

# The “Lost (?) Luther Reference”

By Siegbert W. Becker

In the present discussion of the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper much has been made of a supposedly *lost* Luther quotation. The whole question of a *lost* quotation arises from the fact that the Tappert edition, of the *Book of Concord* has dropped from FC, SD, VII, 87 a reference to the fourth volume of the Jena edition of Luther’s works. This reference has supposedly been identified as an allusion to Luther’s letter to Simon Wolferinus, a letter in which Luther speaks of the moment in which the real presence begins.

Even if we grant, for the sake of argument that the FC *lost* reference is a citation of the Wolferinus correspondence, a wrong impression is created by calling it a lost quotation. The impression may easily be left in the mind of the reader that Pieper and Walther and other spokesmen of the old Synodical Conference who wrote during the so-called “Babylonian Captivity of the Lord’s Supper” went astray from the ‘pure doctrine’ of the blessed Sacrament of the Altar because they were unaware of this passage in which Luther clearly defends the concept of an extension of the real presence in time against those who hold that the real presence is limited to a “mathematical point.”

For us at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary this reference to a *lost* quotation fails to strike a responsive chord. We have never adopted the Tappert edition because we want our students to become accustomed to the use of the original German and Latin versions of the Lutheran Confessions. For that reason we still use the Triglot edition of the Book of Concord. In this edition the reference to the fourth volume of the Jena edition has not been dropped.

Moreover, the whole concept of a “Babylonian Captivity of the Lord’s Supper” is a pure invention. The excuse is made for the fathers that they were led into that “captivity” because they did not have the benefit of the modern researches into this subject. These researches have supposedly recovered the Wolferinus correspondence and a few other “forgotten” citations from Luther’s works. The implication is left that if they had been fully aware of this material they would not have held to a “receptionist” view of the real presence according to which the presence is real only during the eating and drinking.

Especially two quotations from Luther are involved in the discussion. One is the Wolferinus correspondence to which allusion has already been made: the other is a quotation from a 1528 document in which Luther deals with the aberration of Carlstadt.

Both of these quotations were very well-known to Walther and Pieper and to the fathers of the Synodical Conference. Both of them are reproduced at length in Porta’s *Pastorale Lutheri*, which was first published in 1582 and which was for centuries a standard textbook for Lutheran pastoral theology. It was reprinted as late as 1842, and was in common use in the Synodical Conference. Thus, even if the reference to the fourth Jena volume had been missing for centuries from the FC, the opinions of Luther expressed in the Wolferinus correspondence and in his letter to Carlstadt of 1527 or 1528 were not at all unknown to the later dogmatists and Dr. Walther. In fact, Walther cites the advice of Luther to Wolferinus in his textbook on pastoral theology (C. F. W. Walther, *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, St. Louis, Concordia, 1906, p. 189).

It would therefore perhaps be better not to speak of a *lost* quotation. *What is the “Lost” Reference?*

Something, however, should also be said about the identification of the FC reference to the fourth volume of the Jena edition as an *obvious* reference to the Wolferinus letter.

The paragraph in the Formula of in which the reference to Jena Volume IV, occurs discusses the “useful rule:” “*Nihil habet rationem sacramenti extra usum a Christo institutum*” (FC, SD, VII, 85). This principle, that nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ, is then discussed and the principle is restated in the words:

Apart from this use, when in the papistic mass the bread is not distributed, but offered up or enclosed, borne about and exhibited for adoration, it is to be regarded as no sacrament just as the water of baptism, when used to consecrate bells or to cure leprosy, or otherwise exhibited for worship, is no sacrament or baptism.

Immediately after that, the paragraph then closes with the words: For against such papistic abuses this rule has been set up at the beginning (the Latin here adds the words, “of the reviving Gospel”) and has been explained by Dr. Luther himself, Tom. IV, Iena” (FC, SD, VII, 87).

Because the page number of the reference is not given, scholars have speculated about this reference in an effort to determine what the authors of the Formula might have had in mind. A respected Lutheran scholar has written,

Volume IV of the German edition contains Luther’s German writings from 1520-1530. This writer has not had the opportunity to examine this volume, but Dr. Tom Hardt has. The only possible reference in the German Volume IV that he could come up with which might have some reference to the “common rule that there is no sacrament apart from the instituted use” might be Luther’s letter to Carlstadt, written January 29, 1528 (Bjarne Teigen, *CTQ*, 43, 4 (Oct 79) p. 297)

From Dr. Tom Hardt’s failure to find any reference in the German Jena edition and from the fact that in the Wolferinus letter, printed in volume four of the Latin edition, there is a rule formulated by Melancthon in reference to the Lord’s Supper the conclusion is drawn that the reference to “Tom. IV Iena” in FC, SD, VII, 87, must be an *obvious* reference to the Wolferinus letter.

However, the text of the formula says that this rule was “set up” and “explained” by Dr. Luther “at the beginning”, and, as we have already noted, the Latin translation add, “of the reviving Gospel.” The normal conclusion that one might draw is that Luther or the church set up this rule and “explained” (the German has “*erklaert*” and the Latin “*declarata*”) it early in the Reformation period. The Wolferinus correspondence, however, date from 1543, a date which in 1580 could scarcely have been viewed as belonging to the “beginning of the reviving Gospel.” “On the other hand, the fourth volume of the German Jena editions contains writings produced by Luther prior to the time of the Augsburg Confession, which certainly would fit better with the words from the Formula.

Moreover, the Wolferinus letter does not refer to a rule “set up” or “formulated” (Tappert) by Dr. Luther, but to a rule set up by Melancthon. The rule, as formulated by Melancthon, is not identical with the rule quoted in FC, SD, VII, 85, quoted previously. It reads, “*Sacramentum nullam esse extra actionem sacramentalem* (there is no sacrament apart from the sacramental action).”

While Luther does seem to “explain” this rule in the letter to Wolferinus, yet it should not be forgotten that he did not “set up” or “formulate” the rule in this way. It should, however, also be noted that the German word *erklaert* does not necessarily mean “explain,” even though both the Triglot and (Tappert translate in this way. This may also be reflected in the Latin translation which renders the German word *erklaert* with *declarata*, which can mean “explain” but more naturally in this context would seem to mean “to set forth clearly” or to “proclaim.” We could therefore without

apology translate, “Against such papistic abuses this rule was formulated and proclaimed by Dr. Luther at the beginning (of the reviving Gospel).”

Since there appears to be no rule formulated by Luther in the fourth volume of the Latin Jena edition and since the fourth volume of the German edition contains earlier writings of Luther, it might be in place to reexamine that volume, in which Dr. Tom Hardt could find no reference to any useful rule that “Luther” might have “*formulated*” “*at the beginning.*”

This reexamination of the German edition is in place also because in this part of the seventh article of the Formula of Concord there are several other references to the Jena edition. In section 77 of this article there is a reference to Tom. VI, fol. 99, and in section 78 to Tom. III, fol. 446. Both of these references are to the German edition. When therefore just a few paragraphs later there is a reference to Tom. III without a folio reference, it might logically be presumed that also this reference is to the German edition.

Moved by these considerations, the present writer has reexamined the fourth volume of the German Jena edition to see whether there is in that volume any *useful rule formulated by Luther early in the reformation period*, as the working of the Formula would seem to indicate.

From Volume IV of the German Jena edition it becomes evident that in 1528 Luther was asked several times for an opinion concerning the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. It might be remembered that this is the period of the Saxon Visitation, which certainly belongs to “the beginning of the reviving Gospel.”

In answer to these requests Luther wrote two “opinions (Bedencken).” The first is signed by both Luther and Bugenhagen. In it Luther writes,

*Erstlich da Ir fragt von der Pfarr/Messe etc. Wisset Ir/das kein Pfarrherr mit gutem Gewissen kan Messe halten allein/da keine Communicanten sind. Darumb ists hie nicht weiter fragens/Entweder kein Mess/oder Communicanten* (Jena IV, fol. 316f). (Your first question relates to the pastor’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper. You must know that no pastor can with a good conscience celebrate the Lord’s Supper in private, when no communicants are present. There can be no question about this (either no Lord’s Supper or communicants))

In the second opinion, signed only by Luther and evidently written in the same year in answer to a similar question concerning the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, Luther writes, *Das wils nicht tun/Mess halten one not/Das ist/so keine Communicanten da sind/Denn es ist stracks wider die einsatzung Christi.* (ibid., fol. 317). (It will not do to celebrate the Lord’s Supper when there is no need for it, that is, when no communicants are present; for that is diametrically opposed to the institution of Christ).

With that quotation before us there is nothing left to explain away. Those who have identified the reference in FC, SD, VII, 87 with the letter to Wolferinus have felt a need to explain why the useful rule ascribed to Luther in the Formula is in the Wolferinus correspondence ascribed to Melancthon. There is, however, no difficulty here if the Formula had reference instead to volume four of the German Jena edition.

Moreover, the two “opinions” from Luther, which are printed in the German edition fit *all* the words of the Formula paragraph in question. First, we have here a very definite *rule* concerning the proper and valid celebration of the Lord’s Supper. In its briefest form Luther’s rule simply states in effect: “No communicants, no Lord’s Supper.” In the second “opinion” Luther states the principle in a slightly expanded form, name, “When no communicants are present, no Lord’s Supper is to be celebrated.” In other words, if no eating and drinking take place there is no valid sacrament even if the words of institution are read. It seems rather obvious that even though Luther

believed that the words of institution are the almighty words of Christ, yet the reading of the words does no effect the real presence unless the eating and drinking follow.

Secondly, we have here a rule formulated and proclaimed by *Dr. Luther himself* and not one formulated by Melancthon, as is the case in the Wolferinus letter.

Thirdly, it is a rule formulated “*at the beginning (of the reviving Gospel)*” and not one that one might expect to find Luther’s correspondence dating from the last years of his life. The two “*Bedencken*” from 1528 are surely more appropriate here than a letter from 1543.

Fourthly, this rule of Luther was clearly set up in *opposition to the papistic abuses* of the mass. If the Lord’s Supper is to be celebrated only when there are communicants present to commune, that is, to eat and to drink the body and blood of Christ together with the consecrated bread and wine, that is, bread and wine set aside for this sacred use, then it follows also that “apart from this use, when in the papistic mass the bread is not distributed, but offered up or enclosed, borne about, and exhibited for adoration, it is to be regarded as no sacrament” (FC, SD, VII, 87).

Finally, the words of the paragraph in the Formula (VII, 85-87) “*extra usum a Christo institutum...extra actionem divinitus institutam. . .If the institution of Christ be not observed . . . the entire external, visible action of the Lord’s Supper instituted by Christ*” apparently are an echo of the remark which Luther makes in the second opinion quoted above, where, after formulating the rule, he comments that a celebration of the Lord’s Supper that is not in accord with this rule is “diametrically opposed to the institution of Christ.”

When the facts are examined, it seems evident that the reference to “*Tom. IV Iena: in FC, SD, VII, 87* is therefore an obvious reference to the German edition.

### **The Wolferinus Correspondence**

Even if we would grant however, that the reference in Article VII, 87 is to the Wolferinus letter, it would be impossible to prove that this letter demonstrates that Luther believed that the real presence comes into existence when the pastor, in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, pronounces the words, “This is my body.”

The present writer has read every major work that Luther wrote on the Sacrament of the Altar. He can not recall a single place in which Luther says that *when the pastor speaks* the words of institution in the name of Christ over the elements, at that time, the elements are the body and blood of Christ.

The Wolferinus letter certainly does not say this, in fact, if it is read fairly and normally it specifically rules out such a notion concerning the beginning of the real presence.

There can be no question in the mind of anyone who has read Luther extensively that Luther believed in a real presence, which was extended in time. He clearly believed that the body and blood of Christ were present during the whole celebration of the sacrament. Whether he believed that this was a doctrine of Scripture to which every one was obligated to assent is another question.

In the Wolferinus letter Luther says that the sacramental action begins *ab initio orationis Dominicae*. If this phrase is translated as it would normally be translated under all ordinary circumstances, namely, “from the beginning of the Lord’s Prayer” the assertion that Luther taught that it begins with the reading of the words of institutions can no longer be maintained. Some have therefore attempted to show that *ab initio orationis Dominicae* means that the body and blood of Christ are present from the beginning of the words of institution when those words are read by the pastor in a valid celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

It is admitted that Luther usually used the word *oratio* in the sense of “prayer,” but it is maintained that since Luther occasionally used the word in the sense of “oration” or “speech,”

therefore it is perfectly proper to translate *ab initio orationis Dominicae* as “from the beginning of the words of institution.”

But while it is true that the word “*oratio*” also in Luther can occasionally mean “speech” or “oration,” yet the words “*oratio Dominica*” are never used by Luther in any other meaning than “Lord’s Prayer.” Ever since Cyprian in the early centuries of the church wrote a commentary on the *Our Father* with the title *Oratio Dominica* that phrase has become wedded to the prayer which Jesus taught to His disciples. If anyone wishes to dispute this he should come up with at least one other passage in which Luther, or any other medieval writer for that matter, uses the words “*oratio Dominica*” in any other meaning than “Lord’s Prayer.” To cite the “gnesisio-Lutheran Erhard Sperber” as an authority for the translation “the Lord’s words” (Tom G.A. Hardt, *Venerabilis et Adorabilis Eucharistia*, p. 234) is hardly evidence when one realizes that every Saligerite must translate in this way. If it is not so translated Luther is irretrievably lost for Saligerism.

In the Wolferinus letter Luther is speaking of the order of service in which the Lord’s Supper is celebrated. He says that the sacramental action begins with the beginning of the *orationis Dominicae* and that it lasts until all have communed, the cup has been drunk, the wafers consumed, the people dismissed, and the pastor has left the altar. He is clearly describing the sequence of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

A part of that order of service that Luther describes was the recitation of the Lords’ Prayer. That Luther clearly distinguished between the words of institution and the Lord’s Prayer is crystal clear from his *Formula Missae*, the first order of service he drew up for use in the reformed church. In that order of service the words of institution, spoken by the pastor, are followed by the singing of the *Sanctus* and this in turn is followed by the Lord’s Prayer, which in the *Formulas Missae* is called the *oratio Dominica*. How in view of Luther’s own words in the *Formula Missae* it can be said that he may have had the words of institution in mind when he wrote that the sacramental action (and therefore the real presence) began “from the beginning of the *orationis Dominicae*” is almost impossible to comprehend.

It is sometimes argued that Luther had the *Formula Missae* in mind when he wrote to Wolferinus, and that since the Lord’s Prayer follows the words of institution in that service “*ab initio orationis Dominicae*” means after the words of institution have been read.” If it were true that the Lord’s Prayer followed immediately upon the reading of the words of institution that argument would have some validity. The fact remains, however, that in this Latin order of service the singing of the *Sanctus* intervened between the reading of the words of institution and the Lord’s Prayer. It is sometimes asserted that if the words of institution are truly divine words they must take effect immediately, because the Word of God needs no time to go into fulfillment. Therefore we must say that after the pastor says, “This is my body,” it must be the body of Christ, even though we cannot fix precisely at what syllable the miracle takes place. If this is Luther’s view, one can hardly understand why he would allow the singing of the *Sanctus* to be completed before he would insist that the Lord’s body is present, “*ab initio orationis Dominicae*.” He ought to say instead “from the beginning of the *Sanctus*.”

However, it is by no means certain that Luther had the *Formula Missae* in mind when he wrote the letter to Simon Wolferinus in 1543. That Latin order of service was supplemented in 1526 by Luther’s *Deutsche Messe*. In this German order of Service the Lord’s Prayer preceded the reading of the words of institution.

In this case, too, the thesis which says that the initiation of the real presence is tied to the recitation of the words of institution by the pastor is destroyed totally and irrevocably, if Luther is to be our final authority in such matters. For in that case, if the *oratio Dominica* is the Lord’s

Prayer, as it must be, then the real presence begins some time before the words of institution are spoken. It is not necessary to say that Luther looked upon the Lord's Prayer as a "table prayer" to be spoken at the "Lord's Table." Nor does it help matters to say that Luther never views prayer as the effective instrument by which the real presence is initiated. Luther just believed that the real presence was in effect during the whole celebration of the Lord's Supper by virtue of the institution and command of Christ. He evidently viewed the praying of the Lord's Prayer as the beginning of the communion service proper.

Nor is it entirely impossible to say that the recitation of the Lord's Prayer was viewed as at least a part of the consecration. Ingemar Furberg in his doctoral dissertation on *Das Pater noster in der Messe* (Lund: Carl Bloms Boktryckeri. 1968) quotes the Wittenberg Kirchenordnung of 1533, which says,

*zu zeiten nach der prefation betet der preister das vater unser fuer die ganz gemein und consecriert fuer die communicanten mit solchem gesang* (immediately after the proper preface the pastor prays the Lord's Prayer for the whole congregation and consecrates for the communicants with such a chant) (p. 213).

Furberg does not believe that the words mean that the Lord's Prayer was a consecrating prayer, but he holds that the words "with such a chant" refer to the words of institution, which followed immediately after the Lord's Prayer in the 1533 *Kirchenordnung*. Whatever the proper interpretation of "*mit solchem gesang*" is, that is the order of service used in Wittenberg in 1533 and Luther may well have had it in mind in 1543 when he wrote to Wolferinus and said that the sacramental action, and therefore also the real presence, began "*ab initio orationis Dominicae*."

It is, however, really unnecessary to speculate about which order of service Luther had in mind. In either case, whether it was the *Formula Missae* or the *Deutsche Messe*, of "*ab initio orationis Dominicae*" means, as it must, "from the beginning of the Lord's Prayer," the beginning of the real presence is separated from the words of institution by a period of time, and we can no longer say that when (in the temporal sense) the words of institution are recited by the pastor, then (also temporal, "at that time") the real presence is in effect.

Moreover, if we would grant, for the sake of argument, that *ab initio orationis Dominicae* is "from the beginning of the reading of the words of institution," as Dr. Tom Hardt would have us believe, then another difficulty arises which brings us into conflict with Luther's remarks in the letter to Carlstadt. In that letter (WA, Br, 4, 1214, 138ff) Luther says that we need not be concerned about the instant in which the real presence comes into existence. He refers to the discussions that were carried on in the Middle Ages concerning the syllable at which the real presence begins. He likewise says that it is really of no consequence whether the bread and wine are distributed before or after the words of institution are spoken. However, if the *oratio Dominica* is the words of institution and the real presence begins at the beginning of the *orationis Dominicae*, then Luther in the letter to Wolferinus contradicts what he had said in the letter to Carlstadt fifteen years earlier. For then we can no longer say that it made no difference to Luther whether one holds that the real presence begins with the first or middle or last syllable of the consecrating words, since here he obviously holds that it begins with the first syllable, if indeed we are to take his words at face value.

One more thing needs to be said concerning the Carlstadt letter. It is true that Luther refers to the medieval quarrels about syllables, but a careful reading of Luther's words makes it crystal clear that he does not reject only this sort of controversy. We have already pointed out that Pieper, Walther, and other spokesmen of the old Synodical Conference were well acquainted with both the Carlstadt letter and the Wolferinus correspondence. Yet they never saw in them any indication that

Luther realized that in his letter Luther not only rejected a “now” attached to syllables but he rigidly opposed any effort to fix the time of what to him would have been equivalent to “transubstantiation,” a notion which he, by the way, did not reject as downright false but as unnecessary speculation, and for that reason to be rejected. Luther says, for example,

We despise such thoughts and prescribe no moment (nu) or time for God, but we are satisfied simply to believe *that what God says will happen and be actually happens*. . . So we also say here that the bread is the body of Christ, for Christ says: “This is my body.” We have no use for logomachies which argue about moment and syllables, for we are commanded to believe God’s words and accept them as true, but we are not to seek an answer to the question in which instant or how they are true and fulfilled.

Luther’s statement that we are not to seek *how* they are fulfilled is certainly significant for the present controversy, in which some have held that they are fulfilled by the recitation of the words, “This is my body.”

Finally it should be noted that in the Wolferinus letter Luther consistently argues that what Wolferinus had done was to be censured because he had given offense and raised the suspicion that he was inclined to Zwinglianism. Not once does he say that the action, which he prescribes for Wolferinus, is commanded by Christ in the words of institution.

This is a very significant point that must not be overlooked, for it clearly allows for this that in other circumstances and other times and places the demands made on Wolferinus would not need to be repeated.

If, for example, a WELS pastor would suddenly without consultation with his brethren, begin to immerse children in holy baptism, he would certainly raise all sorts of questions in the mind of his parishioners and all other members of the Synod who would hear of it. They would very correctly begin to wonder whether he does not have Baptist tendencies, and the president of the Synod might well write to him, as Luther wrote to Wolferinus, asking him to desist from such Baptist actions. By that, however, we would not be saying that immersion is wrong.

In like manner Luther’s advice to Wolferinus, since he argues only on the basis of offense, cannot be used as evidence that the words of institution require one to believe that the real presence begins with the first syllable of the Lord’s Prayer (whether it is recited before or after the words of institution makes no difference) and lasts until the pastor has left the altar. All that can be established is that in those times anyone who would adopt ceremonial and liturgical practices which were common among the Zwinglians and Reformed would by such acts give the impression that he was beginning to adopt Zwinglian views. In the same way someone in our time and in our country who would reintroduce the elevation and adoration, even if he would at the elevation not say such things as “Behold this bread which created the world,” would nevertheless raise the suspicion that he was on the way back to Rome. It was just this that the CICR very likely had in mind when it used the word “Romanizing.”

All that can be established from the words of institution is that the bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ when they are distributed and received. Whether they are the body and blood of Christ only when they are distributed and received or prior to their distribution and reception the Bible does not answer for us and therefore it is presumptuous to ask that question. We can be sure that when the pastor in the communion service reads the words of institution and the bread and wine are distributed and received, then all communicants, worthy or unworthy, by virtue of the first institution on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, also receive from the pastor the true body and the true blood of Christ to eat and to drink.

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