

G I V E N
F O R Y O U

RECLAIMING
CALVIN'S DOCTRINE
OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

KEITH A.
MATHISON

FOREWORD BY R. C. SPROUL


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*This book is dedicated to my son,
Joseph Michael Mathison.*

*The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice,
And he who begets a wise child will delight in him.
Let your father and your mother be glad,
And let her who bore you rejoice.
(Prov. 23:24–25)*

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FOREWORD BY R. C. SPROUL

Recently I visited a newly constructed church building. The interior was spacious and beautifully decorated. However, I was stunned by what was not visible to my eye. There was no pulpit and no communion table.

The absence of a fixed pulpit was not too much of a cultural shock for me as I have seen countless churches wherein plexiglas lecterns serve as portable pulpits, easily removed to make room for the drama presentation. The ancient and historic use of the elevated pulpit that symbolizes the lofty import of the word of God preached, is now relegated to the realm of the vestigial remnants of the dark ages. The furniture itself is an art form. Indeed all forms are art forms and all art forms communicate something. What this shift in art form from elevated pulpit to plexiglas lectern means may be left to the reader's imagination.

During the sixteenth-century Reformation some dramatic changes occurred in church architecture and adornment. One of the most dramatic changes was the shift from the altar to the communion table. The altar was usually fixed against the back wall. The priest stood in front of it, facing the altar with his back to the congregation. In this posture the priest was presenting an offering—a sacrifice (albeit “unbloody”) of Christ to the Father on behalf of the people.

When the Reformers rejected the idea of the Lord's Supper as a propitiatory sacrifice, the placing and use of the communion table changed. In most Protestant churches the altar was no longer viewed as an altar (a place for sacrifices) but was now viewed as a table from which a meal could be served. The offering was not to God but to the people.

The sixteenth century witnessed a massive debate concerning the meaning and function of the sacrament. The magisterial Reformers were by no means in monolithic agreement on serious issues regarding the Lord's Supper. Yet as divided as they were on some issues, the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists were solidly in agreement on two vital issues—that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace and that Christ was really and truly present in the sacrament. All three affirmed that the believer is actually nurtured by the risen body and blood of Christ.

Since the sixteenth century there has been a gradual but steady erosion of the Reformed view of the sacrament so that in the present era the doctrine of the real presence is decidedly a minority report.

From the earliest times of Christian history there has been a close link between the church's understanding of the nature of the sacrament and her attention to it. Its use tends to follow its perceived significance. When the sacrament is reduced to the level of a "naked sign" or "nude symbol," its importance and its practice all but disappear from the life of the church.

I am convinced that where the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is taken lightly the people of God are sorely impoverished. Without both Word and sacrament we face a spiritual famine.

The light of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is in eclipse. The shadows of postmodern relativism have covered the table. For the Lord's Supper to be restored to the spiritual life of the church there must be an awakening to its meaning, significance, and power. I know of no greater instrument apart from Scripture itself to bring this renewal to pass than the pages of this book.

This volume represents the best and most comprehensive treatment of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper I have ever seen. When I read it for the first time (and D.V. not the last time), I said to Keith Mathison, "You may die now." Keith gave me a puz-

zled look as he was not ready to sing the *Nunc Dimittis*. I explained that if he made no other contribution to the church for the rest of his life, he has already provided a legacy for future generations by writing this book.

The term “must read” may be overused and therefore trivialized. But if ever there was a genuine “must read” book, it is this one. Read it quickly before the communion table disappears from your church.

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I owe a lot of people many thanks in connection with the writing of this book. First, I must thank my dear wife Tricia for once again being supportive and offering constant encouragement, especially during those times when the hurdles appeared insurmountable. I'd like to thank my daughter Sarah for her constant and unquenchable joy. My son Joseph was born during the writing of this book and deserves thanks for providing me with numerous excuses to take lengthy breaks from research and writing.

I want to thank Allan Fisher for asking me to write this book. I know that it is his hope, as well as mine, that this work will contribute in some way to even more and deeper reflection on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I want to thank Paul Fields, Frank James, Don Kistler, Richard Gamble, and Brian Nicholson for helping to find materials and for providing access to obscure books and articles; R. C. Sproul Jr., Greg Bailey, and Burk Parsons for providing helpful feedback on various subjects discussed in the book; and Tim Dick for his encouragement and assistance in the later stages of this project. I would like to offer my special thanks and gratitude to Grace Mullen, librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Without her help, this book simply could not have been completed. She

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graciously assisted me in locating numerous books and articles. She took the time to copy and send many of them to me when I was unable to obtain them locally. Her Christian service has been a humbling example for which I am extremely grateful. Finally, I would like to thank R. C. Sproul for encouraging me to keep writing.

INTRODUCTION

ne of the most interesting phenomena that one encounters when comparing the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformers with the writings of their twentieth-century heirs is the different amount of attention devoted to the Lord's Supper. The Reformers devoted volumes of books, letters, tracts, and sermons to the subject. The sixteenth century was a time of heated controversy over such crucial doctrines as the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone, yet the doctrine that was discussed more often than any other was that of the Lord's Supper. In our own day, however, the Lord's Supper is rarely the subject of books or sermons. One of the secondary purposes of this book is to address the neglect of this sacrament.

The primary purpose of this book is to introduce, explain, and defend a particular doctrine of the Lord's Supper—the doctrine taught by John Calvin and most of the sixteenth-century Reformed confessions. This is not the doctrine taught in most Reformed churches today. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries two distinct views of the Lord's Supper gained some measure of confessional authority in the Reformed church.¹ The first view traces its roots to

1. See, e.g., Paul E. Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549): Did Calvin Compromise?" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 90.

John Calvin, while the second traces its roots to Ulrich Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger. Zwingli's own strictly memorialist view was generally disowned by the Reformed churches and confessions of the sixteenth century.² However, from the seventeenth century onward, it has gradually become the dominant view in the Reformed church.

It is the thesis of this book that the gradual adoption of Zwingli's doctrine has been a move away from the biblical and Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. This book will argue that Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is the biblical doctrine, the basic doctrine of the sixteenth-century Reformed churches, and the doctrine that should be reclaimed and proclaimed in the Reformed church today.

Part 1 of the book traces the historical development of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In chapter 1, John Calvin's own doctrine of the Lord's Supper is explained in some detail. In chapter 2, the teaching of other sixteenth-century Reformed leaders and confessions is explored. In chapter 3, the developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are examined. Particular attention is paid to the English Puritans and the Westminster Confession of Faith. And in chapter 4, some of the developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are explored—most notably the nineteenth-century controversy between John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge.

In Part 2, the most relevant biblical passages are examined. Chapter 5 discusses the Old Testament passages that point in different ways to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In chapter 6, the most important passages in the New Testament are closely examined.

Part 3 of the book is devoted to theological and practical questions concerning the Lord's Supper. In chapter 7, a critique of the Zwinglian, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic doctrines of the Lord's Supper is presented. In chapter 8, a summary of the Calvinistic doctrine of the Lord's Supper is outlined. Issues such as the real presence, union with Christ, eucharistic sacrifice, and the efficacy of the sacrament are addressed. In chapter 9, several practical questions about the

2. B. A. Gerrish, "John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 238.

observance of the Lord's Supper are addressed, namely the frequency of communion, the elements to be used, and paedocommunion.

Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as the sacrament of union and communion with himself. It was instituted as a sacrament of unity, yet it has become the source of numerous divisions within the body of Christ. It is to our shame that we have rent asunder what God has united in Christ. It is not the purpose of this book to encourage further self-mutilation by the bride of Christ. It is not intended as a polemical attack on any group of believers. Instead, it is my prayer that it will simply encourage prayerful reflection on, and discussion of, this often neglected sacrament. It is my prayer that our Lord Jesus Christ may use it in some small way for his glory and for the furtherance of his kingdom.

Part 1

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT



JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

John Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is rich, complex, and often surprising. His writings on the subject span the entire course of his career as a reformer and are found in sermons, tracts, commentaries, and theological treatises. Calvin was continually interacting not only with Roman Catholics, but also with Lutherans and Zwinglians. And although Calvin outlined the essential features of his doctrine early in his career, these ongoing debates with others would help to sharpen and clarify his views on a number of points.¹

In order to comprehend Calvin's arguments, it is important to understand something of the historical context of the eucharistic discussions of the sixteenth century.² The debates had been going on for several years before Calvin entered the scene in the late 1530s. In 1520, Martin Luther had strongly criticized the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments in his book *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.³ Luther challenged the Roman claim that there were

1. For a good introduction to Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, see Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953).

2. For a thorough overview of the historical context, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 7:603–82.

3. For an overview of Luther's eucharistic doctrine, see Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959); cf. Bernhard

seven sacraments, insisting that Jesus Christ had instituted only two (or perhaps three). He also argued that the Roman view overemphasized the role of the priesthood in the sacraments. He focused his attention on three errors of the Roman church:

1. The withholding of the cup from the laity.
2. The doctrine of transubstantiation.
3. The idea that, in the Eucharist, the priest performs a good work or sacrifice on behalf of the people.

Luther considered each of these ideas to be blatantly unbiblical. Despite all of his criticisms of the Roman Mass, however, Luther did not challenge the idea that the consecrated bread and wine were somehow the body and blood of Christ.⁴

A controversy soon erupted between the Lutherans and those who followed Ulrich Zwingli. According to Zwingli, the sacraments were a means by which the Christian pledged and demonstrated his allegiance to the church. He argued that the Eucharist was essentially a commemoration of the death of Christ.⁵ He based his view on a different interpretation of Christ's words of institution, "This is my body." According to Zwingli, the word "is" in this sentence really means "signifies" or "represents." Luther reacted in a strongly negative way to this interpretation.⁶

The different views led to an ongoing dispute between the German Reformers and their Swiss counterparts. An attempt to resolve the disagreement was made at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529. Unfortunately, although the participants were able to come to agreement on fourteen articles, they were unable to agree on one point of the fifteenth article, namely, whether the true flesh and blood of Christ are bodily present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.⁷ Accord-

Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 127–36, 169–77, 306–13.

4. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Zwinglian views will be discussed in chapter 7.

5. There is some debate as to whether Zwingli's eucharistic views were actually "Zwinglian." There are obscure hints in his later writings that he allowed more than a purely memorialist symbolism in the sacrament. For more on his thought, see W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

6. Cf. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 169–77.

7. Throughout this book, the term *Eucharist* is used interchangeably with the term *Lord's Supper*.

ing to Luther, Jesus Christ is bodily present in the Eucharist, but according to Zwingli, he is present only in the hearts of believers.⁸

The failure at Marburg served as an incentive to Calvin. He wanted to achieve what Luther and Zwingli had not been able to achieve—common ground among the different branches of the Reformation.⁹ Calvin seems to have deliberately sought to find a biblical middle ground between the Lutheran and Zwinglian positions. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Calvin's mediating position was as close to Zwingli's view as it was to Luther's view. Calvin sympathized with Luther's position. He did not have the same enthusiasm for Zwingli's position.¹⁰ As David Steinmetz explains,

Among the non-Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth century, none was more reluctant to disagree with Martin Luther or more eager to find common ground with him than John Calvin. At the colloquy between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians held at Regensburg in 1541, Calvin, recently accredited as a delegate from Strasbourg, aligned himself with Philip Melancthon and the Lutheran party by signing the Augsburg Confession, an action that provoked unfavorable comment among some non-Lutheran theologians.¹¹

The point is that Calvin's position on the Lord's Supper was much closer to that of Luther than it was to that of Zwingli.¹² This is important to remember, because in later centuries many of the heirs of Calvin would gradually move away from his position toward a more Zwinglian doctrine.

8. Cf. Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 178–81.

9. See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172; cf. Joseph N. Tylenda, "The Ecumenical Intention of Calvin's Early Eucharistic Teaching," in *Reformatio Perennis: Essays on Calvin and the Reformation in Honor of Ford Lewis Battles*, ed. B. A. Gerrish (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 27–28.

10. See François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1963), 332–33.

11. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 172.

12. Wendel, *Calvin*, 330–31.

CALVIN'S INFLUENCES

Luther's influence on Calvin's understanding of the Eucharist was strong, but Luther was not alone in shaping the thoughts of the young reformer. Calvin was also strongly influenced by Augustine, Martin Bucer, and others. The influence of Augustine on Calvin's eucharistic thought was especially pervasive.¹³ Calvin appealed to him in support of several basic elements of his doctrine:

1. The nature of signs and their relationship to the reality that is signified.
2. The figurative nature of the words of institution.
3. The unprofitable nature of unworthy reception.
4. The heavenly location of Christ's natural body.
5. The relationship between the sacraments of both testaments to Christ.¹⁴

The influence of Augustine is encountered at virtually every point in Calvin's eucharistic doctrine.

Bucer's influence can also be seen at several points in Calvin's doctrine. As François Wendel notes, "The parallel that is drawn [by Calvin] between the receiving of the elements and the nourishment of the soul by the body of Christ is already to be found in Bucer's *Evangelical Commentary*."¹⁵ There were others, such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, who not only influenced Calvin, but also were influenced by him. It is important to note who influenced Calvin because, although he was attempting to find a biblical common ground, he was not attempting to do so independently of others. He searched the Scriptures, but he also searched the writings of other believers for insight into this difficult doctrine.

13. *Ibid.*, 313; cf. Joseph Fitzer, "The Augustinian Roots of Calvin's Eucharistic Thought," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 165.

14. Fitzer, "Augustinian Roots," 168; cf. G. R. Evans, "Calvin on Signs: An Augustinian Dilemma," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 154.

15. Wendel, *Calvin*, 332.

CALVIN ON THE SACRAMENTS

As we turn to Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, we note that he worked it out within the broader context of his doctrine of the sacraments. It is helpful, therefore, to observe first how he understood the general nature of the sacraments. Calvin provides a comprehensive definition of the sacraments in the fourth book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Calvin begins his chapter on the sacraments with some basic definitions and a discussion of how the sacraments function as signs and seals. He first offers a brief definition of what a sacrament is:

It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is, an outward *sign* by which the Lord *seals* on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men. Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward *sign*, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him. Whichever of these definitions you may choose, it does not differ in meaning from that of Augustine, who teaches that a sacrament is "a visible *sign* of a sacred thing," or "a visible form of an invisible grace," but it better and more clearly explains the thing itself.¹⁶

Calvin also followed Augustine by defining sacraments as "visible words" of God.¹⁷ But we see already in his longer definition the introduction of the concept of the sacraments as "signs" that seal certain promises.

Calvin develops his definition of the basic concepts by explaining the origin of the term *sacrament*. He explains that the ancient Latin fathers used this term to translate the Greek word *mystērion*. The term was "applied to those signs which reverently represented sublime and

16. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.14.1 (emphasis added).

17. B. A. Gerrish, "John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 232.

spiritual things.”¹⁸ The Greek-speaking Christians continued to use the Greek term, so that what the Latin Christians called “sacraments” the Greeks called “mysteries.”

Calvin turns his attention next to the relationship between the word and the sacraments. He points out that “from the definition that I have set forth we understand that a sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it.”¹⁹ For Calvin, the word and the sacraments are inseparably joined, and the sacraments generally accomplish that which the word accomplishes—being different means to the same end. Both the word and the sacraments “offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”²⁰

The connection between the word and the sacraments is quite strong in Calvin’s thought. According to Calvin, the sacraments must include the word in order to be sacraments.²¹ He quotes Augustine, who says, “Let the word be added to the element and it will become a sacrament.”²² Elsewhere, as Ronald Wallace notes, Calvin defines the sacraments as “true visible representations of the invisible spiritual things to which the Word directs us.”²³ To emphasize this truth, Calvin says, “The testimony of the Gospel is engraven upon the sacraments.”²⁴ And not only does Calvin argue that the sacrament cannot exist without the word; he also points out that the word alone does not have its intended effect apart from the sacrament.²⁵

When Calvin turns to a discussion of the way in which the sacraments function as seals, he is forced to answer a potential objection to his doctrine. Some were arguing that if the sacraments generally accomplish the same thing that the word accomplishes, then they must be superfluous. Calvin responds by saying,

18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.2.

19. *Ibid.*, 4.14.3.

20. *Ibid.*, 4.14.17.

21. *Ibid.*, 4.14.3–4. Cf. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 135–37.

22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.4.

23. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 139–40.

24. Calvin, commentary on 2 Cor. 5:19, cited in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 139–40.

25. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 137.

To this our answer would be in brief: the seals which are attached to government documents and other public acts are nothing taken by themselves, for they would be attached in vain if the parchment had nothing written on it. Yet, when added to the writing, they do not on that account fail to confirm and seal what is written.²⁶

He adds that “the sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life.”²⁷

The sacraments are not only seals of the promises of God, but also signs of his covenant. Calvin explains what this means:

Since the Lord calls his promises “covenants” [Gen. 6:18; 9:9; 17:2] and his sacraments “tokens” of the covenants, a simile can be taken from the covenants of men. What can the slaughter of a sow accomplish unless words accompany the act, indeed, unless they precede it? For sows are often slain apart from any inner or loftier mystery. What can giving the right hand accomplish when hands are often joined in battle? Yet when words precede, the laws of covenants are by such signs ratified, although they were first conceived, established, and decreed in words. The sacraments, therefore, are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word.²⁸

In the same section, Calvin also compares the sacraments to “pillars” and “columns,” as well as to “mirrors in which we may contemplate the riches of God’s grace, which he lavishes upon us.”²⁹

Calvin turns his attention next to the way in which the sacraments confirm faith as instruments of the Holy Spirit. He first notes that the importance of the sacraments is not affected by the fact that they are received by the wicked. The sacraments may be received by all, but

26. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.5.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 4.14.6.

29. *Ibid.*

they are efficacious only for those who receive them with faith. He explains:

It is therefore certain that the Lord offers us mercy and the pledge of his grace both in his Sacred Word and in his sacraments. But it is understood only by those who take Word and sacraments with sure faith, just as Christ is offered and held forth by the Father to all unto salvation, yet not all acknowledge and receive him.³⁰

In other words, the offer in the sacraments is objective, but it can be received only by faith.

One of the most important functions of the sacraments, according to Calvin, is to confirm and increase faith. He writes:

As to the confirmation and increase of faith . . . I assign this particular ministry to the sacraments. Not that I suppose there is some secret force or other perpetually seated in them by which they are able to promote or confirm faith by themselves. Rather, I consider that they have been instituted by the Lord to the end that they may serve to establish and increase faith.³¹

Calvin takes great pains to distance himself from any “magical” understanding of the sacraments. He insists that there is no force or power that resides inherently in the elements themselves. What power they have comes from the working of the Holy Spirit:

The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears. Therefore, I make such a division between Spirit and sacraments that the power to act rests with the for-

30. *Ibid.*, 4.14.7.

31. *Ibid.*, 4.14.9.

mer, and the ministry alone is left to the latter—a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power.³²

In Calvin's understanding, the Holy Spirit plays an essential role in the ministry of the sacraments. In order that "the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of the Lord."³³ Apart from the Spirit's work, the sacraments profit nothing. When the Spirit does work, he "transmits those outward words and sacraments from our ears to our soul."³⁴

Although the sacraments are used in this way by God, we are not to place our confidence directly in them. They are instruments, and so they have value only insofar as God uses them as his instruments. As Calvin puts it, "God uses means and instruments which he himself sees to be expedient, that all things may serve his glory, since he is Lord and Judge of all."³⁵ And just as we are not to put our confidence in any of God's other creatures that have been designed for our use, "neither ought our confidence to inhere in the sacraments, nor the glory of God be transferred to them."³⁶ In the use of the sacraments, as in the use of all things, God is to be given all the glory.

Furthermore, the sacraments do not, in and of themselves, impart grace. Instead, like the word of God, they present Christ to us. Calvin strongly criticizes the Roman Catholics for saying that "the sacraments of the new law (those now used in the Christian church) justify and confer grace, provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin."³⁷ According to Calvin, any view such as this, which promises righteousness apart from faith, "hurls souls headlong to destruc-

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 4.14.10.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 4.14.12.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 4.14.14.

tion.”³⁸ Citing Augustine again, he argues that “there can be invisible sanctification without a visible sign, and on the other hand a visible sign without true sanctification.”³⁹

The Augustinian distinction between a sacrament and the matter of a sacrament is very important in Calvin’s thought. He explains, “The distinction signifies not only that the figure and the truth are contained in the sacrament, but that they are not so linked that they cannot be separated; and that even in the union itself the matter must always be distinguished from the sign, that we may not transfer to the one what belongs to the other.”⁴⁰ He quotes Augustine, who wrote, “In the elect alone the sacraments effect what they represent.”⁴¹

But what is the matter or substance of the sacraments? Calvin answers, “Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him.”⁴² He explains further how the sacraments are effective:

The sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there.⁴³

In response to those who might argue that this view implies that the wicked who receive the sacraments render them null and void, Calvin offers the following:

What I have said is not to be understood as if the force and truth of the sacrament depended upon the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary. For since it is one thing to offer, another to receive, nothing prevents the symbol

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 4.14.15.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 4.14.16.

43. *Ibid.*

consecrated by the Lord's Word from being actually what it is called, and from keeping its own force. Yet this does not benefit a wicked or impious man. But Augustine has well solved this question in a few words: "If you receive carnally, it does not cease to be spiritual, but it is not so for you."⁴⁴

We see this careful distinction between the sign and the thing signified emphasized repeatedly throughout Calvin's writings on the sacraments. As we will see, it is an especially crucial element of his eucharistic doctrine.

We have already noted Calvin's assertion that apart from the work of the Spirit, the sacraments profit nothing. At this point in his discussion, he elaborates further on what this means. He says of the sacraments,

They do not bestow any grace of themselves, but announce and tell us, and (as they are guarantees and tokens) ratify among us, those things given us by divine bounty. The Holy Spirit . . . is he who brings the graces of God with him, gives a place for the sacraments among us, and makes them bear fruit.⁴⁵

This is important for several reasons. Calvin explains the first reason at some length:

We do not deny that God himself is present in his institution by the very-present power of his Spirit. Nevertheless, that the administration of the sacraments which he has ordained may not be unfruitful and void, we declare that the inner grace of the Spirit, as distinct from the outward ministry, ought to be considered and pondered separately. *God therefore truly executes whatever he promises and represents in signs*; nor do the signs lack their own effect in proving their Author truthful and faithful.⁴⁶

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 4.14.17.

46. Ibid. (emphasis added).

This concept destroys the false notion that “justification and the power of the Holy Spirit are enclosed in elements.”⁴⁷

Another aspect of Calvin’s doctrine is that God truly executes what he represents in signs. There is a connection between the action of the minister administering the sacraments and the action of God. Calvin writes, “God accomplishes within what the minister represents and attests by outward action.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere he defends the view “that God, moreover, as he is true and faithful, performs by the secret virtue of his Spirit that which he figures by external signs, and, accordingly, that on the part of God himself, not empty signs are set before us, but the reality and efficacy at the same time conjoined with them.”⁴⁹ In Calvin’s view, what is promised in the sacraments is really and truly given.⁵⁰ It is important for Calvin to note, however, that although God ordinarily gives the reality at the same time that the signs are presented by the minister, there are exceptions to this rule:

The nature of baptism or the Supper must not be tied down to an instant of time. God, whenever he sees meet, fulfils and exhibits in immediate effect that which he figures in the sacrament. But no necessity must be imagined so as to prevent his grace from sometimes preceding, sometimes following, the use of the sign.⁵¹

Calvin says that to tie the grace of the sacrament to the time that the sign is administered without exception is to rob God of his sovereignty.⁵²

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. “The Best Method of Obtaining Concord,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2:573.

50. François Wendel says that there is a striking similarity between the parallelism inherent in Calvin’s view and the parallelism found in the contemporary Franciscan view. According to both, “there was a parallelism between the reception of the elements in the Supper and the action of the Spirit of Christ, but the elements and the Spirit remained distinct” (*Calvin*, 344–45).

51. Calvin, “Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith Concerning the Sacraments, in Answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, 2:342.

52. Ibid., 343. That a separation in time between the receiving of the sign and the receiving of the grace signified is the exception rather than the rule can be readily seen in Calvin’s rejection of Westphal’s criticism of his understanding of baptism. Westphal accused Calvin of denying that men are born again by the washing of baptism. Calvin calls this accusation a figment of Westphal’s imagination

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Having a general understanding of Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments, we may turn to what is perhaps one of his greatest contributions to theology, his doctrine of the Lord's Supper. After years of studying the Scriptures and the writings of the church fathers, Calvin offered what he believed to be a biblical doctrine that resolved a number of perplexing and controversial issues.

Definitions and Explanations

In 1540, Calvin wrote *A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ*. This little booklet, written in Calvin's native French, was intended to show clearly and concisely the middle ground between the Lutherans and the Zwinglians. In it, he provides one of his clearest explanations of why the Eucharist was instituted:

For this reason, the Lord instituted for us his Supper, in order to sign and seal in our consciences the promises contained in his gospel concerning our being made partakers of his body and blood; and to give us certainty and assurance that in this consists our true spiritual nourishment; so that, having such an earnest, we might entertain a right assurance about salvation. Second, for the purpose of inciting us to recognize his great goodness towards us, so that we praise and magnify it more fully. Third, to exhort us to all sanctity and innocence, seeing that we are members of Jesus Christ, and particularly to unity and brotherly charity, as is specially recommended to us.⁵³

According to Calvin, the Supper is given as a seal of the promise that believers who partake of it are truly partaking of the body and blood of Christ. It is also given to cause us to recognize and ac-

and says, "Having distinctly asserted, that men are regenerated by baptism, just as they are by the word, I early obviated the impudence of the man, and left nothing for his invective to strike at but his own shadow" (p. 340).

53. John Calvin, "A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 144.

knowledge his amazing grace and to exhort us to holiness of life. Calvin expands on the first of these reasons in his *Institutes*:

It is not, therefore, the chief function of the Sacrament simply and without higher consideration to extend to us the body of Christ. Rather it is to seal and confirm that promise by which he testifies that his flesh is food indeed and his blood is drink [John 6:56], which feed us unto eternal life [John 6:55].⁵⁴

This is a central element of Calvin's eucharistic thought, but it cannot be properly understood apart from the important concept of union with Christ.

Union with Christ

The concept of union with Christ is crucial to Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Unless the connection is understood, very little of what he says about the Supper makes sense. We must begin by noting what Calvin says about the purpose of the Incarnation:

We must hold therefore that Christ, being the eternal Son of God, and of the same essence and glory with the Father, assumed our flesh, to communicate to us by right of adoption that which he possessed by nature, namely, to make us sons of God. This is done when ingrafted by faith into the body of Christ. . . .

Moreover, that Christ may thus exhibit himself to us and produce these effects [expiation, imputation, and intercession] in us, he must be made one with us, and we must be ingrafted into his body. He does not infuse his life into us unless he is our head, and from him the whole body, fitly joined together through every joint of supply, according to his working, maketh increase of the body in the proportion of each member.⁵⁵

According to Calvin, we can receive Christ's benefits only by being united with him, and we can be united with him only because he

54. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.4.

55. Calvin, "Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, 2:213–14.

took on human flesh in the Incarnation. As Wendel explains, "Our contact with God can be made only by the intermediation of the incarnate Christ."⁵⁶

As we will observe, Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is intimately connected to this concept of mystical union with Christ. According to Calvin, in the Lord's Supper "Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality [John 6:51]."⁵⁷ The sacramental signs of bread and wine "represent for us the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ."⁵⁸ Calvin explains that this mystery of union and communion with Christ is shown through visible signs because the reality itself is, by its very nature, incomprehensible.⁵⁹

Calvin's explanation of the nature of the believer's mystical union with Christ is worth examining further. In commenting on Ephesians 5:30, Calvin explains what Paul meant when he wrote, "For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones." According to Calvin, Paul "does not simply mean that Christ is a partaker of our nature, but expresses something higher . . . *and more emphatic.*"⁶⁰ Commenting on verse 31, he elaborates on what this union means:

As Eve was formed out of the substance of her husband, and thus was a part of himself; so, if we are the true members of Christ, we share his substance, and by this intercourse unite into one body. . . . Paul says that *we are members of his flesh and of his bones*. Do we wonder then, that in the Lord's Supper he holds out his body to be enjoyed by us, and to nourish us unto eternal life?⁶¹

In his response to the Lutheran Heshusius, Calvin is even more explicit on the nature of the mystical union:

56. Wendel, *Calvin*, 340.

57. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. John Calvin, *Commentaries* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 21:323 (emphasis in original).

61. *Ibid.* (emphasis in original).

I do not restrict this union to the divine essence, but affirm that it belongs to the flesh and blood, inasmuch as it was not simply said, My Spirit, but, My flesh is meat indeed; nor was it simply said, My Divinity, but, My blood is drink indeed.

Moreover, I do not interpret this communion of flesh and blood as applying only to the common nature, in respect that Christ, by becoming man, made us sons of God with himself by virtue of fraternal fellowship; but I distinctly affirm, that our flesh which he assumed is vivifying by becoming the material of spiritual life to us. And I willingly embrace the saying of Augustine, As Eve was formed out of a rib of Adam, so the origin and beginning of life to us flowed from the side of Christ. And although I distinguish between the sign and the thing signified, I do not teach that there is only a bare and shadowy figure, but distinctly declare that the bread is a sure pledge of that communion with the flesh and blood of Christ which it figures.⁶²

The bond of the mystical union between the believer and Christ is the Holy Spirit. As Calvin explains in the *Institutes*, “The bond of this connection is therefore the Spirit of Christ, with whom we are joined in unity, and is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us.”⁶³

In Calvin’s thought, the promise of union with Christ is the aspect of the gospel that the sacraments are chiefly designed to present and represent.⁶⁴ Wallace summarizes Calvin’s explanation of the necessity of this union. First, “Calvin teaches faithfully that Jesus Christ through His life and especially His death and resurrection performed in His human nature, and indeed in His human body, all that was necessary for the salvation of mankind.”⁶⁵ Also, “Since Christ has thus worked out our salvation in and through His human body and human nature, it follows that the benefits of His work are not available for us, unless we ourselves are brought into some kind of com-

62. Calvin, “Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, in Order to Dispute the Mists of Tileman Heshusius,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, 2:507.

63. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.12.

64. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 143; cf. Gerrish, “John Calvin,” 229.

65. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 145.

munion with the human nature and indeed with the body, in which all the work of our salvation was performed.”⁶⁶ Further, “Participation in the blessings which Christ died and rose to win for us is inseparable from communion with His person, and Calvin insists that this union can be attained only through participation in the ‘flesh’ of Christ.”⁶⁷ Finally, “In this union there takes place what Calvin calls a ‘wondrous exchange’ made by the boundless goodness of God, whereby Christ takes upon Himself what is ours, and transfers to us what is His own.”⁶⁸

According to Calvin, each of the two sacraments is related to the believer’s union with Christ. Baptism is connected with the believer’s initiation into mystical union with Christ. The Lord’s Supper is connected with the believer’s ongoing continuation in this union.⁶⁹ B. A. Gerrish provides a helpful explanation of the relationship between the Eucharist and the mystical union in Calvin’s thought:

The role of the Eucharist in the life of the Church is traced by Calvin to the fact that our communion with Christ is not whole and perfect from the very first, but subject to growth, vicissitudes, impediments. . . . The very nature of the symbolism suggests to Calvin that the Lord’s Supper is a matter of nourishing, sustaining, and increasing a communion with Christ to which the word and baptism have initiated us.⁷⁰

For Calvin, we are initially united to Christ in connection with baptism, and we grow in this union in connection with our partaking of the Eucharist.

Christ, according to Calvin, is the believer’s source of life, his spiritual nourishment. In his commentary on John 6:51, Calvin explains how Christ acts as the mediator of divine life for believers:

Though this power [to quicken souls] comes from another source than from the flesh, still this is no reason why the desig-

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*, 145–46; cf. Gerrish, “John Calvin,” 230.

68. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 147.

69. Cf. *ibid.*, 149–50.

70. Gerrish, “John Calvin,” 234.

nation may not accurately apply to it [the flesh of Christ]; for as the eternal Word of God is the fountain of *life*, (John i.4,) so his flesh, as a channel, conveys to us that *life* which dwells intrinsically, as we say, in his Divinity. And in this sense it is called life-giving, because it conveys to us that life which it borrows for us from another quarter.⁷¹

Calvin explains this idea further in the *Institutes*:

But when the Source of life begins to abide in our flesh, he no longer lies hidden far from us, but shows us that we are to partake of him. But he also quickens our very flesh in which he abides, that by partaking of him we may be fed unto immortality. “I am,” he says, “the bread of life come down from heaven. And the bread which I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.” [John 6:48, 51; cf. ch. 6:51–52, Vg.] By these words he teaches not only that he is life since he is the eternal Word of God, who came down from heaven to us, but also that by coming down he poured that power upon the flesh which he took in order that from it participation in life might flow unto us.

From this also these things follow: that his flesh is truly food, and his blood truly drink [John 6:55; cf. ch. 6:56, Vg.], and by these foods believers are nourished unto eternal life. . . .

But the flesh of Christ does not of itself have a power so great as to quicken us, for in its first condition it was subject to mortality; and now, endowed with immortality, it does not live through itself. . . . Accordingly, he shows that in his humanity there also dwells fullness of life, so that whoever has partaken of his flesh and blood may at the same time enjoy participation in life. . . .

. . . the flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours into us the life springing forth from the Godhead into itself. Now who does not see that communion of Christ’s flesh and blood is necessary for all who aspire to heavenly life?⁷²

71. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 19:262.

72. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.8–9.

We see that for Calvin, the Incarnation was crucial because Christ had to take upon himself human flesh in order to mediate divine life to us. According to Calvin, the flesh of Christ functions as something of a “channel” or “conduit” through which the divine life is poured into those who are in union with him.⁷³ He is the true Vine, and we are the branches.

The Presence of Christ in the Eucharist

We must now turn our attention to the subject of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. This topic has probably been the source of more discussion and controversy than any other subject related to the Eucharist, and for that reason we must be especially careful to be clear about what Calvin did and did not say. In order to understand Calvin's doctrine of Christ's presence, we must begin with his doctrine of signs. As Gerrish observes, “It is hardly too much to say that Calvin's entire sacramental theology lies implicit in his doctrine of signs (which, of course, he borrowed from St. Augustine).”⁷⁴

Calvin's discussion of sacramental signs is found throughout his works, and he teaches the same thing in every place—that the signs and the things signified must be distinguished without being separated. In one place he writes,

Wherefore, though we distinguish, as we ought, between the signs and the things signified, yet we do not disjoin the reality from the signs, but acknowledge that all who in faith embrace the promises there offered receive Christ spiritually, with his spiritual gifts, while those who had long been made partakers of Christ continue and renew that communion [Par. 9].⁷⁵

In the introductory letter to “Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments,” he asks, “Who is there amongst us who labours not to show that the Sacraments are conjoined with their reality and effect?”⁷⁶ In

73. A more modern illustration would be electricity, which requires a conduit in order to travel from its source to its destination.

74. Gerrish, “John Calvin,” 233.

75. Calvin, “Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments,” 215.

76. *Ibid.*, 207.

his commentary on John 6, he says much the same thing: “It must be acknowledged, that a sacrament consists of a visible sign, with which is connected the thing signified, which is the reality of it.”⁷⁷

Ronald Wallace summarizes some of the main points of Calvin’s doctrine of the sacramental union between the signs and the things signified. First, “the union formed between the divine and human activity in the event of God’s action in the sacrament is so close as, practically speaking, to become one of identity.”⁷⁸ As Calvin expresses it, “The name of the thing, therefore, is transferred here to the sign—not as if it were strictly applicable, but figuratively on the ground of that connection which I have mentioned.”⁷⁹ Second, this sacramental union is “so transcendent and freely personal that the thing signified must be regarded as distinct from the sign.”⁸⁰ If the sign actually becomes the thing it signifies, it necessarily ceases to be a sign, and if this happens, it ceases to be a sacrament. Third, there is “no natural analogy for this union.”⁸¹ It is a unique mystery with no parallel in the natural realm. The only possible analogy for the sacramental union is the mystery of the Incarnation. Fourth, observes Wallace, “There is no doubt that Calvin sees an analogy which at least serves to regulate his thinking on this mystery of sacramental union, in the mystery of the union between God and man in Jesus Christ.”⁸²

The analogy that Calvin sees between the union of God and man in Jesus Christ and the union of sign and reality in the sacrament helps to explain some of his main arguments. In arguing for distinction without separation, Calvin was appealing to the accepted formula of orthodox Christology. As Paul Rorem notes, Calvin’s sacramental theology was “a Chalcedonian balancing act.”⁸³ Just as the divine and human natures of Christ must be distinguished without being sepa-

77. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 19:207; cf. Calvin, “Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith,” 271, 274; Calvin, “A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper,” 147.

78. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 162.

79. Calvin, commentary on 1 Cor. 10:4, cited in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 163.

80. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 162.

81. *Ibid.*, 165.

82. *Ibid.*, 167.

83. Paul E. Rorem, “The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549): Did Calvin Compromise?” in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 73; cf. McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 183.

rated, so too the sign and the reality signified must be distinguished without being separated.

It is important to note Calvin's view of the relationship between the signs and the things signified because for Calvin the bread and wine of the Supper are signs representing something present, not signs representing something absent.⁸⁴ Joseph Tylenda observes that Calvin does not use the term *adesse*, "because this word indicates a real, physical presence."⁸⁵ Instead, the term that Calvin uses most frequently is *exhibere*, a word that "presupposes a presence and manifests it."⁸⁶ In fact, one of the clearest aspects of Calvin's doctrine of the sacramental signs is that these signs are not bare and empty figures. As I. John Hesselink notes, "Contrary to much popular opinion, even in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, Calvin does *not* teach that the bread and wine are mere symbols of Christ's body and blood."⁸⁷ Gerrish provides a good summary of Calvin's thought on this point of doctrine:

Only the most perverse misreading of the sources could conclude that the sacraments for Calvin have a purely symbolic and pedagogical function. . . . The sacraments do instruct by means of graphic symbols, but they also are real means of grace by which the thing symbolized is communicated.

If this were not already clear enough from the entire progress of thought in the *Institutes*, it should have been removed beyond all doubt by Calvin's careful and explicit statements about the nature of signs. To the relation of sign and thing signified he applies the language of the christological formula, "distinction without division." We must distinguish the sign from the thing signified, but we cannot separate them. Where the sign is, there is the reality also. And since Christ himself is the reality—the "matter" or the "substance" of the sacraments—the signs are nothing less than pledges of the real presence. Indeed, they are the media through which Christ effects his presence to his

84. Cf. Tylenda, "Ecumenical Intention," 31–32.

85. *Ibid.*, 31.

86. *Ibid.*

87. I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 146.

people. The sign cannot be or become the reality, but it is not the symbol of an absent reality either.⁸⁸

As Augustine observed long before Calvin, it is crucial to sacramental theology to distinguish between the sign and the thing signified without separating them.

A second issue that must be briefly discussed before turning to what Calvin specifically says about the mode of Christ's presence in the Supper is Calvin's interpretation of Christ's words of institution. What did Jesus mean when he said "This is my body" at the Last Supper? To this question, Calvin devotes a considerable amount of attention. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24, for example, he explains the meaning of these controversial words:

This is my body. . . . Christ calls the bread *his body*. . . . Let us regard it then as beyond all controversy that Christ is here speaking of the bread. Now the question is—"In what sense?" That we may elicit the true meaning, we must hold that the expression is figurative;⁸⁹ for, assuredly, to deny this is exceedingly dishonest. Why then is the term *body* applied to the bread? All, I think, will allow that it is for the same reason that John calls the Holy Spirit a *dove*. (John i.32) Thus far we are agreed. Now the reason why the Spirit was so called was this—that he had appeared in the form of a dove. Hence the name of the Spirit is transferred to the visible sign. Why should we not maintain that there is here a similar instance of metonymy, and that the term *body* is applied to the bread, as being the sign and symbol of it . . . ? I lay it down, then, as a settled point, that there is here a sacramental form of expression, in which the Lord gives to the sign the name of the thing signified. . . . We must now proceed farther, and inquire as to the reason of the metonymy. Here I reply, that the name of the thing signified is not applied to the sign simply as being a representation of it, but rather as

88. Gerrish, "John Calvin," 233.

89. As we have already seen, the term *figurative* does not have exactly the same connotations in Calvin's thought that it has to many modern ears. This will become even clearer as the discussion proceeds.

being a symbol of it, by which the reality is presented to us. . . . Hence the *bread* is *Christ's body*, because it assuredly testifies, that the body which it represents is held forth to us, or because the Lord, by holding out to us that symbol, gives us at the same time his own body; for Christ is not a deceiver, to mock us with empty representations. Hence it is regarded by me as beyond all controversy, that *the reality is here conjoined with the sign; or, in other words, that we do not less truly become participants in Christ's body in respect of spiritual efficacy, than we partake of the bread.*⁹⁰

Here we see again Calvin's care in avoiding a view of the sacraments that results in the signs becoming bare and empty symbols.

We must also observe that when Calvin says that the words of institution are "figurative," he means that they are an example of a particular figure of speech—a metonymy. He is using the term *figurative* in contrast to those interpreters who understood the words "This is my body" in an overly literal sense. But just as Calvin rejects a strictly literal interpretation of these words, so he also rejects any interpretation that renders the sacrament an empty symbol.⁹¹

Having discussed Calvin's doctrine of sacramental signs and his understanding of the words of institution, we may now turn to his specific teaching about the mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. The great Calvin scholar Henry Beveridge claims that Calvin distinctly asserts the true presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.⁹² The accuracy of his observation can be observed in numerous places in Calvin's work. In the *Institutes*, for example, Calvin writes:

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space. . . . Now,

90. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 20:376–78.

91. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20–23; Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 197–99; Wendel, *Calvin*, 343.

92. "Translator's Preface," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, 2:xx.

that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, as if he penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises. . . . I indeed admit that the breaking of the bread is a symbol; it is not the thing itself. But, having admitted this, we shall nevertheless duly infer that by the showing of the symbol the thing itself is also shown. For unless a man means to call God a deceiver, he would never dare assert that an empty symbol is set forth by him. . . . And the godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there. For why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, except to assure you of a true participation in it? But if it is true that a visible sign is given us to seal the gift of a thing invisible, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us.⁹³

Later in the same book, Calvin says of Christ:

In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them.⁹⁴

Similarly, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24, he says, “I conclude, that Christ’s body is *really*, (as the common expression is,)—that is, *truly* given to us in the Supper, to be wholesome food for our souls.”⁹⁵

Calvin did not often use the expression “real presence.” He did not do so because, as Tylenda observes, “Calvin considered a ‘real’ presence as one which involves the following: Christ’s body must leave heaven and be enclosed in the bread so that the bread is said to be the body of Christ; if Christ’s body be so enclosed, it follows that

93. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10.

94. *Ibid.*, 4.17.32.

95. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 20:379 (emphasis in original).

it is corporeally present, and if the body is present, it is locally present."⁹⁶ Calvin would allow the use of the word *real* only "if it be used for 'true', i.e. as opposed to deceptive or illusory."⁹⁷ The problem for Calvin was that the word *real* carried with it a lot of unwanted connotations, and people were inclined to read into it things he did not want to communicate—specifically ideas such as local or corporeal presence. He rejected any such idea of a local, corporeal presence, but he strongly believed in the true presence of Christ.

As Calvin stated repeatedly, his argument with the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans was over the mode of Christ's presence, not the fact of that presence.⁹⁸ Lutherans and Catholics believed in and taught a doctrine of local, corporeal presence (albeit in different ways). Calvin strongly denied this doctrine in whatever form it was presented. As one Calvin scholar notes, "While rejecting the material presence of the body of Christ in the bread, he proclaims that the whole of Christ is truly present, in his humanity and his divinity."⁹⁹

Paul Rorem lists the four basic reasons why Calvin rejected the idea of a local, corporeal presence: "the danger of superstitious idolatry of the bread, a correct and catholic Christology of Christ's human and divine natures, the proper and essential role of the Holy Spirit, and the very definition of a sacrament: 'The matter [*res*] must always be distinguished from the sign, that we may not transfer to the one what belongs to the other."¹⁰⁰

The danger of superstitious idolatry was not a hypothetical issue in Calvin's mind. He was convinced that the common Roman practice of adoring the consecrated host was clear evidence that an incorrect doctrine of Christ's presence inevitably led to such idolatry.¹⁰¹ Calvin also saw that the idea of a local, corporeal presence was contrary to a correct understanding of orthodox Christology. In order to maintain the idea of a local presence, Luther had advocated the doctrine of the ubiquity of the glorified body of Christ. According to Luther, Christ's

96. Joseph N. Tylenda, "Calvin and Christ's Presence in the Supper—True or Real," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 71.

97. *Ibid.*

98. See Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 183; Tylenda, "Calvin and Christ's Presence," 67–68; cf. Calvin, "Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine," 510, 528–29.

99. Wendel, *Calvin*, 343.

100. Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus*," 74.

101. Calvin, "A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper," 159.

human body could be simultaneously present everywhere that the Lord's Supper was being observed.¹⁰² Calvin believed that such a doctrine necessarily confused the properties of the divine and human natures of Christ, contrary to Chalcedonian orthodoxy.¹⁰³ According to Calvin, it is a defining characteristic of flesh to "subsist in one definite place, with its own size and form."¹⁰⁴ Ubiquitous flesh would, by definition, cease to be true flesh.¹⁰⁵

Christ's physical body, according to Calvin, is locally present in heaven and will remain there until he returns again. He explains, "Not Aristotle, but the Holy Spirit teaches that the body of Christ from the time of his resurrection was finite, and is contained in heaven even to the Last Day."¹⁰⁶ Christ's physical body is in heaven and does not have to descend to earth in order for us truly to partake of it. This is true, according to Calvin, first of all because "the minds of believers (this being an heavenly act) are raised by faith above the world."¹⁰⁷ Second, the Holy Spirit, "removing the obstacle which distance of space might occasion, conjoins us with his [Christ's] members."¹⁰⁸ The Holy Spirit is "sufficient to break through all impediments and surmount any distance of place."¹⁰⁹

Wallace provides a helpful summary of the various aspects of Calvin's thought. He reminds us, first of all, that Calvin agrees with the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics "that the flesh of Christ is given in the sacrament."¹¹⁰ This is repeatedly emphasized throughout Calvin's works. In fact, Calvin asserts, "the whole of Christ is given in the sacrament."¹¹¹ This is necessary, according to Calvin, because the flesh of Christ is the channel of the life that belongs inherently to the divine nature.¹¹² Wallace points out four basic points in Calvin's eucharistic doctrine that must be kept in mind as we next consider the mode of partaking of Christ's body and blood:

102. Wendel, *Calvin*, 345.

103. *Ibid.*, 348–50.

104. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.24.

105. The doctrine of ubiquity will be discussed and critiqued in greater detail in chapter 7.

106. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.26; cf. Calvin, "Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith," 285.

107. Calvin, "Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith," 280.

108. *Ibid.*; cf. p. 249.

109. Calvin, "The Best Method of Obtaining Concord," 577.

110. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 199.

111. *Ibid.*, 200; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.9.

112. Cf. Calvin, commentary on John 6:51.

(i) *The body of Christ*, in which he wrought our redemption and apart from which we cannot be saved, in being communicated to us in the sacrament *remains*, throughout the participation, *in heaven*, beyond this world, and *retains all its human properties*. . . .

(ii) *Communion with the body of Christ is effected through the descent of the Holy Spirit, by whom our souls are lifted up to heaven*, there to partake of the life transfused into us from the flesh of Christ. . . .

(iii) Partaking of the flesh of Christ in the supper is thus a *heavenly action*, in which the flesh is *eaten in a spiritual manner*. . . .

(iv) The presence of the body of Christ in the Supper, though it may be called a *real presence* and a *descent of Christ* by the Spirit, is nevertheless also a "*celestial mode of presence*" and leads to no localisation of the body of Christ on earth, no inclusion of it in the elements, no attachment of it to the elements. . . .¹¹³

The Mode of Partaking of the Body and the Blood

The controversies that arose over the issue of how one partakes of Christ in the sacrament were as heated as those that arose over the issue of how Christ is present in the sacrament. Calvin, therefore, explains his doctrine at great length in numerous places. In the *Institutes*, for instance, he begins his discussion of this topic by stating that Christ "offers himself with all his benefits to us, and we receive him by faith."¹¹⁴ He goes on to explain what this means:

None but the utterly irreligious deny that Christ is the bread of life by which believers are nourished into eternal life. But there is no unanimity as to the mode of partaking of him. For there are some who define the eating of Christ's flesh and the drinking of blood as, in one word, nothing but to believe in Christ. But it seems to me that Christ meant to teach something more definite, and more elevated, in that noble discourse in which he commends to us the eating of his flesh [John 6:26ff.]. It is that we are quickened by the true partaking of him; and he has therefore designated this partaking by the

113. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 203–10 (emphasis in original).

114. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.5.

words “eating” and “drinking,” in order that no one should think that the life that we receive from him is received by mere knowledge. . . . We admit indeed, meanwhile, that this is no other eating than that of faith, as no other can be imagined. But here is the difference between my words and theirs: for them to eat is only to believe; I say that we eat Christ’s flesh in believing, because it is made ours by faith, and that this eating is the result and effect of faith. Or if you want it said more clearly, for them eating is faith; for me it seems rather to follow from faith. . . . In this way the Lord intended, by calling himself the “bread of life” [John 6:51], to teach not only that salvation for us rests on faith in his death and resurrection, but also that, by true partaking of him, his life passes into us and is made ours—just as bread when taken as food imparts vigor to the body.¹¹⁵

Calvin examines the difference between “eating the body of Christ” and “believing in Christ” in more detail in his commentary on John 6:35:

Those who infer from this passage that *to eat* Christ is *faith*, and nothing else, reason inconclusively. I readily acknowledge that there is no other way in which we *eat* Christ than by *believing*; but the *eating* is the effect and fruit of faith rather than faith itself. For *faith* does not look at Christ only as at a distance, but embraces him, that he may become ours and may dwell in us. It causes us to be incorporated with him, to have life in common with him, and, in short, *to become one with him*, (John xvii, 21). It is therefore true that by faith alone we eat Christ, provided we also understand in what manner faith unites us to him.¹¹⁶

The difference here is subtle, but important. Some were arguing that when Christ commanded his followers to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he was merely urging them to believe in him. According to

115. *Ibid.*

116. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 17:250 (emphasis in original).

this position, believing in Christ is all that is meant by “eating his flesh and blood.” Calvin rejected this view, saying that eating is a result of faith, not faith itself. In other words, faith is the instrument by which we truly eat and partake of the body and blood of Christ. God promises that those who eat the bread and drink the wine are truly partaking of the life-giving flesh and blood of Christ. Therefore, according to Calvin, “those who receive this promise by faith are actually made partakers of his flesh and blood.”¹¹⁷

Calvin continues by expressing dissatisfaction with the way in which some Protestants describe the manner in which we partake of Christ. He says, “Moreover, I am not satisfied with those persons who, recognizing that we have some communion with Christ, when they would show what it is, make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood.”¹¹⁸ Calvin expands on this idea in his treatise against Heshusius:

I say that although Christ is absent from the earth in respect of the flesh, yet in the Supper we truly feed on his body and blood—that owing to the secret agency of the Spirit we enjoy the presence of both. I say that distance of place is no obstacle to prevent the flesh, which was once crucified, from being given to us for food. Heshusius supposes, what is far from being the fact, that I imagine a presence of deity only.¹¹⁹

He reiterates this same point in his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper*, saying that “it is not only a matter of being partakers of his Spirit; it is necessary also to partake of his humanity, in which he rendered complete obedience to God.”¹²⁰

Heshusius and others may have misunderstood a phrase that Calvin uses regularly in his eucharistic writings. Calvin often speaks of “spiritual eating.” Many have misunderstood this phrase, thinking that by it Calvin meant we only partake of Christ’s spirit. He explains the true meaning of his words in the *Institutes*. He says, “For us the

117. *Ibid.*, 209.

118. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.7.

119. Calvin, “Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine,” 554.

120. Calvin, “A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper,” 146; cf. Wendel, *Calvin*, 334.

manner [of eating] is spiritual because the secret power of the Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ.”¹²¹ Calvin discusses this issue in a treatise entitled *The Best Method of Obtaining Concord*:

Another controverted point relates to the term *spiritually*, to which many are averse, because they think that something vain or imaginary is denoted. Definition must therefore here come to our aid. Spiritual then is opposed to carnal eating. By carnal is meant that by which some suppose that the very substance of Christ is transfused into us in the same way as bread is eaten. In opposition to this it is said, that the body of Christ is given to us in the Supper spiritually, because the secret virtue of the Spirit makes things which are widely separated by space to be united with each other, and accordingly causes life from the flesh of Christ to reach us from heaven.¹²²

Spiritual eating, therefore, does not mean that we partake only of Christ’s Spirit or only of Christ’s divine nature. Instead, it is because we partake of Christ’s flesh and blood *by the power of the Holy Spirit* that Calvin calls this manner of partaking “spiritual eating.”

Calvin’s opposition to “carnal eating” is also closely related to his argument that by faith alone we eat Christ. According to Calvin, we do not partake of the flesh of Christ by means of the human digestive system. As Calvin expresses it in one place, “Faith alone is the mouth—so to speak—and the stomach of the soul.”¹²³ In response to Joachim Westphal, who vehemently opposed his view, Calvin elaborates on this idea:

He [Westphal] conceives that there is no bodily presence if the body lurk not everywhere diffused under the bread; and if believers do not swallow the body, he thinks that they are denied the eating of it. We teach that Christ is to be sought by faith, that he may manifest his presence; and the mode of eating which

121. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33.

122. Calvin, “The Best Method of Obtaining Concord,” 577–78.

123. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 17:268.

we hold is, that by the gift of his Spirit he transfuses into us the vivifying influence of his flesh.¹²⁴

According to Calvin, then, we partake of the flesh of Christ by faith, through the secret power of the Holy Spirit, who pours the life of the flesh of Christ into us.

The role of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's doctrine of the Eucharist has often been misunderstood, but it is crucial for an understanding of how believers can partake of the flesh and blood of Christ when Christ's body is locally present in heaven. The question, as Hesselink observes, is "how the distant, ascended Christ becomes one with us in the Supper."¹²⁵ The answer is the Holy Spirit. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11, Calvin explains how the Holy Spirit accomplishes this:

The sharing in the Lord's body, which, I maintain, is offered to us in the Supper, demands neither a local presence, nor the descent of Christ, nor an infinite extension of His body, nor anything of that sort; for, in view of the fact that the Supper is a heavenly act, there is nothing absurd about saying that Christ remains in heaven and is yet received by us. For the way in which He imparts Himself to us is by the secret power of the Holy Spirit, a power which is able not only to bring together, but also to join together, things which are separated by distance, and by a great distance at that.¹²⁶

Calvin is convinced that the main problem with most explanations of the Eucharist is that they assume that a local, corporeal presence is necessary in order for believers to truly partake of the flesh and blood of Christ. He believes that this assumption is false, and that it gave rise to theories such as transubstantiation and the ubiquity of Christ's body. He is convinced that many of these controversies could be avoided if this unnecessary assumption were rejected. Calvin is convinced that believers may truly partake of the body of Christ and

124. Calvin, "Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith," 282.

125. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 147.

126. Cited in *ibid.*, 148.

that such partaking does not require the local, corporeal presence of Christ's body because the Holy Spirit is able to unite the believer with Christ regardless of the physical space between them.

At this point, however, another complicated question arises, having to do with the relationship between our faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Hesselink outlines the basic question:

Do we then only lift up our hearts (*sursum corda!*) to the ascended Christ and somehow feed on him there? Or, is there a sense in which the risen Christ by his Spirit descends to us and nourishes us spiritually through the partaking of the elements? Both are true, but the accent is on the former.¹²⁷

Christ's physical body does not descend, but Calvin does sometimes use the language of descent to describe what occurs in the Supper by the power of the Holy Spirit. Again, Hesselink provides some clues to Calvin's meaning:

Calvin can also speak figuratively of Christ's coming down to us in order to nourish us in the Supper. For "in order to be present with us, he does not change his place, but from heaven *he sends down* the efficacy of his flesh to be present in us" (Comm. 1 Cor. 11:24, emphasis added). "We say Christ descends to us both by the outward symbol and by his Spirit, that he may truly quicken our souls by the substance of his flesh and blood" (IV.17.24).¹²⁸

It is not the physical body of Christ that descends; instead, it is the "efficacy of his flesh" that descends by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is a conduit of sorts—or, as Calvin explains in the *Institutes*, the Spirit "is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us."¹²⁹ Calvin ties together these two key ideas—raising our hearts to Christ in heaven and partaking

127. *Ibid.*, 149.

128. *Ibid.*

129. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.12.

of Christ's flesh through the agency of the Holy Spirit—in his response to the Lutheran Heshusius:

But if we refuse not to raise our hearts upwards, we shall feed on Christ entire, as well as expressly on his flesh and blood. And indeed when Christ invites us to eat his body, and to drink his blood, there is no necessity to bring him down from heaven, or require his actual presence in several places, in order to put his body and his blood within our lips. Amply sufficient for this purpose is the sacred bond of union with him, when we are united into one body by the secret agency of the Spirit.¹³⁰

In order to partake of the flesh and blood of Christ, both faith and the work of the Holy Spirit are necessary.

Calvin's language about the mode of partaking in the Eucharist raised many objections, especially among Lutherans. We have seen Calvin's responses to a number of these objections. At this point, we must consider one further objection. In his response to Heshusius, Calvin mentions that some were claiming that he was denying that believers "are made partakers of the substance of the flesh and blood of Christ."¹³¹ His response is clear:

But it is declared in my writings more than a hundred times, that so far am I from rejecting the term substance, that I ingeniously [i.e., candidly] and readily declare, that by the incomprehensible agency of the Spirit, spiritual life is infused into us from the substance of the flesh of Christ. I also constantly admit that we are substantially fed on the flesh and blood of Christ.¹³²

According to Calvin, "Jesus Christ gives us in the Supper the real substance of his body and his blood."¹³³ Knowing that his statements could be misunderstood, Calvin also explains what he does *not* mean. When we partake of the flesh of Christ, we are not to understand this

130. Calvin, "Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine," 516.

131. *Ibid.*, 502.

132. *Ibid.*; cf. pp. 506–7.

133. Calvin, "A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper," 148.

to mean that there is any corporeal substance that is infused into the believer. There is no physical mixture of our bodies with Christ's body.¹³⁴ Again the point is that we do not partake of Christ's flesh by means of our digestive system.

Calvin's statements about corporeal infusion raise the important question of the *manducatio infidelium*, or participation in the body of Christ by unbelievers. This was a key difference between Calvin and the Lutherans.¹³⁵

Luther's emphasis on the objectivity of the sacrament and his view of the ubiquity of Christ's body lead to the conclusion that when the Supper is eaten by the wicked they receive Christ. Granted, they are not blessed thereby. The result is "poison and death."¹³⁶

Wendel offers a helpful summary of the differences between the Lutheran view and the view of Calvin:

The whole conflict upon this point can be shortly summed up thus: Union between the Christ and the Eucharistic elements meant, according to the Lutherans, that there was real contact between the body and the blood on the one hand, and the bread and the wine on the other: according to Calvin, it meant only that the believer received the body of Christ when he consumed the consecrated bread. Westphal and the Lutherans therefore maintained that there was a direct relation between the Christ and the elements; Calvin, on the contrary, put the Christ and the elements separately into direct contact with the believer.¹³⁷

Because the Lutheran (and Roman Catholic) view tied the flesh of Christ specifically to the elements, they argued that all who partake of the elements partake of the flesh of Christ. Calvin adamantly rejected this idea.

134. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.5, 10.

135. Cf. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 177.

136. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 150.

137. Wendel, *Calvin*, 344.

Calvin has a different perspective, based on his understanding of the manner of Christ's presence and the manner of partaking of Christ's body. Calvin repeatedly asserts that while the body of Christ is objectively given to both believers and unbelievers, only those who partake in faith receive it. Calvin explains this clearly in the *Institutes*:

The flesh and blood of Christ are no less truly given to the unworthy than to God's elect believers. At the same time, it is true, however, that, just as rain falling upon a hard rock flows off because no entrance opens into the stone, the wicked by their hardness so repel God's grace that it does not reach them.¹³⁸

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:27, Calvin explains why his view does not destroy the objective efficacy of the sacrament:

Christ's body is presented to the wicked no less than to the good, and this is enough so far as concerns the efficacy of the sacrament and the faithfulness of God. For God does not there represent in a delusive manner, to the wicked, the body of his Son, but presents it in reality; nor is the bread a bare sign to them, but a faithful pledge. As to their rejection of it, that does not impair or alter anything as to the nature of the sacrament.¹³⁹

In the same way that water falls upon both trees and rocks, so too the body of Christ is offered and given to all who come to the Table. But just as water is received only by those creatures with the God-given capacity to receive it, so too is the body of Christ received only by those with faith.

Calvin is adamant on this point. "Now in what way," he asks, "could the man who is altogether destitute of a living faith and repentance, having nothing of the Spirit of Christ, receive Christ himself?"¹⁴⁰ In the *Institutes*, he expands on this question:

138. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33; cf. Calvin, "Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine," 524–25; Calvin, "Mutual Consent in Regard to the Sacraments," 217.

139. Calvin, *Commentaries*, 20:387.

140. *Ibid.*, 386.

All those who are devoid of Christ's Spirit can no more eat Christ's flesh than drink wine that has no taste. Surely, Christ is too unworthily torn apart if his body, lifeless and powerless, is prostituted to unbelievers. And this is contradicted by his plain words: "Whosoever will eat my flesh and drink my blood will abide in me and I in him" [John 6:56].¹⁴¹

According to Calvin, "Unbelievers communicate only in a visible symbol."¹⁴² He explains: "He who does not abide in Christ and in whom Christ does not abide, doubtless does not spiritually eat his flesh or drink his blood, although he may carnally and visibly press the sign of the body and blood with his teeth."¹⁴³ Only believers partake of the flesh and blood of Christ, because only believers are united with Christ and abide in him.

When Calvin outlined his understanding of Christ's presence in the Supper and the manner of our partaking of his body and blood, his Lutheran critics often accused him of being bound by human reason, saying that he and his followers "attribute no more to the power of God than the order of nature allows and common sense dictates."¹⁴⁴ Calvin does not believe that this is a fair charge. He readily admits that the doctrine of the Lord's Supper involves profound mysteries:

For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.¹⁴⁵

The manner of Christ's presence in the sacrament and the manner of our partaking of his body and blood are great mysteries. When

141. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33.

142. *Ibid.*, 4.17.34.

143. *Ibid.*

144. *Ibid.*, 4.17.24.

145. *Ibid.*, 4.17.7.

Calvin considered it, his response was to say, "I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare."¹⁴⁶ We may at times have to echo his thoughts and say with him regarding the Supper that we "rather experience than understand it."¹⁴⁷

Eucharistic Sacrifice

From the earliest decades of the church onward, the Fathers used sacrificial language when speaking of the Eucharist. In the first several centuries of the church, the Eucharist was viewed as a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. The Lord's Supper was a time when the saints gathered and offered public thanks to God. In fact, the Greek word *eucharisteō*, from which we get the term *Eucharist*, means "to give thanks." In later centuries, however, the idea of a eucharistic sacrifice began to be more and more connected to Christ's propitiatory sacrifice on the cross.¹⁴⁸

Calvin denied that the Eucharist is in any sense a "sacrifice and offering to obtain forgiveness of sins."¹⁴⁹ He contended strongly against the view "that the Mass is a work by which the priest who offers up Christ, and the others who participate in the oblation, merit God's favor, or it is an expiatory victim, by which they reconcile God to themselves."¹⁵⁰ As J. T. McNeill notes, this was the view that was prevalent among the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic theologians in the Sorbonne.¹⁵¹ According to Calvin, "There is as much difference between this sacrifice [of Christ on the cross] and the sacrament of the Supper as there is between giving and receiving."¹⁵²

In one revealing passage, Calvin examines the relationship between the sacrifices of the Old Testament and Christ's sacrifice on the one hand, and the relationship between Christ's sacrifice and the Lord's Supper on the other:

146. *Ibid.*, 4.17.32.

147. *Ibid.*

148. See the appendix.

149. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.1.

150. *Ibid.*

151. *Ibid.*, p. 1429, n. 2.

152. *Ibid.*, 4.18.7.

If anyone diligently ponders, he will observe that this difference between the Mosaic sacrifices and our Eucharist is established by the Lord's word, that, although the former represented to the Jewish people the same effectiveness of Christ's death as is today shown to us in the Supper [Lev. 1:5], yet the form of representation was different. For among the Jews the Levitical priests were commanded to prefigure the sacrifice that Christ was to perform; the victim was brought forward to take the place of Christ; there was an altar on which it was to be sacrificed; thus, in short, all things were carried out in order that there might be set before the people's eyes a likeness of the sacrifice that was to be offered to God in expiation. But after Christ's sacrifice was accomplished, the Lord instituted another method for us, that is, to transmit to the believing folk the benefit of the sacrifice offered to himself by his Son. He has therefore given us a Table at which to feast, not an altar upon which to offer a victim; he has not consecrated priests to offer sacrifice, but ministers to distribute the sacred banquet.¹⁵³

The Old Testament sacrifices were types of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The Supper does not stand in the same relationship to Christ's propitiatory sacrifice. In the Supper we do not offer a sacrifice. We partake of the One who was sacrificed.

Calvin continues by pointing out that there were essentially two kinds of sacrifices under the Old Testament administration: sacrifices of propitiation and sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise.¹⁵⁴ The Lord's Supper is in no way a sacrifice of propitiation. It cannot obtain pardon for sins, appease God, or acquire righteousness. It simply cannot atone for sin.¹⁵⁵ Providing atonement for sin is something that only Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, could do, and he alone did it once for all on the cross.

Unlike sacrifices of propitiation, sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise are to continue in the church forever.¹⁵⁶ According to Calvin, it is this kind of sacrifice alone that the Lord's Supper entails. "The Lord's Supper cannot be without a sacrifice of this kind, in which

153. *Ibid.*, 4.18.12.

154. *Ibid.*, 4.18.13.

155. *Ibid.*, 4.18.14.

156. *Ibid.*, 4.18.16.

while we proclaim his death [I Cor. 11:26] and give thanks, we do nothing but offer a sacrifice of praise.”¹⁵⁷ The Lord's Supper is a sacrifice of thanksgiving.¹⁵⁸ This is, in fact, one reason why the Lord's Supper began to be called the Eucharist (“thanksgiving”) very early in the history of the church.

The Bond of Love

For Calvin, the primary benefit of the Lord's Supper is that it strengthens our faith and our union with Christ, but he did not ignore the horizontal dimensions of the sacrament. The Supper was also intended to produce effects among believers themselves. As Hesselink explains, the Lord's Supper “implies mutual love and oneness among the faithful and evokes a spirit of gratitude.”¹⁵⁹ Calvin expresses these points vividly in his first catechism of 1538:

Now this mystery, as it is a proof of God's very great bounty toward us, so at the same time it ought to admonish us not to be ungrateful for such lavish kindness, but rather to proclaim it with fitting praises and to celebrate it with thanksgiving. Then we should embrace one another in that unity, with which the members of this same body bound among themselves are connected. For there could be no sharper goad to arouse mutual love among us than when Christ, giving himself to us, not only invites us by his example to pledge and give ourselves to one another, but as he makes himself common to all, so also makes all one in himself.¹⁶⁰

In the *Institutes*, Calvin beautifully explains why the Eucharist is properly termed “the bond of love”:

The Lord also intended the Supper to be a kind of exhortation for us, which can more forcefully than any other means quicken

157. *Ibid.*, 4.18.17.

158. For an interesting article on the subject of the eucharistic sacrifice in Calvin's thought, see Joseph Tylenda, “A Eucharistic Sacrifice in Calvin's Theology?” in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 196–206.

159. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 151.

160. Cited in *ibid.*

and inspire us both to purity and holiness of life, and to love, peace, and concord. For the Lord so communicates his body to us there that he is made completely one with us and we with him. Now, since he has only one body, of which he makes us all partakers, it is necessary that all of us also be made one body by such participation. The bread shown in the Sacrament represents this unity. As it is made of many grains so mixed together that one cannot be distinguished from another, so it is fitting that in the same way we should be joined and bound together by such great agreement of minds that no sort of disagreement or division may intrude. I prefer to explain it in Paul's words: "The cup of blessing which we bless is a communicating of the blood of Christ; and the bread of blessing which we break is a participation in the body of Christ. . . . Therefore . . . we . . . are all one body, for we partake of one bread" [I Cor. 10:16–17, cf. Vg.]. We shall benefit very much from the Sacrament if this thought is impressed and engraved upon our minds: that none of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us, without at the same time, injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do; that we cannot disagree with our brethren without at the same time disagreeing with Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving him in the brethren; that we ought to take the same care of our brethren's bodies as we take of our own; for they are members of our body; and that, as no part of our body is touched by any feeling of pain which is not spread among all the rest, so we ought not to allow a brother to be affected by any evil, without being touched with compassion for him. Accordingly, Augustine with good reason frequently calls this Sacrament "the bond of love."¹⁶¹

It is clear that, in Calvin's thought, communion with Christ cannot be separated from the communion of the saints. This union with Christ and corresponding union with the brethren must be "impressed and engraved upon our minds." This will not happen until this truth is regularly proclaimed from our pulpits.

161. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.38.

Proper Celebration

Calvin was interested not only in the doctrine of the Eucharist, but also in its proper observance. The Lord's Supper was not merely a theological theory. It was at the heart of Christian worship. Calvin devotes considerable effort to explaining why and how the sacraments should be observed. One of the first things he impresses upon the minds of his readers is that God commands that the sacraments be observed and that nothing he commands is superfluous. Therefore, the diligent use of the sacraments is not optional; it is absolutely necessary.¹⁶² He explains this point in his commentary on Isaiah 7:12:

If God chooses to add anything to His Word, it ought not to be regarded as a virtue to reject this addition as superfluous. It is no small insult offered to God, when His goodness is despised in such a manner as if His proceeding towards us were of no advantage, and as if He did not know what it is that we chiefly need. . . . Let us, therefore, learn to embrace the signs along with the Word, since it is not in the power of man to separate them. . . . Fanatics of the present day disregard Baptism and the Lord's Supper and consider them childish elements. They can not do so without at the same time neglecting the whole Gospel; for we must not separate those things which the Lord has commanded us to join.¹⁶³

It is a grave error, according to Calvin, to treat the sacraments as if they were optional elements to be observed or ignored at our discretion.

Wallace provides a helpful summary of the main points in Calvin's view of the celebration of the sacraments in the church.¹⁶⁴ First, according to Calvin, the sacraments are subordinate to the word:

The right administering of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the Word. For whatever benefit may come to us from

162. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 239.

163. Cited in *ibid.*

164. *Ibid.*, 242–52.

the Supper requires the Word: whether we are to be confirmed in faith, or exercised in confession, or aroused to duty, there is need of preaching. Therefore, nothing more preposterous could happen in the Supper than for it to be turned into a silent action, as has happened under the pope's tyranny. . . . Silence involves abuse and fault. If the promises are recited and the mystery declared, so that they who are about to receive it may receive it with benefit, there is no reason to doubt that this is a true consecration.¹⁶⁵

According to Calvin, the word and the sacraments are inseparably joined, and this means that both are necessary.¹⁶⁶

The second main point in Calvin's view of the celebration of the sacraments is that they should be observed "in a simple and close adherence to the original form of institution."¹⁶⁷ Wallace explains that Calvin took care to preserve the ancient liturgical structure because of its simplicity and because it accomplished the goals that the sacrament was intended to accomplish:

Calvin, in collaboration with others, published in 1542 forms of prayer for the Church in Geneva. Amongst these there is a section entitled "La maniere d'administrer les Sacremens selon la coustume de l'eglise ancienne" [The manner of administering the Sacraments after the custom of the ancient Church]. This title indicates that Calvin, in drawing up his order of service, had in mind the pattern set by the ancient liturgies, and it has been pointed out that if this order for the Supper is taken in conjunction with the ordinary morning service which it was designed to follow, then the whole form corresponds in general outline, and in many details, to the form always followed in the Church for the celebration of the mystery. The approach begins with invocation, confession of sin, singing of Psalm, prayer for illumination, sermon, prayer of intercession, closing with a prayer based on the Lord's Prayer. This is followed by a

165. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.39.

166. *Ibid.*, 4.14.3-4.

167. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 243.

repetition of the Apostles' Creed, and a prayer of approach specially relevant to Communion. Then come the words of institution followed by solemn warnings against unworthy participation, and an exhortation to communicants to examine themselves and seek salvation in Christ alone, this part corresponding to the "Sancta sanctis." Then follows a paragraph beginning with an exhortation to the people to "raise their hearts and minds on high where Jesus Christ is, in the glory of His Father, and whence we look for Him at our redemption," certain doctrinal considerations being added to this end. This latter part corresponds to the "Sursum Corda." The distribution of the elements immediately follows. The post-communion takes the normal form of thanksgiving, dedication and blessing.¹⁶⁸

Calvin also provides an outline of the eucharistic liturgy in his *Institutes*.¹⁶⁹ The most striking thing about this liturgy is its simplicity.

This simplicity is largely due to the third main point that Calvin makes in connection with the celebration of the Supper, which is that it should not be obscured by other ceremonies and rituals.¹⁷⁰ Calvin believes that the visible imagery presented in the Supper itself is sufficient. He explains, "Since Jesus Christ has been manifested in the flesh, doctrine having been much more clearly delivered, ceremonies (figures) have diminished."¹⁷¹ In his commentary on John 4:23, he explains this point in more detail:

We may justly say that the worship of the law was spiritual in its substance, but in respect of its form, it was somewhat earthly and carnal; for the whole of that economy, the reality of which is now fully manifested, consisted of shadows. . . . Whereas now *the veil of the temple has been rent*, nothing is hidden or obscure. There are indeed among us at the present day, some outward exercises of godliness, which our weakness renders necessary,

168. *Ibid.*, 243–44.

169. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

170. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 247.

171. Cited in *ibid.*, 249.

but such is the moderation and sobriety of them that they do not obscure the plain truth of Christ.¹⁷²

For Calvin, the introduction of numerous ceremonies was a step backward into the shadowy type of worship found under the old covenant.

The fourth main point that Calvin makes about the celebration of the Lord's Supper is that it should be observed frequently.¹⁷³ Knowing what the sacrament is and what benefits it brings, "all, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast."¹⁷⁴ Calvin believed that the Supper should be observed "at least once a week."¹⁷⁵ He explains:

It was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's Passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim his goodness; finally, by it to nourish mutual love, and among themselves give witness to this love, and discern its bond in the unity of Christ's body.¹⁷⁶

It is no wonder, then, that Calvin cites with approval the practice of the apostolic church in the book of Acts, in which "it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayer, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving."¹⁷⁷ Despite his stated wishes, Calvin was not allowed by the city council of Geneva to implement weekly communion. Instead, he was forced first to settle for monthly communion and later for quarterly communion. There is no doubt, however, about what Calvin himself believed. The Lord's Supper should be observed as often as the word is preached and prayer is offered.¹⁷⁸

172. Cited in *ibid.* (emphasis in original).

173. *Ibid.*, 252–53.

174. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.46.

175. *Ibid.*, 4.17.43.

176. *Ibid.*, 4.17.44.

177. *Ibid.*

178. Cf. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism*, 152–54. It is unfortunate that most of the heirs of Calvin follow the practice that he was forced to settle for against his will, rather than following the practice that was most consistent with his doctrine. There are, however, signs that this problem is being addressed in

Summary

The doctrine of the Lord's Supper has often been the subject of division and discord in the church. Such was the case in the middle of the sixteenth century, when a young John Calvin began his career as a pastor and reformer. The Reformation was split over the issue, with the Lutherans on one side of the divide and the Zwinglians on the other. Calvin attempted to offer a mediating position that would achieve several goals. He was convinced that his position was clear, that it preserved the mystery of the sacrament, that it avoided any absurdities, and that it was in conformity with the rule of faith.¹⁷⁹ Gerrish has helpfully summarized the main features of Calvin's doctrine of the Supper under six basic points:¹⁸⁰

1. The Lord's Supper is a divine gift. It is not merely the reminder of a gift.
2. The gift that is given is Christ himself. In addition, it is the whole Christ that is given.
3. The gift is given through signs, which are intimately connected with the reality that is signified and which guarantee the presence of the reality that is signified.
4. The gift is given by the Holy Spirit. When Calvin says that Christ is "spiritually present," he means that the body and blood of Christ are made present by the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit.
5. The gift is given to all who communicate, but those who receive the Supper without faith receive it to their condemnation.
6. The gift evokes gratitude, and this is the eucharistic sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.

For Calvin, the Lord's Supper was not primarily a subject for debate. It was a gift of God to be thankfully celebrated as often as the church gathered together. The Eucharist was a gift that expressed the unbreakable unity of the body of Christ. This is why Calvin was so passionate about finding a way to heal the divisions that had arisen

Presbyterian and Reformed churches and that celebration of the Lord's Supper on at least a weekly basis is gradually becoming a reality in many of these churches.

179. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 217–26.

180. Gerrish, "John Calvin," 234–36.

because of arguments about this sacrament. He was not able to accomplish this in his own generation, but his views on the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper stand as a landmark in the history of the church. Those who consider themselves his heirs and those who share his passion for the church would do well to prayerfully consider what he taught.