

“The Sacred Supper of Christ and What it Brings to Us”

Exploring John Calvin’s Understanding of the Lord’s Table

Church History Paper

By Greg D. Stiner

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Table of Contents

Preface..... iii

Introduction..... iv

Exploration of History Requires a Right Perspective 1

Exploring the Historical Context of the Supper - Leading Up to the Reformation 2

Exploring the Eucharistic Controversies of Calvin’s Times..... 4

Exploring Calvin’s Writings..... 8

Exploring Calvin’s Doctrine of the Super 12

Conclusions and Observations..... 16

Bibliography 17

Preface

In mid-October in the year 1492, Christopher Columbus supposed he had reached India when he made landfall. However, fellow explorers, subsequent study, and historical records have proven that Columbus was about 12,000 miles short of his desired goal. In a paper whose goal it is to explore John Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Table, I can certainly sympathize with Columbus.

For a Presbyterian Christian, exploring Calvin on the Supper is no ordinary expedition for a number of reasons. First, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a tremendous blessing given by Christ to His Church as signs and seals of the covenant of grace. As such, the Supper is not to be made the subject of human speculation, but discerningly studied in a manner worthy of God. Second, because Calvin's writings are extensive in scope and widely influential in the Church, his views on the Supper are a matter of historical interest and bear examination due to his relationship to the Reformed community. Third, as we read Calvin, there should be an awareness that there are currently, and have been in the past, numbers of individuals in the Reformed community and beyond whose goal is to recover Calvin's doctrine of the Eucharist, or at least their brand of it. Fourth, because of the former, we contend there is not so much a need to recover Calvin, as to let him speak plainly through his writings, as a witness in his own behalf, and more importantly as a witness to the Bible. As a Reformed community, our supreme loyalty is to Christ and to His word. Calvin's writings are highly valued and esteemed, but only as we see a highly skilled exegete faithfully handling the Word of God. Fifthly, those who seek peace within the Church will own that a view of the Lord's Table built upon Scripture, will also find harmony with the Consensus Tigurinus and the Westminster Standards.¹ The underlying view in this paper is that both these standards provide the doctrinal decisiveness and latitude required for either a Calvin or a Bullinger.

This paper is intended to be a broad exploration of Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Table and will do little more than point to some of Calvin's speculative views on the Supper. Therefore, the intended benefit here is to be found more in the study of the comparative and comprehensive, and not so much the exclusive or controversial aspects of Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper.

¹ Ligon Duncan remarks that the ecclesial confessions of the Consensus Tigurnnus and the Westminster Confession, reflect "a churchly consensus", meaning they also reflect a propriety of sound counsel and wisdom. See, *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, Vol 2, True Communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper, paragraph 8 (Scotland: Christian Focus Pub, 2004), 448.

Introduction

The place of Divinely appointed sacraments among the people of God has captivated the minds of succeeding generations since the beginning of time. So much so, that recorded Sacred History finds individuals who were willing to be put to death, or in the case of some, to put others to death for their views of the sacraments.² This phenomenon is not bound to Sacred History alone and is particularly observable with regard to the sacrament of the Lord's Table at the time of the Protestant Reformation.³

While the intent is not a focus on violence, yet recalling the dangers mentioned above does help us to reflect with deeper thought and a desire for keener insight on the place of the Lord's Supper within the Christian Church. Since the Supper of Christ occupies a prominent place in the life of the faithful, we naturally will ask questions like these: "What is the meaning of the Lord's Table?" "Is the Supper more of a memorial or is there also communion with Christ, and if so, how?" "What did Jesus mean by the words, 'this is my body'?" "What are the benefits of the Supper?" "What are the dangers of misusing the Supper, and are we observing the sacrament in a manner worthy of Him who gave His life for our own?"

Scripture alone can authoritatively and ultimately decide and answer these questions, and yet it must be realized that succeeding generations do not look at the Bible as if they were first generation theologians. Ignoring our Christian predecessors will impoverish, and often imperil, men's souls by ignoring the lessons to be gained from the Church's history. The writings of the sixteenth century Reformer of Geneva speak to issues raised above, just as many others have before and since that time, so why look at John Calvin's views? The answer to this question lies in the uniqueness of the period in which Calvin lived and in measure at the uniqueness of Calvin's own willingness and ability to apply his Biblical research to those living in his day. If we explore even in a broad manner the writings of Calvin, we become exposed to the great minds of one of the most fruitful periods in church history, and so iron sharpens iron.

² We might argue here that the first murder in the annals of world history was related to a sacrament, that of Cain killing his brother Able in Genesis 4. With a simple definition that a sacrament is, "a visible word" then we understand how that the earliest of sacrifices appointed by the LORD were indeed a visible word and worthy of the definition set forth by Augustine, see *the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Homilies on the Gospel of John, Chap. 15:3, Tractate LXXX (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub, 1886).

³ John Calvin in 1540, stated in a tract entitled *A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Savior Jesus Christ*, "Though the old doctors of the Sorbonne dispute with great subtlety, how the body and blood are joined to the signs, yet it cannot be denied that this opinion has been received by great and small in the popish Church, and that it is cruelly maintained today by fire and sword, that Jesus Christ is contained under these signs, and there he must be sought." J.K. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 2000), 158.

Exploration of History Requires a Right Perspective

As the expedition begins, a consideration of the Church's doctrine and practice of the Lord's Table in its historical context will be of help in discerning more clearly the Reformer's views of the Lord's Supper by affording a common vantage point. The importance of gaining a clear historical perspective is surely helpful to any discussion of views held by those who have gone before us, because it reminds us that we are all men of like passion and subject to similar infirmities. Also, because they were men of their times and captured by history, providence had shaped their lives and thoughts, just as it does us today. But weighing the thoughts of others written down for us, especially when they can no longer speak in this world for themselves, must be guardedly undertaken and cautiously employed in truth and humility. Yet, as we find our own studies confirming or opposing the thoughts of those who have gone before us we can begin to learn that after all there is no new thing upon the earth, only fresh minds coming to the same age old questions.⁴

The primary question is whose perspective shall we take, or whose compass is true? And this question points to the necessity for an ultimate standard. It is just here that the uniqueness of Calvin's writings comes into focus, pointing true north. For the Genevan Reformer the norm or standard was the word of God alone as can be seen in the first article of the *Genevan Confession* (1536), written by Calvin and presented by William Farel and John Calvin to the Genevan magistracy:

First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord.

However, this Genevan confession was at variance with the Roman Catholic Church in the era of the Reformation,⁵ and today as well.⁶ Holy Scripture was no longer the all-sufficient rule to

⁴ Ecclesiastes 1:9 "That which has been is that which will be, and that which has been done is that which will be done. So there is nothing new under the sun." Surely men understand that Solomon is speaking in a general sense, e.g. "man will always be discovering new things" is a universal truism that recognizes the permanence of the curiosity of man's nature.

⁵ John Eck, a principle Roman Catholic theologian and antagonist of the Protestant Reformation stated, "The Scriptures are not authentic, except by the authority of the Church." *Enchiridion of Commonplaces*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 13.

⁶ "It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls." *The Documents of the Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Herden and Herden, 1996), *Dei Verbum*, 8.

judge matters of faith and life for the Church. The traditions of the Church Fathers and the voice of the Church have become the ultimate judge of God's truth.

Exploring the Historical Context of the Supper - Leading Up to the Reformation

Historically and practically, the Bible had been mediated through the hands of the Church's priests.⁷ Often made a hidden and forbidden book, the common man was not allowed to read and understand the Bible for himself. The consequence of this approach to Christianity was realized in a developing spiritual darkness and ignorance of God's Word, which bred all manner of superstition in both the priests and people. And yet it was not always so, as we see in this candid passage from the Roman Catholic Historian, Michael Davies, in his work *A Short History of the Roman Mass*. Concerning the liturgy of the early church we are told that,

*Although there was considerable liturgical uniformity in the first two centuries there was not absolute uniformity. Liturgical books were certainly being used by the middle of the 4th century, and possibly before the end of the third, but the earliest surviving texts date from the seventh century, and musical notation was not used in the west until the ninth century when the melodies of Gregorian chant were codified. **The only book known with certainty to have been used until the fourth century was the Bible from which the lessons were read. Psalms and the Lord's Prayer were known by heart, otherwise the prayers were extempore. There was little that could be described as ceremonial in the sense that we use the term today [Emphasis added].** Things were done as they were done for some practical purpose. The lessons were read in a loud voice from a convenient place where they could be heard, and bread and wine were brought to the altar at the appropriate moment. Everything would evidently have been done with the greatest possible reverence, and gradually and naturally signs of respect emerged, and became established customs, in other words liturgical actions became ritualized.*⁸

In the celebration of the Supper from the days of the Apostles until the fourth century, Davies says that, "There was little that could be described as ceremonial in the sense that we [Roman Catholics] use the term today." So where did the ceremony of what the Council of Trent called the "Holy Sacrifice of the Mass" originate? Davies is not entirely clear as to this point, but he describes the earliest aberration as a mere liturgical evolution from Scripture alone to established customs and

⁷ "Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, It [the Council of Trent] decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,--in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, --wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,--whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures,--hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never (intended) to be at any time published. Contraveners shall be made known by their Ordinaries, and be punished with the penalties by law established." *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 17-21.

⁸ Michael Davies, *A Short History of the Roman Mass* (Charlotte: TAN Books & Pub, 1997).

rituals. However, this seemingly minor shift of emphasis provided the guise under which idolatry crept into the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The simple words of institution, "... that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ... and said, This is My body, which is for you", were to become shrouded in unbiblical ideas and actions that in time became idolatry, and so the sins of Jeroboam were revisited. Sorrowfully, once again the Son of Man was betrayed by His own familiar friend.

According to the historian N.R. Needham the Mass became, "a visual drama for the average person, an event in which they were spectators rather than participants."⁹ The rituals of the Mass were said to represent elements of Christ's atoning death in an elaborate ceremonial proclamation of the cross.¹⁰ But rather than elucidating Christ to the worshiping community, this ritual had the chilling effect of obscuring the central truths of the gospel. For instance, the worshiper was told that as the bread of the Lord's Table was elevated by the priest and the ritual words of the Mass were recited that the worshiper was seeing the literal body of Jesus Christ even though it remained only bread in substance. As the Roman Mass developed in history, it became not a celebration of the Lord's Supper, but rather in Roman doctrine it was a continuation or re-crucifixion of Jesus' body and blood offered to God through the ministry of priests in a bloodless offering on an altar.¹¹ This purported miracle is known in Roman Catholic theology as the doctrine of transubstantiation,¹² a word which simply means a change of substance. But this long word with a simple meaning has profound implications and this because the worshiper was told that Jesus Christ was physically present within the bread or host, and so was expected to give adoration to the host as though it were Jesus!¹³

⁹ N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, Part Three (London: Grace Pub Trust, 2004), 43.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The doctrine of the Mass was for the first time codified at the Council of Trent, in 1562. There the council declared that in the Mass "...Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner ..." and that "... the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory..." and further that, "... the Lord, appeased by the oblation thereof, and granting the grace and gift of penitence, forgives even heinous crimes and sins." Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Twenty Second Session - Doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass, Chap. 2 That the Sacrifice of the Mass is Propitiatory both for the Living and the Dead (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 179. For a fuller discussion of the doctrine of the Roman Mass from a Reformed perspective, see Loraine Boettner's, *Roman Catholicism* (Pittsburgh: P&R Pub,1962), 168-195.

¹² For the official dogma of the Roman Church regarding the doctrine of Transubstantiation, see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Thirteenth Session - Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Canons IV and VI (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 137.

¹³ In fact the Roman Church anathematized all who disavowed this point; see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. II, The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Thirteenth Session - Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Chap. IV Transubstantiation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 130.

Exploring the Eucharistic Controversies of Calvin's Times

Integral to Calvin's understanding of the Supper of Christ, are the controversies of the times in which he lived and labored. We touch on them here to note how complex the issues had become, and from this we can again see how much the Word of God was needed by the Church. From the vantage point of the sixteenth century when Reformers began to compare the Church's practice of the Mass with the simplicity of the Lord's Table instituted and practiced at the time of the New Testament and the Apostles, it was difficult to discern the Mass as being taken from Scripture at all. As a trained scholar, John Calvin was conversant with the writings of the Church Fathers and medieval scholastic theologians.¹⁴ When Calvin came to analyze what had been taught in the Church concerning the Lord's Supper, i.e., the Roman Catholic view, we find Calvin making an unabashed use of the Church Fathers to refute Roman Catholic theologians, by drawing upon them where their views have Biblical support and in turn criticizing the fathers where they go astray from the Bible.¹⁵ Calvin recognized that Satan had stolen from the Church an inestimable treasure in the Lord's Supper and that Satan had not only marred its truth and beauty with superstitions, but he went further to obscure the truth by quarrels and conflicts so as to make this spiritual food distasteful to men.¹⁶ By his own testimony, Calvin wrote to resolve and remove "... those difficulties with which Satan has tried to ensnare the world."¹⁷ The Church had allowed herself to be ensnared and the very life was being choked out of her members as the educated became jaded observers, skeptical of what the churchmen taught, and the less educated were bound in "gross superstition." Mankind needed a light to guide them from the enfolding darkness of human opinion and superstition which characterized the much of the medieval church.

The light that Scripture shed on abuses within the Church deeply moved many Christians to see the need to rescue and restore the Christian faith through the proper proclamation of the Bible's

¹⁴ See Calvin's letter to Cardinal Sadolet as found in J.K. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2000), 219-256. A brief excerpt from page 231 gives evidence of Calvin's scholarly familiarity with the writings of the early Church fathers, "I shall not press you so closely as to call you back to that form which the apostles instituted, though in it we have the only model of a true church, and whoever deviates from it in the smallest degree is in error. But to indulge you so far, I ask you to place before your eyes the ancient form of the Church as their writings prove it to have been in the ages of Chrysostom and Basil among the Greeks, and Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine among the Latins; and after so doing, to contemplate the ruins of that Church which now survive among yourselves."

¹⁵ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Four, Chap. XVIII, sections 9-11, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1437-1440.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, Chap. VI, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1360.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

contents.¹⁸ God answered prayers and owned their efforts at reforming the Church and over the course of time much of Christendom was led to apply a sweeping reformation to the Church. Interestingly, even though the Roman Catholic Church anathematized the Reformed teaching, they none the less were led to see the need for correcting several moral abuses within the Papacy. Yet, just as when Jesus preached the truth of God certain religious factions among the Jews revolted and charged Him with blasphemy, so also when the truth of Christ's gospel was sent forth in power to conquer at the time of Reformation, the battle lines were drawn in the form of controversies. We observe that with reform we may expect controversy to ensue, and this was certainly true with the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Striking a blow at the Papal Mass meant striking a blow at the very heart of medieval Catholicism.¹⁹

But the controversies during this period were not just with the Roman theologians or the "Mass-doctors"²⁰ as Calvin referred to them. Sadly, the Reformers would find themselves in disagreement within their own ranks as to how Christ is present in the Supper.

Luther's doctrine expressed in writing and preaching had corrected several abuses connected with the Supper, and yet his view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper changed only slightly from current views in the Church. Lutheran theologians refer to the Lord's Supper as a Sacramental Union or Real Presence other theologians such as Robert L. Reymond, Charles Hodge, and R.L. Dabney use the term *consubstantiation* to describe the Lutheran view. However, it should be noted that Lutheran theologians usually object to the term *consubstantiation*, which means alongside the substance. But as Charles Hodge said,

This presence of the body and blood of Christ in, with, and under the bread and wine has been generally expressed by non-Lutherans by the word consubstantiation, as distinguished from the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation. The propriety of this word to express the doctrine of Luther is admitted by Philippi, if it be understood to mean, what in fact is meant by it when used by the Reformed, "das reale Zusammensein beider Substanzen," i.e., the real coexistence of the two substances, the earthly and the heavenly. But Lutherans generally

¹⁸ "But when it is most clearly proved by the Word of God that the Mass, however decked in splendor, inflicts a signal dishonor upon Christ, buries and oppresses his cross, consigns his death to oblivion, takes away the benefit which came to us by it, and weakens and destroys the sacrament by which the memory of his death was bequeathed to us—will any of the roots be too deep for this most sturdy ax (I mean the Word of God) to slash and upturn? Is there any covering so dazzling that this light cannot disclose the lurking evil? John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Four, Chap. XVIII, section 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1431.

¹⁹ "I know how deeply this plague has taken root, how much it lurks under the appearance of good, how it displays the name of Christ, and how numerous persons believe that in the one word "Mass" they embrace the whole sum of faith." *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVIII, page 1429-1430.

²⁰ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVIII, page 1437.

*object to the word because it is often used to express the idea of the mixing two substances so as to form a third; or the local inclusion of the one substance by the other.*²¹

In any event, the Augsburg confession tersely declares that:

Of the Supper of the Lord they teach that the [true] body and blood of Christ are truly present [under the form of bread and wine], and are there communicated to those that eat in the Lord's Supper [and received]. And they disapprove of those that teach otherwise [wherefore also the opposite doctrine is rejected].

This view represents the literal or “true” body of Christ as being, in the words of Luther, “in, with, and under” the elements of the Supper. Luther strongly held to a literal rendering of the words of institution used by Christ at the Supper “...this is my body...”²² This topic became a source of great contention between the Lutherans and the Reformed Churches.

Opposed to Luther’s view on the real bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer and pastor of the church in the city of Zurich, understood Christ to teach in the words of institution “...this is my body...” to mean “this represents my body.” The common representation of Zwingli’s view is that the Supper of Christ held no mystery, it was only a memorial. But we should keep in mind as Ligon Duncan has noted,

*“The memorial view (often unfairly attributed to Zwingli, who denied it explicitly) which views the Supper as mere remembrance, and treats it as a sign but not a seal, and which typically has a non theology of the presence of Christ and sacramental efficacy (that is, there has been little theological reflection on those points and hence they are answered only via denials, and any positive affirmations are vague and not forthcoming).”*²³

Luther referred to those who held such views as “sacramentarians.” In fact the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (1576) uses this term to describe both Zwingli’s followers as well as Calvin. The *Concord* says that Zwingli was “more perspicuous and plain” but Calvin (not using his name specifically, while obviously intended) was more “astute and crafty” and warned against those, who used the words of Lutheran real bodily presence theology to describe a real spiritual presence theology.²⁴ Zwingli had acknowledged the presence of Christ at the table in communion, but as

²¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 673.

²² As found in Matt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22; Lk. 22:19; and 1 Cor. 11:24.

²³ Duncan’s quotation from Zwingli’s writings should clear Zwingli from a mere memorial view of the presence of Christ at the Supper, “If I have called this a commemoration, I have done so in order to controvert those who would make of it a sacrifice. ... We believe that Christ is truly present in the Lord’s Supper; yea that the true body of Christ is eaten in communion, not in a gross and carnal manner, but in a spiritual and sacramental manner, by the religious, believing, and pious heart.” See Ligon Duncan III, *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, Vol. II., True Communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 431-432.

²⁴ Writing in 1559, Calvin denies the charge of being a “sacramentarian” saying, “And we reject the Enthusiasts and Sacramentarians who will not receive such signs and marks, although our Savior said: ‘This is my body, and this is

Geoffrey W. Bromiley suggests Zwingli seemed to have failed in setting forward a distinct Eucharistic doctrine to replace Luther's view of Christ's consubstantial presence, which in turn left him open to misrepresentation as a mere memorialist, or in Lutheran parlance, a sacramentarian.²⁵ History recounts that Andre Carlstadt, Luther's one time colleague at Wittenberg, held a sacramentarian view and for this among many other things, was forced to leave Wittenberg under Luther's influence. Luther's distaste of that event may well have influenced him against Zwingli, whose views seemed to be similar with those of Carlstadt in this matter.

Understandably, controversy ensued between Luther and Zwingli, over the presence of Christ in the Supper. So sharp was the criticism given by Luther that he seemed to deny that Zwingli was even a Christian.²⁶ However, it must quickly be pointed out that at the Marburg Colloquy, held in 1529, a conference convened to promote the unity of the Protestant churches, Martin Luther was requested to draw up articles of agreement between the Swiss and German Reformers. At the conclusion of the Marburg Colloquy in all but one point Luther and Zwingli found general agreement. It is the fifteenth and final article from Luther's own pen to which we turn our attention here:

*In like manner, as to the use of the sacrament, we are agreed that, like the Word, it was ordained of Almighty God, in order that weak consciences might be excited by the Holy Ghost to faith and charity. And although at present we are not agreed upon the question whether the real body and blood of Christ are corporeally present in the bread and wine, yet both the interested parties shall cherish more and more a truly Christian charity for one another, so far as conscience permits; and we will all earnestly implore the Lord to condescend by His Spirit to confirm us in the sound doctrine.*²⁷

The historian goes on to state that after the conference at Marburg, the controversy between Lutherans and the Reformed parties became more moderate and quotes Martin Luther as saying "Now that we are agreed ..." (according to the Marburg Colloquy) "... the Papist will no longer hope that Luther will ever be one of them."²⁸ While Martin Luther never returned to the Papal fold, it is a sad note that neither did he relinquish his insistence that Christ's physical body was present "in, with, and under" the elements of the Supper. This rift remains between the Lutheran, the Reformed and

my blood." Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. III, French Confession of Faith (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 381.

²⁵ G.W. Bromiley, ed. *Zwingli and Bullinger, The Lord's Supper* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 176-238.

²⁶ Needham quotes Luther saying, "I cannot regard Zwingli or any of his teaching as Christian at all." See, N.R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, Part Three (London: Grace Pub Trust, 2004), 157.

²⁷ J.H. Merle d'Aubingne, *The History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, Book Thirteen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1846, reprinted in 1987), 534.

²⁸ *Ibid*, page 535

other protestant churches down to current times and can be found in the confessions of each of the representative churches, i.e., the *Formula of Concord* (1576) and the *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549).

The historical setting given above should help when seeking to grasp Calvin's own understanding and teaching concerning the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, because a reader is in a position to see adjacent and concurrent historical events which undoubtedly influenced Calvin and his contemporaries. In disagreement with Luther's nearly Romanish way of explaining the presence of Christ in the Supper and unconvinced of the completeness of Zwinglian views²⁹ leaders among the Reformed churches, such as Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vamigli, and John Calvin saw in the Bible a promised communion with Christ's body and blood at the Supper, albeit in a spiritual, non-corporeal manner. Calvin, and others with him, sought to build a theology of the sacrament true to Scripture, one that would encourage the faithful, rebuke the errant, while placating the bitter arguments between Reformed and Lutheran parties. Anyone who has attempted to mediate between two parties and has been rewarded for that effort with grief and misunderstanding can appreciate the roll that Calvin stepped into. The role of relationships between the Protestant leaders (inclusive of personal friendships such as between Calvin and Luther's theologian, Melancthon, or political alliances), and their attempts at unifying Protestant Church practice and doctrine should not be overlooked when gauging some of the accommodating language used by Calvin in his writings. Whether or not this should excuse some of Calvin's slightly speculative³⁰ notions regarding the Supper, which we have yet to encounter, will not be decided here; but we should at the least gather some appreciation for the difficult circumstances under which he labored and endeavored to affect a concord of unity. It is from the whole of this perspective that we now sample some of Calvin's major writings on the Lord's Supper.

Exploring Calvin's Writings

The Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536-1559) is Calvin's magnum opus, not by virtue of length but for being his principle theological work. This work was the lifelong labor of Calvin, being first published in 1539, and updated repeatedly by Calvin and lastly republished in 1559. To

²⁹“Moreover I am not satisfied with those persons who, recognizing that we have some communication with Christ, when they would show what it is, make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood.” *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, 1366-1367.

³⁰ Even those sympathetic to Calvin will admit that some of Calvin's views on the Supper are speculative, Ligon Duncan notes, “Calvin's view is more specific, speculative, and semantically complex than the Westminster's but may be wholly consonant with it.” *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, Vol. II., True Communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 445.

suspect that a continual republication until within five years of his death in 1564, reflects the more mature thoughts of Calvin on the Supper would be correct, no doubt. Yet, at the same time, Duncan suggests from his own reading of the various editions of the *Institutes* on the Supper, “It allows the student to detect the repeated and unaltered core of Calvin’s view ...”³¹ In other words, Calvin’s views on the Supper presented in the various editions of the *Institutes* were fairly consistent from 1539 until his death in 1564. This solidarity and consistency within the various editions of the *Institutes* throughout Calvin’s life will be helpful to keep in mind when attempting to synthesize Calvin’s writings on the Supper.

The *Institutes* show pastoral concern that the people of God would recognize the value of the Supper in the life of the Church. This strain was regularly a part of Calvin’s teaching emphasis on the Supper. In the opening section on the Supper of Christ, Calvin stated, “For these reasons, after summarizing the matter in a way intelligible to the unlearned, I shall resolve those difficulties with which Satan has tried to ensnare the world.” God’s people were being robbed of their privileges and worse. We might say that Calvin saw that the enemy of Christ had substituted a spiritual carcinogen for the consecrated bread and wine of the Lord’s Table. The honor of God’s name and truth was at stake and so Calvin wrote to oppose misrepresentations of the Supper from wherever those false views may come. On another front Calvin saw the enemy was stirring up strife and hurtful controversies among the Reformed and Evangelicals to the embarrassment of the entire Church.³² These aims evidence a truly pastoral concern for God’s church.

The Genevan Confession (1536) is a short statement of faith for the city of Geneva prepared by Calvin and Farel. This confession contains a short article on *The Holy Supper*, where the phrase “true spiritual communion” is used to describe the nature of the Supper. This early phrase from Calvin has been recently offered as perhaps a more correct name for Calvin’s understanding of the presence of Christ at the Supper.³³ At any rate, this is an early statement outside of the *Institutes* showing Calvin’s understanding of the sacrament at the beginning of his first tour of duty in Geneva.

A Confession of Faith Concerning the Eucharist (1537) This document is significant in that it represents an early attempt at unity among the Reformed community. This document was written to show that its subscribers had not espoused Lutheran views of the Supper and to deny the charge of

³¹ Ibid. page 442.

³² See the above discussion of the Luther – Zwingli debate over the real bodily presence of Christ in the Supper.

³³ Ligon Duncan, *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, Vol. II., True Communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 433-434.

being sacramentarians. Among its noted signers are John Calvin of Geneva and Martin Bucer of Strasbourg.

A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Savior Jesus Christ (1540) was written while Calvin resided in Strasbourg after being exiled from Geneva. The treatise shows a heart of concern for the consciences of weak Christians, who were perplexed at the Eucharistic contentions among the servants of God. It is laid out in an orderly five section fashion, summarized here as, the Reason, Benefits, Use, Errors, and Disputes concerning the Supper of Christ. Those familiar with Calvin's chapter on "The Sacred Supper of Christ and What it Brings to Us" in the *Institutes* will find this familiar but not identical reading. The pastoral concern of Calvin for the greater good of the Church of Christ is apparent from the first to the last of this treatise. Besides noting this model of ministry, in light of the ongoing debates in Presbyterian circles as to how we must understand Calvin's view of the presence of Christ at the Supper, this treatise should not be overlooked. Calvin used strong language regarding his view and tells us, "We all confess, then, with one mouth that, in receiving the sacrament in faith, according to the ordinance of the Lord, we are truly made partakers of the real substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ."³⁴ Great care ought to be taken when attempting to understand Calvin on this point to avoid taking his words out of literary context and the historical times in which Calvin lived and wrote. As alluded to previously, this paper is not engaged in answering this particular question, only to point to it as we pass.³⁵ But one point of application begs to be made before passing on. It is more than ironic that the very point for which Calvin was laboring, the peace and unity of the Church, would be undermined by the very formula of words he chose to use. Perhaps, in this matter we are not so very different either.

The Catechism of the Church of Geneva (1545) When recalled to Geneva, Calvin was not content with the mere theory of godliness. He sought to instruct the flock of God, as a pastor whom the Holy Spirit had made an overseer. In framing a catechism for his flock, Calvin gave eight Sundays out of fifty-five in which his catechism touches upon the sacrament of the Lord's Table. By comparison, the Westminster Larger Catechism gives thirteen of its one-hundred and ninety-six questions to the sacraments, three specifically on Baptism, eight specifically on the Lord's Table, two

³⁴ J.K. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, A Short Treatise (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2000), 166.

³⁵ This reference is to the long standing debates and disputes over Calvin's view of a substantial partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper, i.e., Hodge and Nevin, and more recently Duncan and Mathison, and many others who have joined the debate over the centuries. Dr. Wayne R. Spear, whose unpublished papers are credited in the bibliography, has pointed out that while not agreeing with all of Duncan's conclusions, the helpful nature of Duncan's article on *True Communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper* is to be recognized, particularly for any who wish to obtain a balanced approach and increase their grasp of the issues at stake.

on Baptism and the Lord's Supper. While the numbers may not be impressive, it remains an interesting fact that the Westminster Assembly gave less than half as much instruction on the sacraments in its catechism than did the Reformer of Geneva. True, they are separated by over one-hundred years of history, and early controversies had become more entrenched, but the emphasis of each is none-the-less apparent and should be noted when discussing their respective theologies.

The Consensus Tigurinus or *The Agreement of Zurich* (1549) was forged by the pastors and doctors of Zurich and those of Geneva. Timothy George suggests the Consensus, "... represents a genuine intra-Reformed ecumenical achievement."³⁶ This document represents the binding together of the continental Reformed Church. The importance of this document for our study is that while Calvin is a principle author, it reflects a consensus between Bullinger (Zwingli's successor in Zurich) and Calvin. This document, while forever binding the Reformed Church together, did manage to further alienate the Lutherans and as Schaff has said, "While the Consensus brought peace and harmony to the Swiss churches, it ... became the innocent occasion of the second sacramental war."³⁷ It has also been observed that while Calvin could subscribe to the *Consensus's* contents, yet it was not the full expression of his own views. However, accepting the *Consensus* as his own confession of faith would mean that in Calvin's view, his use of language in all of his published writings was at least able to be interpreted in accord with the *Consensus*. The significance of this fact is to realize that Calvin would go on for years writing in the same vein as he had done since his first edition of the *Institutes* and unless he was disingenuous (or had elsewhere recanted), his views were in substantial accord with the Zurich pastors and doctors.

The True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper (1561), is a lengthy reply to the Lutheran Pastor Tileman Heshusius, which came on the heels of the bitter Westphal disputes. The work is marked not only by strong polemics, but also a large use of colorful metaphors and adjectives. One part of tremendous historical import is the passage regarding Calvin's great esteem of Melancthon, the Lutheran theologian.³⁸

The Best Method of Obtaining Concord (1561) written after the harsh polemics in the Westphal-Heshusius tract writing disputes, now comes something from the pen of Calvin meant to promote unity. This Calvin must have felt as one of his great callings in the Christian life, because

³⁶ Timothy George, *John Calvin and the Church*, Part I, John Calvin and the Agreement of Zurich (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 54.

³⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 473.

³⁸ J. K. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2000), 258-259.

he seems to return to it in his writings like iron is attracted to a magnet or a spring feeling the force to return to rest after being stretched. As we will see, Calvin wished the sacramental controversies would cease.

Calvin's other works such as his *Commentaries of Sacred Scripture, The French Confession of Faith* (1559), and many others would add valuable substance to the discussion of Calvin on the Supper. But these have not been ignored for any other reason except brevity's sake, as the works above are more than sufficient to show in the main Calvin's views on the Supper.

Exploring Calvin's Doctrine of the Super

As to the nature of the Supper, John Calvin saw in the sacrament "a spiritual banquet"³⁹ by which the Father nourishes "us throughout the course of our life"⁴⁰ and "wherein Christ attests himself to be the life giving bread, which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality" and concluded "the knowledge of this high mystery is very necessary, and in view of its very greatness demands a careful explanation."⁴¹ The sacrament was appointed to signify and seal the benefits of the gospel to us, signs pointing to the reality; seals that confirm and assure us that the work of Christ promised was indeed a reality.⁴²

John Calvin warns Christians to guard against two faults, first, by making too little of the sacramental signs by separating the sign from the mystery. Second, Calvin warns us to be on guard for those who make too much of the sacramental signs and so obscuring the mysteries with the sign. For Calvin, the key to solving the controversy was to maintain the proper connection between the sign and the thing signified, as he indicates this when he says,

*And the Godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see the 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 your 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.*⁴³

The matter that sets the Reformer of Geneva apart in his theology from the views of Rome, Luther, and Zwingli is how he understood the implications for the words of institution, "This is my

³⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1360

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, page 1360

⁴² *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, page 1363

⁴³ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, page 1371

body.” In other words, how is Christ present in the Lord’s Supper? Calvin sees with Zwingli and Luther that the Supper is not a recreation of the once for all sacrifice of Christ on the cross.⁴⁴ He agrees with Zwingli that the words of institution “...this is my body...” should be understood to say that “...this bread represents my body...” Yet he goes beyond this to affirm that “... the bread and wine represent for us the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ.”⁴⁵

For Calvin, this meant not just a spiritual apprehension of the blessings and benefits which Christ purchased by His once for all sacrifice on the cross embraced by faith. But it also included the idea of the believer’s *substantial* participation in Christ’s body and blood of Christ through the sacrament, though not circumscribed or tied to the elements themselves, as though automatically having the power to confer grace, but in a non-corporeal and spiritual manner, made effectual by the power of the Holy Spirit as we exercise faith in the promise of God. Here are Calvin’s words,

*He is, however, obtained, I affirm, not only when we believe that he was made and offering for us, but when he dwells in us – when he is one with us – when we are members of his flesh, (Eph. 5:30), - when in fine, we are incorporated with him (so to speak) into one life and substance. Besides I attend to the import of the words, for Christ does not simply present to us the benefit of his death and resurrection, but the very body in which he suffered and rose again. 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. I use the common form of expression, but my meaning is, that our souls are nourished by the substance of the body, that we may truly be made one with him, or, what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving virtue from Christ’s flesh is poured into us by the Spirit, though it is a great distance from us, and not mixed with us.*⁴⁶

This leads Calvin into the next great question of “... how is it possible that his body, which is in heaven, is given to us here upon earth?” Yet, before we follow the giant down this path, there is another question. Precisely what does Calvin mean by a *substantial* partaking of Christ’s flesh? It can be difficult to know with precision and it was a source of much controversy in his own time, and even now. We find Calvin writing with an irenic tone to those who were not in accord with him on this controversial point in a tract entitled *The Best Method of Obtaining Concord* (1561), where he explains his theological use of the term substance,

When these matters have been arranged, there still arises the doubt as to the term substance. To settle this the easy method seems to be to remove the gross fancy of eating the flesh, as if it were like corporeal meat which is received by the mouth and descends into the stomach. For when this absurdity is out of the way, there is no reason why we should deny that we are substantially fed by the flesh of Christ, because we are truly united into one body with him by

⁴⁴ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVIII, page 1429

⁴⁵ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, page 1360

⁴⁶ I Corinthians 11:24, *Calvin’s Commentary*, (Wilmington: Assoc. Pub and Authors, unknown date), 1673.

*faith, and so made one with him. Hence, it follows that we are joined with him by a substantial fellowship, just as substantial vigor flows down from the head to the limbs. The explanation to be adopted then will be that substantially we become partakers of the flesh of Christ – not that any carnal mixture takes place, or that the flesh of Christ brought down from heaven penetrates into us or is swallowed by the mouth, but because the flesh of Christ, in virtue of its power and efficacy, vivifies our souls just as the substance of bread and wine nourish our bodies.*⁴⁷

Now continuing to follow Calvin's explanation as to how a life-giving virtue from Christ's flesh, which is only spatially and locally present at the right hand of the Father in heaven, can be given to men on earth we find his first response is that this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

*For as to his communicating himself to us, that is effected through the secret virtue of his Holy Spirit, which cannot merely bring together, but join in one, things that are separated by distance of place, and far remote ... It seems incredible, that we should be nourished by Christ's flesh, which is so great a distance from us. Let us bear in mind, that it is a secret and wonderful work of the Holy Spirit, which it were criminal to measure by the standard of our understanding.*⁴⁸

How can this be? Calvin, surely one of the great exegetes of the Bible, after stating his view, in his own mind was not able to pierce the veil and so was prepared to accept as mystery the way in which this union and communion took place, saying,

*Now if anyone should ask me how this takes place, 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. And to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.*⁴⁹

While spiritual communion with our Savior is truly a mystery, i.e. Eph. 5:30-32, and we would do well to follow Calvin's humility in expressing wonder at it where it is taught, yet before we are completely enamored with the expression of Calvin in this place, recall the meaning of the words of Jesus where He says, "Take eat, this 'is' My body." Once we accept that the word "is" means this "represents" my body, which Calvin assents to, the question must then be asked, why is there any further need for a construction such as is given in the above quotations? Calvin answered that it goes back to the need for the sign to signify the reality, or else it is a naked sign, warning that, "Christ is not a deceiver, to mock us with empty representations." But, since apprehending Christ in faith is hardly an empty representation, Calvin seems driven to explain the Supper as a mysterious communion involving a believer's substantial participation in the body and blood of Christ. While explaining his view, Calvin is able to walk a very fine line between the two extremes of

⁴⁷ J.K. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Best Method of Concord (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2000), 328-329.

⁴⁸ I Corinthians 11:24, *Calvin's Commentary*, (Wilmington: Assoc. Pub and Authors, unknown date), 1673-1674.

⁴⁹ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, page 1403.

distinguishing without dividing the sign (bread and wine) from the reality (body and blood). Calvin's argument for a view of substantial participation⁵⁰ may appear drawn-out and unnecessarily contrived on this point. It raises a question as to how many Christians would discern the Lord's body in such a manner, and so be able to derive the benefits sealed to us in the Supper. Also ask, if Bullinger's view was unobjectionable to Calvin then,⁵¹ why should any in the Reformed Church raise a rancor over it now?

Calvin's second response as to how this participation in the body and blood of Christ occurs is plain, we obtain participation by faith. It seems that Calvin of necessity held to a view of faith efficacy for obtaining benefits in the Supper.

But, in order that we may be capable of this participation, we must rise heavenward. Here, therefore, faith must be our resource, when all the bodily senses have failed.

Speaking the part of faith Calvin continues by saying,

What then? You see bread – nothing more – but you learn that it is a symbol of Christ's body. Do not doubt that the Lord accomplishes what his words intimate – that the body, which thou dost not at all behold, is given thee, as a spiritual repast.⁵²

Calvin's opening remarks in his commentary on the words, "This is my body" pull the curtain of history back and give us a small window, not only Calvin's feelings about the controversial side of these disputes, but also the magnitude of them in the church of his day.

I shall not recount the unhappy contests that have tried the church in our times as to the meaning of these words. Nay rather, would to God that we could bury the remembrance of them in perpetual oblivion!⁵³

The well-known church historian Philip Schaff voiced his agreement with Calvin's sentiment, for when remarking upon the whole scene he stated,⁵⁴

"The Eucharistic controversies in the middle ages and during the sixteenth century are among the most unedifying and barren in the history of Christianity. And yet, they cannot have been in vain."

⁵⁰ Our highly esteemed professor, Dr. Wayne R. Spear uses the term "substance efficacy" to describe Calvin's view of the Supper's efficacy. Wayne R. Spear in his papers, *Calvin and Westminster on the Lord's Supper - Exegetical and Theological Considerations* and *The Nature of the Lord's Supper According to Calvin and the Westminster Assembly*, Dr. Spear has kindly allowed access to two of his currently unpublished papers, both of which shed abundant light and helpful insight on the historical questions and controversies within the Reformed tradition regarding Calvin's views of the efficacy of the Lord's Supper.

⁵¹ Calvin commenting on 1 Cor. 11:24, notes this view and concludes by saying, "As for those who are of this opinion, I have no objection to their holding such a view." He then gives his own mystical understanding. The point, here is that Calvin had "no objection" to this view which more closely represented the views of Bullinger. *Calvin's Commentary* (Wilmington: Assoc. Pub, unknown date), 1673.

⁵² I Corinthians 11:24, *Calvin's Commentary*, (Wilmington: Assoc. Pub and Authors, unknown date), 1674.

⁵³ *Ibid.* page 1672.

⁵⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 2011), 474.

Although our struggles with sin and controversy wear the flesh down, one great end of the Supper is to provide the Christian with spiritual nourishment “unto true and blessed immortality,” Calvin knew this to be the case and saw the Supper as necessary in that light. How many times have saints been at the communion table and had their hearts fed and nourished in this way? Thanksgiving and gratitude at the Lord’s Table must rule our nature or it will little matter whether Christ was physically standing in the room or if our hearts were raised on high.⁵⁵ Gratitude is the language of grace and the contemplation of that grace should lead our hearts to the very Christ who is in heaven.

I urge my readers not to confine their mental interests within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them. 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 express.⁵⁶

The sacred Supper of Christ and what it brings to us is an inviting subject and one that draws us back over and over again because of what, or rather Who we find – Christ Jesus. Now, having explored in a broad manner the historical settings and doctrinal writings of the Reformer regarding the Lord’s Supper what observations should be made?

Conclusions and Observations

- 1. The Bible’s power in shaping the theology of worship in the Reformation through studying its writers is clearly observed.**

Application: In what discernable way is Scripture shaping our theology of public worship?

- 2. The challenge and example before the Church is to learn from our rich Christian heritage while remaining true to God’s unchanging standard of truth.**

Application: In order to learn from our fathers in the faith, we must know them.

- 3. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper can through neglect or a lack of teaching be dangerously overrated or underrated, even from a slight shift in emphasis.**

Application: Consistently apply the Reformed Ecclesial Confessions in a pastoral manner.

- 4. Even where traditionalized and entrenched positions exist, “sacrament wars” within the Churches of Christ have always been a cause for humility and repentance.**

Application: How much more among the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches?

- 5. The love of God in Christ is on display in the Supper, and is effectual for the elect alone.**

Application: How are my own communion seasons with Christ and his body the Church?

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20).

⁵⁵ Luke 24:30-35.

⁵⁶ *Institutes*, Book Four, Chap. XVII, page 1367.

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