacraments, ethics, etc. What follows is a short excerpt from the section on the Eucharist.*



What, therefore, will their authority avail, however great and excellent they are? The truth is more excellent. To the others, who break out with, "You seem to me to hold that the bodily flesh and also the blood of Christ are not present in the Eucharist," I answer: Do you say this of yourself or have others said it to you? If you are a believer, you are aware how salvation comes; and then the Word of God has such power with you that you raise no question about bodily flesh. But if others have told you that this is my view, I say to them that in this matter I hold as the church of Christ holds. She will not even brook the question whether the body of Christ is in the Sacrament of the Eucharist in actual, physical, or essential form. For when you bring up these elements of the world, she will thrust this buckler in your face: "The flesh profiteth nothing" [John 6:63]; why, then, do you dispute about the flesh? Even if you now cry out, "O heaven! O earth!" nay, even "Stars and seas!" I shall simply say, "The flesh profiteth nothing"; why, then, is it better for you to be curious rather than anxious about it? Be this, then, a wall of bronze, "The flesh profiteth nothing." Go now, and bring up all your engines of war, catapults, battering rams, sheds, and every kind of weapon; far from shattering this wall, you will be able not even to shake it.

We must, then, hold a different view of the flesh and blood of this sacrament from that which the theologians have thus far laid down, whose opinion is opposed by all sense and reason and understanding and by faith itself. For I do not think we have to listen to those who are so bold as to say, "I have always firmly believed that in this sacrament I eat the essential body, or the bodily and sensible flesh, of Christ." As if in saying this they could persuade anyone to believe that his senses perceive what they do not perceive! When, therefore, they say that the whole thing is established by faith and therefore cannot be denied, for we must firmly believe that we have a sense perception of the bodily flesh, I reply: "I know what faith is and I know also what sense is; but you, either not having this knowledge or supposing that I have it not, are trying to cast darkness upon my light. Faith exists in our hearts through the Spirit of God, and we are sensible of it. In fact, that there is an inward change of heart is not an obscure matter, but we do not perceive it by means of the senses."

But now these persons come and, because they fancy that faith is a violent and deliberate turning of our hearts towards some even quite incongruous thing, they therefore aver that here the belief that the bodily and sensible flesh is present is held with unwavering faith. Yet in this they make two mistakes: first, in thinking that faith has its origin in man's decision and election. They make a mistake here because, although faith is hope and trust in things quite remote from sense, nevertheless it does not rest upon our decision or election. The things upon which we set our hopes themselves cause us to put all our hopes upon them; for if we were made believers by our own election or determination, all men could become believers by their own strength, even the impious. Since, therefore, faith has not its origin in sense or reason and looks not to the things of sense, it is easy to discover how they err in the second place.

They err in the second place, then, in applying faith to things of sense, and in saying that through these it brings us certainty. But of that there is no need, for what is perceived by sense owes nothing to faith. Why should anyone hope for that which he already sees? For things which are perceived when presented to the senses are things of sense. Let us see now how finely these things fit together: By faith we believe that the bodily and sensible flesh of Christ is here present. By faith things quite remote from sense are believed. But all bodily things are so entirely things of sense that unless they are perceived by sense they are not bodily. Therefore, to believe and to perceive by sense are essentially different. Observe, therefore, what a monstrosity of speech this is: I believe that I eat the sensible and bodily flesh. For if it is bodily, there is no need of faith, for it is perceived by the sense; and things perceived by sense have no need of faith, for by sense they are perceived to be perfectly sure. On the other hand, if your eating is a matter of belief, the thing you believe cannot be sensible or bodily. Therefore what you say is simply a monstrosity.

Observe, too, that the theologians asserted here another thing, which even the senses know not, namely, that bread is flesh; for if this had been so, it would have been established by the verdict of sense, not by faith. For faith springs not from things accessible to the sense nor are they objects of faith. Nor do I think we have to listen to those who, seeing that the view mentioned is not only crude but even frivolous and impious, make this pronouncement: "We eat, to be sure, the true and bodily flesh of Christ, but spiritually"; for they do not yet see that the two statements cannot stand, "It is body" and "It is eaten spiritually." For body and spirit are such essentially different things that whichever one you take, it cannot be the other. If spirit is the one that has come into question, it follows by the law of contraries that body is not; if body is the one, the hearer is sure that spirit is not. Hence, to eat bodily flesh spiritually is simply to assert that to be body which is spirit.

I have adduced these things from the philosophers against those men who, in spite of Paul's warning to be on our guard against philosophy, Col. 2:8, have made it the mistress and instructress of the Word of God, that they may see clearly how nicely they sometimes weigh their decisions and pronouncements. In short, faith does not compel sense to confess that it perceives what it does not perceive, but it draws us to the invisible and fixes all our hopes on that [cf. Heb. 11:1]. For it dwelleth not amidst the sensible and bodily, and hath nothing in common therewith. Come now, understand what happiness is born in you if you believe that you eat the bodily and sensible flesh of Christ, or, as others say, eat his bodily flesh spiritually! You will undoubtedly admit that nothing arises therefrom but perplexity, dullness, and to speak freely, suspicion in regard to other things of faith which are most certain and most sacred. Yet these fine fellows were all the while saying that this monstrous eating of sensible and bodily flesh is a prop to faith, and sometimes they brought it forward as a miracle, which yet no man perceived. Who, pray, ever made up such nonsense, and that before the eyes of those who clung in their hearts to the true and most high God, and who, as soon as they examined their faith, saw that there was no need of paradoxes of this sort? For what did God ever promise of those who believed that bodily flesh is eaten here? Did not those who were truly faithful know for certain that salvation is found in relying upon the mercy of God, of which we have the sure sign or pledge in Jesus Christ the only begotten Son of God?

What, then, do you imagine this invention – subtle, forsooth, since it consists of words only (for no mind can take it in, and neither does faith teach it, as we have seen) – effected with the pious? Nothing, by heaven. Hence it undoubtedly came about that those who were truly pious either believed nothing of the kind, or when pressed to believe took to flight in their hearts, even though with their lips they confessed that they believed it was as the impious declared. For who, when confronted with anything so monstrous, did not flee, saying: "Do not examine this thing; believe the Fathers." And whenever the goading voice of the truth said: "It is a strange thing. How can it be that you should be compelled to believe that which you cannot see to be possible? When the Jews did not comprehend it, Christ showed that it was to be understood spiritually, but now these persons say it is done in a bodily and material sense, which yet you do not

perceive or experience,” did not everyone say to himself: “It is not for you to take anxious thought about these things”? But these fellows had taught men thus to run away that the truth might not shine forth and be understood. And as to the impious, they did not trust even in Christ, so far were they from giving him thanks for the redemption given to us. What, then, did they do but tyrannically thrust upon us what it is impossible that they themselves believed, even though they said so a thousand times? For faith is the gift of God; and since God never taught this thing, he surely has not drawn men to believe it. That he did not teach it is clear, because the flesh profiteth absolutely nothing. . . .



*From S. M. Jackson and C. N. Heller, eds., Zwingli: Commentary on True and False Religion (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1981), 212–15.*

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