

## 9. CALVIN ON THE SUPPER: PUZZLING AND PROVOCATIVE

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Calvin's claims about the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper have been a puzzle and provocation to many of his theological heirs. On this matter Calvin's language is emphatic. In his 'Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper' he argues that 'all benefit which we ought to seek from the Supper is annulled, unless Jesus Christ be there given to us as substance and foundation of all', and that to deny that 'true communication of Jesus Christ is offered to us in the Supper is to render this holy sacrament frivolous and useless'.<sup>1</sup> Even more confronting is Calvin's reference to the communication of the body and blood of Christ. He claims that there is a 'mystical blessing' [*mystica haec benedictio*] which is that 'we are . . . bidden to take and eat the body which was once for all offered for our salvation'.<sup>2</sup> It is Calvin's insistence on union with the body and blood of Christ which is the main problem for many of his Reformed and Evangelical readers. This chapter will focus on this most provocative element of Calvin's teaching on the sacraments in order to gain an insight into more general features of his view of the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

Calvin's view of the communion with body and blood of Christ in the Lord's

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1. J. Calvin 'Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper', in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1954), p. 146.
  2. *Inst.* 4.17.1.

Supper is found in his liturgies and in his more scholarly writings. In liturgies for both Strasbourg and Geneva, Calvin had the following exhortation,

let us believe those promises which Jesus Christ, who is the unfailing truth, has spoken with His own lips; He is truly willing to make us partakers of His body and blood, in order that we may possess Him wholly and in such a way that He may live in us and we in Him. And though we see but bread and wine, we must not doubt that He accomplishes spiritually in our souls all that He shows us outwardly by these visible signs, namely, that He is the bread of heaven to feed and nourish us unto eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin presented his view in relation to Rome, Luther and Zwingli in the midst of a controversy which threatened to destroy the Protestant movement. He was a strong critic of the doctrine of transubstantiation and the associated doctrines of Rome and ‘the schoolmen’. He happily calls this ‘buffoonery’.<sup>4</sup> For Calvin Luther’s view of the presence of Christ ‘in, with, and under’ the elements had not moved far enough from Rome.<sup>5</sup> In the ‘Short Treatise’ Calvin says that Luther stumbled because ‘it is difficult to give an explanation of so high a matter, without using some impropriety of speech’. That criticism did not mean that he stood with Zwingli.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that Zwingli and Œcolampadius ‘forgot to define what is the presence of Christ in the supper’.<sup>7</sup> Calvin presented his position as mediating between that of Zwingli and that of

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3. J. Calvin, ‘The Form of Church Prayers’, in B. Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 207.
  4. Calvin, ‘Short Treatise’, pp. 155–163 and *Inst.* 4.17.11–17. He describes the doctrine as ‘fictitious’ (4.17.14) and those who hold it as ‘foully deluded by Satan’s tricks’ (4.17.15).
  5. Luther’s insistence on this was based on his commitment to take Jesus’ words of institution and his teaching in John 6 seriously and literally. Luther defended his view on the basis of the ubiquity of Christ’s human nature because of the communication of the properties in the hypostatic union. See J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 158–160; and M. Wreidt, ‘Luther’s Theology’, trans. K. Gustavs, in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. D. K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 110.
  6. Zwingli ‘believed in the presence of Christ, but not his bodily presence, nor his presence in his human nature’: W. P. Stephens, *Zwingli: An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 94.
  7. ‘Short Treatise’, p. 165.

Luther. He argues, with too great an optimism, that although the controversy is fierce there is common ground in that all confess that ‘in receiving the sacrament in faith . . . we are truly made partakers of the real substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ’.<sup>8</sup>

Gerrish summarizes Calvin’s view in the following points.<sup>9</sup>

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 our purposes, points 2–4 are the centre of interest. We will seek to understand why Calvin saw the gift as ‘the whole Christ’ and why it mattered to him to insist that this included Christ’s body and blood. We will also investigate what Calvin meant by Christ being present in this mode by the Spirit.

### **Interpretative struggle: is there a difference between Zwingli and Calvin?**

Interpreters have struggled to understand the debate between Calvin and Zwingli and to make sense of Calvin’s view. Pelikan presents the debate as

8. ‘Short Treatise’, p. 166.

9. 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. R. C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), pp. 234–236. Mathison uses Gerrish’s summary: see K. A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), p. 47.

one between 'Reformed and Lutheran' and does not note a difference between Calvin and Zwingli.<sup>10</sup> Grudem sees no great difference between Calvin and Zwingli on the Supper, saying the difference was about 'the nature of the presence of Christ'.<sup>11</sup>

D. B. Knox takes the view that Zwingli and Calvin (and the English Reformers) held the same view of the Supper: that Christ is present 'sacramentally, that is, by way of sign'; that it is 'Christ in his crucifixion' who is present as he is 'remembered', which for Zwingli is no 'mere bare remembrance'.<sup>12</sup> He argues that 'no spiritually-minded believer' (by which he means any true believer, who must have the Spirit) 'can remember the Lord without at the same time being in conscious fellowship with him through the Spirit'. He thus declared it 'extraordinary' that J. K. S. Reid, in introducing Calvin's 'Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper', should state that he taught 'a true and real presence of Christ' in the elements.<sup>13</sup>

Although these commentators cannot see any great difference between the two positions, there are some who can. Schaff's judgment is that 'Zwingli's theory reveals the spiritualizing and rationalizing tendency of his mind', while 'Luther's theory reveals his realistic and mystical tendency'.<sup>14</sup> He also argues that Calvin succeeded in his goal 'to combine the spiritualism of Zwingli with the realism of Luther, and to avoid the errors of both'.<sup>15</sup> Schaff's recognition that there is a real difference between Calvin and Zwingli is correct. At most Zwingli affirms a real communion with Christ which is brought to mind in the Lord's Supper; Calvin affirms the participation of the believer in the body and blood of Christ by means of the Supper. The explanation of what underlies this difference is not straightforward, but the existence of the difference is plain.

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10. J. Pelikan, *Reformation*, pp. 187–203. Given Pelikan's focus on church doctrine and the eventual production of the Zürich Consensus in 1549, which presented a united Reformed view, his approach is understandable.
11. W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 995 n. 10.
12. D. B. Knox, *The Lord's Supper from Wycliffe to Cranmer* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), pp. 52–53.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.
14. P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, *Modern Christianity: the Swiss Reformation* (1910; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 86.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 590.

### ***Rejection of Calvin: the preference for Zwingli***

Mathison has shown that Calvin's position was the consensus position of Reformed theology in the sixteenth century.<sup>16</sup> He then finds a gradual, though not uniform, move away from Calvin's position toward that of Zwingli, so that 'by the time we reach mid-eighteenth-century New England, there is little left of the original eucharistic theology of Calvin because the emphases of Zwinglian theology have become dominant'.<sup>17</sup> He highlights the move away from Calvin's view through an examination of the controversy between J. W. Nevin and C. Hodge over Nevin's 1846 work *The Mystical Presence*.<sup>18</sup> Nevin presented Calvin's position as the proper Reformed view, from which later theology had declined; Hodge responded by accusing Nevin of having the theology of Schleiermacher and holding a heretical Christology. Highlighting a key issue in the debate, Hodge claimed that the Reformed doctrine of union with Christ referred only to the reception of the Spirit and did not involve Christ's human nature. Nevin's voluminous response seems to have won the debate over historical theology, though Hodge was far more influential in his own day and subsequently.<sup>19</sup> Mathison shows the same trend in Scottish theology in the nineteenth century and in twentieth-century conservative Reformed theology, though Warfield stands as an exception.<sup>20</sup>

Mathison's observation is confirmed by the fact that many recent authors who generally follow Calvin have found his view of the sacraments problematic and have preferred a view more like that of Zwingli. Charles Hodge presents his views as very similar to those of Calvin.<sup>21</sup> Yet he judges Calvin's view that there is a special benefit in the Supper by which our soul is vivified

16. Mathison, *Given for You*, pp. 49–91.

17. *Ibid.*, 128.

18. This has been reprinted as J. W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, ed. A. Thompson (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2000).

19. Mathison, *Given for You*, pp. 136–156.

20. *Ibid.*, 161–176.

21. C. H. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1872, 3 vols; London: James Clarke, 1960), III, 646–647 seeks to harmonize Calvin and Zwingli on the question of the presence of the glorified body of Christ offered in the Supper. Calvin affirms this but Zwingli denies it; Hodge comments that Calvin can mean this only as a way of expressing our reception of the benefit of Jesus' death, or else he would be inconsistent.

by the blood and body of Christ ‘peculiar’.<sup>22</sup> Likewise Berkhof finds Calvin’s view of sacramental union ‘not entirely clear’ and ‘obscure’ and ‘dubious’. He declares that Calvin ‘seems to place too much emphasis on the literal body and blood’ and states a preference for Dabney and Hodge, who speak less realistically.<sup>23</sup>

Grudem offers a decidedly Zwinglian account, stating that Christ is ‘spiritually present’ as we partake of the Supper, which symbolizes the body and blood of Christ. The relation between the elements and the body and blood of Christ is minimal.<sup>24</sup> Erickson is dismissive of Calvin’s view. He attributes even a view of Christ’s spiritual presence to an inappropriate conservatism among the Reformers and a mystical interpretation of ‘a profound encounter with Christ’ by participation in the Supper. He states ‘the rite is basically commemorative’.<sup>25</sup>

Reymond is wary of Calvin’s approach and charges that he

comes perilously close to suggesting the Godhead’s apotheosising of Christ’s humanity and to transferring, at least in the Lord’s Supper, the saving benefits of Christ’s atoning death directly to his human nature now localised in heaven.<sup>26</sup>

Reymond’s critique is probably the most vigorous of any contemporary Calvinist and will demand more attention in the examination of Calvin’s position.

### ***Rejection of Calvin: Radical Orthodoxy***

Not all critics of Calvin are Zwinglian. Recently those associated with Radical Orthodoxy have been critical of Calvin’s view of the Supper. Graham Ward argues that Calvin’s thought is caught in a dualism which distinguishes between a ‘carnal’ presence and a ‘spiritual’ presence. According to Ward, this leads Calvin to affirm Christ’s absence as the Ascended One and rests on a nominalist view of the creation of meaning in a sign to affirm Christ’s presence. Ward recognizes that for Calvin this was a true sign, but argues that Calvin sets the

22. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, 630.

23. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1939, repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), pp. 653–654.

24. W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 995.

25. M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, rev. edn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 1130.

26. R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), p. 963.

stage for modernity, which doubts the truth of the sign of an absent Christ.<sup>27</sup> According to Milbank, Calvin's sacramental theology 'is not really coherent', since 'the idea of the spiritual participation in a body that is in heaven makes very little sense'. He prefers the Thomist view, which affirms that Christ's body if it is to be present must as a body be physical, 'albeit mysteriously physical'.<sup>28</sup>

The Radical Orthodox criticism coheres with the Zwinglian to the extent that both claim that Calvin's assertion of the true presence of Christ does not fit well in his wider theology. The Zwinglian then says that the presence language should be attenuated, while the Radical Orthodox want the wider theology framed in a more 'participatory metaphysics'.<sup>29</sup>

### How Christ saves

In order to assess Calvin's doctrine of the Supper, we have to view it in relation to other themes of his thought. Only once we have seen his doctrine in its proper theological context can we make an assessment of it. Since it is Christ as Saviour who Calvin insists is presented in the sacraments, then we will not understand this view of sacraments unless we understand his account of who Christ is and how he saves.

When Calvin begins his exposition of the person and work of Christ he starts with the assertion that 'it is of greatest importance for us that he who was our Mediator be both true God and true man'.<sup>30</sup> Not only did our separation from God by sin require that he must descend to us, but this descent must take place in such a way that 'his divinity and our human nature might by mutual connection grow together'.<sup>31</sup> Calvin's exposition of Christ's work makes much of the incarnation, with the result that there is no simple distinction between the person of Christ and his work. Redemption required incarna-

27. G. Ward, 'Church as the Erotic Community', in *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, ed. L. Boevee and L. Leijssen (Louvain: Peeters, 2001), pp. 181–188.

28. J. Milbank, 'Alternative Protestantism', in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant and Participation*, ed. J. K. A. Smith and J. H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), p. 35.

29. Milbank, 'Alternative Protestantism', p. 35.

30. A more detailed engagement with Calvin's Christology is found in Mark Thompson's contribution to this volume.

31. *Inst.* 2.12.1.

tion because of the depth of the human plight. There had to be an exchange and, Calvin asks rhetorically, ‘Who could have done this [work] had not the self-same Son of God become the Son of man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?’<sup>32</sup> Calvin unfolds this necessity, further explaining that since man was lost by his own disobedience it was necessary that man should counter this with obedience and satisfaction of God’s judgment. So, ‘since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature he might win victory for us.’<sup>33</sup> Calvin holds that the work of Christ requires that he take on human nature fully.

When Calvin comes to deal with the relation of the two natures in the God-man he walks the well-established paths of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. In doing so he stresses the unity of the person as the usual concern of the Bible, rather than speculative questions about the two natures. He offers the hermeneutical key that ‘those things which apply to the office of the Mediator are not spoken simply either of the divine nature or of the human’.<sup>34</sup> That is, he will explain the work of redemption in terms of what Christ the God-man did, rather than attributing elements of the work to one nature or the other.

As Calvin deals with the work of the Mediator as prophet, priest and king, his exposition emphasizes the priestly work of Christ.<sup>35</sup> Here again Calvin shows the importance of the incarnation as the premise of the life and death and resurrection of the Mediator. So, he says, ‘from the time he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us’. Calvin then takes a tighter focus: ‘to define the way of salvation more exactly, Scripture ascribes this as peculiar and proper to Christ’s death’.<sup>36</sup> As Calvin deals with Jesus’ death it is clear that not only its possibility but also its effectiveness depends upon his humanity. Calvin emphasizes that ‘the penalty to which we were subject has been imposed upon this righteous man’, and focuses on Jesus’ condemnation by Pilate as a demonstration that ‘he took

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32. *Inst.* 2.12.2.

33. *Inst.* 2.12.3.

34. *Inst.* 2.14.3.

35. *Inst.* 2.15.1–6 deals with the threefold office; the following chapters focus particularly on his work of expiation.

36. *Inst.* 2.16.5.



the role of a guilty man and evildoer'.<sup>37</sup> This 'representation', 'transfer' and 'substitution' (as Calvin calls it) depends on Jesus being human. Jesus also took the curse 'as an expiatory sacrifice'.<sup>38</sup> Again this depends upon him taking on human flesh.

When Calvin considers Jesus' burial he sees in it the truth that Christ entered fully into death, in order that he might conquer death for us.<sup>39</sup> In his treatment of Christ's burial Calvin also begins to develop the theme that what Christ experienced in his body believers come to experience in their bodies. He notes there is a second effect of Christ's death: 'by our participation in it, his death mortifies our earthly members so that they may no longer perform their functions; and it kills the old man in us that he may not flourish and bear fruit'.<sup>40</sup>

When Calvin turns to the resurrection he explains that it has three aspects.<sup>41</sup> On the one hand it reveals the accomplishment of the cross, for in it 'his death manifested its power and efficacy in us'.<sup>42</sup> There is also a benefit in the experience of believers in the resurrection itself: 'we are reborn into righteousness through his power'. That is, regeneration or vivification are ours because of Christ's resurrection. The third benefit is still awaited: our physical resurrection.

The hope of physical resurrection is also related to Christ's ascension. Calvin's discussion of the ascension stresses Christ's physical absence and the coming of the Spirit, so that 'as his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth'.<sup>43</sup> Christ's physical *absence* from earth is due to his physical *presence* in heaven. Thus the benefits which flow to the Christian from the ascension come by the Spirit, but are related to Christ's body. He has entered heaven 'in our flesh, as if in our name', so in a sense we are already seated with

37. Ibid.

38. *Inst.* 2.16.6.

39. '[H]e let himself be swallowed up by death, as it were, not to be engulfed in its abyss, but rather to engulf it that must soon engulf us; he let himself be subjected to it, not to be overwhelmed by its power, but rather to lay it low, when it was threatening us and exulting over our fallen state': *Inst.* 2.16.7. The creedal reference to Christ's descent into hell receives a similar exposition in *Inst.* 2.16.10.

40. *Inst.* 2.16.7.

41. On the bodiliness of the resurrection Calvin says: 'he suffered the same death that other men naturally die; and received immortality in the same flesh that, in the mortal state, he had taken upon himself': *Inst.* 2.16.13.

42. Ibid.

43. *Inst.* 2.16.14.

him (so Eph. 2:6). For Calvin the representative work of Christ is tied to his remaining in human flesh.

This review of Calvin's exposition of the work of Christ highlights the place that he gives to Christ's body. At each point the work of redemption is grounded in the fact that the Son of God has taken on our flesh. The traditional Reformed exposition of the person of Christ in his work has dealt with two states: the state of humiliation and the state of exaltation.<sup>44</sup> Calvin works with three stages in his account of the work of redemption. He speaks of (1) the whole of Christ's life culminating in the cross as the payment for sins; then (2) the resurrection of Christ's body; and then (3) his bodily ascension and absence. In each stage Christ's body is the locus of human redemption.

### How do we share in redemption?

Calvin's answer to the question of how we share in salvation comes in the famous opening words of Book III of his *Institutes*. He declares that 'as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us'.<sup>45</sup> That is, sinners must be united with Christ and participate in him in order to enjoy his benefits. Saving union with Christ rests on the incarnation and the resulting unity of Christ with humanity. The two are not, however, identical. Garcia points out that when Calvin writes to Vermigli about the matter he states that the incarnation union is 'very general and feeble' and that a mystical union with Christ, leading to a spiritual union, is necessary for sinners to enjoy the benefits secured in the incarnation.<sup>46</sup>

There has been considerable discussion about how Calvin's doctrine of 'union with Christ' should be understood. Calvin retains the traditional language of 'mystical union', leading some to conclude that he has a form of mysticism.<sup>47</sup> Others have suggested that Calvin's view of union is more like

44. H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. J. Vriend, ed. J. Bolt (4 vols; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008), III, 406.

45. *Inst.* 3.1.1.

46. M. A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), pp. 186–187.

47. For Calvin's reference see *Inst.* 3.11.10. For the cautious claim that Calvin's view is mystical see D. E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), pp. 7, 11.

the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*, in which the *energia* of God fills the redeemed but not his *ousia*. Butin and Billings have argued that Calvin's doctrine is theotic, grounded in a perichoretic union.<sup>48</sup> Neither mysticism nor *theosis* are labels which do justice to Calvin's view of the nature of union with Christ.<sup>49</sup> Calvin gives no formal definition of the concept. Garcia's comment accurately reflects what can be gathered from Calvin's use of the concept:

communion with Christ is much more than mental but less than baldly physical or essential. It is real and true but not a miracle of ontological oneness but by the blessing of the Spirit's work.<sup>50</sup>

The relationship is ultimately undefinable because it is 'mysterious': that is, beyond human knowing.

However we describe Calvin's view of union, he is clear that it involves union with the whole Christ, including – indeed, especially – Christ's bodily humanity. John 6 was very important for him with regard to the nature of saving union. Jesus' words at Capernaum represent one of many points in John's Gospel at which it becomes clear that incarnational union is not sufficient for salvation. Jesus says that people must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have eternal life (John 6:54–56). Calvin recognizes that Jesus' graphic language is a way of describing faith (John 6:29, 35, 40, 47, 69); however he insists that while 'eating' is a metaphor, the reference to Jesus' flesh is not metaphoric. It speaks of 'the uninterrupted communication of the flesh of Christ' which brings salvation. He goes on to say that the passage is not about the Lord's Supper, but that 'there is nothing said here that is not figuratively represented, and actually bestowed on believers, in the Lord's Supper; and Christ even intended that the holy Supper should be, as it were, a seal and

48. J. T. Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: the Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 61–66. Billings refers to 'Calvin's doctrine of deification, if we may call it such' and repeats all his qualifications in note 162, see p. 60. See also P. W. Butin, *Revelation, Redemption and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 83, 186 nn. 45, 46.

49. For an assessment of the claims that Calvin's view of union can be described as mysticism, or perichoretic *theosis*, see J. McClean, 'Perichoresis, Theosis and Union with Christ in the Thought of John Calvin', *RTR*, forthcoming.

50. Garcia, *Life in Christ*, p. 258.

confirmation of this sermon'.<sup>51</sup> That is, while John 6 is not about the Lord's Supper, the Supper is about what John 6 is about. That point runs ahead of our discussion at present.

The centrality of union with Christ in Calvin's soteriology is underlined by the opening words of the 'Confession of Faith concerning the Eucharist' composed by Farel, Calvin and Viret around 1537. The statement indicates that salvation only comes as the Spirit brings believers into union with Christ:

We confess that the spiritual life which Christ bestows upon us does not rest on the fact that he vivifies us with his Spirit, but that his Spirit makes us participants in the virtue of his vivifying body, by which participation we are fed on eternal life.<sup>52</sup>

When Calvin expounds the life of faith in the Spirit in Book III of the *Institutes*, the three stages of the work of Christ play an organizing role in his thought, underlining the relation of the incarnation and the Christian life. The traditional motifs of mortification and vivification play an important role in his exposition of repentance and are coupled with a stress on life lived in hope.<sup>53</sup> Mortification aligns with Christ's suffering, vivification with Christ's resurrection and hope with his ascension. Calvin teaches that mortification and vivification happen only 'by participation in Christ'. Because we share in Christ's death and resurrection, our old self is crucified and we are raised into newness of life that the image of God may be restored in us. This course of repentance runs through the whole of the Christian life, until the believer is conformed to the image of God in glory.<sup>54</sup>

Calvin offers an analysis of the psychological experience of suffering, indicating how it teaches and trains believers. Underlying that account is the fact that suffering flows from participation in Christ and brings conformity with Christ. Furthermore, in suffering we experience the power of the resurrection.<sup>55</sup> Sufferings will have this spiritual significance only because we live now in hope of the resurrection. So Calvin concludes, 'if believers' eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection, in their hearts the cross of Christ will at last triumph over the devil, flesh, sin and wicked men'.<sup>56</sup>

51. *CNTC* 4, pp. 169–170.

52. 'Confession of Faith concerning the Eucharist', in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, p. 168.

53. *Inst.* 3.3.5–9.

54. *Inst.* 3.3.9.

55. *Inst.* 3.8.1.

56. *Inst.* 3.9.6.

The connection between Christ's work in his body and our salvation in our bodies is at the heart of Calvin's account of the Christian life. He does not treat sharing in Christ as simply a figure of speech. For example, in his exposition of Romans 6 he deals with Paul's horticultural metaphor that we are 'ingrafted' [*sumphutoi*] with Christ in the likeness of his death.<sup>57</sup> He comments that this deals not only with 'our conformity to the example of Christ but also the secret union [*arcana coniunctionem*] by which we grow together with Him'.<sup>58</sup> He acknowledges the metaphorical aspects of the expression by pointing out two important differences between the metaphor and the reality it describes. Firstly, 'in the grafting of trees the graft draws its nourishment from the root but retains its own natural quality', but in union with Christ 'we not only derive the strength and sap for the life which flows from Christ, but we also pass from our own nature into His'. On the other hand, our death is not the same physical death as his, but rather there is an 'analogy'. Having acknowledged these ways in which the figure is not like the reality, Calvin asserts that the words show that we share in Christ's nature, that is, his physical death and resurrection, and that we experience that sharing in vivification and mortification.

### How do we come to be united with Christ?

Since union with Christ is the way in which believers come to share in his blessings, the next question must be: how do they come to be united with Christ? Calvin's answer to this question is as clear as it is well known. He opens Book 3 of the *Institutes* with the assertion that 'we obtain this by faith', but that there is a higher answer which comes from God's side: 'the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits'.<sup>59</sup> Later, Calvin explains that 'Christ, when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, at the same time so engrafts us into his body that we become partakers of every

57. The word occurs in Rom 6:25 and can have the horticultural meaning which Calvin develops, though Doug Moo comments that it is used in too many other contexts for there to be any degree of probability that the association is present in this passage: D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 368 n. 76.

58. *CNTC* 8, pp. 123–124.

59. *Inst.* 3.1.1. See Billings, *Participation*, pp. 100–102, for a discussion of Calvin's introduction of Book III and the opening chapter into the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*.



good'.<sup>60</sup> Calvin's doctrine of the union of the believer with Christ by the Spirit is not in distinction from a doctrine of union with the body of Christ. Rather, Calvin holds that the incarnate Christ was anointed with the Spirit as the second Adam that he might share the Spirit with his people and they might be united to him in his incarnation.<sup>61</sup> For Calvin, a union with the body of Christ comes about through the indwelling of the Spirit and the response of faith.

Calvin carefully and consistently ascribes union with Christ to the Spirit and to faith. In this pairing it is clear that the Spirit grants faith and so has a causal priority, since 'faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>62</sup>

The role of faith in union with Christ relates to Calvin's claim that the gospel mediates this union. Calvin declares that Christ is presented to us 'clothed in his gospel' and it is always through the Word that God draws people to himself.<sup>63</sup> Torrance has argued that Calvin saw that we were offered 'auditory, intuitive knowledge of God' in the Word.<sup>64</sup> That is a knowledge which is not reached by deduction but is a direct personal knowledge of God: 'the Word of God does certainly involve the communication of truths and statements, in and through these God speaks to us directly and confronts us with the majesty and dignity of his Truth'.<sup>65</sup> Torrance's account of how Calvin came to this view is not sustained by the evidence, but his summary of Calvin's view is still helpful.<sup>66</sup>

Deddo explains Torrance's claim in the following terms: 'the Spirit puts us in actual, immediate, intuitive, non-formal, even empirical touch with the actual reality and presence of God himself as the Word, not just externally but internally present to our spirit'.<sup>67</sup> The word 'immediate' is inaccurate,

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60. *Inst.* 3.2.35. Similarly, 'Perfect salvation is found in the person of Christ . . . that we might become partakers of it "he baptises us in the Holy Spirit and fire" bringing us into the light of faith in his gospel and so regenerating us that we become new creatures': *Inst.* 3.1.4.

61. *Inst.* 3.1.2.

62. See *Inst.* 3.1.4.

63. *Inst.* 3.2.6.

64. T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 23. For an extended exposition of this, see T. F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), pp. 86–95.

65. Torrance, *Hermeneutics*, p. 93.

66. A. N. S. Lane, 'Recent Calvin Literature: A Review Article', *Themelios* 16.2 (1991), p. 20.

67. G. W. Deddo, 'The Holy Spirit in the Theology of T. F. Torrance', in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. E. M. Colyer (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 101.



since Torrance's claim is that the intuitive knowledge is mediated by the word. Deddo is correct to stress that this knowledge is not merely cognitive, either in Calvin or in Torrance's description. For Calvin the declaration of the gospel brings us into an encounter with Christ, and as the Spirit gives faith the Word mediates a union with Christ. This union, as I have stressed, is a union with the whole Christ, particularly with the ascended, incarnate Christ.

### Christ's human nature and union

At this point we can return to Reymond's vigorous criticism of Calvin. He claims that the Reformer holds that the benefits of salvation come from the virtues of the humanity of Christ 'which flow into it from the Godhead'. He believes that the implication of this is that Calvin unintentionally 'comes perilously close to apotheosising' Christ's humanity: that is, making the humanity of Christ divine.<sup>68</sup> This seems to imply that Calvin moved too close to a Lutheran view of the *communicatio idiomatum*, or at least that this language did not properly guard against that. Reymond makes this criticism because Calvin insists that participation in the body and blood of Christ is how the Supper mediated salvation.

We have to take into account Calvin's whole account of the relation of the two natures in order in order to assess Reymond's criticism. Calvin presents both Christ's divine and human nature as indispensable to his work as Mediator. He states that the life, righteousness, lordship and authority required to swallow up death, conquer sin and rout the powers lie 'with God alone'. At the same time, only man could remedy disobedience with obedience, satisfy God's judgment and pay the penalties for sin.<sup>69</sup> So the mediator had to be both divine and human, and the two natures had to, as it were, work in concert in order for him to complete his work.

Calvin typically does not refer to the 'natures' working, for it is the person of Christ who works. Calvin explains the communication of the attributes as a way of expressing truths of the incarnation: 'things that he carried out in his human nature are transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity'.<sup>70</sup> In Calvin's exposition of the work of Christ he retains a careful treatment of the union of the two natures but with a focus on the one person

68. Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, p. 963.

69. *Inst.* 2.12.3, p. 466.

70. *Inst.* 2.14.2. H. Blocher comments, rightly, that the term 'improper' 'has no negative connotation; it is a philologist's word for a departure from ordinary . . . forms of

of the Mediator. Muller argues that in teaching such a *communicatio idiomatum in concerto* with its focus on the concrete person of Christ, Calvin, along with Zwingli, Bucer and Bullinger, ‘consistently refused to allow a flow of divine attributes from the divine to the human’.<sup>71</sup>

Calvin is very wary of teaching a direct union with Christ’s divine nature, because this was the teaching of Osiander. The point that Calvin rejects in Osiander’s teaching on justification is ‘that Christ is our righteousness because he is God eternal, the source of righteousness’.<sup>72</sup> Calvin focuses our righteousness in that which comes from Christ’s death and resurrection. He acknowledges that our righteousness come from God, and indeed from the Father. But this righteousness does not become ours by participation in the essential righteousness of God, but rather by our union with Christ the Mediator we participate in the righteousness of his life, death and resurrection. Calvin does not reverse Osiander’s position and say that we receive righteousness from Christ’s human nature alone. Indeed, he allows that if Osiander had taught that Christ’s essence becomes ours as man and ‘also in that the divine essence is poured into us’, then his position would have been less dangerous and objectionable.<sup>73</sup>

In criticism of Osiander Calvin returns to the theme of Book II: that Christ’s work of redemption required him to be God and man and that he ‘carried out all these acts according to his human nature’.<sup>74</sup> In explaining his position Calvin makes explicit reference to the Lord’s Supper and John 6. He argues that in both cases our attention is directed to ‘the whole Christ’, and that we learn that we receive what is his through his flesh. He often uses the trope of a fountain, in that the death and resurrection of Christ make him the source from which flows blessings which ‘otherwise would lie unprofitably hidden in that deep and secret spring’. At the conclusion of this discussion Calvin states that when the work of Christ is understood in the terms he has outlined then he would accept Osiander’s expression that the ‘righteousness of which Christ makes us partakers with himself is the eternal righteousness of the eternal God’.<sup>75</sup>

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expression’: H. Blocher, ‘Luther and Calvin on Christology’, paper presented to Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, August 2007, p. 9 n. 92.

71. R. A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 13.

72. *Inst.* 3.11.5.

73. *Inst.* 3.11.6.

74. *Inst.* 3.11.9.

75. *Ibid.*





Reymond is correct to state that Calvin teaches that the believer receives through Christ's humanity 'virtues which flow into it from the Godhead'. However, this is not a teaching unique to Calvin's view of the sacraments, but is a consistent part of his teaching of the believer's union with Christ. Reymond's claim that Calvin has simply chosen confusing language is not accurate. Calvin explicitly opposes a teaching that we receive righteousness immediately from divine essence, insisting that all that we receive from God comes to us through Christ's human nature. The righteousness which believers enjoy comes from God, and indeed from the Father, but is also that which is achieved by Christ in his death and resurrection and so can never be separated from his flesh.

Reymond's criticism highlights exactly that point of Calvin's theology which informs his view of the Lord's Supper. Salvation lies in the person and work of the incarnate Son. In order to share in salvation we must have a communion with him, and the Lord's Supper offers and sustains that communion. As Horton says, 'if we have trouble with this aspect of Calvin's eucharistic teaching, then we will have difficulty with his entire doctrine of union'.<sup>76</sup>

### The Lord's Supper and participation

Having reviewed Calvin's account of salvation and the place of union with Christ in that, we are now able to understand the importance of his doctrine of participation in the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Calvin holds that the Lord's Supper presents the gospel and therefore it presents Christ. In the 'Short Treatise' he states the principle that 'just as God has set all fullness of life in Jesus, in order to communicate it to us by means of him, so he has ordained his Word as instrument by which Jesus Christ, with all his benefits, is dispensed to us'. Then he argues that 'the Lord instituted for us his Supper, in order to sign and seal in our consciences the promises contained in his gospel'.<sup>77</sup> In the *Institutes* Calvin argues that 'the sacrament requires preaching to beget faith'.<sup>78</sup> Wallace shows from a wide range of Calvin's works that he held that the sacraments had no validity or effect without the Word, that the sacraments were representations of the Word and that they

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76. M. S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 134.

77. 'Short Treatise', pp. 143–144.

78. *Inst.* 4.14.4.



sealed the Word.<sup>79</sup> For Calvin sure knowledge of God as Creator is possible only through the Scriptures.<sup>80</sup> Knowledge of God as Redeemer depends even more entirely upon the Scriptures, for there is Christ presented in his gospel.<sup>81</sup> Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments builds on this view of revelation by the Word. Without the gospel proclaimed, the sacraments have no meaning and so no effect.

At this point Calvin's more general discussion about the sacraments illuminates his understanding of the Supper. Calvin related both Word and sacraments to the presentation of Christ to the believer by drawing in Augustine's theory of signs. As he discusses the Lord's Supper, Calvin states that God shows the incomprehensible mystery of union with Christ 'in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity'.<sup>82</sup> Van der Kooi explains that Calvin's thought about the sacraments reflects a certain view of creation as well as about salvation.<sup>83</sup>

With Augustine, Calvin made the distinction between *signum* ('sign') and *res* ('thing'). Understanding and communication depends on signs which signify things. Words are the most common signs, though there are other types. Words are not natural signs (the way smoke is a natural sign of fire). Rather words are given signs [*signum datum*] in which the meaning must be established and is not inherent. There are physical objects which are also given signs and these can be treated as if they are words, so Augustine calls them 'visible words' [*verba visibilia*]. For Augustine the timeless intelligible realities of God are known when words function as signs and 'help direct our mind's eye to the realities they signify'. These realities and the truth do not exist in the sign; the *signum* must not be confused for the *res*. The sign conveys the truth of the thing, so that the hearer can grasp the truth inwardly. It is in the mind that the truth of things is grasped. This Platonic conception is linked for Augustine with the further need for words to recount for us historical events which are themselves signs of divine truth and are part of God's redemption. Most important of these historical truths is that 'the Word became flesh'.<sup>84</sup> The necessity of historical

79. R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh/London: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), pp. 137–141.

80. *Inst.* 1.6.1–4.

81. *Inst.* 2.9.2.

82. *Inst.* 4.17.1.

83. C. van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God, – A Dipych*, trans. D. Mader (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 195.

84. T. Williams, 'Biblical Interpretation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. E. Stump and N. Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 66.

events to reveal God and bring redemptive knowledge of him modifies the Platonism upon which Augustine drew. It does not, however, qualify the fundamental distinction between *signa* and *res*.

Calvin is less enamoured of Platonism than Augustine, and for the sake of this examination we can set aside a discussion of the extent of the Reformer's debt to Plato.<sup>85</sup> However, Calvin embraced the account of the relation of *signa* and *res* which he found in Augustine and, like Augustine, applied it particularly to the sacraments.<sup>86</sup> The power of the view was that it made a distinction between the two without denying that the *signa* mediate the truth of the *res*. So Calvin explains that 'the sacred mystery of the Supper' consists of 'physical signs' and 'spiritual truth', which are 'represented and displayed' by the symbols. He explains that analysis makes it clear that he does not hold that Christ is present 'only by understanding and imagination', but in such a way that believers have 'true participation in him'.<sup>87</sup>

This theory of signs gave Calvin the tools to give a powerful account of the nature of the sacraments. The Supper and Baptism are, if understood physically, simply bread and wine and water. However, they are used in actions which God has made into 'given signs' and which are explained by the words of the gospel, in particular the words of institution.<sup>88</sup> Calvin adopts Augustine's definition of a sacrament as 'a visible sign of a sacred thing or of an invisible grace'. His exposition of this definition is that a sacrament 'is a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with a mutual attestation of our piety toward him'.<sup>89</sup> So Calvin maintains Augustine's distinction

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85. J. Boisset claims that a Platonic perspective is required to see the unity of Calvin teaching: J. Boisset, *Sagesse et sainteté dans la pensée de Jean Calvin* (Paris, 1959), p. 272, quoted in J. Fitzer, 'The Augustinian Roots of Calvin's Eucharistic Thought', *Augustinian Studies* 7 (1976), p. 69 (repr. in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. R. C. Gamble, New York: Garland, 1992, p. 165). Partee responds that 'it seems extremely wayward' to assert any direct influence of Plato on Calvin's view of participation: see C. Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (1977; repr. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), pp. 114–115.
86. T. J. Davis, *This Is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), pp. 147–148, shows the key role of Augustine in shaping Calvin's thought about the Supper in the 1543 edition of the *Institutes*.
87. See *Inst.* 4.17.11.
88. On the importance of the words of institution for Calvin's view of the Supper, see Davis, *This Is My Body*, pp. 67–71.
89. *Inst.* 4.14.1.



between the sign [the *sacramentum rei* or *res significans*] and the invisible reality which is signified and mediated [the *res sacramenti*].<sup>90</sup> When performed in the context of the proclaimed Word, these actions point to Christ and salvation in him. In doing so they mediate an inner knowledge of and participation in that to which they point. This mediation comes about only when the Spirit works to bring about union with Christ and so when faith is present.

Calvin does not claim that his exposition of the sacraments using Augustine's sign theory allows a full explanation of the presence of Christ in the Supper. Indeed, just the opposite is the case. Calvin explains that 'it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare' and that it is more experienced [*experior*] than understood [*intelligam*].<sup>91</sup> The signs theory allows Calvin to speak of participation in Christ mediated by Word and sacraments.

The Radical Orthodox criticism of Calvin on the sacraments is that he moves too far from the Platonism of Augustine and Thomas and so affirms a true presence but not a real presence. It is true that Calvin's stress on the ascension introduces a note of 'absence' in his account of the presence of Christ in the Supper. However, this may not be simply due to a nominalism which can find only an arbitrary relation between *res* and *signa*. Calvin is certainly careful to maintain the distinction between creature and Creator.<sup>92</sup> However, his insistence on the heavenly location of Christ's body is not simply because he lacks a participatory metaphysic. Rather it is an important affirmation of the importance of the body of Christ, qua body, in redemption. It is not clear how Aquinas' account of Christ's body present but occupying no location, at rest in heaven and only discernible by the intellect is a more adequate account.<sup>93</sup>

### More in the Supper than the Word?

One of the puzzles for some interpreters of Calvin is why he seems to ascribe greater effect to the Supper than he does to the Word. This feature of his view

90. Van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror*, p. 196.

91. *Inst.* 4.17.31.

92. Berkouwer explains that Calvin stood 'on guard against any crossings of creaturely boundary-lines' because 'from the gospel he learned that the riches of Christ consisted in the fact that he redeemed us as one of us'. So he resisted any suggestion that Christ did not remain fully human: G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, trans. J. H. Kok (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 282.

93. *ST* 17, pp. 107–119 (3a, 75 a5–7).



is the point at which the Zwinglian view makes its objection. The Zwinglian critique observes that the Word of God mediates life from God and is the foundation of the sacrament. It asks how there can be any way to ascribe more to the Supper, let alone any reason to ascribe more. Calvin's answer is summed up in his term 'seal'. The Supper, like the Word, is a sign, but it is also a seal. He states that the chief function of the Supper is not 'to extend to us the body of Christ' but 'to seal and confirm that promise by which he testifies that his flesh is food indeed and his blood is drink'.<sup>94</sup> The theory of signification underlies Calvin's account of the sealing dimension of the Supper. As God-ordained and Spirit-empowered signs, the sacraments convey the thing they signify. However, the very physicality of them – the sight, touch and taste of the elements – makes them compelling. As bodily beings we benefit greatly from the physical signs which God gives to confirm the promises he has made. The sacraments do not make God's promise true or more true, so Calvin says that 'God's truth is of itself firm and sure enough, and it cannot receive better confirmation from any other source than from itself'.<sup>95</sup> The sacraments do, however, convey the truth of God's promises to believers in a striking way.

The 'signification' of the sacraments explains why Calvin particularly relates the reception of the body and blood of Christ to the Lord's Supper. As a sign of God's grace the Supper mediates all of Christ and all his blessings, for there is no separating of one blessing from the others. However, the words of institution and the meaning given to the signs refer particularly to the body and blood of Christ. Calvin then aligns the reality mediated by the Supper with the truth that it signifies. This is the point of analogy or *tertium comparationis* which ensures that the relation between the *sacramentum rei* and *res sacramenti* is not arbitrary. The Scriptures make the connection between the Supper and participation in Christ's body and blood. Jesus' own words in the setting of the Last Supper, held during the Passover festival and with the prospect of Jesus' death, establish the connection. Paul asks, 'Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?' (1 Cor. 10:16). This biblical description of the Supper leads Calvin to affirm that as an effective sign the Supper grants to those who believe that which it signifies.

A summary of the case so far is in order. I have argued that Calvin's view of the Supper rests on his view of the importance of the incarnation in redemption. Christ's body is central to his redemption of embodied humans. Calvin's

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94. *Inst.* 4.17.3.

95. *Inst.* 4.14.3.

account of the Christian life is that it involves Spirit-mediated union with the risen and ascended embodied Christ. This union is established and sustained by the Word through which the Spirit presents Christ to believers. The Supper presents to believers a visible and tangible sign of the truth that Christ has died for them, and that they share in Christ's death and resurrection. Thus the Spirit of Christ by the words, actions and elements of the Lord's Supper seals to Christians their union with Christ's body and blood.

### Scriptural basis

Calvin is committed to presenting a theology which answers fully to Scripture. So we can rightly ask if his doctrine of the sacraments is found in Scripture. If we begin with the question of the participation in Christ in the sacraments, Calvin can point to 1 Corinthians 10. There Paul asserts that to eat and drink the Supper is to participate in Christ. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:27 speaks of unworthy eating and drinking as 'sinning against the body and blood of the Lord'. The words of institution also play an important part in Calvin's theology.<sup>96</sup> Beyond the references to the Supper, Calvin's theology of the Supper is supported by the biblical emphasis on the importance of the incarnation and union with Christ. John 6 is most important in drawing these themes together.<sup>97</sup>

Calvin's doctrine of the Supper gives a clear insight into his approach to Christian theology. It is grounded in a careful and thoughtful understanding of biblical texts. However, he is not simply collecting and summarizing texts which refer directly to the Supper. Calvin's method is to deal with the many themes of Scripture and to draw those themes together in a theological exposition, with a constant interest in how he can serve Christian piety. As he does this the Supper becomes an important topic in his thought.

### Baptism

Further light may be shed by examining the way Calvin speaks of the other Christian sacrament, baptism. Calvin treats baptism in a similar way to the

96. *Inst.* 4.17.20–25.

97. Horton lays out the biblical support for Calvin's view in detail in *People and Place*, pp. 119–123.

Lord's Supper, though with an important difference in emphasis. He describes baptism with similarly realistic language about union with Christ's death and resurrection. He writes that 'those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit'.<sup>98</sup> Yet he often is content to speak of what the water of baptism 'represents' (the washing away of sin, sharing in mortification and vivification and union with Christ) with no further discussion of the presence of Christ in the sacrament.<sup>99</sup> The relatively reduced emphasis on the 'real presence' in baptism may be explained in terms of the representation involved. That is, the bread and wine represent Christ's body and blood, while the water represents Christ's Spirit.

Gerrish wonders if there is an incoherence in Calvin's view of baptism. He points out that Calvin can refer the validity of baptism to the past as a sign of the fact that God has already adopted the children of believers.<sup>100</sup> He can relate it to the present, 'in the assurance that the reality is present in and with the sign'.<sup>101</sup> He can also claim that the sacrament will in time bear the fruit of faith.<sup>102</sup> Gerrish argues that Calvin has developed each of these strands in interaction with a different problem and that this introduces a certain tension into his presentation.<sup>103</sup>

There is no need to find an incoherence in Calvin's view at this point. His presentation reflects the subjective and objective elements of his presentation, but applied to the sacrament of entry rather than of sustenance. In dealing with both the Supper and baptism Calvin holds that God truly uses the sacrament and is truly present in it, but that he uses it as a sign and so is present by mediation. This is the objective side of Calvin's view of the sacraments. Calvin

98. *Inst.* 4.15.5.

99. So Calvin says the Lord 'speaks to us through a sign' and 'performs for our soul within as truly and surely as we see our body outwardly cleansed, submerged and surrounded with water': *Inst.* 4.15.14.

100. 'God declares that he adopts our babies as his own before they are born, when he promises that he will be our God and the God of our descendants after us. Their salvation is embraced in this word': *Inst.* 4.15.20.

101. Gerrish, 'Reformed Doctrine', p. 115.

102. 'Infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not been formed in them, the seed lies hidden without by the secret working of the Spirit': *Inst.* 4.16.20.

103. Gerrish, 'Reformed Doctrine', p. 115.

also teaches that the effect of the sacrament and God's presence depends upon the work of the Spirit, and this work can never be controlled by the church in its celebration of the sacraments. This is the subjective side of his view of the sacraments. Because baptism deals with 'entry' into God's family, the temporal question arises in a way in which it does not with the Lord's Supper, and both the objective and the subjective sides must be included in explaining baptism. So Calvin can say both that in baptism the children of believers are adopted as God's children, and also that through this sign the Spirit brings assurance of adoption and the fruit of union with Christ. This complexity of presentation is consistent with Calvin's view of the sacraments.

Calvin had a great deal of biblical material to lead him toward this view of baptism. The New Testament uses the term over one hundred times, and from Matthew 28 on it is consistently presented as the sign that people have entered into salvation in Christ and so in the church. Peter's sermon at Pentecost calls for repentance and offers baptism in the name of Christ for forgiveness (Acts 2:38). Three thousand baptisms occurred that day, and this continued through Acts (8:12, 36; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16). Christians continued to baptize people as they became disciples (Rom 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:13; Gal. 3:27) and this continued in the post-apostolic era.

It is sometimes suggested that much of the baptism language of the New Testament is metaphorical. However, Leon Morris comments 'that this is a distinction the New Testament never makes'.<sup>104</sup> That is, in most cases there is a reference to water baptism, even if the term has a more extended reference as well (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:12). The New Testament writers then routinely relate baptism to a wide range of spiritual blessings. Beasley-Murray repeats and endorses Schlatter's comment that 'there is no gift or power which the Apostolic documents do not ascribe to baptism'.<sup>105</sup>

Because baptism was the common experience of Christians, it is quite likely that there are also allusions to Baptism in texts that do not explicitly mention baptism (e.g. Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5).<sup>106</sup>

Thus Calvin as a biblical theologian had every reason to speak realistically

104. L. L. Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 81.

105. G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962; repr. Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), p. 263.

106. See G. Wainwright, 'Baptism, Baptismal rites', in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997) for a range of possible allusions to baptism in the later NT and for post-canonical references.



about the connection between salvation and baptism, stating that ‘at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life’, and ‘through baptism Christ makes us sharers in this death, that we may be engrafted in it’, and ‘those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ’s death in the mortification of their flesh together with the work of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit’.<sup>107</sup> As with Calvin’s realism about the Supper, his language here about baptism has troubled some later Reformed writers who want to distance themselves more fully from baptismal regeneration. Calvin’s affirmations depend on his theology of signification. He is not claiming that the water of baptism in itself brings us into salvation.<sup>108</sup> Rather, as with the Lord’s Supper, we have a God-ordained sign which is a sign of incorporation into Christ and by the Spirit is used to grant that which it signifies.

### Appreciating Calvin and the sacraments

Can the heirs of Calvin appreciate his view of the sacraments? We can surely appreciate his Christological emphasis. For Calvin Christ is the material [*materia*] or substance [*substantiam*] of the sacraments. This is because all their firmness [*soliditatem*] lies in him and without him they promise nothing. Calvin states this in order to make the point that it is only as the sacraments lead us to Christ that they have any value for us. When we find Christ through them then ‘we receive in true faith what is offered there’.<sup>109</sup>

We can appreciate Calvin’s theology of the sacraments as part of his vision of the Christian life. He has an ecclesial vision in which the church is key to entering into God’s salvation. It is a vision of mediated salvation in which the Word proclaimed in the church and sacraments enacted by the church bring believers into union with the ascended Christ and so into all his blessings. The special role of the sacraments is to seal to believers that which they have been promised in the Word and have grasped by faith. Just because this vision is often missing in contemporary churches, we can allow Calvin to show us that the Bible directs us to the church as our mother, and to the Word and sacraments as God’s ordained means to create and sustain his church.

We can appreciate that Calvin’s emphasis on the sacraments is motivated

107. *Inst.* 4.15.3, 5.

108. *Inst.* 4.15.2.

109. *Inst.* 4.14.16.

by his belief that they rank highly among God's blessings for his church. For Calvin the two sacraments alone are ceremonies which 'promise salvation' because they come from God. God alone can determine how he will testify to the truth of his promises, and in his wisdom he has done so in the Lord's Supper and baptism. Only baptism in the context of the gospel preached can mark a person's entry into the faith, and the Lord's Supper is how God determines to offer 'a sort of continual food on which Christ feeds the household of his believers'.<sup>110</sup> For that reason Calvin calls for these ceremonies to be conducted in the church without the addition of further elements or the obscuring effect of other ceremonies. Reformed and evangelical churches in the twenty-first century usually put far less stress on the sacraments than did Calvin. We teach on them rarely, and reduce our celebration of them. As we appreciate Calvin's approach we will place a renewed emphasis on the sacraments.

This chapter has aimed to help us appreciate Calvin's provocative view of the presence of Christ in the sacraments. Calvin insists on this because salvation depends on union with the whole Christ offered to faith by both Word and sacraments. Explanations of the sacraments in evangelical churches routinely speak of what they are not (in order to avoid superstition), but say little of what they are. Calvin reminds us that the Bible uses dramatically realistic language to describe the place of the sacraments in the life of the church. He gives us a theology of the sacraments in which we celebrate God's kind provision for the church, in which he seals to us that which he promises. Calvin claims that not only may Christ be found in the sacraments, but for those who hear his Word and trust in him he *will* be found in them. We may want to seek a different way to describe how baptism and the Lord's Supper mediate union with Christ, perhaps using speech-act theory rather than Augustinian signification theory. As we do, however, we have far more need to learn from Calvin than we have need to correct him.

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110. *Inst.* 4.18.19.