

# A Brief and Necessary Commentary on the Words of Acts 3:



**“Christ must receive heaven.”**

***Nikolaus Selnecker***

*Aaron T. Fenker, Translator*



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by Dr. Nikolaus Selnecker

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Translated by

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For Sarah, whom the Lord gifted to me (Prov 31:10), as well as the children with whom He has filled our home and hearts (Ps 128).

οὐ γάρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, δύναμις γάρ θεοῦ ἐστιν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι. (Rom 1:16)

**עלית לאروم שכיבת שבי ל夸חת מתקנות באדם ולאף סוררים לשכון יה אלהים :** (Ps 68:19)

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

## **Translator's Preface**

This work offers background information for anyone who wants to understand *The Formula of Concord* in a more in-depth way. The length of history surrounding the necessity of *The Formula of Concord* is not long, only about 40 years. The arguments, however, were broad, and the people involved in these debates were many. The battle lines were sharply drawn, and there were many theological skirmishes happening alongside major offensives, all at roughly the same time. Arguments from that time, even those within *The Formula of Concord*, may at times seem overly technical, straining out the gnat of theological minutia, as it were, but these are simply the battle scars or battle reports of the far reaching theological war over the truth of the Gospel. Thus, there is much behind even a seemingly simple and mundane point, thesis, or antithesis within *The Formula of Concord*.

Such the case with Selnecker's *A Brief and Necessary Commentary on the Words of Acts 3*. His work offers helpful background information to the debate surrounding Antithesis 8 of Solid Declaration: VII. The Lord's Supper (SD VII § 119). Therein it is stated that Acts 3:21 should be translated, "Christ must [receive] heaven," and the translation "Christ must be received by heaven" should be rejected. No further explanation is given within the Solid Declaration. Thus, Selnecker's commentary offers more insight into the rationale for this Antithesis.

In my Lutheran seminary training, the "proper translation" of Acts 3:21 ("Christ must [receive] heaven") was mentioned, along with what Solid Declaration VII § 119 says. This "proper translation" was mostly assumed, although the English Standard Version, the main translation of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, translates this passage, "whom heaven must receive." Due to a lack of time—much ground to cover in LCMS Seminary academics—or to a failed recollection on my part because of the intervening years, I could not recall any further commentary regarding the translation, beyond how the battle report of SD VII § 119 gives it.

Such assumptions of translation are not helpful. Assumptions breed academic laziness on two fronts. First is the idea that this does not matter, since it is only about theological, ivory tower minutia. Second, there is the thinking that no further thought is required since the only correct answer was already given at seminary. Thus, no further "why" is required. Such assumptions also foster an "us (Lutheran) vs them (Reformed)" mentality, and due to the aforementioned academic laziness, there is no ability to attempt a resolution or even have a meaningful discussion.

Personally speaking, such assumptions have never worked for me. This is especially so when it comes to the translation of God's Word, wherein "the mighty works of God" promised and delivered in Jesus Christ are being delivered "in our own language" (Acts 2:11). How to translate, therefore, is of the utmost importance! As Luther once said, "Neglect the languages, lose the Gospel."<sup>1</sup> Now, according to the original grammar of Acts 3:21, I understand from an overly technical aspect that it could be rendered either as the Formula demands or as most other modern translations do. Why, then, choose one over the other?

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<sup>1</sup> AE 45, 120.

Now, while a Lutheran understanding of “why” can be gleaned from SD VII § 119 itself and other Lutheran writings from the time (e.g., Martin Chemnitz’s *Lord’s Supper*), a direct explication of the translation choice was, in my estimation, sadly lacking. Moreover, theological assumptions are neither right nor safe for those who teach and those who learn. Thus, I was delighted to find Selnecker’s *Brief and Necessary Commentary on the Words of Acts 3* during my research for my Master of Sacred Theology thesis. I had always been puzzled by SD VII § 119, and Selnecker’s work offers this much-needed clarification.

My work is indebted to the work of Dr. Henning Jürgens. While PDF scans are available of the original work, Dr. Jürgens digitized the text.<sup>2</sup> This was helpful in a couple ways. First, his digitization made it possible for me to read some of the Greek portions of the text, since the Greek font used the 16th century is difficult to read. Second, he included footnotes to the text. However, since his lengthy footnotes are in German, and I am scarcely skilled or qualified to work with that language, I have simplified Dr. Jürgens footnotes, only citing original works for the Church Fathers or, if possible, the theologians of the Selnecker’s time.

I hope that Selnecker’s work is not simply a means for greater insight and clarity to the translation of Acts 3:21, or the theological background to SD VII § 119, though this was the impetus for my work. Most importantly, I hope that it would bring the comfort of our Savior Jesus Christ not just to the so-called professional theologians but also to the pious lay theologian. (All Christians are theologians.)

For the sake of the Gospel, that you and I would believe who Christ is, who is He is for us, and what He delivers to us in His Supper, much blood, sweat, tears, and even ink have been spilled throughout history. While not much ink, relatively speaking, was spilled by Selnecker on this work, he did it with the hope that faith in Christ would be strengthened not only through the proper understanding of Acts 3:21, but also through the proper preaching and teaching of the Supper of Jesus’ body and blood. Thus, it is fitting to conclude with Selnecker’s own prayer—his own conclusion to *A Brief and Necessary Commentary on the Words of Acts 3*:

We pray You, O Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, that You would be and remain with us, protect Your omnipotence and truth, and unite our hearts to the glory and praise of Your name. Sanctify us and preserve us in the once acknowledged truth, the confession of doctrine, and the simplicity of clear and uncorrupted faith, and do not allow us, because of any fear or peril, to be divided from the truth of Your Word and even by sorrow from its meditation, as David says.<sup>3</sup> Amen.

The Week of Trinity 14, 2022 (August 18)

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<sup>2</sup> Digitization available at <http://diglib.hab.de/edoc/ed000211/start.htm> and [http://diglib.hab.de/content.php?dir=edoc/ed000211&distype=optional&metsID=edoc\\_ed000211\\_commonefactio\\_edition1&xml=commonefactio%2Fedition.xml&xsl=tei-transcript.xsl](http://diglib.hab.de/content.php?dir=edoc/ed000211&distype=optional&metsID=edoc_ed000211_commonefactio_edition1&xml=commonefactio%2Fedition.xml&xsl=tei-transcript.xsl) (both last accessed, July 12, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Possibly a reference to Psalm 119.

## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used within the footnotes:

AE	<i>Luther's Works: The American Edition.</i> 55 vols. Eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958–67
Triglotta	<i>Concordia Triglotta: die symbolischen Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, deutsch-lateinisch-englisch.</i> Edited and Translated by F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.
CChr.SL	<i>Corpus Christianorum, series Latina</i> (1953–)
History and Theology	Charles P. Arand, Robert Kolb, and James A. Nestigen, <i>The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord</i> (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012)
KW	<i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.</i> Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca.</i> Edited by J.P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris, 1857–66.
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina.</i> Edited by J.P. Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1878–90.

## Introduction

*With heart and mouth we reject and condemn as false, erroneous, and misleading all Sacramentarian opinions and teachings. These do not agree with, but contradict and oppose, the doctrine presented above, founded on God's Word:*

*8. It is taught that because of His ascension into heaven, Christ is enclosed and restricted by His body in a definite place in heaven. He cannot or will not be truly present with us in the Supper, which is celebrated according to Christ's institution on earth. But He is as far and remote from it as heaven and earth are from each other. Some Sacramentarians have willfully and wickedly falsified the text "Christ must receive heaven" (see Acts 3:21) for the confirmation of their error. Instead of this translation they have rendered it "Christ must be received or be restricted and enclosed by heaven or in heaven," so that in His human nature He can or will in no way be with us on earth.*

*(Solid Declaration: VII. The Holy Supper, 112, 119)*

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### ***History of English Editions of the Book of Concord***

The above translation is an emended one that is taken from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (hereafter *Concordia*), and this edition of the Book of Concord is the recommended resource for any laity who desire to read the Lutheran Confessions. The emendation included above, viz., “receive,” more faithfully follows both the Latin (*accipere*) and German (*einnehmen*) of SD VII § 119. Both words mean “receive.” Before we can consider why such emendation was necessary beyond basic definitions, we must consider the other current English translations of the Book of Concord, which are part of two families.

The above-emended *Concordia* is the most modern of the first family of the Book of Concord in English. *Concordia*, by its own admission “is not a brand-new translation from the original German and Latin texts. [It] is a revised and updated version of the translation originally prepared by William H. T. Dau and G. Friedrich Bente for the *Concordia Triglotta*, published in 1921.”<sup>1</sup> The history for this family goes farther back than just the *Concordia Triglotta* (hereafter *Triglotta*). Bente says in his preface, “The English translation of the TRIGLOT is throughout the joint effort of Prof W. H. T. Dau and myself. It is based on the original German and Latin texts, respectively, and on the exiting English translations, chiefly those incorporated in Jacob's *Book of Concord*.”<sup>2</sup> Jacobs in the preface to his edition (first published in 1911) states, “The second edition of the New Market translation (1854), for which our English churches owe so much to the energy and devotion of the brothers Revs. Ambrose and Socrates Henkel...[has] been frequently consulted, and have furnished material aid.”<sup>3</sup> How much aid was supplied by the Henkel edition to Jacobs' translation of the Formula could be elucidated by further study, but sufficed to say the

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<sup>1</sup> *Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions: A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord, 2nd Edition* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), xvii. The revision and updating to the Formula of Concord was done by Rev. Edward Engelbrecht (*ibid.*, xi).

<sup>2</sup> “Preface”, *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), iii.

<sup>3</sup> *Book of Concord*, ed. Henry Jacobs (Philadelphia, PA: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1911), 6.

Jacobs-*Triglotta-Concordia* (hereafter J-T-C) family began with Jacobs in 1911, with some roots back to the Henkels in 1854.

The second family is about half the age of the first, and it stems from the work of Theodore Tappert (1904–73) whose edition of the Book of Concord (hereafter Tappert) was published in 1959. Tappert stands apart from the other English translation. After acknowledging previous translation and editions, Tappert says, “It is of course inevitable that the present translators should have been influenced by the work of those who preceded them (sometimes helped by felicitous renderings, sometimes hampered by renderings which have become domesticated), but a comparison will reveal the extent to which the present translations are dependent on the original texts rather than on earlier translations.”<sup>4</sup> The Formula of Concord in Tappert was translated by Arthur Carl Piepkorn.<sup>5</sup>

As *Concordia* served to revise and update the *Triglotta*, thus Tappert was revised and updated in 2000 in *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (hereafter Kolb-Wengert). “The present translation” Robert Kolb says, “is an extensive revision of the Tappert edition, although the other translations mentioned<sup>6</sup> have also on occasion been consulted.”<sup>7</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert served as the General Editors for the eponymously named edition, and the work of revising and updating A. C. Piepkorn’s translation of the Formula of Concord from Tappert was also done by Robert Kolb.<sup>8</sup> The Tappert-Kolb-Wengert (hereafter T-K-W) family began with Tappert in 1959, which was updated in 2000. While both editions in the T-K-W family acknowledge the other English editions, even recognizing some consultation with them, any affinity with them should be seen as, a felicitous consistency.

### ***The Translation of SD VII § 119 into English***

Within *Concordia*, emended and quoted above, the translation (not emended) of SD VII § 119 reads “Christ must occupy heaven.”<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is the translation of choice for the entire J-T-C family. The only variance in this family of editions is whether to use a noun (“Christ”)<sup>10</sup> or indefinite pronoun (“who”).<sup>11</sup> Thus, the verb (“occupy”) binds the family together. The verb which binds the T-K-W family together is “take possession of.”<sup>12</sup> The extent to which the Henkel

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<sup>4</sup> *Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959), v–vi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>6</sup> i.e., Henkel, Jacobs, and *Triglotta*. (cf., “Forward,” KW, vii.)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Concordia*, 580.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; *Triglotta*, 1013.

<sup>11</sup> Jacobs, 623.

<sup>12</sup> Tappert, 590; KW, 614.

edition has affected either family seems to be minimal, by the admissions of their various prefaces noted above. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Henkel edition of the Formula, translated by Rev. J. R. Moser and revised by Rev. C. F. Schaeffer,<sup>13</sup> thus renders SD VII § 119: “It behooved Christ to receive the heaven.”<sup>14</sup> A felicitous and serendipitous agreement with the emendation proffered above!

Of the J-T-C family and the T-K-W family, it must be further noted that neither family has the Lutheran translation be the exact opposite of the sacramentarian translation. It is true that neither the German nor the Latin not match in Formula VII itself. It must be noted that the primary text for the Formula of Concord is the German.<sup>15</sup> Due the limits imposed by a lack of prowess, this author will consign himself hereafter mostly to the Latin.

In Solid Declaration VII § 119, The Lutheran *oportet Christum caelum accipere* (“Christ must receive heaven”)<sup>16</sup> is contrasted with the Sacramentarian *oportet Christum caelo capi* (“Christ must be enclosed by heaven.”)<sup>17</sup> Thus, in translating the Formula’s German rendering of the Latin, the J-T-C family contrasts “occupy” with “be received”<sup>18</sup> and the T-K-W “take possession of” with “held by.”<sup>19</sup> Be that as it may, the Henkel translation contrasts “receive” with “be received.”<sup>20</sup> This choice in the Henkel edition, as well as the emendation proffered above, would simply lay out, for the sake of the lay, casual, or simple reader, the true distinctive between the Lutheran and the Sacramentarian positions. Moreover, it would, as Francis Pieper notes and which shall be discussed more below, keep us grounded to the Greek text itself.

For LCMS Lutherans in particular this “which-translation-is-it” discussion is not some trifle or a λογομάχια (1 Tim 6:4) to be marked and avoided (Tit 3:10; Rom 16:17). It, of course, touches on a discussion of which translation of the Lutheran Confessions should be used,<sup>21</sup> and even what method should be employed in translating them.<sup>22</sup> Be that is it may, this translation of Acts 3:21, however, touches upon *The Lutheran Study Bible*, the use and possible preaching of the text on

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<sup>13</sup> *The Christian Book of Concord, Second Edition*, ed. Ambrose Henkel and Socrates Henkel (New Market, VA: Solomon D. Henkel and Brs., 1854), iv and vi.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 683.

<sup>15</sup> “It should be noted that the German translations of the Apology and Treatise, as well as the Latin versions of the Smalcald Articles, the Catechisms, and the Formula of Concord, must already be regarded and treated as paraphrases and first expositions of the respective originals.” (Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul Koehneke and Herbert Bouman (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), xxviii.)

<sup>16</sup> German: *Christus mußt den Himmel ennehmen*.

<sup>17</sup> German: *Christus mußt › von oder im ‹ Himmel also eingenummen oder umbeschrieben und begriffen werden*.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs, 623; *Triglotta*, 1013; *Concordia*,

<sup>19</sup> Tappert, 590; KW, 614.

<sup>20</sup> Henkel, 683.

<sup>21</sup> During the author’s academic studies at Concord Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN, he gleaned that KW is preferred for academics and *Concordia* for lay use within the LCMS.

<sup>22</sup> The granular level of verb choice, not unsurprisingly, is not described in any of the prefaces.

Easter 3B according to the LCMS Three-Year Lectionary, and finally the quintessential textbook for Christology in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, namely, Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 2*. Let us consider the first and last of these, in that order, and this shall, of course, have impact as a pastor takes on the task of the second.

### ***The Lutheran Study Bible on Acts 3:21***

*The Lutheran Study Bible* uses the English Standard Version, and therein that Bible translation thus renders the pertinent portion of Acts 3:21: "Whom heaven must receive." There is no ESV note about the ability to translate it also "He must receive heaven." Moreover, there is a TLSB footnote specifically about the phrase, "heaven must receive." It states, "Christ ascended to the Father, yet His present reign still links Him with His Church. See note, Mt 28:20."<sup>23</sup> There is no mention of SD VII § 119, although it directly takes up the verse, but the TLSB note at Matthew 28:20 does cite SD VIII § 78.<sup>24</sup> The TLSB thus leans toward the Sacramentarian understanding of the passage in question, albeit not as overtly as its predecessor, the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (CSB). Therein, the CSB thus comments on the NIV rendering ("He must remain in heaven"): "An alternate translation is: 'It is necessary for heaven to receive him,' which does not preclude his presence at the gatherings of believers and at the Lord's Supper."<sup>25</sup> Thus, both TLSB and the CSB are far afield from SD VII § 119, which makes Selnecker's work still very important and timely, but these two Lutheran (LCMS) Study Bibles also diverge from Francis Pieper who vigorously defends the translation "Christ must receive heaven," which SD VII § 119 prescribes as necessary.

### ***Francis Pieper on Acts 3:21***

Francis Pieper takes up Acts 3:21 and the Solid Declaration in *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 2* wherein he discusses Christology. That volume, unlike the other volumes, was partially translated by J. T. Mueller due to the death of Theodore Engelder, the principle translator of all three volumes.<sup>26</sup> While this author is ill equipped to dive deeply into particularities and intricacies of German, it is evident by simple comparison that the Engelder-Mueller translation also includes some expansion on Peiper's text.

It appears that Engelder or Mueller did not do this with any malice. For example, the English includes a reference to the Authorized Version, which does not occur in Pieper's original German.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, their English translation of Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* adopts Pieper into the J-T-C family of translation in regards to Acts 3:21. In both places where Acts 3:21 is

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<sup>23</sup> TLSB, 1837–9n3:21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1650n28:20.

<sup>25</sup> *Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House), 1660n3:21.

<sup>26</sup> "Forward" in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 2*, trans. Theodore Engelder and J. T. Mueller (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), v.

<sup>27</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. 2*, 326; cp. Francis Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik, Zweiter Band* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 384.

directly cited, it is translated, “Who” or “Christ must occupy heaven.”<sup>28</sup> Pieper, only citing the text (“*Oportet Christum coelum accipere*”) once, translates it with the verb “*einnehmen*” (“receive”).<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the rest of the section regarding Acts 3:21, Pieper himself defends the proper translation as “Christ receives heaven.” This makes the initial translation choice of “occupy” all the more puzzling. Toward his defense, however, Pieper, regarding the mistranslation of δέχεσθαι as passive, says, “But δέχεσθαι here can only mean *capere* (to receive) and not *capi* (to be received), no matter whether οὐπανόν or ὅν is regarded as the subject of the clause. To express the passive *capi*, the statement would have to read something like this: ὅν δεῖ ὑπὸ τοῦ οὐπανοῦ or οὐπανῶ δέξασθαι. So here the Reformed actually falsified or perverted the clear words of Scripture by changing *capere* to *capi*, which certainly is a matter of no small importance.”<sup>30</sup> Pieper shortly thereafter cites Beza who later walked back his passive translation of Acts 3:21, namely, “Christ must be received by heaven” (*Oportet Christum coelo capi*) became “Whom the heavens must receive” (*Quem oportet quidem coeli capiant*).<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Beza continually maintained his “inclusion theory.”<sup>32</sup>

Pieper thus rounds out his discussion:

For the sake of argument, we may admit the translation ‘whom the heavens must receive,’ or even the passive construction, ‘who must be received by heaven,’ without thereby granting the circumscription of Christ in heaven. We must merely keep in mind the fact that according to Scripture the proper goal (*terminus ad quem proprius*) of Christ’s ascension is the right hand of God, or the heaven of the divine majesty (*coelum maiestaticum*). If this Scriptural doctrine is maintained, even the “being-received-into-heaven” translation will not mean a circumscription of Christ’s human nature (*Beschraenkung*), but rather its exaltation beyond all limitations (*Entschraenkung*), as the Lutherans teach.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, while Pieper argues for the translation “who must receive heaven,” he nevertheless recognizes that “whom the heavens must receive” is a grammatically valid translation. In spite of that, however, Pieper, based on the rest of Scripture, says that the statement, irregardless of translation, cannot support the teaching that Christ is stuck in heaven. This echoes the note from the CSB noted above.

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<sup>28</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, 326;

<sup>29</sup> cf. Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik, Zweiter Band*, 384. See above, “History of English Editions of the Book of Concord,” 1.

<sup>30</sup> Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, 327.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 326–7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 327–8.

### ***Other Lutheran Dogmatics***

When it comes to other dogmatics texts, their authors or compilers are a mixed bag. Most do not take up the discussion of Acts 3:21, yet a remnant at least mentions it. Edward Koehler, due to his goal to offer a dogmatics text for laity that avoided technical terms and discussion,<sup>34</sup> does not mention the matter. Jack Kilcrease is silent on it in *The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Christ and His Benefits*.<sup>35</sup> David Scaer does not discuss the passage in *Christology*,<sup>36</sup> nor Carl Braaten in *Christian Dogmatics*, which he edited with Robert Jenson.<sup>37</sup> Surprisingly, Johann Gerhard does not discuss Acts 3:21 in his *Loci Communes Theologici* neither in his Locus on Christ<sup>38</sup> nor on the Lord's Supper.<sup>39</sup>

Heinrich Schmid does bring up Acts 3:21, yet only by citation of Hollaz:

The ascension is the glorious act of Christ by which, after having been resuscitated, He took Himself, according to His human nature, by a true, real, and local motion, according to His voluntary determination (*per liberam aconomiam*), and in a visible manner unto the clouds, and thence in an invisible manner into the common heaven of the blessed, and to the very throne of God; so that, having triumphed over His enemies, He might occupy the kingdom of God (Acts 3:21), reopen the closed Paradise (Rev. 3:7), and prepare a permanent inheritance for us in heaven (John 14:2).<sup>40</sup>

J. T. Mueller uses Hollaz via Schmid when he briefly takes up the subject of Acts 3:21 in his *Christian Dogmatics*,<sup>41</sup> which he wrote as “an Epitome” to Pieper’s *Christliche Dogmatik*,<sup>42</sup> although Pieper himself does not use this exact portion of Hollaz.<sup>43</sup> Shortly thereafter, Mueller also states, “Christ’s session at the right hand of God is therefore His exaltation, according to His human

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<sup>34</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), iv.

<sup>35</sup> Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Christ and His Benefits* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> David P. Scaer, *Christology* in *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume VI*, ed. Robert Preus (Chelsea, MI: Sheridan Books, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> cf. Carl Braaten, “Sixth Locus: The Person of Jesus Christ” in *Christian Dogmatics, Volume One*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 552–5.

<sup>38</sup> cf. Johann Gerhard, *On the Person and Office of Christ in Theological Common Places*, trans. Richard Dinda, ed. Benjamin Mayes (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> cf. Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici, Tomus Quintus*, ed. Eduard Preuss (Berlin, 1867), 1–253.

<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Third Edition, rev.* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1899), 380.

<sup>41</sup> J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), 300.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., iii.

<sup>43</sup> cp., Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 324–330.

nature, to the sovereign lordship and rule over all things, Eph. 1, 20–23; 4, 10; 1 Pet. 3, 22; Acts 3, 21)."<sup>44</sup> Mueller, unlike Pieper, makes no further defense of Acts 3:21.

Johann Baier's *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, which was edited by C. F. W. Walther, would have been known by Mueller, Pieper, and Schmid, and therein Baier does not comment himself on Acts 3:21. He does say, "Indeed truly, really, and bodily He was lifted up from the earth (see Acts 1:9). Nevertheless, it must not be so subjected, or just as a natural way is thus bound, so that His presence on earth is denied because the ascended body in heaven. For He is not only in heaven, but even it says that He ascended above all heavens (Eph. 5:10)."<sup>45</sup> To defend this position Baier cites a similar and near portion of Hollaz as Schmid, Mueller, and Pieper,<sup>46</sup> as well as Solid Declaration VII § 119 itself.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, Martin Chemnitz, who was a contemporary of and co-formulator with Selnecker, also discusses Acts 3:21. Martin Chemnitz does not, however, mention the passage either in his seminal tome *The Two Natures in Christ*<sup>48</sup> nor in his response to forty-one theses published by the secret Sacramentarians in Wittenberg,<sup>49</sup> but he does mention it in his work on the Lord's Supper. (This difference will be discussed briefly below.) In *The Lord's Supper*, Chemnitz states, "The grammar [of Acts 3:21] shows that it is not the meaning that heaven captured Christ or incarcerated Him, but that Christ took possession of heaven or occupied it, which Luther very meaningfully translated into German with *den Himmel einnemen*."<sup>50</sup>

Chemnitz uses not only grammar but context to defend his position, stating, "The sequence and context of the entire speech demonstrate what the meaning of this passage in Acts 3:21 actually is. Peter is here making the point of his entire oration, namely, that the heavenly Father has adorned that Jesus who was crucified out of weakness with the highest and most incomprehensible glory and power."<sup>51</sup> After discussing the difference between God's presence and glory in heaven and that on earth, Chemnitz says, "What Peter said...is exactly the same as what David says [Ps 110:1]<sup>52</sup>...and what Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:25–26: He must reign until ... the

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<sup>44</sup> Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, 300.

<sup>45</sup> Johann Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae III*, ed. C. F. W. Walther (Grand Rapids, MI: Emmanuel Press, 2005), 95–6, author's translation.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 96–7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1971).

<sup>49</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Christ's Complete Omnipresence and Theological Discourse: Martin Chemnitz's Genesio-Lutheran Response to Forty-One Theses by the Secret Sacramentarians*, trans. Aaron T. Fenker (Master's of Sacred Theology Thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord's Supper*, trans. J. A. O. Preus, in *Chemnitz's Works*, vol. 5 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 217.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> I.e., "Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies your footstool."

last enemy, namely death, is destroyed.”<sup>53</sup> After this Chemnitz defends the Biblical Lutheran understanding of what “God’s throne,” “above all heavens,” and “the right hand of God” mean.<sup>54</sup>

### ***The Apology of the Book of Concord on Acts 3:21***

The *Apology of the Book of Concord*, since it was authored by Martin Chemnitz, Timothy Kircher, as well as Nikolaus Selnecker, obviously takes up similar lines of argument as Selnecker in *A Brief and Necessary Commentary*, albeit more briefly. First, its authors reject the teaching that Christ is enclosed in heaven and thus cannot be present with His body and blood in the Supper as He promised.<sup>55</sup> Second, they defend that understanding by defending their translation of Acts 3:21 by also rejecting the translation of their opponents.<sup>56</sup> Theology and the translation of the Biblical text are thus intertwined endeavors.

How should one translate ὅν δεῖ οὐρανὸν μὲν δέξασθαι? The *Apology of the Book of Concord* for its defense goes for to the definition of δέχομαι. The *Apology* says, “One of them, and not the least of them [Calvin], has written: ‘From this word (δέξασθαι, “capture”), which is ambiguous, nothing definite can be concluded in this matter. But another [Beza] has written that he wanted to translate δέξασθαι as a passive so that there would be a definite text which could be opposed to those who taught that Christ’s body was truly present, distributed, and received in the Lord’s Supper.’”<sup>57</sup>

It should be noted here that the Solid Declaration II § 12, when discussing 1 Corinthians 2:14 (“Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of the Spirit”), offers this definition for δέχομαι: “The Greek word really means, grasp, seize, or accept ‘the gifts of the Spirit,’ or are not capable in spiritual matters, ‘for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them.’”<sup>58</sup> The *Apology of the Book of Concord* thus offers some expansion on this simple word and definition:

It is certainly surprising that they dare to say and allege this so insolently, as if no one were able to show them an example from the Greek authors in which the word δέξασθαι is used for “occupy” or “capture.” They were shown that Plutarch once says ἥκειν καὶ

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<sup>53</sup> Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Supper*, 218.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 218–23

<sup>55</sup> *Apology of the Book of Concord* in *Martin Chemnitz’s Works*, Vol. 10 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 108–9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 109–10.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 109. Calvin more fully says, “But this is a doubtful speech (*ambigua loquatio*); because we may as well understand it that Christ is contained or comprehended in the heavens, as that he doth comprehend the heavens. Let us not therefore urge the word, being of a doubtful signification; but let us content ourselves with that which is certain, that we must seek for Christ nowhere else save only in heaven, whilst that we hope for the last restoring of all things; because he shall be far from us, until our minds ascend high above the world” (John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles* in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. XVIII, trans. Christopher Fetherstone, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 152–3).

<sup>58</sup> KW, 546.

παράλαβεν βασιλείαν, that is, “He came to Rome and accepted or occupied the kingdom,” and then another time expresses the same thing in these words: δέχεσθαι τὴν ἀρχὴν and ἀναδέξασθαι τὴν πόλιν, where the word δέξασθαι means “occupy,” “capture.” Similarly, they have heard the explanation of Oecumenius, who bluntly observed, “Peter did not say that heaven captured Christ but that Christ captured heaven.” Their insolence in this matter is shocking, for they write, “Peter does not speak here about the dominion of Christ over heaven and earth, but only about how his human nature was taken up into the heavenly dwelling.” That interpretation is so absurd that it needs no special refutation!<sup>59</sup>

Based on this definition and understanding of δέξασθαι, Lutherans historically have understood ὃν δεῖ οὐρανὸν μὲν δέξασθαι to be “He must receive heaven.”

### ***The Different Emphases of “Occupy”***

With all the forgoing in mind, let us turn to the term “occupy.” At first blush, the translation offered in the J-T-C family is not much different than the one cited from the Sacramentarians. This, of course, rests on the common meaning of “occupy,” namely, “to be in or within a specific location.” There is, however, another definition, namely, the one, along with its explanation, that the *Apology of the Book of Concord* offers. Let us consider both in turn.

When it comes to modern colloquial use, “Christ must occupy heaven,” although slightly different in emphasis, is relatively synonymous in meaning with “Christ must be received by heaven.” Both mean Christ goes into heaven and is “in that place.” Now, it is true that “This Jesus who was taken up from you into [εἰς] heaven, will thus come to you in the same manner you saw Him go into heaven,” as the two angels told the Apostles. (Acts 1:10) Pieper may have this verse in mind when discussing the grammatically acceptable translations above, nevertheless this definition, although common today, is not what is meant by “occupy” in the J-T-C family.

The other definition of “occupy” is highlighted and elucidated by the *Apology of the Book of Concord*. There δέχομαι is further defined as “occupy” or “capture.”<sup>60</sup> The *Apology of the Book of Concord* specifically cites Plutarch who uses δέχομαι this way, stating, “They were shown that Plutarch once says ἤκειν καὶ παράλαβεν βασιλείαν, that is, ‘He came to Rome and accepted or occupied the kingdom,’ and then another time expresses the same thing in these words: δέχεσθαι τὴν ἀρχὴν and ἀναδέξασθαι τὴν πόλιν, where the word δέξασθαι means ‘occupy,’ ‘capture.’”<sup>61</sup> Thus, this is a more political or military definition of the word “occupy.” The definition of “occupy” employed by the J-T-C family, to use the noun instead of the verb as an example, is thus, “the occupation of territory.”

The term “occupy” can, of course, be understood correctly. If it used to mean “being in a place” (like an “occupied” sign on a lavatory), that is incorrect. If it is used to mean “being in control of a place” (like the “Occupy Wall Street” movement), that is correct. This political-military

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<sup>59</sup> *Apology of the Book of Concord*, 110.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

definition is distinct from the common definition, and it can be taught and understood as distinct. Nevertheless, if the translator keeps the laity in mind, he should ask and answer the following questions: should such a nuance in definition be employed, and will such nuance be properly understood by the common reader?

The T-K-W shift to “take possession of” instead of “occupy” is for sure a comment on the inadequacies of “occupy.” Such inadequacy was noticed by Piepkorn in translating the Solid Declaration in the 1950s, some thirty years after the Triglot was translated, which version Piepkorn ostensibly was familiar with, since he was an LCMS clergyman. “Take possession of” attempts to clarify the Lutheran position against the Reformed, although, as noted above, the Henkel translation makes the matter most clear by using “receive” and “be received by” for the Lutheran and Reformed understandings respectively. Moreover, the choice to use “receive” versus “be received” also employs for both positions the word employed by Peter, viz., δέχομαι.

### **Implications of Peter’s Use of Δέχομαι**

When it comes to Christ’s ascension and Acts 3:21, Peter’s use of δέχομαι emphasizes a different reality of Christ’s Ascension. In Acts 3:21 Peter does not use the language of movement like he does in 1 Peter 3:22 (ESV), “[Christ] has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”<sup>62</sup> Unlike his eponymous Epistle, Peter uses the verb “to receive” (δέχομαι) in Acts 3. Thereby Peter emphasizes the theology of Christ’s session at the right hand of the Father, as the Spirit says, e.g., in Philippians 2:9.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, when Peter uses the word “to receive” (δέχομαι) in Acts 3:21, he is doing so to serve another theological purpose. “To receive” (δέχομαι) is the opposite of “to give” (δίδωμι) or “bestow” (χαρίζομαι). This not only relates Acts 3:21 to Philippians 2:9, as noted above, but Peter’s words also call to mind the words of our Savior Himself. Jesus says in Matthew 28:18 (ESV), “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given (ἐδόθη) to Me.” Therefore, when Father gives “all authority in heaven” (Mt 28:18) or “bestows” the supreme name to His eternal Son (Phil 2:9), according to His assumed human nature, that is the other side of the theological coin of Christ “receiving heaven.” (Acts 3:21)

Selnecker, of course, has more meat on the bones, so to speak, below than the preceding. Be that as it may, the translation problem remains for the the first family of translation for the Book of Concord (Jacobs, *Concordia Triglotta*, and *Concordia*). “Occupy” and “be received by” can easily be misunderstood as two aspects (the latter firmer than the former) of the same “stuck in heaven” idea, which Pieper calls “inclusion theory.”<sup>64</sup> “Occupy” makes, in modern parlance, the difference between the historic Lutheran rendering (“receive heaven”) and the Sacramentarian and Reformed (“received by heaven”) basically moot. The second family of manuscripts (T-K-

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<sup>62</sup> This echoes what is said at the end of Mark: “So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” (Mk 16:19 ESV)

<sup>63</sup> “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed (ἐχαρίσατο) on him the name that is above every name.” (Phil 2:9 ESV).

<sup>64</sup> cf., Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, 326–27.

W), with an eye towards this problem, translates the passage correctly in syntax and meaning with “take possession of.”

For simplicity’s sake, however, the emendation of “receive” was offered above. The first reason is to fit the intent of *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, namely, it is for laity. “Receive” is a slightly more natural way of speaking, though every football fan knows what “take possession of” (T-K-W) means. The second reason for emendation is related to the first. “Take possession” is truly a conceptual antonym of “be received,” yet “receive” is even more clearly (conceptually and linguistically) the opposite of the antithesis rendering offered in *Concordia*, viz., “be received.”

### ***The Lord’s Supper Connection***

The connection the Lord’s Supper is clear. The Solid Declaration takes up Acts 3:21 not in its confession of the person of Christ (Article VIII), but it is defended in Article VII: The Holy Supper. As gleaned above, the dogmaticians noted bring up Acts 3:21, if at all, under the locus and discussion of Christ: His Person and His work. Chemnitz on the other hand, as well as the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord and the Apology of the Book of Concord, take a different approach. They discuss this passage when defending the Biblical teaching that the consecrated bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are really Christ’s body and blood. Since the Sacramentarians and Calvinists defended their rejection of this teaching by citing Acts 3:21, skewing it to say Christ was locked in heaven, it was at that point Chemnitz and the formulators discussed it.

There is some wisdom in this organization. Including this discussion under the Locus on the Lord’s Supper rather than analytically under Christ’s Person and Work,<sup>65</sup> offers some great biblical fodder for preaching on Ascension Day as well as Maundy Thursday. Another opportunity for preaching this, as far as the LCMS is concerned, is granted in the Three-Year Lectionary: Series B where Acts 3:11–21 is the Old Testament/First Reading for Easter 3.<sup>66</sup> Preaching the Ascension and Christ’s session at the right hand of God and how both correspond to the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper (and vice versa), is important for all to understand that we might find comfort in what the Supper is and offers: Jesus’ body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

This connection between Christ’s Ascension/Session and the Lord’s Supper is clearly reflected in Samuel Kinner’s hymn, “Lord Jesus Christ, You Have Prepared,” where such confession is sung through the second and third stanzas: “Although You did to heav’n ascend, Where angel hosts are dwelling . . . Yet, Savior, You are not confined To any habitation; But You are present even now

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<sup>65</sup> cf. Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism, Volume 1: A Study of Theological Prolegomena* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 43–6.

<sup>66</sup> This statement is true for *Lutheran Service Book* (2006), but not *Lutheran Worship* (1982) wherein Acts 3:13–15, 17–26 is the reading for Easter 2B (*Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 49–50). The reading selections are different for other Lutheran Synods. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America maintains use of the Revised Common Lectionary in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) where Acts 3:12–19 is the reading for Easter 3B (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 33). The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod uses Acts 3:12–20 for Easter 2B (cf., “Planning Christian Worship Revision,” last updated June 15, 2020, <https://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/planning-christian-worship-revision/>).

Here with Your congregation.”<sup>67</sup> How is Christ present? “Your true body and Your blood Our lips are here receiving. This Word remains forever true, All things are possible with You, For You are Lord Almighty.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, by the words “Though reason cannot understand, Yet faith this truth embraces: Your body, Lord, is even now At once in many places,”<sup>69</sup> Kinner draws us to confess the truth about the illocal nature of God’s right hand.

Finally, connecting Acts 3:21 specifically (and Christ’s Ascension and Session generally) with the Lord’s Supper is an important concrete connection. This confession can analytically placed in a faithful way under Christology in general, as Pieper does. This abstracts the topic from the concrete reality of the reception Christ’s Supper, which the faithful devote themselves to (Acts 2:42). Putting it with Christology in general can lead to the misunderstanding that such a conversation is theological minutia and only resides within the proclivities of the theologian’s desire to “strain out the gnat” (Mt 23:24). In truth and fact, however, Acts 3:21, its proper translation, as well as its connection to the Lord’s Supper has great practical implications for catechesis, for preaching, as well as for hymnody, which is nothing else than those two married together with music for the praise and glory of God.

### ***Brief Historical Sketch***

Nikolaus Selnecker (1532–92), one of the principle architects behind the Formula of Concord, wrote his *Brief and Necessary Commentary* in 1571.<sup>70</sup> This was roughly six years before the publication of the Formula of Concord (1577), which briefly predated the publication of the entire Book of Concord (1580). The Epitome of the Formula of Concord, primarily the work of Jacob Andreae (1528–90), does not mention the controversy about Acts 3:21. Although Martin Chemnitz (1522–86) was the chief architect behind the Solid Declaration of the Formula Concord, Article VII was chiefly written by David Chytraeus (1530–1600) and does mention the controversy over Acts 3:21.<sup>71</sup> Selnecker’s *Brief and Necessary Commentary* serves then as helpful framing for the above confessional statement.<sup>72</sup>

Selnecker uses his *Brief and Necessary Commentary* to respond to the theologians who denied the true understanding of the Lord’s Supper. According to Christ’s own words (“This is My body...this is My blood”), the Lutheran confession is: “the body and blood of Christ are truly present and

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel Kinner, “Lord Jesus Christ, You Have Prepared” (No. 622) in *Lutheran Service Book*, trans. Emanuel Cronenwett (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), stanzas 2–3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, stanza 4.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, stanza 5.

<sup>70</sup> For more on the life of Nikolaus Selnecker see Theodore R. Jungkuntz, “Nikolaus Selnecker—The Weather Vane?” in *Formulators of the Formula of Concord: Four Architects of Lutheran Unity* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), 89–109.

<sup>71</sup> Chytraeus was keen to avoid controversy, which is also attested to by the fact he did not mention the ubiquity controversy in SD VII (cf. Jungkuntz, *Formulators*, 85, and Lowell Green, “Article VII, The Formula of Concord: The Holy Supper,” in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 215).

<sup>72</sup> *History and Theology*, 265–276.

distributed to those who eat the Lord's Supper" (*Augsburg Confession, Article X: The Lord's Supper*); "the bread and wine in the Supper are Christ's true body and blood" (*Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VI: The Sacrament of the Altar*); and "it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ Himself for us Christians to eat and to drink." (*Small Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar*) Those holding to this confession took up the title "True (*Gnesio*) Lutherans," and they labeled those who opposed it "Sacramentarians" as an ironic slight. Selnecker thus responds to the Sacramentarians in general, but he is also responding in particular to Theodore Beza (1521–1609).

Theodore Beza had published his first edition of the New Testament in 1565, and Selnecker is chiefly railing against this work by Beza. In his edition, Beza includes the text in three parallel versions: Erasmus' Greek Edition, his own Latin translation of the Greek, and Jerome's Vulgate. Beza also includes his own glosses or comments as well. Selnecker takes issue with both Beza's translation of Acts 3:21 and his corresponding gloss or comment on the that passage. Beza's parallel treatment of the passage is what necessitated Selnecker to do the same.<sup>73</sup>

Selnecker's position is not just put forward in the above cited portion of the Solid Declaration. Selnecker, along with Martin Chemnitz and Timothy Kircher (1533–87), crafted the *Apology of the Book of Concord*.<sup>74</sup> It is in that document that the Lutheran understanding is defended in more detail, albeit still briefly. Antithesis 8 of the Solid Declaration is expanded to little more than a page.<sup>75</sup> Selnecker's Commentary is thus still helpful not only due to more expansive treatment, but also because the Apology of the Book of Concord hints at it, saying, "Because these words of Peter [in Acts 3:21] have been abundantly treated by us in public writings against [our opponents], we refer to those explanations here for the sake of brevity."<sup>76</sup>

### Conclusion

Lutherans, and all Christians for that matter, "receive and embrace with our whole heart the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel. They are the only true standard or norm by which all teachers and doctrines are to be

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<sup>73</sup> Beza's translation is as Selnecker quotes it: "He certainly must be held by heaven," (*Quem oportet quidem caelo capi*). In his response (see page 16 below), Selnecker also hints at this gloss of Beza:

"Be held by heaven," ὃν οὐρανὸν δέξασθαι. That is, 'to be be contained in heaven.' For, as we have said elsewhere, with Hebrews, the consequence is often understood by positioning one word, as when 'to come' (*venire*) replaces ἐξελθεῖν, and many similar things that we have noted in their own places. Since, however, we have instead used the passive way of speaking more than the active, this has been done by us so that a double meaning would be avoided by all. For this is the value of working in the Church of God, so that this clear testimony exists against those who for this reason think that we must ascend into heaven by faith, to be united to our head, and against those who think that Christ's body has returned, either again from heaven or on earth, like Jupiter from the Elysian Fields. Moreover, they precisely and most perniciously see that this has been challenged by us. Yet δέχεσθαι replaces δέξασθαι. This interchange (*enallage/ἐναλλαγή*) happens here and there: Matthew 10:34–35, Luke 9:22 and 17:25, and often elsewhere. (Theodore Beza, *IESU CHRISTI D.N. Novum Testamentum, sive Novum Foedus* (Geneva, 1565), 18.)

<sup>74</sup> "Introduction" in *Apology of the Book of Concord*, xix–xxiv.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–10.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

judge.” (*Solid Declaration: Summary, Rule, and Norm 3*) All other Creeds, Confessions, or other Christian writings are judged by the Scriptures, and these other things serve as proclamation and witness to the one, universal Christian teaching drawn from Scripture alone. “Everything should be subjected to God’s Word.” (*Solid Declaration: Summary, Rule, and Norm 9*)

Selnecker in his *Commentary* argues from such a position. He defends the integrity of the translation “Christ must receive heaven,” by first marshaling other Scripture passages. This fits the *Sola Scriptura* principle, namely, that Scripture is its own best interpreter. Second, he also brings in the witness of the Church Fathers. When he does so, he is not putting Scripture and the Fathers on equal footing. “Other writings should not be received in any other way or as anything more than witnesses that show how this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles, and at what places.” (*Epitome: Summary, Rule, and Norm 2*)

To that cloud of witnesses, as regards Acts 3:21, we do well to add Selnecker’s *Commentary*. Why? Words matter. What the Bible says matters. History and the Fathers matter. Translation matters. It is not only the definition of the words that matter, but also how God in other Scriptures reveals the same truth. Secondarily, as noted above, it also matters how the Fathers interpret and confess this and other passages, as well as how they do their theology in light of the same. There is no need to go into that here, for Selnecker does that well enough in his *Commentary*. Thus, as quoted above, the Apology also says, “Because these words of Peter have been abundantly treated by us in public writings against [our adversaries], we refer to those explanations for the sake of brevity.”

## ***Translations of Acts 3:21***

### *Modern Mainline Translations of the Bible*

...whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (*English Standard Version*, 2001)

Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began. (*King James Version*, 1611)

Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. (*New International Version*, 2011)

...whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. (*New King James Version*, 1982)

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### *Modern Lutheran Translations*

*The AAT was translated by Rev. Dr. William Beck (1904–66) who was a minister and professor in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).<sup>1</sup> The EHV is produced by the Wartburg Project, an organization in fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).<sup>2</sup>*

...and whom heaven had to receive until the time when everything will be restored, as God said long ago by His holy prophets. (*An American Translation*, 1976)

He must receive heaven until the times when everything will be restored, as God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (*Evangelical Heritage Version*, 2019)

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<sup>1</sup> *Christian Encyclopedia, Electronic Edition*, s.v. “Beck, William Frederick Henry,” <http://cyclopedia.lcms.org/display.asp?t1=B&word=BECK.WILLIAMFREDERICKHENRY> (last accessed June 22, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> The Wartburg Project is located at <http://wartburgproject.org> (last accessed June 22, 2020).

## **Nikolaus Selnecker's Commentary**

I have seen that certain writings have been disbursed. Within these writings, among other things, are portions also from Bezae's translation. His work in expositing the New Testament has been collected in these writings.<sup>1</sup> Now, if only a judge instructed in some true piety and doctrine would be summoned! (Bezae is certainly worthy of this, by his own praise and commendation). Then, with God's help, we would particularly show others in our exegesis (ἐξηγήσει) of the New Testament the words that are written in Acts 3:21, "Christ must receive heaven," but they are alleged to be this way, "Christ must be received by heaven."

Observing, however, the deceit and deducing the traps that even conceal something under the surface (καὶ ὅπουλον τι), good and pious men were grieved so that they rendered back their faith, confession, constancy, so that the opinion of some erudition and the rule of faith would be shown from the manifestly distorted testimonies of Holy Scripture.

I certainly do not know what more I could do! I do desire to depart and be with Christ. (Phil 1:23) I certainly do see where they distort the matter, and I do see that almost no one else, in his own heart and zeal, wants there to be more glory for Christ, who is our flesh and blood sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

Perhaps the time and occasion is given, that others should rightly and sufficiently complain about these devices, even certainly before the judgment seat of the Son of God and at the final execution of judgment. At the moment, we will only discuss first the words or the text, then the translation or interpretation, so that we may uncover for the pious youth the hidden (*supputridum*) impulses of those who adhere to the translation "Christ must be received by heaven."

Now, in fact, nothing has greatly moved, disturbed, or made us anxious these past twenty years, so that we would believe that the Ascension plainly happened according to the speculations of the Sacramentarians, which unfortunately the rendering of this really evil and impious translation ("Christ must be received by heaven") persuades us to do. For what is underneath can be visible from this citation.

The text will endure; the interpretation will perish helpless. And Oecolampadius has not been able to preserve any other answer except that he in some way boldly opposed this from the beginning, namely, that he and his comrades seek the interpretations but Luther the words, and that he has such vigor that evidently he first would desire to amputate his own hand than at any point even begin to write anything against Luther.

Since it falls to me, as the least and most pitiable, and who daily desires, longs for, and expects a brief time for divine mercy and distraction, I desire to harm no one's doctrine, conscience, faith, fame, or property. May Your sincerity and virtue guide me, O Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Beza, *IESU CHRISTI D.N. Novum Testamentum, sive Novum Foedus* (Geneva, 1565), 18.

“I am seeking Noah’s ark, so that I may avoid a grim fate.” (Gregory the Theologian)<sup>2</sup> I truly long for the cross and discipline for each and every person who is now investigating the majesty of Christ captive on the side of human reason and empty disputation, who decide that they are able to let loose a bottle of questions and to limit the glory of our flesh that is assumed and glorified in Christ. “It is good for me,” David says, “that you have humbled me, etc.” (Ps 119:71) It is rightly spoken: “He who is not tested, what kinds of things does he know?” (Ecclesiasticus 34:11, Vulgate) And I see that this is lacking for those who are twisters of plain clarity and truth.

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### **Original**

But let us hear and read the words of the sermon given by Peter, which they themselves have thus in the Greek text:

μετανοήσατε οὖν καὶ ἐπιστρέψατε, εἰς τὸ ἔχαλειφθῆναι ὑμῶν τὰς ἀμαρτίας, ὅπως ἄν ἔλθωσι καιροὶ ἀναψύζεως ἀπὸ τοῦ Κυρίου, καὶ ἀποστείλῃ τὸν προκεχειρισμένον ὑμῖν Ιησοῦν Χριστὸν, ὃν δεῖ οὐρανὸν μὲν δέξασθαι ἄχρι χρόνων ἀποκαταστάσεως πάντων, καὶ λοιπά.

Jerome’s version:

*Poenitemini igitur & convertimini, ut deleantur peccata vestra, ut cum venerint tempora refrigerii a conspectu Domini, & miserit eum qui praedicatus est vobis, Jesum Christum, quem oportet quidem coelum suscipere (recipere) usque in tempora restitutionis omnium, &c.*

Therefore, repent and turn back, that your sins would be blotted out, in order that times of refreshing would come from the Lord, and would send you the appointed Jesus Christ, who must receive heaven until the times of the restoration of all things,” etc.

Erasmus:

“*Quem oportet quidem coelum accipere.*”

“Therefore be penitent and converted, that your sins would be blotted out, that when the times of refreshment come from presence of the Lord, and He send Him who has been preached to you, Jesus Christ, who must certainly accept (receive) heaven until the times of the restoration of all things,” etc.

“It is necessary that He receive heaven.”

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<sup>2</sup> PG 37, 1243

## **Original**

From the version of the Syriac [New] Testament:

*Resipiscite igitur et convertimini, ut deleantur  
peccata vestra, et eveniant vobis tempora  
tranquillitatis a conspectus faciei Domini, ac mittat  
vobis illum, qui praeparatus erat vobis, Ieschua  
Christum, quem oportet Coelos excipere, usque ad  
complementum temporum omnium, &c.*

## **Translation**

“Therefore come to your senses and be converted, that your sins would be blotted out, that times of tranquility would come to you from the presence of the Lord’s face, and He send you Him, who has been prepared for you, Jesus Christ, who must receive Heaven, until the completion of times of all things,” etc.

From the German version of sainted Dr. Luther, which is the most well crafted of all and has the most clarity:

*So tut nun Buße und bekehrt euch / daß eure  
Sünde vertilgt werden / auf daß da komme die  
Zeit der Erquickung / für dem Angesichte des  
HERRN / wenn er senden wird / den / der euch  
jetzt zuvor gepredigt wird / JESUS Christum /  
welcher muß den Himmel einnehmen / bis auf die  
Zeit / da herwiedergebracht werde alles, was Gott  
geredet / etc.*

Thus now make confession and turn yourselves / that your sins would be destroyed / until the time of refreshment comes / from the LORD’s face / when He would send / Him / who has now been preached to you beforehand / JESUS Christ / who must take up heaven / until the time / when He would restore all things, whatever God spoke / etc.

\* \* \*

Therefore, these words (“He must receive heaven”) have never been received and understood in any other way within the true Church except concerning the exaltation of the human nature in Christ, or Christ’s being seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty, so that learned antiquity and the agreement of all the sensible approve. This seating is certainly not an uncertain place in heaven or a specific or binding place in the heavens, but it is “all authority” ( $\pi\alpha\sigma\alpha\ \varepsilon\xi\omega\sigma\alpha$ ) that was given to the glorified and exalted human nature in Christ.

For Christ ascended to heaven, that is, that I may use the words of Augustine, “the condition of the nature, which He assumed being born from a human mother, He has located above the heavens at the right hand of God the Father.”<sup>3</sup> The right hand of God, as Athanasius and Basil categorically, obviously, and most truly interpret, does not mean a circumscribed nor some other place, either inferior or physical, whereby it would be for maintaining a space for the restrained surrendered body, but it means the state of equality, namely, the majesty, glory, and honor of God, to which Christ has been transported according to His human nature.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Sermo CXCV In natali Domini* (PL 38, 1017f.).

<sup>4</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Arianos I*, 61 (PG 26, 140f.); Basel, *De Spiritu Sancto VI*, 15 (PG 32, 8993).

Damascenus, Orthodox Faith (Book 4, Chapter 2), says, “We say that Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father bodily (σωματικῶς), but we do not say a local right hand of the Father. For how does He, who is uncircumscribed (ἀπεργραπτός), have a local right hand? For their local right and left hands, which are circumscribed, are manifest. Therefore we understand that right hand of the Father is the glory and honoring of the deity, at which the Son of God, who existed before the ages as God and ὁμοούσιος to the Father, who in our time was incarnate, sits bodily, co-glorifying His flesh.”<sup>5</sup>

Chrysostom (Heb 1): “He sits at the right hand of majesty on high.” When he says, “on high,” he does not confine God to a place, but he is showing that Christ as man is higher and more eminent than all things.<sup>6</sup>

Also: “He ascended above all heavens, beyond which there is nothing else. Clearly this is His power and dominion.”<sup>7</sup>

Hebrews 7:26 says, “He has become higher than the heavens.” Here we only understand heavens not as bodily schemes, to which He has become loftier even according to His nature (that I may use the interpretation even of Oecolampadius himself) because according to the divine nature He cannot be exalted, but here we understand heavens even as all angels and saints. For being superior to all these (since the Word of God has always existed higher than the heavens), He sat down on His Father’s throne by His flesh, as Oecumenius says.<sup>8</sup>

He was elevated over all heavens and orders of heavenly spirits to the seat of the Father’s Majesty, where He now sits in the fulness of honor and glory, as Primasius, Augustine’s disciple, clearly says, “Not as the Word of God, who without doubt created all the heavens, but according to His flesh and human nature, to which has now been given all authority in heaven and on earth.”<sup>9</sup> “For divinity confers upon the flesh what the Son of God has always possessed with the Father,” to use the words of Severianus, who became famous around the year of Christ 400.<sup>10</sup>

Jerome also says, “the authority has been given to Him, who a little before had been crucified, buried in the tomb, afterwards resurrected,”<sup>11</sup> that is, this authority in heaven and on earth and exaltation must be understood as pious and orthodox antiquity has always spoken, namely, that is has been given to the Son of Man not according to the deity that is coeternal with the father but

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<sup>5</sup> John of Damascus, *Expositio Orthodoxae Fidei* LXXV (PG 94, 1104).

<sup>6</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia II super Epistolam ad Hebraeos* (PG 63, 24).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Oecumenius of Tricca, *Commentarium in Epistolam ad Hebraeos VII* (PG 119, 360).

<sup>9</sup> Haymon from Auxerre, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Hebraeos VII* (PL 68, 732).

<sup>10</sup> Pseudo Augustine, *Solutiones diuersarum quaestionum. Solutio LXXX*, (CChr.SL 90, 211,16).

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, *Commentarium in Evangelium Matthaei IV* (PL 26, 226).

according to the assumed humanity and flesh. Or as Athanasius says: “[He talks] about the temple of the flesh and not about the deity” (*περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ τοῦ σώματος οὐ περὶ τῆς θεότητος*).<sup>12</sup>

We therefore receive the words (“Christ must receive heaven”) not referring to some corporeal seat or location but referring to the heart, honor, glory, and majesty, or the fulness of the Father’s majesty, as pious and learned antiquity and all the orthodox of all times along with it have said. We live, die, and persevere in this faith, understanding, and confession, knowing that the flesh or our nature was assumed by the Son of God into the unity of His person, which has been glorified, and carried off above all heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father Almighty, and to possess all authority in heaven and on earth. “He indeed receives as man what He possessed as God,” Theodoret himself also says, “and the nature that He assumed from us became a participant of the same honor with Him who assumed it, “not by changing the flesh into the nature of the divinity, but by filling the flesh with divine glory” (Dial 2),<sup>13</sup> and “by perfectly uniting it into the unity of the deity,” that I may use the words of Epiphanius.<sup>14</sup>

Theodoret from Athanasius against the same, as is evident, cites this, “Sit at My right hand.” “These words are about the Lord’s body. If indeed the Lord says, ‘I fill heaven and earth,’ (Jer 23:24) and God encloses all things, yet He is contained by nothing, then on what seat does He sit? Therefore it is the body to which He says, ‘Sit at My right hand’ (Ps 110:1)” (*Τὸ σῶμα τοίνυν ἔστιν, ὃ λέγει, κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου*).<sup>15</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa (Oration 3 on the Lord’s Resurrection), “The things that He possessed naturally as God, He is said to receive as a man, which happened by a definite plan. For this reason He also said, ‘Father, glorify me with Your own glory, which I had, etc.’ (Jn 17:5) For unless He had possessed this property as God, it would have not been possible to receive it as something alien to Him, for God the Father speaks through the Prophet, ‘I do not give My glory to another’ (Is 42:8).”<sup>16</sup>

These things should most briefly suffice for the meaning of Peter’s words, unto the glory and majesty of the Son of God and Man, our Creator and Brother, until perhaps it should compel many of those who have gathered with many others, both my friends and enemies, but truly each and every one of my friends who seek the majesty of Christ, the God-man (*τοῦ θαυμώποι*), Immanuel, and His divine or infinite power, which is not two-fold but single, as I would say together, divine and eternal.

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The words of Vigilius are brought up for an explanation of the Acts 3 passage. He is called as witness concerning the matter at hand, and we do not admit his testimony without a

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<sup>12</sup> Athanasius, *De Incarnatione et Contra Arianos II* (PG 26, 988)

<sup>13</sup> Theodoret, *Eranistes II* (PG 83,165).

<sup>14</sup> Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion LXIX* (PG 42, 332).

<sup>15</sup> Theodoret, *Eranistes, Florilegium II* (PG 83, 180); Athanasius, *Sermo Maior de Fide XXIX* (PG 26,1283).

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio II De Resurrectione Domini* (PG 46, 649; TN, 353).

qualification. His words are kept this way: “If there is one nature of the Word and flesh, how, since the Word is everywhere, would the flesh not also be found everywhere? For indeed, when He was on earth, He was certainly not in heaven: And now because He is in heaven, He is certainly not on earth, and in so much He is not, so that we would hope that Christ, according the same, would come from heaven, whom we believe to be with us on earth according to the Word.”<sup>17</sup>

This is objectionable to us because the same Vigilius has many things that are in part openly demerit worthy and in part praiseworthy, namely, that Christ would end up disturbing the Father for us, since He is not our Mediator or Advocate according to the deity but only according to our nature, and the titles “Jesus” and “Christ” do not pertain to God but to man.<sup>18</sup> Theodoret himself also contradicts such a deranged man.<sup>19</sup> since Vigilius would bind Christ, according to the assumed and glorified human nature, to a certain place in heaven, and would remove the form of servant from us, when he says that that nature, which nevertheless has never been transported into heaven as a servile form, would plainly be absent to us, and thus he supposes, insofar as insane men reason from this, that Christ neither can nor desires to be in His Supper with a bodily appearance (*σωματικὴ παρουσίᾳ*) either by omnipotence or by reason of His Truth. For because he says that the flesh of Christ is contained in a place, He neither can nor must truly be present in regards to the doctrine of the power and majesty of the Son of Man and also the Lord’s Supper. For although the body is said to retain its circumscribed (*περιγραπτὸν*) and essential properties, nevertheless the exception always and deservedly outweighs in regard to those uncircumscribed (*ταῖς ἀπεριγράπτοις*) and supernatural privileges, which Holy Scripture attributes to the body or the entire human in the person of Christ.

Vigilius, however, contradicts this very thing, while citing the words from Chrysostom: “We acknowledge that whatever nature it may be, to which it is said, ‘Sit at my right hand’ (Ps 110:1), and you shall be a sharer in my feet, without doubt the nature, which had heard ‘you are dust and to dust you shall return’<sup>20</sup> (Gen 3:19), ascribes the seating of the human nature in Christ to the right hand, that is, the divine majesty and universal rule among all creatures.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, without discrimination and exception, you hear especially about the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, in which, according to the Words of Institution, Christ, anywhere and everywhere it is administered in the Church, is there with His present body and blood, and the flesh of Christ offers, communicates, and distributes in the same way through the hand of the minister to those who eat the bread and wine. Yet, he says this human nature in Christ sits at the right hand of the Magnificent Father, or really, binds it to a place in heaven.

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<sup>17</sup> Vigilius Thapsensis, *Contra Eutychetem IV*, 14 (PL 62, 126).

<sup>18</sup> Selnecker mistakes this Vigilius with Vigilius of Trent.

<sup>19</sup> Theodoret, *Eranistes II* (PG 83,148).

<sup>20</sup> Literally “You are earth, and into earth you shall go” (*terra es, et in terram ibis*).

<sup>21</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homilia de Ascensione Domini*, cited by Vigilius Thapsensis, *Contra Eutychetem V*, 24 (PL 62, 152).

The words of the Catechism, which resound in the churches and schools of the region of Meissen, and thus far in many others places by God's blessing, ought to be for us in the place of a confession.<sup>22</sup>

ώσπερ ὁ νίδιος θεοῦ ἐνανθρωπήσας καὶ παθών τῇ σαρκὶ καὶ ἀναστάς ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν καὶ ἀναληφθείς εἰς οὐρανὸν κάθηται ἐκ δεξιῶν πατρὸς παντοδυνάμου, ἀληθινῶς μὲν καὶ χωρὶς πάσης ἀλληγορίας τε καὶ ὑπερνοίας καὶ πλάσεως διανοητικῆς οὐκ ἐν περιγραφῇ δὲ τόπου ἢ λογισμοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου, ἀλλ’ ἀχωρήτως τε πάσῃ κτίσει καὶ ἀνεκδιηγήτως τῇ φράσει καὶ ἀκαταλήπτως τῷ νοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, οὕτω καὶ τὸ σῶμα καὶ τὸ αἷμα Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ διαδίδοται ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ κατὰ τὴν κυριακὴν διάταξιν ἀτρεκῶς μὲν καὶ τῷ ὄντι οὐ τροπικῶς ἢ ἐσχηματισμένως τῶν ρήμάτων νοουμένων, ἀλλὰ ἐνδεικνύοντων τῶν ἀπλῶς τὸ σημαινόμενον.

Γίνεται ταῦτα οὐ πλαστῶς οὐδὲ τυπικῶς ἥγουν τροπικῶς κατὰ ὑπόνοιάν τινα, ἀλλ’ ἀληθῶς κατὰ τὸν νοῦν τῶν ρήμάτων.

Thus the author himself renders it:

Just as the Son of God became man, suffered in the flesh, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty, truly and apart from any allegory, or even comment, false intelligence of spirit, He is nevertheless not circumscribed by a place or human reason, but it is so, since the mind of man cannot declare with oratory and comprehend that He is present to all creatures. Thus both the body and blood of Jesus Christ are distributed in the Church according to the Lord's ordaining, indeed truly and really, not with tropes or a figurative definition of the words, but by the evidence of the simple definitions, etc.

And a little later:

These do not happen falsely, or figuratively by a certain designed trope, but truly according to the understanding of the words.

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From these, which we have noted most briefly, it can become clear to all that this gloss and perverse version ("Christ must be received by heaven") diametrically opposes the analogy of faith, and that they are deservedly rejected by many and for the most grievous of reasons. We would expose a few of them that must be considered more fully and diligently by the godly reader who loves truth and simplicity.

The first reason is the properties of words in every language. For when we say, "Christ has been preached, who must receive heaven, etc.", who ever would draw the following meaning from it? Namely, that our statement would rashly affirm, with an ordinary transposition and mutation of the words, which would form a double meaning, that the word "heaven" be placed in the place of the subject, whose office would be as it were to hold and contain Christ. Who would therefore

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<sup>22</sup> Joachim Camerarius, ΚΑΤΗΧΗΣΙΣ (Leipzig, 1562), VD 16 C 448.

discern that should be said that Christ is held by heaven, that is, contained by heaven? Should we seek the visions of Apollonis and the leaves of Sibylls in the sacred letters and the evidence of testimonies?

Therefore the second reason is the Truth and Majesty of holy language, to which must not be added certain flexibilities that have been recalled from past oracles and hell itself.

Third, it is clear that this passive version is only used to stabilize the delirium about locality or bodily location. No testimonies of these things exist in the Sacred Letters. For the authority of Christ, the Son of Man, who sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty, is farther away than a locality or bodily location, so that it could be mocked by a new and dangerous voice, weakened, restricted to a certain place in heaven, and captured, bordered, and contained by the same. Therefore, this version results in the disgrace and abuse of the glorification of the human nature in Christ who sits at the right hand of the Father.

Fourth, the faith and conscience of all the sane contradict this version. Just as the Swiss, for the same reason, seem to be more disciplined than others, while they are saying that “Christ must be received by heaven” is not their interpretation.

Fifth, this version has been thought up recently. It was heretofore unknown to universal antiquity and to our churches and schools, it is aimed at distorting the Lord’s Supper and denying the natural presence and participation of Christ’s true body and blood, and it confirms the monstrosities of the Sacramentarians.

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We pray You, O Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, that You would be and remain with us, protect Your omnipotence and truth, and unite our hearts to the glory and praise of Your name. Sanctify us and preserve us in the once acknowledged truth, the confession of doctrine, and the simplicity of clear and uncorrupted faith, and do not allow us, because of any fear or peril, to be divided from the truth of Your Word and even by sorrow from its meditation, as David says.<sup>23</sup> Amen.

Honor and Glory to God Alone.

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<sup>23</sup> This echoes language in Ps 119, 37, and 38.