

Consensus

Volume 45
Issue 2 *Festschrift in honour of the Rev. Dr.
Gordon Jensen*

Article 3

7-25-2024

The Lord's Supper and the Conversational Theology of Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Brenz

Timothy J. Wengert

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Western Origin Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wengert, Timothy J. (2024) "The Lord's Supper and the Conversational Theology of Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Brenz," *Consensus*: Vol. 45: Iss. 2, Article 3.

DOI: 10.51644/RSQQ2436

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol45/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

The Lord's Supper and the Conversational Theology of Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Brenz

Timothy J. Wengert¹

With his book on the Wittenberg Concord of 1536,² Gordon Jensen has established himself as one of the most important scholars of the Lutheran Reformation. While his research concentrates on Luther and Bucer and also includes important insights into most of the other important figures in the Lord's Supper controversy, he only mentions Johannes Brenz in passing—in part because Brenz was unable to attend the negotiations in Wittenberg in 1536 that led to Wittenberg Concord. This essay seeks ever so slightly to expand his basic argument of how consensus was reached in this controversy by focusing upon two letters written by Philip Melanchthon to Johannes Brenz in the year leading up to that Concord. These letters reveal an oft-neglected aspect of Wittenberg's approach to theology: that it be done not by fiat but by conversation. The sophistication of that conversation from the pen of Wittenberg's foremost teacher of rhetoric—a sophistication often undervalued by historians and theologians alike—opens up a far more nuanced reading of such communication and an appreciation of its role in creating and maintaining peace within Evangelical (Lutheran) ranks.

Background on the Lord's Supper Controversy

As Amy Nelson Burnett has so carefully shown, the intra-Protestant debate over the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper did not start as a debate between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli.³ On the contrary, as Swiss and South German theologians read Jan Hus, John Wycliffe, and a letter of Cornelius Hoen delivered to Zurich by Hinne Rode, they developed alongside Wittenberg's erstwhile professor of theology, Andreas Bodenstein (Karlstadt), a view of the Lord's Supper that called into question Christ's presence in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Their early writings of 1524 through 1526 met with immediate objections from other South German pastors, including Johannes Brenz, the pastor in Schwäbisch-Hall. An open letter to Martin Bucer, dated 3 October 1525, was Brenz's first foray into battle.⁴ There he upbraided Bucer for demanding that for the sake of peace Brenz and others not attack the Swiss and Strasburg theologians, despite the latter having caused the uproar in the first place. Thus, Brenz argued, by denying Christ's corporal presence in the Eucharist, Bucer and Oecolampadius were to blame for causing schism. However Tertullian or Theophylact were to be interpreted, the debate was over Christ's words and nothing else. The fact that circumcision was a *sign* of the covenant did not apply to Christ's presence in the bread, which was not simply a sign. This eucharistic presence occurred by means of the Word of God and thus could not be reduced to a mere sign. Among a host of examples for a direct

¹ Timothy J. Wengert, an ELCA pastor, is professor emeritus of Reformation history at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

² Gordon Jensen, *The Wittenberg Concord: Creating Space for Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

³ Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments: Print and Authority in the Early Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190921187.001.0001>.

⁴ Johannes Brenz, *Epistola ... de uerbis Domini, Hoc est Corpus meum, opinionem quorundam de Eucharistia refellens* ([Haguenau: Setzer, 1526]).

reading of “This is my body,” Brenz pointed out that when Jesus said “I am the resurrection,” he did not mean that he was a sign of the resurrection.

Eight days later, Brenz sent Johannes Oecolampadius an open letter (more like a full-blown tract) signed by a variety of South German pastors.⁵ Thus, a year before Luther added to his attack on Karlstadt by entering the lists against the Swiss, Johannes Brenz was the central defender of the corporal presence (to use his term) of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Wittenberg’s position in the early dispute came from Brenz and Johannes Bugenhagen.⁶ Until 1527, both Luther and Melanchthon thus allowed others to represent Wittenberg’s point of view.⁷

Martin Bucer’s Movement Toward Wittenberg

Meanwhile, Martin Bucer made his position even clearer by adding comments on the Lord’s Supper to his translations of works by both Bugenhagen and Luther. This so irritated Luther that he publicly upbraided Bucer at the 1529 colloquy in Marburg. It was not that Bucer did not separate his remarks from the translations but rather that the presence of such comments left the mistaken impression that Wittenberg had changed its position and had approved what Bucer wrote. At the same time, however, Bucer was carefully studying Luther’s writings, especially his 1528 *Confession on Christ’s Supper*, in the hopes of finding some pathway to reproachment between the two sides. Unlike Ulrich Zwingli (and perhaps Johannes Oecolampadius), Bucer had no trouble imagining some sort of presence of Christ in the Supper, but he was worried throughout his career about the kind of “bread worship” so prevalent in late-medieval piety. When Luther explained that he was speaking of a “sacramental presence” connected especially to the Supper’s purpose (eating and drinking for the forgiveness of sin), Bucer found an avenue for modifying his position.

But would this convince Wittenberg theologians? What has gone largely unnoticed is that Bucer not only began to use certain portions of Luther’s arguments but that he also borrowed extensively from the comments of Philip Melanchthon. It was first Melanchthon who on occasion used the term *cum pane* (with the bread) to describe the presence of Christ’s body in the Eucharist. For another, Melanchthon—the quintessential Latinist—could also use the verb *exhibere* to explain the giftedness of Christ in the Supper. Bucer then took up this language as allowing for descriptions of Christ’s presence in the Supper that did not imply a physical, “Capernaïtic” eating (cf. John 6) and did not mean that Christ became trapped in the elements outside of the Supper’s proper use.

A Note on “*Exhibere*”

Here it is important to note that in classical Latin *exhibere* and its cognates were rarely if ever equivalent to the English “exhibit” (i.e., to show) and meant more generally to give or proffer. Indeed, the term simply summarized the entire action in the Lord’s Supper (taken, distributed, received, eaten). Since both *cum pane* and *exhibere* appeared in the 1540 version

⁵ Johannes Brenz, *Syngramma clarissimorum qui Halae Suevorum convenerunt virorum super verbis Coenae Dominicae, et pium et eruditum: ad Iohannem Oecolampadion, Basiliensem Ecclesiasten* ([Augsburg: Simprecht Ruff], 1526).

⁶ Johannes Bugenhagen, *Wider den neuen irsal vom Sacrament des leybs vnd bluots vnsers herren Jesu Christi: ain wol gegrundter sendbrief* ([Augsburg, 1525]).

⁷ The notion that Melanchthon was silent, in part supported by comments in letters to friends, is somewhat misleading. By 1530, following Brenz’s approach, Melanchthon also wrote and published both an open letter to Oecolampadius and a tract on the sayings of the church fathers.

of the Augsburg Confession, prepared by Melanchthon in preparation for talks with Roman Catholic counterparts at colloquies held in Hagenau, Worms, and Regensburg (later nicknamed the *Variata*), these terms later were viewed as attempts by Melanchthon to abandon Wittenberg's position on Christ's "real" presence in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. As used in the early stages of the controversy, however, they demarcated what Melanchthon was best known for: attempts to hone theological language to reflect the heart of the gospel. Indeed, he was so successful that the *cum pane* became the central way the authors of the Formula of Concord described Christ's presence.⁸

Initially, however, Bucer met with rejection from Wittenberg's side. When he showed up in Augsburg for the 1530 diet, Melanchthon first refused to meet with him until convinced to do so by Argula von Grumbach and Gregor Brück, Saxony's chancellor. Indeed, Brenz, who seemed not to harbor the same reservations about Bucer, met with him first. Luther received a subsequent visit from Bucer at the Torgau Castle, where, despite Melanchthon's suggestions, the Strasbourg leader presented his own (in Melanchthon's view) unsatisfying position of Christ's presence.

Even at this early stage, however, at least one important divergence between Bucer and his Swiss allies had appeared by 1530: he rarely employed arguments over Christ's "session" at the right hand of God, arguments championed by Oecolampadius and, later, Zwingli. As a well-trained humanist and careful exegete of the gospels, he had to know that "God's right hand" did not necessarily mean a place but, as Luther had argued in his tracts and at Marburg and as Melanchthon had written in the Augsburg Confession, wherever God rules. Having been witness (along with Brenz) to Luther's Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, with its clear delineation of the theology of the cross, Bucer would have understood the dangers of using untrammelled reason to understand the mysteries of God. This may have been why Bucer was only too happy to employ Luther's notion of a "sacramental presence" from his 1528 tract.

Moreover, Bucer brought with him to Augsburg the Tetrapolitan Confession, the confession of faith of four imperial cities, the most important of which was Strasbourg. Although quickly overshadowed by the Augsburg Confession (not least of all because of the former's prolixity), on the Lord's Supper we read:

And hence with singular zeal they always publish this goodness of Christ to his people, whereby no less today than at that last Supper, to all those who sincerely have given their names among his disciples and receive this Supper according to his institution, he deigns to give his true body and true blood to be truly eaten and drunk for the food and drink of souls, for their *nourishment* unto life eternal, so that now he may live and abide in them, and they in him, to be raised up by him at the last day to new and immortal life, according to his words of eternal truth: "Take, eat; this is my body," etc.; "drink ye all of it for this is my blood," etc.⁹

⁸ See Timothy J. Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in the Parish* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 103–24. The later Luther amalgamation, "in, with, and under," obscures the care with which the Concordists made their argument in the Solid Declaration, separating the three prepositions and interpreting "in" and "under" in light of "with."

⁹ James T. Dennison, Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, vol. 1: 1523–1552 (Grand Rapids: Heritage Books, 2008); e-book accessed 30 December 2023: <https://apostles-creed.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/tetrapolitan-strasbourg-swabian-confession.pdf>. See Jensen, *The Wittenberg Concord*, 55–60, for more details.

To be sure, at this point Bucer emphasized the role of the sacrament as a sign of believers and as food for souls and thus for believers, all of which put his commitment to an unconditional, real presence of Christ into question by raising the issue of who exactly receives Christ's body and blood.

If one reduces Bucer's continuing appeals to Brenz, Melanchthon, and Luther as merely attempts to establish a political alliance, it is important to note that by late 1534 Luther himself could foresee a political alliance with people who fundamentally disagreed in matters of theology, basing it on Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians about the validity of marriage to a non-believer. Thus, especially from Wittenberg's point of view, by 1535 agreement on the Lord's Supper was no longer connected to political alliance. Moreover, Bucer's publications from this period, especially his rebuke of the religious leaders in Münster, strongly indicated that his appeal to Christ's presence in the Eucharist was hardly a ruse.¹⁰

Correspondence between Luther and Bucer

The events of 1534–1536 have been well explained by Prof. Jensen. Hidden among the many aspects of the negotiations, however, are a series of letters written by Melanchthon to other reformers. The genesis of these letters in general, but particularly those to Brenz arose this way. In late 1534, Philip Melanchthon, at the invitation of Landgrave Philip of Hesse, was to meet with Martin Bucer in Kassel around Christmas. He prevailed upon Luther to write his own letter outlining his position and inviting discussion with Bucer.¹¹ This letter, often misrepresented as being harsh, and Melanchthon's role as merely a messenger feigning neutrality, both need further examination. As far as the letter goes, Luther simply stated his position always with the now-deceased Zwingli and Oecolampadius in mind. But Luther also knew how Nicholas von Amsdorf, who in 1535 would write a tract in part attacking Bucer, felt. The harshness was thus directed not at Bucer at all but rather at objections within Wittenberg's own camp. (In von Amsdorf's case, the objections were never overcome, so that he never signed off on the Wittenberg Concord.)¹²

Luther raised the following points. First, this dispute was not merely a "war of words." Second, it could not be solved by splitting hairs, so that one side admitted only bread was eaten and the other that Christ was also consumed. Third, Luther insisted that the Scriptures and the church fathers were on his side, spelling this out with respect to Augustine in points four through six. The seventh point was possibly the most important, where Luther insisted that he was firmly committed to overcoming this disagreement. His final point (missing in many copies of the letter) underscored his commitment to toleration: "If in fact those people wanted to hold to their position, namely, concerning the presence of Christ's body with the bread, and they were to ask us despite this to tolerate [them] in turn, I plainly will tolerate

¹⁰ See *Bericht auß der heyligen geschrift von der recht gottseligen anstellung und haußhaltung christlicher gemeyn, eynsatzung der diener des worts, haltung und brauch der heyligen sacramenten ... durch die Prediger des heyligen Euangeli zuo Straßburg/ der Stat und kirchen zu Münster in Westfal erstlich geschriben* (Strasbourg: Matthias Apiarius, 3 March 1534), esp. A 2v – C 4v.

¹¹ Heinz Scheible et al., eds., *Melanchthons Briefwechsel*, no. 1511 [henceforth: MBW 1511], *Band T 6 & Band T 7* (Bad Cannstatt/Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog 2005 & 2006) [Henceforth T 6 & T 7], here T 6:237–50, dated 17 December 1534.

¹² For the specifics, see my forthcoming biography of Philip Melanchthon, chapter 8.

them in the hope of future communion. For, in the meantime, I am not able to commune with them given what they believe or understand [*in fide et sensu*].”¹³ Luther then closed the letter with a summary of his position, in which he twice used the phrase *cum pane* (with the bread): “Our position, however, is this: The body [of Christ] is with the bread or in the bread in such a way that it is truly eaten with the bread. And whatsoever the bread has done to it, the body of Christ experiences the same, so that the body of Christ is truly said to be carried [from the altar], given [by the priest], received [by the communicant], and eaten whenever the bread is carried, given, received, and eaten.”¹⁴

Bucer, writing an open letter to both Luther and Melanchthon, answered each objection point by point.¹⁵ Luther mistakenly held that the Strasbourg leaders did not believe that Christ is truly eaten. Moreover, on the basis of Luther's *Great Confession* of 1528, they now understood that by a physical union Luther meant a sacramental union, as he stated there. In this context, the two sides were in fact talking past one another. In no sense would Bucer's side say that only bread and wine were consumed but rather, through a sacramental union, the Body and Blood of Christ was received with the bread and wine. It was, as Luther himself had also said in his *Confession*, a matter of synecdoche. On the matter of patristic authorities, Bucer also proclaimed a kind of convergence. By omitting any discussion of the *sessio ad dextram* (Christ seated at God's right hand), the fact that the fathers talked of the elements as symbols did not undermine their commitment to Christ's real presence, as long as that presence was not permanent (as with transubstantiation) and divorced from eating and drinking. Again, Bucer's irenic approach mirrored Luther's!

But this exchange was not the only result of the Kassel meetings. At the same time, and with Melanchthon's assistance, Bucer, in what could be labeled the Augsburg Concord, wrote a description of his instructions to the pastors in Augsburg (several of whom would attend the meetings in Wittenberg in 1536).¹⁶ This letter, along with Bucer's clear statements regarding Christ's presence in tracts from this time, helped pave the way for Luther's broader acceptance.

Melanchthon's Letter to Brenz

Immediately after arriving back in Wittenberg, Melanchthon wrote a letter to Brenz with instructions that he should destroy the letter after reading it.¹⁷ He began by mentioning Brenz's continuing reluctance at reaching concord with one-time supporters of Zwingli. In response, Melanchthon insisted on drawing the line at matters of the Trinity “and other things” (that is, Christology and justification). He was aware of no aberrant teachings among these people and asked Brenz to provide examples if he could. Indeed, Bucer was completely disgusted with the heterodox teaching of Sebastian Franck (who had left Strasbourg for Ulm), and Landgrave Philip of Hesse had promised to get the city of Ulm to take action against Franck.

¹³ MBW 1511 (T 6:250, 56–59).

¹⁴ MBW 1511 (T 6:250, 63–67).

¹⁵ MBW 1513 (T 6:251–57), Bucer to Melanchthon in Kassel, written on 28 or 29 December.

¹⁶ MBW 1514 (T 6:258–62), joint communiqué from Kassel, dated 29 December 1534, at least for Landgrave Philip of Hesse and Elector John Frederick. MBW 1514, T 6:258, identifies three families of texts going back to copies for each prince and another, perhaps, for the Augsburg pastors. It uses “*conjunctio*” for the *cum pane*.

¹⁷ MBW 1527 (T 6:278–80), dated by MBW to either 12 or 21 January 1535. Brenz's brother, Bernhard, delivered the letter. Brenz obviously did not do what Melanchthon had requested.

Turning to the meeting between Bucer and Melanchthon in Kassel, Melanchthon insisted that he had not reached any agreement with Bucer but had merely transmitted to Wittenberg the Strasburger's positions. While suggesting that they speak about these matters in person, Melanchthon added "I do not make my own judgment and freely yield to you all as leaders in the churches. Moreover, I affirm the true presence of Christ in the Supper."¹⁸ But then Melanchthon turned to one of the sticking points in the continuing debates: the church fathers. Switching to Greek (probably so Brenz's brother and others would not know what he was writing), Melanchthon reminded Brenz that he had read much of what the ancients had written about the matter where the older witnesses "without ambiguity interpret the Sacrament as an image [τύπος] and figuratively [τροπικῶς]," while the newer ones or forgeries held the opposite view. "Consider for yourself, whether you are defending the old positions. I would pray fervently that the godly church would discuss this matter without sophistry and without tyranny."¹⁹ But the point of this comment was not to abandon Christ's true presence in the Supper but to explain why Bucer continued to insist on using words like "sign" or "type" to describe the bread. In Melanchthon's view, one could not *ipso facto* reject the language of another theologian if it were based upon ancient expressions.²⁰ The tyranny he mentioned was the kind of theology by fiat that both he and Luther assiduously avoided: Luther by asking for the opinions of others (see below) and Melanchthon by insisting upon open conversation of the matter.

Switching back to Latin, Melanchthon mentioned the persecution of Evangelicals in France and pleaded with Brenz to deliberate on these matters in the light of the ancient church. He, Melanchthon, hoped for concord without sophistry, based upon the deliberations of good people conferring with one another. The other side would doubtless reject the results if they thought them based upon newer authors, but they were good people and now had come closer to Luther's position, moved by some witnesses among the ecclesiastical writers. He then appealed directly to Brenz: "Are you now angry at what has transpired? Would you even reject our discussing this?"²¹ All of this needed to be hashed out between the two men face-to-face. Melanchthon was simply entreating Brenz to receive it in the best possible spirit.

Melanchthon's Letters to Other Reformers Including Brenz

What happened next has also been misconstrued or overlooked. Luther had indicated his acceptance of Bucer's position as described in his letter, but he insisted that Melanchthon contact other reformers for their opinions. Besides Brenz, the list included Johann Agricola of Eisleben, Andreas Osiander of Nuremberg, Urbanus Rhegius of Lüneburg, and Georg Spalatin of Altenburg. There may have been others, but von Amsdorf was conspicuously absent, and his exclusion from these conversations may be related to his 1535 attack on Bucer in print. These letters represent a remarkable example of Melanchthon's diplomacy (perhaps the reason Luther did not write these letters himself) and his ability to shape

¹⁸ MBW 1527 (T 6:279, 20–22).

¹⁹ MBW 1527 (T 6:280, 23–28).

²⁰ This interpretation of this letter runs in large measure contrary to the work of Otto Fricke, *Die Christologie des Johannes Brenz in Zusammenhang mit der Lehre vom Abendmahl und der Rechtfertigung* (Munich: Kaiser, 1927), 222, note "*", who concludes that this runs directly contrary to a Lutheran understanding of the Words of Institution.

²¹ MBW 1527 (T 6:280, 38). Melanchthon seemed to have been citing passages from Brenz's earlier (now lost) letter to him.

Wittenberg's request in light of the position of each recipient. In each case, however, he included a copy of the communiqué jointly written by Bucer and himself. Thus, the theologians were given an opportunity to agree or disagree with Luther's own assessment of Strasbourg's position on the Lord's Supper.

In the letter to Johannes Agricola, Melanchthon maintained a very positive approach (despite their earlier public clash over *poenitentia* [penitence] in 1527). He even reminded the rector of Eisleben's Latin school of the man's 1527 catechism that used language similar to Bucer's.²² To Urbanus Rhegius Melanchthon expressed his hope for concord, "I plainly judge that they are not far away from our position, indeed that they agree on the substance [*reipsa*]; nor do I condemn them."²³ Indeed, Melanchthon's use of pronouns ("our" for Wittenberg's position) and "they" for Strasbourg's) bespoke his continuing commitment to Wittenberg's approach to the Lord's Supper.²⁴ To Spalatin, Melanchthon wrote somewhat later but also maintained a very positive attitude, describing Bucer's statement as "balanced and very moderate."²⁵ He trusted that Spalatin "would also judge their spirits [to be] not adverse to concord."

With Brenz, however, the letter was far more diplomatically written. Melanchthon certainly had not forgotten the animosity between Brenz and Bucer, exacerbated by Erhard Schnepf, whose presence in Tübingen had stirred up recriminations against "Zwinglians" (especially Ambrose Blarer [aka Blaurer]) and earned Schnepf an admonition from Master Philip. He also may have had his rather blunt letter to Brenz from January in mind. Melanchthon began the letter to Brenz by mentioning that he was enclosing a copy of the agreement (MBW 1514), which echoed Bucer's public statements. "Although Luther plainly does not condemn this, nevertheless he did not yet want to pronounce [judgment] on it. He does this so that you may see it, too, so that we may have time for a consultation."²⁶ Melanchthon then described his task of writing to Brenz and "many others" and exploring all of their opinions, "whether you [singular] judge that such positions and teachings should be tolerated. Regarding this I want you to respond to me." Melanchthon borrowed a Greek term (perhaps from Plato's *Theaetetus*, 183e), hoping Brenz's response would be "not in an *overly coarse manner*, for I do not want to fight with them."²⁷ The point was to caution Brenz against a too caustic response, and it hinted at Melanchthon's own inclination to accept Bucer's position.

Then, in order to avoid ruffling Brenz's feathers, Melanchthon inserted in Greek what he labeled a "jest" from Homer's *Iliad* (9, 615), where Achilles says to his tutor Phoinix by way of warning him not to shift his allegiance, "It would be fine with me for you to trouble whoever shall trouble me."²⁸ But, besides this "joke," Melanchthon added: "Let us consult

²² MBW 1538 (T 6:299–301), dated [after 3 February 1535] and most likely written at the same time as the letter to Brenz. For Melanchthon's rocky relationship to Agricola, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over "Poenitentia"* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

²³ MBW 1547 [T 6:312–14], dated 3 March 1535.

²⁴ This against the mistake-filled work of Gottfried Hoffmann, *Kirchenväterzitate in der Abendmahlskontroverse zwischen Oekolampad, Zwingli, Luther und Melanchthon: Legitimationsstrategien in der innerreformatorischen Auseinandersetzung um das Herrenmahl* (Göttingen: V & R, 2011).

²⁵ MBW 1543 (T 6:307–08), dated 24 February 1535, here 307, 3–4.

²⁶ MBW 1538 (T 6:309, 4–6).

²⁷ MBW 1538 (T 6:309, 7–9).

²⁸ *Iliad*, 9, 615, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago & London: Phoenix Books, 1951), 214, with alterations, replacing "trouble" for "vex" or "hurt."

together for the tranquility of the churches.”²⁹ This relationship of “differentiated consensus” between these two reformers would continue throughout their lives, as both men labored together to unite the Evangelicals in their teaching without ever breaking into open conflict with each other.³⁰

But the “joke” was at the heart of the letter. Using Achilles, it set up a situation similar to the saying more familiar to English-speaking folks: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Thus, in contrast to the letter to Brenz from January, Melanchthon appealed to Brenz on the basis of friendship over against not the Trojans but people like Schnepf and von Amsdorf, who were already publicly expressing their suspicions about Bucer and his attempts at concord. The joke also set Brenz up as Melanchthon’s teacher and guide, as Phoinix was to Achilles. Melanchthon’s goal? “Tranquility” and “toleration.” This fell far short of an actual concord, which emerged from Bucer’s meeting with Luther the next year. The “joke” was on those who would try to sever Wittenberg’s unified front. Brenz and Melanchthon, who had worked together on the Augsburg Confession and on 25 June 1530 sat weeping in Brenz’s quarters while it was being read at the Diet, had more than enough reason to defend one another, which in their own ways they did at least until 1559, when the use of Melanchthon’s comments on Colossians 3:1 forced Brenz to reiterate his defense of the real presence.³¹

Of course, what happened afterward was something of a mystery. For one thing, Landgrave Philip of Hesse reported to Melanchthon on 6 May 1536 that Brenz was on his way with Bucer to the meeting to be held in Eisenach (later transferred first to Grimma and finally to Wittenberg because of Luther’s health).³² Yet he was not among the signatories of the Wittenberg Concord.³³ In fact, Landgrave Philip was probably inferring that since both men were departing together from the Württemberg town of Göppingen (where the landgrave was assisting the newly restored Duke Ulrich in his rule of that duchy), that they were both going on to Eisenach via Schwäbisch Hall. Perhaps, with the meeting being moved to Grimma (and, eventually, Wittenberg), Brenz reconsidered the trip and remained in his hometown.

Reinterpreting Gregor Brück’s Letter to Elector John Frederick

In the Weimar edition of Luther’s letters, Otto Clemen only muddies the water with a reference to a missive sent to the Elector John Frederick by Gregor Brück and dated 12 May

²⁹ MBW 1538 (T 7:309, 11–12).

³⁰ See Timothy J. Wengert, “Face-to-Face Meetings between Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Brenz: Differentiated Consensus in the Reformation,” in: Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *Collaboration, Conflict, and Continuity in the Reformation: Essays in Honour of James M. Estes on His Eightieth Birthday* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2014), 83–106. At several points in 1535, Melanchthon insisted that these negotiations be kept secret. Even his best friend Camerarius seems to have been kept in the dark. See MBW 1525, 1551, and 1558.

³¹ Timothy J. Wengert, “Philip Melanchthon’s 1557 Lecture on Colossians 3:1–2: Christology as Context for the Controversy over the Lord’s Supper,” in: Irene Dingel et al., *Philip Melanchthon: Theologian in Classroom, Confession, and Controversy* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 209–35.

³² MBW 1731 (T 7:109–10), dated 6 May 1536. Luther was suffering from kidney stones. Julius Hartmann and Karl Jäger, *Johann Brenz nach gedruckten und ungedruckten Quellen*, vol. 2 (Hamburg: Perthes, 1842), 1–76, make no reference to this letter. It could be that Landgrave Philip was misinformed.

³³ MBW 1744 (T 7:131–48), dated 29 May 1536.

1536.³⁴ That letter, far from describing a breach between Luther and Melanchthon on the Lord's Supper, was intended both to get the Elector to give Melanchthon a promised raise so that he could finish constructing his house and to make the upper German pastors, led by Bucer, as welcome as possible. To do this Brück, aided by Luther's statements, constructed a worst-case scenario: What if Melanchthon moved to Tübingen where he might turn Zwinglian.³⁵ Brück then insisted that Luther had reported that both students and ministers [*Caplene*] had complained that Luther's and Melanchthon's opinions were somewhat at odds, and he (Brück) worried that a schism might develop between the two men and that things would only get worse if Melanchthon were forced to leave. (The source of such complaints was not only von Amsdorf but also Konrad Cordatus.) "Martin said that [Melanchthon] was a precious, learned man, but that in addition his reason plagued him. He must really be protected against ending up like Erasmus. This would result in a great scandal so that they would have to write and work against one another."³⁶ Brück made Luther's (unremarkable) criticism of Melanchthon's commitment to reason—on other occasions relayed both seriously and in jest to Melanchthon³⁷—more serious for the elector by the hypothetical invocation of Erasmus. It was clearly not a description of the facts but an attempt by Brück to influence the elector to keep Melanchthon happily in Wittenberg.

Brück went on to describe his conversation with Melanchthon in church over doubts about moving into his house and whether he should accept the elector's increase in salary. But Brück hastened to add that he did not believe this to be Melanchthon's real opinion. In any case, Brück suggested that the elector send the money to remove any cause for Melanchthon to leave. Still further, Brück had talked with Justus Jonas who recounted a conversation with Melanchthon in the presence of Caspar Cruciger, Sr. regarding a Zwinglian view of the Eucharist, during which they asked their colleague why he had treated the

³⁴ WA Br 7:412–13 (Beilage). Clemen published the full text in "Beiträge zur Lutherforschung," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 34 (1913): 93–102, as letter no. 3 on pp. 96–100. Especially unhelpful is Clemen's assumption (p. 98), "Der Brief zeigt vor allem, daß damals doch eine recht bedenkliche Spannung zwischen Luther und Melanchthon bestand." Quite the contrary, the letter shows how Brück could influence the elector in matters of university policy and overcome false rumors about its teachers. On p. 98, n. 4, Clemen refers to another letter from Brück to the elector written over a year later (dated 18/19 September 1537). See Ernst Ludwig Enders, ed., *Dr. Martin Luthers Briefwechsel*, vol. 11 (Calw & Stuttgart, 1907), 271–72. "Doctor Martinus sagt und bekennt, daß er nimmermehr gemeint hätte, daß Philippus noch in den Phantaseien so steif steckte." That is, "Dr. Martin says and confesses that he never would have imagined that Philip was still so deeply mired in the fantasies." But these "fantasies" were papal ones, so that the entire letter had to do with the objections of their former student, Jakob Schenck in Freiburg an der Elbe, who opposed the 1528 *Visitation Articles* (about to be republished as Duke Heinrich of Saxony's *Visitation Articles* for his own lands) and its allowance of receiving only bread in Holy Communion. Brück reported that Luther admitted he did not know Melanchthon's personal view of the Lord's Supper and that (contrary to the papal view) Melanchthon likely thought of it as simply a ceremony and had not (to Luther's knowledge) received the sacrament for a long time. In Kassel, meeting with Bucer, he even proposed ideas that were nearly of a Zwinglian point of view. All this Luther said to contrast with Melanchthon's willingness to accept communion in one kind (and oppose Schenck, against whom Melanchthon wrote an oration, *On the Ingratitude of the Cuckoo*). In other words, Luther was telling Brück that although he did not know Melanchthon's position on the Lord's Supper, he thought it more likely to be allied with Zwingli than with Rome and would never have imagined that the younger man could still defend communion in one kind.

³⁵ Clemen, "Beiträge," 99: "[das ehr] vielleicht in die zwinglische meinung, auch anders mehr, gerahten..." The "vielleicht" is the best indication that this is not a description of Melanchthon but a way of frightening the elector.

³⁶ Clemen, "Beiträge," 99.

³⁷ See Timothy J. Wengert, "Luther and Melanchthon—Melanchthon and Luther." *Luther-Jahrbuch* 66 (1999): 55–88.

sacraments in his new edition of the *Loci communes* in such a cursory manner. Melanchthon's response, which Clemen also misconstrues, simply demonstrated his commitment to restoring agreement on the matter. "To this he answered that he did not want to put too much in [the *Loci*] but to make his position known in a council."³⁸ We know that Melanchthon had elsewhere expressed his (unfounded) fear of having Bucer and Luther in the same room in Wittenberg: that it would lead to greater division on the matter.

Brück then added that although Luther said that this second edition was not as warm or fervid as the first, nevertheless, Luther added, "One must pay attention to the subject matter and yet proceed very carefully, so that one does not create offense."³⁹ So Luther in fact was agreeing with Melanchthon's approach of avoiding offense. Jonas also stated that he could hardly imagine Melanchthon going over to Zwinglian thoughts, given the recent publication of the Zwingli's *Expositio fidei*, which obscured a proper understanding of original sin and rejected all of St. Paul's writings, as had the Anabaptists. Melanchthon had nothing in common with them.⁴⁰ "Although the little man is abstruse and can easily cover up his real motivations," Jonas still did not believe that Melanchthon would approve a Zwinglian approach to the sacraments. Brück closed the letter by suggesting that [Vice-]Chancellor Franz Burchard accompany the theologians in Grimma.

Concord in Wittenberg and Its Aftermath

It is worth noting that at the outset of the Wittenberg meeting, the Wittenberg side raised questions about Bucer's recently published prefatory letter to a collection of Zwingli's and Oecolampadius's correspondence.⁴¹ The objection was not so much to Bucer's letter per se, which tried to convince the reader that the two dead reformers did not reject Christ's presence in the Supper, but to a poem by Heinrich Lupulus titled, "Ulricho Zwinglio Heroi Fortiss[imo]."⁴² To this charge of "guilt by association," Bucer (rightly) blamed the printer for taking a letter he had written earlier and appending it to this collection.

The rest of the May 1536 meetings is well documented by Jensen.⁴³ Melanchthon's fears that they would lead to further division were unfounded—but then everyone seemed surprised that the theologians gathered there actually came to an agreement. Melanchthon, who was absent from the negotiations, nevertheless wrote the agreement, now known as the Wittenberg Concord. It is right to note that initially Melanchthon did not view this as a concord, but as more churches accepted it, he came to see it as such. This explains his work preventing the Smalcald League from accepting Luther's so-called *Smalcald Articles*. It arose not necessarily as a rejection of Luther's language on the Eucharist but out of Melanchthon's realization that such language could not become the sole standard for expressing Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. Although Brenz was not present at the drafting and initial signing of the Wittenberg Concord, we do know that he approved it. A participant at the meetings in early 1537 in Smalcald, he had to leave early and gave Johannes Bugenhagen

³⁸ Clemen, "Beiträge," 99.

³⁹ Clemen, "Beiträge," 99.

⁴⁰ Melanchthon's 1534 lectures on the *Loci* explicitly attacked Zwingli's understanding of these matters.

⁴¹ Theodor Bibliander, ed., *D. D. Ioannis Oecolampadii et Huldreichii Zwinglii Epistolarum Libri Quatuor ...* (Basel: Platter & Lasius, 1536). Bucer's letter appeared on θ 6v.

⁴² Bibliander, *Libri Quatuor*, θ 5v. English: "To Ulrich Zwingli, the Bravest Hero." Lupulus (1497–1534) was a schoolteacher in Bern, who wrote the poem upon Zwingli's death in 1531.

⁴³ Jensen, *The Wittenberg Concord*, 84–126.

power of attorney to act for him. In his written testimony, dated 23 February 1537, Brenz wrote that he had read the Augsburg Confession and its Apology. "I also read the formula of concord in the matter of the Sacraments, instituted in Wittenberg with Mr. Bucer and the others ... In my humble opinion, all of these things accord with the Holy Scripture and with the true *and genuine* position of the Catholic Church."⁴⁴

That same year Melanchthon travelled to Württemberg to assist in reconstituting the University of Tübingen. Ambrose Blarer of Constance had been in charge of matters, but had encountered severe criticism from the faculty due in part to his Zwinglian inclinations. Because Melanchthon could not remain in the duchy but was to return to Wittenberg, he turned to Brenz, urging him to return to his "Fatherland" (Brenz came from the nearby imperial city of Weil der Stadt). In a letter sent from Göppingen on 17 October 1537, Melanchthon not only pointed out how much Brenz's work would support the Reformation in the duchy, but he also made clear that to reform Württemberg along Wittenberg lines, Brenz would be able to clean things up in the wake of Blarer, whose Zwinglian hometown had refused to accept the Wittenberg Concord.⁴⁵ Brenz, on the contrary, could calm things down, "For I have come to realize that they [the faculty] are vehemently opposed to all those who are suspected of holding Zwingli's views."⁴⁶ Brenz should thus accept this call for the sake of Christ, the church, and his fatherland.

Concluding Comments

With this, the circle was complete. Brenz, who was far less reluctant to meet with Bucer in 1530 in Augsburg and whose example may have encouraged Melanchthon do the same, came to distrust Bucer's language in part through his contacts with Schnepf. Melanchthon, who had begun with a far more negative view of Bucer slowly came to realize that Bucer was far closer to Luther's position and worked to further rapprochement between Strasbourg and Wittenberg, even by enlisting the opinions of other trustworthy theologians. Although Melanchthon harbored continuing doubts about the final effect of the Wittenberg Concord, he nevertheless came to respect Brenz's role in fostering a strong Evangelical church in Württemberg. And all this was done within the confines of the Wittenberg way of doing theology: not through stiff-necked assertions but through open conversations by confreres in the faith.

This is perhaps Jensen's greatest accomplishment with his book on the Wittenberg Concord, the subtitle of which gets to the heart of his argument: "Creating Space for Dialogue." As he described for the other contributors to that agreement, here we have seen how Melanchthon, working alongside Luther and certainly not against him, broadened the Concord's acceptance by careful, but forthright communication with other reformers, especially Brenz. Melanchthon's careful diplomacy, when paired with Luther's openness to dialogue, resulted in an agreement that continues to bear fruit in the twentieth century's Leuenberg Agreement and beyond.

⁴⁴ Irene Dingel, ed., *Bekenntnisschriften der evangelischen Lutherischen Kirche*, 3 vols (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 1:836–37. (For the German, see Hartmann and Jäger, *Johann Brenz*, 54.) The words "and genuine" (καὶ γνήσιος) are in Greek; "catholic church" is written with capital letters.

⁴⁵ MBW 1796 (T 7:251–54).

⁴⁶ MBW 1796 (T 7:253, 38–40).