

## JOHANNES OECOLAMPADIUS: CHRISTOLOGY AND THE SUPPER

*by Nicholas Piotrowski*

IT IS SAID that Johannes Oecolampadius had “a very substantial role to play in the establishment of Calvinism,” but has “for the most part [been] ignored” in Reformation studies.<sup>1</sup> The author of these words, together with the other contributors to the 348 page book in which they are found, ironically ignore him.<sup>2</sup> And though Oecolampadius was the lead reformer of Basel, “the mother city of learning” (by virtue of its universities, printing presses,<sup>3</sup> and the way it served as temporary harbor for scholars of every stripe from the Catholic-leaning Desiderius Erasmus to the Reformer William Farel to the Anabaptist Hans Denck), he does not even get his own chapter in David C. Steinmetz’s book devoted to other Reformers who have historically been eclipsed by the greater lights of that age.<sup>4</sup> It seems this neglect has led to simplistic caricatures of Oecolampadius as Zwingli’s unoriginal disciple and Calvin’s simple promoter. Overlooked are Oecolampadius’s contribution to the Eucharistic debates of the 1520s and his implicit Christology evinced thereby. He did *not* simply follow Zwingli in his doctrine of the Supper, but deviated in a significant way that made him a *forerunner* to Calvin’s doctrine of the spiritual presence of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Brian G. Armstrong, “Calvin and Calvinism,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research II* (ed. William S. Maltby; vol. 3 of *Reformation Guides to Research*; St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1992), 79.

2. The perception is doubly ironic because Oecolampadius died before Calvin ever left Paris, let alone wrote the *Institutes* or taught in his academy or sent out a missionary. How then did he *establish Calvinism*? This article argues, in part, that more than establish Calvinism, Oecolampadius helped to construct it.

3. Cf. Thomas A. Fudge, “Icarus of Basel? Oecolampadius and the Early Swiss Reformation,” *Journal of Religious History* 21 (1997): 271.

4. David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings: From Geiler von Kayersberg to Theodore Beza* (2d. ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Fudge (“Icarus,” 269, 284) wonders if Oecolampadius’s reputation was permanently soiled in the eyes of subsequent generations by Luther’s rants against him in the Eucharistic controversy. But that cannot be a sufficient reason; who did Luther *not* castigate in some manner or another?

5. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., “Oecolampadius, Johannes,” *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1182. Fudge (“Icharus,” 274) identifies Oecolampadius as an influence on Thomas Cranmer as well.

In this article I will briefly situate Oecolampadius's life among the frenetic events of the early sixteenth century, and then use his involvement in the Eucharistic debate as a window into his Christology.

## 1. Reformer of Basel

Johannes Oecolampadius was born Johannes Huszgen in Weinsberg in 1482.<sup>6</sup> He excelled greatly in his early education and drew the attention of such scholars as Philip Melancthon, Johannes Reuchlin, and Wolfgang Capito.<sup>7</sup> By 1515 he had already become a master of Greek, Hebrew and Latin, so much so that he was the only one suitable enough to help Erasmus with the notes of his seminal Greek New Testament.<sup>8</sup> Reuchlin and Melancthon both attempted to persuade him to take a post teaching Hebrew at Wittenberg.<sup>9</sup> Instead he became the cathedral preacher and confessor at Augsburg.<sup>10</sup> During the years that followed, his love for the Fathers gave birth to many translations of their works. Then suddenly in 1520, to everyone's surprise, Oecolampadius entered the Bridgettine Cloister at Altomünster, supposedly to avoid having to take a position on Luther's doctrines.<sup>11</sup>

In the monastery, this man of great learning was a "pike among minnows."<sup>12</sup> He continued to study the Fathers and Luther, the latter of which wrote to him there.<sup>13</sup> He, however, reached out to Zwingli.<sup>14</sup> By 1522, realizing that the monastic life was not for him, he asked his "brothers" to expel him, which they gladly did.<sup>15</sup> He returned to Basel, and in 1524 his very-well-attended sermons on Isaiah were

6. Robert C. Walton, "Oecolampadius, Johannes," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed., Hans J. Hillebrand, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3:139. K. R. Hagenbach (*History of the Reformation in Germany and Switzerland Chiefly* [trans. Evelina Moore; 2 vols.; Clark's Foreign Theological Library 59; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1878], 1:275) states that his surname was *Hausschein*.

7. Walton, "Oecolampadius," 3:169.

8. Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 9.

9. Walton, "Oecolampadius," 170. One can only speculate how the Reformation might have developed differently if the mild-mannered Oecolampadius had joined the rowdy Wittenbergers.

10. Cross and Livingstone, "Oecolampadius," 1182; Walton, "Oecolampadius," 170.

11. Cross and Livingstone, "Oecolampadius," 1182. Perhaps Erasmus—whom he greatly admired—had rubbed off on him such that he too wanted to stay neutral. Perhaps he wanted to emulate the solitary contemplative life he observed in some of the Fathers. Either way, no one who knew him foresaw this monastic retreat.

12. Rupp, *Patterns*, 16.

13. Fudge, "Icarus," 271.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Rupp, *Patterns*, 17. The monks did not understand why he was there any more than his scholarly colleagues did. He was critical of their practices, he got special allowances, and they could not understand why he was studying Luther. They thought him a heretic more suited for the dungeon than the monastery (Fudge, "Icarus," 270). Interestingly, Charles V's confessor, Glapio, also met him at Bridgettine and accused him *at Worms* of being a Lutheran (Hagenbach, *History*, 1:277)! He would later deny such a charge before Johann Eck (Walton, *Oecolampadius*, 171).

accused of having “smelt of Lutheranism.”<sup>16</sup> On All Souls Sunday of that same year he replaced the Mass with the Lord’s Supper.<sup>17</sup> Basel was on its way to reform.

In late November of 1524 Zwingli and Oecolampadius met, where they discovered that they already shared strikingly similar views of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>18</sup> The following year Oecolampadius wrote his treatise on the Supper, *De genuine verborum Domini: Hoc est corpus meum*,<sup>19</sup> the contents of which I will consider below. Suffice it for now to comment on its divisive results. The faculty of the University of Paris condemned it; Erasmus wrote against it; the city council of Basil forbade its printing and circulation.<sup>20</sup> For his part Martin Bucer, sensing how it could divide his reforming friends, wrote to Luther, Zwingli, and Oecolampadius concerning *how* they ought to respond to each other vis-à-vis this matter.<sup>21</sup>

By 1529 the dispute had so divided the Swiss from the Wittenbergers that few were hopeful of reconciliation. Philip of Hesse, however, earnestly wanting a “pan-Protestant” alliance, called for a summit meeting at his castle in Marburg in October 1529.<sup>22</sup> Fourteen points of theology were agreed upon. Sadly, though, the issue of the presence of Christ in the Supper was enough of a wedge between the parties.

I am tempted to continue to narrate more intriguing details of Oecolampadius’s life—such as how he was a forerunner to Calvin in the areas of church government and discipline, how he got the nickname “John the Apostle of the Reformation” because of his *love* even for the Anabaptists,<sup>23</sup> and how he married Wibrandis Rosenblatt, former wife of Martin Cellarius and subsequent wife of Wolfgang Capito and Martin Bucer.<sup>24</sup> But this should be enough to introduce us to

16. Hagenbach, *History*, 1:334–35.

17. Walton, “Oecolampadius,” 170.

18. Rupp, *Patterns*, 24. Fudge (“Icarus,” 273) claims that Oecolampadius set forth the idea of the localized body of Christ in one place before Zwingli did. Perhaps they were both influenced by Cornelius Hoen, a Dutch Reformer, who in the autumn of 1524 wrote Zwingli a letter which contained a symbolic interpretation of the Supper. It is rumored that Oecolampadius read the same letter; it was no federal offence in the 16th century to read other people’s mail while it was en route, if only one could so exert their influence on the currier (Rupp, *Patterns*, 23).

19. Hagenbach, *History*, 1:365.

20. Fudge, “Icarus,” 272.

21. Walton, “Oecolampadius,” 170; Rupp, *Patterns*, 25. To give a further sense of just how scared people were of this new teaching, it is worth noting that Basel had been the center of publication for Luther’s works (Walton, “Oecolampadius,” 170). Suddenly, here was something more threatening than even Luther! It had to be published in Straßburg instead (Hagenbach, *History*, 1:367).

22. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1988), 150.

23. Fudge, “Icarus,” 282.

24. Rupp, *Patterns*, 8. If behind every great man stands a greater woman, then this Fräulein did quadruple-duty for the Reformation!

the man and his times, and orient us toward considering his Christology implicit in his doctrine of the Eucharist.

## 2. On the Supper

First we will look at Oecolampadius's doctrine of the Eucharist, then three stimuli that shaped it, and finally its roots in Patristic Christology.

Oecolampadius's view is not synonymous with Zwingli's, for he advocated more than a symbolic view of the Supper. In his 1525 treatise, *De genuine verborum Domini: Hoc est corpus meum*, Oecolampadius taught that the broken bread does indeed direct believers to the body of Christ. It is not, however, the resurrected and ascended body of Christ, but the broken body on the cross to which thoughts are directed.<sup>25</sup> Christ's body is only in heaven. The bread and the wine *symbolize* the body and the blood, yet Christ is indeed present *spiritually* and believers eat of him *by faith*.<sup>26</sup> Where he differs from Luther is obvious. He differs from Zwingli on two points. First, Oecolampadius saw the trope not in the verb (*est*) but in the predicate (*corpus*).<sup>27</sup> The difference here is subtle. Where Zwingli interpreted *hoc est corpus meum* to mean "This *signifies* my body," Oecolampadius interpreted it to mean "This is my body *symbolized*." Secondly, Oecolampadius taught that Christ truly was present *spiritually, through faith* in the eating and drinking.<sup>28</sup> Oecolampadius even finds occasion to make this point when preaching on Isaiah 6 in 1525:

He touched the mouth of the prophet, by which sign he might be cleansed, in which way also to us Christ instituted sacred σφραγιδας [seals] for strengthening the infirmity of our conscience. But no one is touched or receives worthily, except by faith.<sup>29</sup>

Oecolampadius came to his conclusion via three avenues. His first concern was hermeneutical. As mentioned above, Oecolampadius saw a trope in Matthew 26:26, Mark 14:22, and Luke 22:19, just as he did in John 6:50–55<sup>30</sup> which is promptly followed up with clari-

25. Summary of *De genuine verborum Domini* from Hagenbach, *History*, 1:365–67.

26. Walton, "Oecolampadius," 170.

27. Fudge, "Icarus," 272.

28. *Ibid.*, 273–74.

29. Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam Prophetam HUPOMNEMATON, hoc est, Commentariorum, Ioannis Oecolampadii Libri VI* (Basel: Andreas Cratander, 1525), 60 [trans. Vern S. Poythress and Diane M. Poythress; cited 14 February 2008]. Online: <http://www.frame-poythress.org/oe6.html>.

30. "This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is

fyng words in John 6:63—"It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life (RSV)." Thus, to Oecolampadius, the accidents are inconsequential without the Spirit. Had Christ meant that his body was in the bread, he could have said "*In* this bread is my body."<sup>31</sup> At the Marburg Colloquy, Luther insisted that the debate revolve around what the Bible says.<sup>32</sup> Oecolampadius was happy to oblige, saying:

The sixth chapter of John explains the other passage of Scripture. Christ does not speak there of a local presence. He says, 'The flesh profiteth nothing.' I do not want to appeal to reason or geometry—I do not deny the power of God—but because I possess the sum total of faith I speak out of it. Christ is risen and is sitting at the right hand of the Father; consequently he is not in the bread. Our point of view is neither new nor against God; it rests upon faith and Scripture. One must proceed from a carnal eating to spiritual eating. The holy Scriptures use figures of speech, metaphors, metonymies, and the like, where the words mean something else than they say. Thus it is possible that the words 'This is my body' are figurative speech, as we find it in some other passages: 'John is Elias' (Matt. 11.14); 'I am the vine' (John 15.1); 'The rock is Christ (I Cor. 10.4); 'The seed is the Word of God' (Luke 8.11).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, to the Basel Reformer his view of the Supper was the child of his Renaissance learning. To the fountains. To the text. To cogent hermeneutics.

Secondly, Oecolampadius saw this interpretation in the Fathers he so loved and long translated, namely Tertullian and Augustine, but also Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Chrysostom.<sup>34</sup> In them he saw precedent for his hermeneutic.<sup>35</sup>

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my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed (RSV)."

31. Hagenbach, *History*, 1:367.

32. Oecolampadius was really out-matched in temperament with Luther. Luther set the agenda and asked all the questions. Oecolampadius was constantly on his heels, answering questions and defending his answers. He never himself pressed Luther the way Luther pressed him. A reconstruction of the debate can be found in Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation in its Own Words* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 155–60.

33. Translated and printed in Hillerbrand, *Reformation*, 157.

34. Rupp, *Patterns*, 2, 42–43; Fudge, "Icarus," 272. This link to the Fathers is also a contribution beyond Zwingli's.

35. Rupp, *Patterns*, 25; Fudge, "Icarus," 273.

Finally, Oecolampadius was concerned not to deify a part of creation, and instead taught that Christ is *bodily* in heaven.<sup>36</sup>

Of a *bodily* presence of Christ since His exaltation to heaven, the Scripture say nothing; in fact, the contrary is affirmed. Not until the last day will the Lord truly appear again in the body [this creation]. Till then we must think of Him in heaven. Our faith is thus directed to Christ and His reconciling passion, and not to a participation in His body in the Lord's Supper. He is Himself the true bread of our souls, feeding us now with faith and hereafter with eternal glory.<sup>37</sup>

In a 1527 letter he wrote:

I believe the natural body of Christ to be in one place, namely heaven: otherwise there would be no true body. I freely confess the Body of Christ to be present in the bread in that mode in which it is present in the Word itself, through which the bread becomes a sacrament and a visible word. Through faith the Body of Christ which is absent as it can be is as present as it can be to the soul.<sup>38</sup>

Herein, do we not see less of Zwingli's student and more of Calvin's teacher? Christ is both absent physically and also present spiritually, apprehended not by touch or taste but by faith. Thus, the "true body" is preserved.

To summarize, Oecolampadius arrived at a proto-Calvinistic understanding of the Supper as a result of three stimuli. One was his hermeneutic, another his devotion to the Fathers, and a third to his insistence that Christ's natural body can only be in one place at one time, namely in heaven, after the resurrection. It is this final consideration that invites further reflection.

### 3. Nicene and Chalcedonian Commitments

It appears to me that Oecolampadius, in the Supper, did right not only by Chalcedonian Christology, but also by Niceno-Constantinopolitan Trinitarianism. He indeed affirmed the presence of Christ in the meal, but did so with respect for the full and very real humanity

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36. Hagenbach, *History*, 1:366–67.

37. Johannes Oecolampadius, *De genuine verborum Domini: Hoc est corpus meum, etc., juxta vetustissimos auctores expositione liber* (translated and printed in Hagenbach, *History*, 1:367).

38. Ernst Staehelin, ed., *Briefe und Akten zum Leben Oekolampads: Zum vierhundertjährigen Jubiläum der Basler Reformation II (Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte XI; New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971), no. 470* (translated and printed in Rupp, *History*, 27).

of Christ and with recourse to the *oneness* of the Godhead. To have Christ present does not necessitate a *bodily* presence. In fact, his humanity confines him to one spatial location. Whereas being *homousios* with the Father and Spirit, Christ can be present where the Spirit is present. Thus Oecolampadius deftly navigates many mysteries yet has no need for obtuse Aristotelianism. Could it be that Luther's doctrine of the Supper was hindered because he did not see any recourse to the presence of Christ in Trinitarian terms? In this neglect, does Luther not make a slight Chalcedonian misstep, even in his attempt to aggressively defend the humanity of Christ?<sup>39</sup> Or would he direct his rant against me as well for saying such things? Perhaps my reader of a more cordial generation will be gentler in assessing my argument.

On November 23, 1531 Johannes Oecolampadius "entered the true presence,"<sup>40</sup> only weeks after Zwingli. Two years later Calvin fled Paris and took up in Switzerland where Oecolampadius and Zwingli left off. Of course, more could be said about the battles Oecolampadius fought on many other Reformation fronts. He was the instrument that God was pleased to use to reform Basel, a very significant 16<sup>th</sup> century European city, in many ways the kindling of the blaze that would become Geneva.

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39. That is, when Luther was challenged as to why he believed it necessary to have Christ present in the Supper, he is alleged to have bellowed, "I know of no God except the one who became man, and I want none other!" (George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 155). But if he can be present everywhere, what kind of *man* is he?

40. Rupp, *Patterns*, 43.