The doctrine of the sacraments contained in the Second Helvetic Confession reflects not only the profound biblical and patristic knowledge of its author, but also the historical context of its writing. It was formed in relative peace and privacy by a man accustomed to framing public confessions in polemical situations; it came at a time when Switzerland had enjoyed unity on the doctrine of the sacraments for over twenty years, and it expresses Henry Bullinger’s personal witness to this concord. At the same time, the continuing struggle with the Lutherans was reaching its climax in Westphal and Brenz, while the Tridentine development of Roman theology also constituted an opposition (the Council of Trent was drawing to its close as he penned his words in 1561). It is remarkable that Bullinger, veteran of these struggles, is able to remain essentially positive and often eirenic in his Confession. Heritor of both Zwingli and Calvin, a man already of prime importance for the English Reformation, he fashioned a work that has won wide acceptance throughout the Reformed world, not least because his breadth of interest and learning helped him set aside the controversies to write a genuine Confession of faith.

The formative document behind the sacramental teaching of the Confession is the Mutual Consent in regard to the Sacraments (Zürich Consensus: Consensus Tigurinus). This consent was produced in 1549 largely through the work of Calvin and Bullinger, and consisted in twenty-six heads of agreement on the Lord’s Supper. Published in 1551, it was re-published by Calvin in 1554, along with his lengthy exposition, in particular to answer the charges of Westphal and the Lutheran party. Beza stated: “This confession knits Bullinger and Calvin and the churches of Zürich and Geneva in the closest ties”. It represents Bullinger’s progress beyond his earlier “zwinglianism” in the direction of Calvin’s mature and positive thought on the Supper. Rather than playing with names, however, we shall be insisting that Zwingli’s own thought was more complex than the traditional idea of “zwinglianism” allows. In fact he is less a rationalist and memorialist in his sacramental teaching, and more a Reformer intent on honoring the office of the Holy Spirit, and the negation implicit in justification by faith. In this sense, Bullinger takes this truth from Zwingli, and by linking it with Calvin’s more precise and less negative teaching, rescues and preserves it in its proper form. However, it must be noted that this is an interpretation — Bullinger’s interpretation; Zwingli’s own words remain ambiguous on certain points, so that Bullinger is more than a transmitter of Zwinglian ideas, he is a partner in expressing the genuinely Reformed doctrine of sacrament.

WORD, SACRAMENTS, SPIRIT

The more immediate context of the Confession’s sacramental teaching is provided by the preceding chapters, on the church and its ministry. Here we find the familiar marks of the true church, chiefly “the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God”. Christians also “communicate in the sacraments ordained by Christ, and delivered unto us by his apostles, using them in no other manner than as they received them from the Lord himself”. The ministry of the church is a stewardship of mysteries, both “the gospel of Christ” and “the sacraments of Christ”. From this ecclesiological foundation Bullinger
approaches the sacraments as signs and seals of the preached Word, ordered by its justification and sanctification through faith and congruent with its christological nature.

The christological approach places all possible weight on the Word and Spirit of God as the operating power in revelation and reconciliation, in liturgy and life. For Bullinger as for Zwingli, there is no question of a sacramental grace transmitted through creaturely means; it is rather a question of the human situation appropriate to the dynamic of Christ present through his Spirit. This is the “Word” to which he ascribes priority at every step of his argument. In the opening paragraph of the Confession’s three chapters (XIX-XXI) on the sacraments, Bullinger states it as an utter dependence of sacrament on Word, both formally (“God added to the preaching of the Word his sacraments”) and materially (“consisting of his Word, of outward signs, and of thing signified”). The Consensus Tigurinus had also begun with a strong statement: “As the sacraments are appendages of the gospel, he only can discourse aptly and usefully of their nature, virtue, office, and benefit, who begins with Christ” (para. 2). Calvin’s exposition comments that they sought to “refer all things to Christ, gather all together in him, and arrange all under him, and maintain that the whole virtue of the sacraments flows from him”.

The Word of God preached is that to which “God even from the beginning added . . . his sacraments or sacramental signs”. This opening definition (258:47)¹ indicates Bullinger’s fixed point in all sacramental discussion: the essential communion is the “spiritual eating” which the believer enjoys through faith. Like Calvin, and especially his close friend Peter Martyr Vermigli (who joyfully read the Confession before his death at Zürich in 1562), Bullinger prefers to define faith as union with Christ. He therefore likes Augustine’s word, “Believe and you have eaten”. Thus the “word” which functions decisively in the sacramental action is not a matter of sounds or official pronouncements, but that Word to which faith is man’s proper response. “Faith” is not a subjective term (relating to the human spirit), but that which honors the objectivity of the Word of God (the lordly work of the Holy Spirit). The Word is a “heard” and “obeyed” reality, a Word of promise given by the faithful Lord, on whose institution and consecration everything depends. Sacraments do not correspond to a Platonic matter/spirit dichotomy, therefore, but to the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 17.² It is within the form of faith resonant with this hearing of the Word that sacraments have their legitimate place. This will become clear in the chapter on the Lord’s Supper, after his chapters on sacraments and on baptism.

CHRISTUS SERVATOR

God’s covenental word of promise ordained sacraments for the “Old People” as well as for the new. Bullinger makes the bold equation characteristic of the Reformers: circumcision and paschal lamb are the old covenant’s baptism and eucharist.³ He dismisses the question of the number of sacraments in a brief paragraph — repentance, ministerial ordination and matrimony are of divine institution, “profitable (utilia) but no sacraments” (259:18). His chief point is that God is author of all sacraments, “not any man . . . for they belong to the worship of God” (259:24f). Sacraments are cultic acts, valid through divine sanction and not human wont. They have God’s promises joined to them, “which require faith”. Faith stands on the Word, which is like a writing to which God sets the sacraments like seals (259:28ff). Once again we see the close relationship between word and sacrament, like “adjuncts” one of another.
Christ is at work in the sacraments (259:30). The faithful receive them "as from the hand of God" and draw a distinction "between the Lord himself and his minister", for the Lord gives them the reality (res) while the minister gives outward signs. What is the "essence" or "chief thing" in sacraments (substantia, praecipuum, materia)? It is Christ our Savior — Christus Servator (259:45) — the only sacrifice, the lamb, the rock, by whom the elect are circumcised without hands through the Holy Spirit, are washed from their sins and nourished with Christ's very body and blood unto life eternal (259:45-50). In respect of this substance or chief matter, "the sacraments of both covenants are equal" (260.1). In both, God is author, Christ "the only Mediator and Savior of the faithful" is praecipuum and res, in both they are given as signs and seals of the divine benefits, they "distinguish the faithful from all other religions of the world" (a most interesting phrase), and finally, in Bullinger's familiar terms, they "admonish them of their duty".

The differences between sacraments old and new were so well described by Augustine that Bullinger, like the other Reformers, rests content with paraphrasing his summary: ours are firmer, unchangeable, simpler, and testify to the substance and promise now accomplished. Moreover, since the Spirit stirs up greater faith by them, there follows a greater fulness of Spirit (260:19). The old are now abrogated; now there stand, "for circumcision, baptism, and in place of the paschal lamb and the sacrifices, the Lord's Supper".

All sacraments consist of "word, sign and thing signified" (260:27). The Word consecrates, that is, appoints to some holy use, taking the outward things from ordinary life: water, bread and wine. In the first sacrament the significance (res significata) is "regeneration and cleansing from sins", and in the second, "the body of Christ given for us and his blood shed for us, or the communion of the Lord's body and blood" (260:36, 39). Outside this holy use (extra institutionem divinam, ac usum sanctum) the elements remain common. The rite itself is effective because Christ's original consecration remains in force: the first institution is renewed, and then the signs are consecrated and declared sanctified by Christ. Here is a key to Bullinger's understanding of the presence of Christ in his sacrament, at his table: "that first most excellent consecration" (260:48) remains the fountainhead and effective power in the sacramental action. Such holy use and dominical consecration involves the closest relation between sign and signification, a relation of sacramental union (margin Unio sacramentalis; 261:10, uniantur per significationem mysticam). This relation posits a communication of names by which "the signs bear the names of things, because they are mystical symbols of holy things".4

The sacramental relation reminds us, in an apt phrase of Bullinger's, that the Christ who instituted the sacraments did not intend merely a dipping in water or a reception of bread and wine alone, "without mystery" (sine mysterio, 261:15). For we are to participate in the reality, in Christ. Bullinger's sacramental doctrine preserves the objectivity of God's action in a more personal way than the medieval concept ex opere operatum was able to do. In part this may stem from his preference for the idea of divine will — in providence and predestination, for instance — but especially it is his pneumatology that explains his point. Only the Spirit sanctifies, never creatures, and it is only the Spirit who reveals mysteries, especially the mystery of Christ in us, of the hidden presence of the living Christ.5 He understands the Gospel as the mystery of Christ and his transitus in terms strikingly similar to the modern Mysterientheologie of Odo Casel.6
Two species of “sect” are singled out in light of the unio sacramentalis (261:19ff). Some attribute consecration to human, “accidental” things, the pronouncing of certain syllables by a consecrated man. This refers to the Roman teaching which continued the medieval scholastic theory that the words of institution, or certain particular words or syllables in the priest’s formula at Mass, constitutes the effective cause of the consecration of the elements. It was a departure from the Early Church liturgy in which prayer “for the Word and Spirit” forms the heart of epiclesis. Others on the contrary consider the sacraments to be “common signs, not sanctified or effectual”. Because of the invisible reality they despise the visible signs — “such were the Messalians”. Now it is strange that the obscure ancient sect of Euchites or Messalians caught the attention of many Reformers in the sixteenth century; yet they were intended to represent all those “spiritual” sectarians whose concentration on transcendentalia rendered all visible elements despicable. Since the Anabaptist and Schwenckfeld groups stood on Bullinger’s left as the Romans did on the right, he considered both extremes to be examples of a basically sectarian error in regard to the relation between signs and reality, to the nature of the sacramental consecration.

A further opinion about sign and reality is treated separately — not sectarian although still in error. This teaches that “grace and the things signified” are so bound to the signs that to take one is to participate in the other, “whatever manner of men they are” (261:32). This passing reference to the Lutheran insistence on the manducatio impiorum leads him to comment that it is not the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister or receiver that conditions the sacrament, but “the faithfulness or truth and mere goodness of God” (261:36). The “integrity of the sacraments” depends on God and therefore remains, in analogy with God’s Word preached which remains true despite unbelief. This is a strong case in Bullinger’s eyes, for preaching is “not merely bare words” but the reality offered to man. Sacrament shares this nature of promissio and therefore, like the Word, requires faith. Faith alone is appropriate to sacramental reception; otherwise man misses the benefit extended to him by the faithful God.

BAPTISM

When Bullinger turns specifically to Baptism in Chapter XX, he begins with its institution by God, naming John the Baptist as the first that baptized, from whom it came to the apostles. The Lord’s command (Matthew 28:19) and Peter’s word at Pentecost (Acts 2:38) are also mentioned. We should now recall his previous equation of circumcision with baptism, with its presupposition of the unity of covenantal history. A prime point with Zwingli in the original Swiss Täuferkämpfe, this remains Bullinger’s foundation also.

There is but one baptism, for once received it continues throughout man’s life, “a perpetual sealing of our adoption” (262:22). By it we are “enrolled, entered and received (inscribi, initiari, et recipi) into the covenant and family, and so into the inheritance, of the sons of God” (262:24f). Baptism involves purging, and grace “to lead a new and innocent life”. Its moral significance is matched in the Lord’s Supper by Bullinger’s stress on holiness of life and concord with the brethren. Such beginning and continuation of new life represents what the opening paragraph of the section on the sacraments had stated thus: by the sacraments God “gives us to understand what he requires of us” (259:9). Baptism recalls to mind the divine benefit, in forgiving sins so that children of wrath
should be adopted as his own sons. This gracious reality of "new life" is worked in us by the Holy Spirit, while outwardly the water seals these notable gifts, represents them and "sets them before our eyes to be looked upon" (262:37). Two comments are in order here, one ethical and one epistemological.

In terms of theory of knowledge, Bullinger shares the Reformed understanding of revelation as an accommodation through grace by which God humbles himself to the way of knowledge proper to human weakness. This not only provides him with an appreciation of the divine activity as gracious act, but also with an expectation that the divine being will remain distinct (though not necessarily separate) from the human materials of its revelation. In revelation itself, "we are warned not to stick upon those visible things, but to lift up our minds from visible things to things invisible and spiritual". The sacraments correspond to this essential shape of revelation, they do not introduce a different kind of knowledge or relationship. So the "sight" is most important in Bullinger's sacramental doctrine: by the sacraments, God represents or shows forth the Gospel, "outwardly represents, and, as it were, offers unto our sight those things which inwardly he performs unto us" (259:5f) — these introductory words he now repeats. He is aware of the role of the imagination, perhaps heightened in the sacraments, in drawing images from sight, and so probing the mystery of the divine activity and blessing. To those who would divorce "hearing" and "sight" as two separate ways of the knowledge of God, Bullinger would seem to object a harmony in which man's mind is served by a gracious God with those signs by which it may penetrate into the secret of who He is. Thus the analogy has force, as a guide to right faith: "the water makes clean what is filthy, and refreshes and cools the bodies that fail and faint. And the grace of God deals in like manner with the soul; and that invisibly and spiritually" (262:39ff).

The ethical import of the sacraments is an essential one for Bullinger. Baptism has a separative function as well as a unitive one — the baptized are "separated from all other religions and nations" (262:42f). The separation is a necessary component of the ethical nature of the Christian life: "to give unto God obedience, mortification of the flesh, and newness of life". The military analogy enters here: "we are soldiers for the holy warfare of Christ, that all our life long we should fight against the world, Satan, and our own flesh". This sancta Christi militia reminds us of Zwingli's teaching that baptism is a sign of allegiance, a tessera of the Christian soldier. Obdience is not an optional or accidental phenomenon of the new life, but its ordering principle. Christian theology, indeed, is a theology of obedience insofar as it honors this structure of new life. The sacraments in particular involve certain elements to which obedience is the key — their dominical institution for instance, which ties them to the Word in a historical as well as a theological way. As the terminus ad quem of the sacramental action, the new life to which both Baptism and the Supper introduce the man of faith and sustain his faithful obedience, is decisive for Bullinger's doctrine. Too often the "Swiss" view has been interpreted as subjective or anthropocentric, because it stressed the Christian life, the unity of the Church, the fellowship. While it remains true that this stress is attended by certain dangers not always perceived by Zwingli and later (to a lesser degree) by Bullinger, nevertheless this stress in itself is not sufficient reason to judge their doctrine as less than objective and theocentric. The new morality to which Bullinger refers time and again in these chapters is for him the guarantee that it is Christ the Lord with whom we have to do in the sacraments, his will and his Word that is primary, his presence that is acting on man.

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Three final paragraphs on baptism concern its form, its ministers, and the special case of the Anabaptists. The form of baptism should preserve the simplicity of Christ's own baptism and that which the apostles used. "Those things, therefore, which by man's invention were added afterwards and used in the church we do not consider necessary to the perfection of baptism" (263:3f). What renders such additions unnecessary is that original institution which Bullinger emphasized in the previous chapter. Baptism "was sanctified in God's first institution of it, and is consecrated by the Word, and is now of full force, by the first blessing of God upon it" (263:8ff). As to its administration, since it pertains to ecclesiastical offices, it should not be ministered by women or midwives, who are excluded by Paul from such callings. It is thus by implication that he denies any thought of baptismal regeneration. In his sermon on baptism he has a lengthy passage on this point, making much of the precedent of circumcision. An infant dying without the sacrament (e.g. before the eighth day on which circumcision was administered) has "no condemnation imputed" because he is "received into the covenant by the grace of God".  

There is no "pinch of necessity" which requires a departure from the orderliness of this church administration, and its appointed officers.

In a brief refutation of the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism, Bullinger simply summarizes his position by referring to the place of infants within covenant and church: "should not the sign of the covenant be given to them?" (263:17). Behind this lies a wealth of teaching and years of controversy. By this time he knows that his position is widely accepted, and little polemic is in order even if this were not the personal document it is. Apart from arguments from patristic custom, and exegesis of disputed texts, his general line of proof follows the unity of God's covenant-will, as we have seen. It is probably true that at this time, Bullinger's problem is not so much the Anabaptists themselves over the question of infant baptism, as the Lutheran charge that the Swiss are to be lumped together with the Anabaptists on the matter of the Lord's Supper. So he takes this opportunity to make a total separation between his position and theirs, even "in the rest of the peculiar opinions which they hold against the Word of God. We therefore are not Anabaptists, neither do we agree with them in any point that is theirs" (263:19ff)

**THE LORD'S SUPPER**

In chapter XXI the Confession turns to the issue which had become the test case in the Reformation. Even more than the *sola fide*, it was the Lord's Supper which served to put the question of orthodoxy between Roman and Protestant, between Lutheran and Reformed. Although Bullinger had been drawn into the Baptism controversy, remaining conscious of its importance in his role as Zwingli's successor, his continuing involvement in the Supper-Strife showed him the broad and complex issues at stake in its doctrine. As Calvin's ally since the 1549 Consensus, as England's advisor through letters and sermons, as the Lutherans' formidable opponent, he experienced the paradox of how complex this simple ceremony had become, how divisive was the table of unity. The controversy had been raging for almost forty years when he wrote the Confession. His heritage moved with him as he wrote: Zwingli and the Anabaptists; Marburg; debates over the Mass; Zürich and Geneva; Lutheran and Reformed camps. By now the struggle over the Mass has been won, at least in the sense of regional peace and unity. It is the bitter debate with the Lutherans over the mode of Christ's presence in the Supper that is in his mind in 1561.
Behind it lies the impasse and tragedy of Marburg. Luther had gone to Marburg fresh from his struggle with Carlstadt and the “Radical Reformation”, and met Zwingli in those terms — and even as late as the Formula of Concord, Lutheranism charged the Reformed Church with “sacramentarianism”. For his part, Zwingli had been fighting the extreme Roman doctrine of the Mass and met Luther as if his teaching belonged to that “physical” type, and involved a “repetition” of Calvary’s sacrifice. The shadow of Marburg lay over the subsequent debate with the Gnesio-Lutheran party. Identified more and more with Calvin (and Melanchthon), by 1561 Bullinger was caught in the strife that raged openly in Strassburg and the Palatinate, and between the various Lutheran and Reformed strongholds. He and Peter Martyr had become embroiled in a direct debate with Brenz over the nature of the risen body of Christ. The necessity of the manducatio impiorum, and the doctrine of ubiquity had become the Lutheran demands, in part related to the question of whether Article X of the Augustana Variata is a true interpretation of the original Confession of Augsburg. Into this controversy Bullinger does not enter directly here. The Confession is surprisingly cirenic on this point, refraining from explicit refutation of the Lutheran teaching, and instead developing positive doctrine according to careful distinction on the sacramental mode of communion. The concepts that mean so much in other respects — alloiosis, ubiquity, real and substantial presence — stand rather at the edge of this chapter, declared out of bounds by a man who knows them well but addresses himself to a different task than that represented by their unhappy history.

He begins — once again — with the sacrament’s divine author and the continuing power of his first institution. As Christ first consecrated the eucharist to his church, even so “that same consecration or blessing still remains among all those who celebrate no other supper but the same which the Lord instituted” (263:30ff). By this sacred rite God wills to keep the great benefit of Christ’s forgiveness and redemption “in fresh remembrance” (in recenti memoria). This remembrance, along with his feeding us with his own flesh and blood, is “apprehended spiritually, by a true faith” (263:40). The sacrament acts as a seal so that our faith should not waver. Here are the chief elements in Bullinger’s doctrine: Christ’s institution as a permanent power, sacramental action as remembrance and representation, and spiritual communion of faith which is itself strengthened and directed by the sacrament. Now by “remembrance”, Bullinger like Zwingli in his earlier controversies, does not intend to deny “presence” but only “repetition”; and by “spiritual” he does not intend to deny “real” but only “physical”. It is imperative to note what he intends to reject by these terms, various and ambiguous as was their use in the Supper-Strife. For example, in expounding the Zürich Consensus, Calvin had observed that when he said “spiritual”, the Lutherans “roar out as if by this term we were making it not to be what they commonly call real. If they will use real for true, and oppose it to fallacious or imaginary, we will rather speak barbarously than afford material for strife.” Thus the “real” presence was affirmed by both sides, but each sought to guarantee its truth from a different point in the christological circumference. Luther had followed the scholastic idea of substance (Wesen) as that which makes an entity what it is; there is even a divine substance. Following Zwingli, however, Bullinger (like Calvin) understood substance as personal; Christ is subjectus agens in the Supper, the res to whose reality man must be joined (“spiritually, by faith”) if there is to be new life. The debate on the eucharist was correct in forcing the issue back behind sacrament to christology, for it is the nature of
Christ the Lord, and his presence today that is at stake. But it was not correct in reviving patristic categories and parties (Nestorius, Eutyches!) as if the ancient christological struggle was sufficient as a plan of battle for all future generations. To be sure, only the unio hypostatica is worthy of proper eucharistic theology; but too often the Reformation debates involved such pride and such anger that the mystery was lost and they asked — and thought to answer — what Bonhoeffer called the fatal question of christology, the Wie-Frage.17

Bullinger proceeds, in the Confession, by drawing distinctions, first between the outward and the inward in the sacrament: outwardly represented by the signs, inwardly performed by the Spirit, 263:46 — 264:3. Then he contrasts various kinds of eating (Manducatio non est unius generis, 264:15ff). The faithful receive what is given; Christ himself as delivered for us is the praecipuum Coenae. The manner of such reception cannot be the corporeal eating, which Bullinger exemplifies by the Capernaite error refuted in John 6, and by the Roman error set forth in the notorious Ego Berengarius. For “neither godly antiquity believed, nor do we believe that the body of Christ is eaten corporeally or essentially, with bodily mouth” (264:24f). This is the first manner of eating: common, corporeal, proper to receive ordinary bread and wine.

“There is also a spiritual eating of Christ’s body”; the Holy Spirit applies and bestows (applicat et confert nobis) remission of sins, deliverance and life eternal. Christ lives in us and we in him; we apprehend him by true faith so that “he may become to us such spiritual meat and drink, that is to say, our life”. This vivifying nourishment constitutes the spiritual eating without which no man is saved. It is the doctrine of John 6, a crucial text which Bullinger now mentions. John 6 and I Corinthians 10 had been Zwingli’s “two plain Scriptures” concerning the essential communion of faith even apart from sacraments. Bullinger likewise comments, “this spiritual eating and drinking takes place also without the Lord’s Supper, as often as and wherever a man believes in Christ” (265:11). Faith is itself a communion, a spiritual eating — this is the definition which Bullinger brings to his doctrine of sacraments and which lies behind his emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s sovereign work without and within the sacramental action. We must be clear that he is not simply defining sacramental communion as “spiritual” (the Lutheran charge); he distinguishes the two kinds of eating, but since for him the spiritual eating is the key to everything else, therefore the sacramental depends on it. His strength lies in understanding the nature of faith as involving more than human attitudes or concepts, as being the reflex of a presence and a power which constitutes a continuous relationship to Christ. This very strength of his doctrine of faith is that which weakens the expression of his doctrine of the sacraments. When he moves into the description of the third kind of “eating”, the sacramental mode, he finds it difficult to say what else there can be beyond this spiritual eating, for which the sacraments are not necessary.

Yet he states clearly that the believer partakes not only of the spiritual food already noted, but in the sacrament “receives something more” (dum nunc sacramentum quoque accipit, non nihil accipit, 265:20f). What this means in positive and material terms he now tries to explain, though with indifferent success. The believer goes on in continuing communication of the Lord’s body and blood, his faith strengthened and refreshed by this spiritual nourishment, for “he that outwardly receives the sacrament
with true faith not only receives the sign but also enjoys (as we said) the thing itself" (24ff). Moreover, he obeys the Lord's command, with joyful mind gives thanks "for his redemption and that of all mankind", makes a faithful remembrance of the Lord's death, and witnesses this before the church. Finally, the work of Christ is sealed to those who receive the sacrament.

As the climax of the Confession's teaching on the sacraments this paragraph is disappointing. The logic of so marked an emphasis on the spiritual eating of John 6 had meant for Zwingli, and now seems to mean for Bullinger, an inability to make a convincing case for a distinctive benefit to sacramental eating, except as obedience to a divine command, or as a witness — involving that "symbolism" and "memorialism" decried by the Lutherans. The problem turns on Bullinger's stark statement that the spiritual eating takes place also extra Domini coenam (265:11). If there is no clear qualification of this it will mean that the sacramental eating is accidental to the spiritual, or simply a "special case" of the spiritual eating. A sort of gnosticism may even suggest itself, as if the sacraments are merely expendable aids to a higher knowledge — as in the First Helvetic Confession (I, 21, Of Holy Symbols) where they help us "understand the mysteries". How would he meet the Lutheran claim that, except in extremis, sacraments are necessary for true faith, for the spiritual eating? Apart from the question of whether Luther himself moved further along this way during his lifetime, it remains true that the Lutheran position regards the eating by unbelievers as the guarantee of the objective nature of the sacrament and of the necessity of coming to terms with this real presence. Modern Reformed theologians would be more ready to agree than was Bullinger — Gollwitzer has observed that the manducatio physica is the Realgrund of the manducatio spiritualis, while Torrance has contrasted the blessing and judgment received in the Supper: "there would be no judgment in the Supper if the Body and Blood were not extended to or partaken of by the unbelieving recipient". Bullinger's paragraph on this topic of the unbelievers, however, remains within the dichotomy of outward sacrament and res sacramenti. Unbelievers receive the first but not the second, and yet "eat and drink condemnation to themselves" (265:41).

Bullinger seems content to move within the framework set forth in the Zürich Consensus: "by the secret agency of his Spirit he makes the elect receive what the sacraments offer ... all are not capable of receiving Christ and his gifts" (16,18). Although he does not introduce the doctrine of election at this point, Bullinger no doubt proceeds against the background of his stress on the divine will, so that everything in sacramental doctrine hinges on the divine institution, the covenantal ordinances established by God in the holy history. Once again, this is his strength — the divine action! Yet through certain differences in emphasis and general approach, it leads him to a different evaluation of the sacraments in the divine economy from that which a similar emphasis on the divine action and will led Luther. Karl Barth has described the confrontation as one between a Lutheran Yes and a Reformed But. Historically, however, Luther himself interpreted Zwingli's But — with a certain degree of justification — as a mere negation, a simple No. Each of the giants at Marburg retreated into a cul-de-sac, and it is this posture which Bullinger reflects at certain points. Barth's conclusion is that "when the last word falls, the Lutheran Yes may be crossed with the Reformed But — not with No — to complete and explain it..."
One further aspect of Bullinger’s teaching in the Confession should be noted. In the middle of this paragraph on the “sacramental eating of the Lord”, he has one brief sentence which suggests a deeper level to his thought: “For while we live, faith has continual increasings” (265:23). What does he mean by these accessiones? Is there some increment or addition to faith, something to be added to the “spiritual eating” on which he has placed the whole weight of argument? If so, then here is one place at which he makes a much stronger case for the necessity and value of the sacraments than we had suggested. Indeed this is his view, in common with Calvin and Peter Martyr — there is a definite increase of faith effected by sacraments, which the Holy Spirit uses as instruments or helps or seals. The problematic nature of this idea comes from the Reformers’ insistence that only the Spirit can sanctify, so that their jealousy over his unique role often led them to speak as if the earthly elements which he uses as instruments are less than his use actually makes them. Thus the Zürich Consensus speaks positively of the sacramental work of increasing faith in section after section, but at every point feels constrained to qualify lest it attribute too much: the Spirit “uses them as helps; in such manner, however, that the whole power of acting remains with him alone” (12); “they will profit nothing, unless God in all things makes them effectual” (13); “Christ alone... fulfils what the sacraments figure” (14); “all these attributes of the sacraments sink down to a lower place, so that not even the smallest portion of our salvation is transferred to creatures or elements” (15).

Bullinger’s fear is that the sola fide will be jeopardized by too much emphasis on the sacramental elements, their nature and efficacy. Here he reminds us of Zwingli’s conviction that those who desired a bodily presence in the Supper were looking back to the fleshpots of Egypt, to nature, to earthly securities and grounds for faith. He once remarked, “I wish the Germans had never allowed the word sacramentum into their vocabulary” because it inevitably suggested some holy entity, with intrinsic power. Here, then, is the radical nature of justification by faith, that in sacramental doctrine it insists on a corresponding “sanctification by faith alone”. If he has inherited something of Zwingli’s reticence on the question of creaturely means of divine grace, Bullinger has inherited also Zwingli’s genuine understanding of the mystery, “cet élément objectif”, the lordly presence of Christ, who will not tolerate any other claim to provide a “means” of grace, a channel of blessing, a power of sanctification. Because this stemmed from the Reformed grasp of the truth of the divine sovereignty or predestination, it served to produce a spirituality relatively free from mysticism and pietism. Perhaps it is well to make clear this relative judgment on the historical process by which the Reformed doctrine of “union with Christ” issued in moral emphases and postures, while the same in Lutheranism tended to have pietistic and psychologistic overtones, as Wilhelm Niesel has suggested.

“We do not have the supper without Christ” (266:6f). When describing the presence of Christ in the supper, Bullinger introduces the Ascension, to which our appropriate response is the lifting up of hearts (Sursum ergo elevanda sunt corda). “Yet the Lord is not absent from the church when she celebrates the Supper. The sun, being absent from us in the heavens, is yet, notwithstanding, present among us effectually: how much more (quanto magis) Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, though absent from us in body in the heavens, yet is present among us not corporeally but spiritually, by his lively operation,
and so as he himself promised in his Last Supper, to be present among us (John 14, 15, 16)” (266:1ff). This typical Reformed appeal to the ascension of our Lord is presented here with a minimum of polemical purpose. The analogy of the sun indicates Bullinger's desire to make a case for the presence — no “real absence” is intended here! Neither does he insist on locale, on a literal placing of Christ's body in the heavens, the sort of argument which Luther had scornfully dismissed as “geometry” — and which elsewhere, he uses too freely.24 The First Helvetic Confession had also declared that “we do not take the Lord away from his church”. He is here; but in his lordly presence, through the Spirit; not because of any power of the elements over him.

Once again the sacramental doctrine hinges on the question of the relation between sign and reality. Bullinger states his case simply: they are not joined nisi ratione sacramentali (265:44). What is this “sacramental ratio”? The First Helvetic had also taught a mystical mean or sacramental union (e.g. article 22), while in his sermon ‘Of Signs’, Bullinger had been careful to show the nature and connection of the sacramental relation with both analogy and anagogy.25 But he does not place the cause of this relation in any formula of institution or rite of consecration. As we have seen, he accepts the will of God as author and consecrator of the sacraments to be the continuing power constituting such relation and making it effective. In a perceptive sentence of our Confession he writes of the unio sacramentalis as involving both points: “united by a mystical signification, and by the purpose or will of him who instituted the sacraments” (261:10f). Because of this will, the sacramental relation is both meaningful and dependent. In the sermon mentioned above, he discusses the analogy operative in the sacrament, by which bread and wine function in a paradigmatic, even indispensable way; they may be said to “join us visibly to God and all the saints”.26 Again he writes that Christ is present “in the action also of the supper . . . Christ's body is eaten and his blood drunk spiritually; it is also eaten and drunken sacramentally”.27

The resolution of this problem of sacramental relation lies for Bullinger in a consideration of the purpose of the sacrament, its chief end. Two words could sum up: celebration and unity. It is because he is chiefly concerned for thanksgiving by the community and for concord among the brethren that he tends to be impatient with lesser questions of “substantial” presence or the quality of sacramental elements through consecration. Helvetic I had stated: “we rejoice with a joy that cannot be expressed in words, for that life that we have found” (art. 22). In our Confession also his usual term is celebratio, which in the Latin has almost this double meaning of gathering or community as well as festive celebration. Bullinger keeps the two together, for the believing community is the key to “body” of Christ, the necessary context for understanding his presence in the present age.28 In a sermon he says: “For now not by words, but by deeds also, but by mystery, but by sacrament, we are very nearly knit and joined together”.29 And in the Second Helvetic: “we are admonished, in the celebration of the supper, to be mindful of the body whereof we are members; and that, therefore, we should be at concord with our brethren . . .” (266:9ff). Accordingly, there follows a section on “preparation for the supper” in which we are called to examine ourselves, as to belief and its assurance, desire to live a holy life,
“and to persevere through God’s help, in true religion and concord with his brethren, and to offer worthy thanks to God for deliverance” (266:19ff).

The note of the unity of the body brings the Confession’s sacramental teaching to a close, except for brief notes on “the observance of the supper with both bread and wine”. Bullinger’s emphasis on the fellowship is a primary datum for his theology, for koinonia is a reflex of grace, an effect of the Holy Spirit, passive rather than active, as he notes in a clear passage on the word and its German translation (Gemeind is better than Gemeinschaft). It is significant also that the Confession proceeds, in Chapter XXII, to speak of liturgical matters. The sacraments have their place on the community’s way from ministry to liturgy, as the chief task of the stewards of the mysteries, and the principal form of the church’s liturgy.

Bullinger’s restraint in the Confession, in refraining from polemics and concentrating on the positive confession of faith as the proper approach to sacramental communion with Christ, provides us with an illuminating document in assessing his place in the complex of Reformation struggles. His careful distinctions — the secret of good theology! — handle traditional categories such as signum and res significata as well as distinctively Reformed categories such as old and new sacraments within one covenant, in ways that serve to integrate them with a bold attempt to honor the insights of justification by faith. The question at issue turns on the meaning of “spiritual”. We have noted the ambiguity in the sixteenth century use of this term and its cognate vocabulary. In Bullinger’s case, it is never divorced from the office of the Holy Spirit, and therefore signifies an objective element, a divine referent. It characterizes his methodology in handling the doctrine of sacraments, insofar as he begins with the conviction that since only the Spirit sanctifies, nothing earthly can be a “cause of grace”. And although, we saw, this faces him with a seeming paradox in that sacraments therefore appear to be superfluous, he meets the problem partly in terms of the divine accommodation to human weakness and partly in terms of the divine will in establishing specific ordinances. The weakness here is the failure to relate more positively the creaturely elements in those ordinances and that accommodation. He thus reflects Zwingli’s somewhat superficial statement, which he quotes approvingly in a sermon: “it does not offend us, though all those things which the Holy Spirit works be referred to the external sacrament, as long as we understand them to be spoken figuratively (symbolice dicta), as the fathers said”. The need here is for a further distinction yielding a more precise exposition of the creaturely signs as more than “bare” or “empty” — as both Zwingli and Bullinger insisted often enough— because they have a special status within the divine economy; the modern distinction between “sign” and “symbol” attempts to do this.

The Confession therefore, as Jacques Courvoisier has stated, is a child of its age, in its categories and limits of argument: “Elle est du seizième siècle et elle en est bien”. If Bullinger in the Confession had emphasized the eschatological element in the sacraments as he does in his sermons, the chapters we have studied would have gained immeasurably in power. For he sees the work of the Spirit in uniting us with Christ in the present age as part of the larger question of the nature of this age in the light of the future. Thus: “the Lord’s body which was given for us, the remembrance whereof is celebrated in the mystical supper, is not present, but is looked for to come”. He “comes again” only for judgment, at the End, and therefore we dare not
seek direct contact with his "physical" body here and now. Rather, "he is joined unto our hearts and minds by his Spirit; for it were of none effect that he remained in the bread". Like Luther's pro me, this note sounds of grace, for it is finally a question of benefit, of the will of God in his love towards us. The hidden presence of Christ, so aptly expressed by this reticence of Bullinger in stressing the logical and theological priority of spiritual over sacramental eating, is itself a matter of divine grace. We ask too much when we ask for a more "substantial" presence, indeed we ask for we know not what, for judgment. The very hiddenness and spirituality of the presence is for him a mark of God's love and an occasion for thanksgiving. Sacraments are an ordinance which show forth the gentle will of God towards man as nothing else can; for they themselves are part of the Spirit's work of uniting us to Christ our Savior.

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Notes
1 Text used is the Latin of W. Niesel (ed.), Bekenntnisschreiben und Kirchenordnungen, Zürich-Zollikon, E.V.Z. Verlag; references are to page and line numeration. Cf. also A.C. Cochrane, Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century, Philadelphia, Westminster, 1966.

4 Cf. Consensus Tigurinus art. IX; the signs and the things signified not disjoined but distinct; cf. also Calvin's 'Exposition of the heads of agreement', in Tracts and Treatises, trans. H. Beveridge, Edinburgh 1849, vol. 2, p 224.
5 e.g. Sermon 'Of the Holy Ghost', in Decades IV, Sermon 8; cf. also E. Koch, op. cit., pp 215ff.
7 Cf. J.C. McLelland, The Visible Words of God, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd 1957, pp 31ff, 194ff regarding Peter Martyr Vermigli's detailed refutation of the theory.
8 Cf. Sermon 'Of Baptism', in Decades V, Sermon 8; cf. also J. Staedtke, op. cit., pp 277ff.
9 e.g. Sermon 'Of God and the Knowledge of God', in Decades IV, Sermon 3; cf. also J.C. McLelland, op. cit., pp 71ff for Peter Martyr's epistemology and its significance for his sacramental teaching.
10 Decades IV, p 138.

13 H. Zwingli, Von Dem Touff; Vom Widertouff und Vom Kindertouff, 1525. Melanchthon had earlier (Loci Comm. 1521) called sacraments tesserae militares.
15 Decades V, Sermon 8, p 372ff.
16 Cf. Decades V, p 381ff regarding infant baptism, 393ff for a history of anabaptism.
20 Cf. 'Luther's Doctrine of the Eucharist: its Basis and Purpose', in Theology and Church, 1923; (transl. from "Die Theologie und die Kirche", Munich 1928).
over the means of grace is a crucial one in Zwingli's sacramental doctrine. It links up with his strong doctrine of predestination."


14 e.g. Decades V, Sermon 9, p 453. It had been one of Martin Bucer's criticisms of the Consensus Tigurinus that it tended towards an undue emphasis on the locale of Christ's ascended humanity: "Let them not make a new article of faith concerning the certain place of heaven in which the body of Christ is contained"; in Letter to Calvin of 14 August 1549, text in Corpus Reformatorum, vol. XLI, pp 350ff.

15 Decades V, Sermon 6, p 244; cf. pp 314, 328ff.

16 Ibid., p 233.

17 Ibid., pp 452, 463 (Sermon 9).


19 Decades V, Sermon 9, p 468.

30 Decades V, Sermon 7, pp 336ff.

31 Ibid., p 296.

32 Ibid., p 326.

33 The classical and traditional distinction, in which "sign" was the stronger word (continuing the Biblical weight of semeion) and "symbol" a weaker, is usually reversed today, e.g. in Paul Tillich's thought. The distinction itself, however, must be made, in order that we acknowledge a category of arbitrary and dispensable signs over against one of natural and necessary symbols, familiar in philosophy and sociology today.

34 In p 16 of the Introduction to the French edition of 'La confession helvétique postérieure', in Cahiers Théologiques de l'actualité Protestante, 1944.

35 Decades V, pp 417, 446ff.