

A QUESTION OF THE NECESSITY OF THE “REAL PRESENCE”
IN CALVIN’S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

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Thesis:

The ordering of Calvin’s theology, his Christology, and subsequent position that it is the Holy Spirit that communicates an absent Christ to those who will receive it by faith through the sensory elements of the Lord’s Supper, does not require a “real presence” in the bread and the wine.

1. INTRODUCTION

Calvin's doctrine of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper developed out of the broad corpus of reformation debate over the subject. While the reformers were generally critical of the Roman Mass, their own doctrinal positions were often far apart. Early attempts to resolve the conflict such as the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529 merely entrenched the divide between the Lutherans and Zwingli.¹ In Calvin's *A Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ* (written in 1540), he attempted to carve a path somewhere between a Lutheran and Zwinglian position, an approach that is equally evident in his *Institutes*.² Calvin's doctrine appears well thought out, but it is not without ambiguities. Most troubling is his apparent *a priori* adoption, without an adequate coherent defense, of some sort of real presence. Calvin struggles to incorporate the real presence without compromising his Christology. The ordering of Calvin's theology, his Christology, and subsequent position that it is the Holy Spirit that communicates an absent Christ to those who will receive it by faith through the sensory elements of the Lord's Supper, does not require a "real presence" in the bread and the wine.³

Calvin's position, apart from the presence, is curiously more like that of Zwingli than he is prepared to concede. Luther held to the notion that "the consecrated bread and the wine were somehow the body and blood of Christ," while Zwingli held to a representational view where the presence was only in the heart of the participant.⁴ Whereas Zwingli understood that "grace and forgiveness came solely through the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit neither needs nor uses any

¹ Jaques Courvoisier, *Zwingli: A Reformed Theologian* (Richmond, VI: John Knox Press, 1963), 67.

² Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 15.

³ The concern of this paper is not to debate whether there is a "real presence" in the Lord's Supper. The concern is whether Calvin adopted such a doctrine *a priori* or whether it was the logical out working of his theological thought.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

intermediary vehicle such as the Eucharist,” Luther insisted on a real presence.⁵ It is obvious enough in Calvin’s *Institutes* that he is more concerned with being labeled an Anabaptist than holding a somewhat “Lutheran appearing” position. Calvin rejected the Anabaptist moralistic rigor, preferring to view the Supper as for the worthy and unworthy alike.⁶ Perhaps Calvin saw Zwingli’s perfectionist position as contrary to his doctrine of election, and the visible and invisible church.⁷ Zwingli’s dislike for sacramental language would have further divided the two positions.⁸ Calvin rejected the Anabaptist predilection of separating the spiritual and the sensory, or more specifically, reducing the Supper to a memorial.⁹ At the same time, there were also important similarities. Although Calvin gave him greater authority, both Calvin and Zwingli looked to Augustine for support.¹⁰ The two reformers also similarly recognized the critical importance of the doctrine of ascension in regard to the Lord’s Supper.¹¹ Calvin’s position appears closer to Luther in affirming that Christ is present in the supper, albeit in a non-localized manner. The way that Calvin understood this presence, however, is a radical departure from Luther, a departure that actually brings him much closer to Zwingli than he would concede.

What on the surface was a dispute with the Romanists over the sacrificial nature of the mass and transubstantiation is an intense out working of Calvin’s trinitarian and Christological theologies. Calvin is rightly concerned that an incorrect understanding of the *presence of Christ* in the Lord’s Supper undermines orthodox trinitarian and Christological theologies. The

⁵ Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 173-74.

⁶ Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William J. Heynen (Amsterdam: 1973; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 56-57.

⁷ Huldrych Zwingli, *Huldrych Zwingli: Writings*, vol. 2, *In Search of True Religion: Reformation, Pastoral and Eucharistic Writings*, trans. H. Wayne Pipkin (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1984), 143-44.

⁸ Courvoisier, *Zwingli*, 63.

⁹ Balke characterizes the Anabaptist position as denying “that the sacraments could combine the Word of God with a sensory element.” The emphasis must be on the word “combine”. The value of the sensory is as a memorial reminder. Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 53.

¹⁰ Huldrych Zwingli, *Writings*, 143.

¹¹ Courvoisier, *Zwingli*, 70ff.

Chalcedon formulation of the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ is particularly at risk. As Douglas Farrow suggests, “one of [Calvin’s] most impressive moves, as he struggled to preserve the particularity of Jesus without sacrificing sacramental realism, was to reach out towards a relational, christocentric concept of space that would resolve the conflict.”¹² In essence, the ascended Christ is not ubiquitous thus, Calvin sought a “pneumatological solution to the problem of the presence and the absence,” a solution that could cross the “infinite spaces’ that we cannot leap.”¹³ Despite Farrow’s gracious introduction to Calvin’s doctrinal synthesis, Calvin’s position is not without problems. Positively, Calvin offers an important ordering of theological priorities concerning the Supper and recognizes the far-reaching implications of the ascension of Jesus Christ. He also rightly introduces the work of the Holy Spirit in the Supper.

2. THE ORDERING OF CALVIN’S THEOLOGY IN THE *INSTITUTES*

The ordering of Calvin’s theology in his *Institutes* provides an important insight into Calvin’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Calvin orders the four books of his *Institutes* beginning with the “Knowledge of God the Creator,” followed by “The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ.” Next is “The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ”—a discussion of justification, but not the sacraments—and finally, “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein”—which does include the sacraments.¹⁴ Breaking the books down further reveals a more detailed and critical ordering specific to the topic at hand: Christology, ecclesiology, and then the sacraments. Calvin’s

¹² Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1999; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 177-78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), p. xi-xvii.

Pneumatology is underdeveloped, first appearing in the first book of the *Institutes*, well before Christology, and persistently appears in each book.

Douglas Farrow opens up the question of the appropriateness of the prioritization of Christology over ecclesiology.¹⁵ He rightly suggests that Calvin sided with Zwingli in letting Christology control ecclesiology by determining that “what we say about the eucharist must be consistent with faith in Jesus’ bodily departure and return.”¹⁶ At the same time, Farrow is clearly uncomfortable that such an ordering will lead to what he calls “Zwingli’s sacramental nominalism.”¹⁷ He refutes the position that what we know of Christ we know from examination of the Church. Farrow avers, “Where Christ is distinguished from the church as its head – where it is allowed that he, as the ascended one, stands over against us in order also to stand for us in God’s presence and to give his own body to us – Christology can and must control ecclesiology.”¹⁸ On the one hand, Farrow seems to question Calvin, apparently because of this parallel with Zwingli, yet finds it necessary to side with him anyway.¹⁹ Farrow somewhat tips his hand as to his real struggle and reveals one of the primary struggles that Calvin indirectly addresses in his doctrine of the Lord’s Supper when he posits, “it would be a mistake to try to handle this methodological question prior to or apart from the actual discussion of the eucharist.”²⁰ The issue is not so much Christology over ecclesiology as it is the Eucharist over

¹⁵ Douglas Farrow, "Between the Rock and a Hard Place: In Support of (Something Like) a Reformed View of the Eucharist," *The International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 2 (July 2001): 179.

While Farrow poses the question and addresses it through third parties, he never does unambiguously declare his position in this article. Considering his penchant for describing the church as “eucharistic” and use of the term “eucharistic ecclesiology” in his book *Ascension and Ecclesia* he would at least appear to give the eucharist priority over ecclesiology. While he can say that Christology has priority over ecclesiology, his ordering would appear to be Christology, the Eucharist, and then ecclesiology. The Church is then defined by Christ through the Eucharist, a position that almost demands a “real presence”. Cf. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*.

¹⁶ Farrow, "Rock and Hard Place", 179.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The reasons for this will become more apparent in §3.

²⁰ Ibid.

ecclesiology and perhaps even Christology. The question then becomes, how do we encounter, know and commune with Christ?

The noetic and communion issue is at the heart of the debate over the real presence. If the Lord's Supper is the locus of knowing and communing with Christ, then a doctrine of the presence is essential, for how else can we know Christ? It is on this point that Calvin may very well have made his greatest departure from the Romanist tradition. Consider Calvin's ordering of how we have knowledge of God. "The most perfect way of seeking God . . . [is] for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself."²¹ These works we know through Scripture,²² but it is the "testimony of the Spirit [which] is more excellent than all reason."²³ Whereas knowledge of God is dependent ultimately on the Holy Spirit, communion or fellowship with God, is dependent entirely on God's election. As Calvin expresses it, "God designates as his children those whom he has chosen, and appoints himself their Father. Further, by calling, he receives them into his family and unites them to him so that they may together be one."²⁴ Election is in Christ alone and it is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we have knowledge of Christ.²⁵ We are engrafted in Christ, receiving "sure communion with himself" through the "preaching of the Gospel" as illuminated by the Holy Spirit.²⁶ It is entirely the act of God that man can know God and have fellowship with Him.

It is particularly through the work of the Holy Spirit that we can know and have communion with Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Calvin denies that the Lord's Supper can be

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.10.

²² *Ibid.*, 1.6.3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.7.4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.24.1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.24.5,8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

beneficial in the knowledge of and communion with Christ, but it does set the stage for Calvin's insistence on the Holy Spirit as the primary actor in the Supper. The Lord's Supper is not *the* means of knowing and communing with Christ rather it is *a* means. The Supper precedes neither Christology nor ecclesiology, rather as Calvin asserts, Christology and ecclesiology precede the doctrine of the Supper. Calvin declares the marks of the church are "the preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments."²⁷ The sacraments are signs or marks of the church, not the church a sign or mark of the sacrament.

3. CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE ASCENSION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Before further consideration of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, we need to address the Christological question of the nature of Christ's body and the ascension. As Farrow posits, reform theology maintains that the "glorified body of Jesus Christ exists in its own place, that is its place is *other* than ours, and that it remains in this place exclusively until the parousia,"²⁸ Calvin appears to appeal to the Chalcedonian formulation specifically as it relates to the humanity of Jesus Christ. Calvin affirms that:

For what does all Scripture more clearly teach than that Christ, as he took our true flesh when he was born of the virgin and suffered in our true flesh when he made satisfaction for us, so also received that same true flesh in his resurrection, and bore it up to heaven. For we have this hope of our resurrection and of our ascension into heaven: that Christ rose again and ascended.²⁹

Calvin also affirms that "the condition of flesh [is] that it must subsist in one definite place, with its own size and form."³⁰ Jesus Christ could not be truly man and truly God if His humanity was other than ours. Calvin is adamant that we must "let nothing inappropriate to

²⁷ Ibid., 4.1.10.

²⁸ Farrow, "Rock and Hard Place", 169.

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.29.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.17.24.

human nature be ascribed to his [Christ's] body, as happens when it is said either to be infinite or to be put in a number of places at once."³¹ If, as Calvin claims, that "the body of Christ from the time of his resurrection was finite, and is contained in heaven even to the Last Day [cf. Acts 3:21]," then it is wrong to speak of Christ as being present, at least in a bodily or localized sense.³² Interestingly, Zwingli makes a remarkably similar argument based on the ascension against any localized presence of Christ in the Eucharist.³³

If Christ is ascended, then how can we speak of the real presence of Christ in the Supper? Farrow points to Calvin's appeal "to the power of the Holy Spirit as the proper basis for a robust doctrine of the real presence."³⁴ Wallace, citing Calvin, shows just how closely he connects Christ to the Holy Spirit when he equates Christ's "divine energy" with the work otherwise attributed to the Holy Spirit. "Thus I teach that Christ, though absent in the body, is nevertheless not only present with us by His divine energy, which is every where diffused, but also makes His flesh give life to us."³⁵ Farrow points out, the Spirit does not stand in or as a substitute for Jesus but as a link to Him, leading Calvin to "a keener sense of the interpersonal, trinitarian dimensions of human existence."³⁶ Milner poignantly points out, "Calvin will not speak of the Spirit apart from Christ any more than he will speak of Christ without the Spirit."³⁷ This allows Calvin to move toward a position where the presence of the Holy Spirit is in effect the presence of Christ.

³¹ Ibid., 4.17.19.

³² Ibid., 4.17.26.

³³ Courvoisier, *Zwingli*, 70-72.

³⁴ Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 177. Farrow cites the *Institutes* 4.17.12 and Calvin's reference to Augustine.

³⁵ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 215. Wallace is citing the *Corpus Reformatorum*, 9:76.

³⁶ Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 176.

³⁷ Benjamin Charles Milner Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1970), 130.

Calvin's Pneumatology is not well developed. Calvin is clear that "we know that justification is lodged in Christ alone, and that it is communicated to us no less by the preaching of the gospel than by the seal of the sacrament, and without the latter can stand unimpaired."³⁸ The efficacy of "communication" is an act of the Holy Spirit. It is worth noting here that the "communication" relates to the way Christ is communicated both through preaching and through sacrament alike. Consistent with his position on the Spirits involvement in the sacraments, he suggests that it is Christ's Spirit present in a "spiritual banquet."³⁹

God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he under-takes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. And not content with this alone, he has willed, by giving his pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality. To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality [John 6:51].⁴⁰

Clearly, he states, "that God himself is present in his institution by the very-present power of his Spirit."⁴¹ Paradoxically, Calvin categorically rejects the notion that the presence is *only* spiritual, insisting that we cannot omit mention of flesh and blood.⁴² Calvin's insistence on a presence that is spiritual, but evidently not merely spiritual is perplexing at best in light of his doctrine of ascension.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.17.10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.17.1. John 6 provides what may well be one of the most difficult passages to exegete in the debate over the presence. The question that must be answered is, did Jesus speak in literal or figurative terms. Calvin avers for much of the Biblical text associated with the supper to be handled as a metonymy, not allegorically (cf. *Inst.* 4.17.19-21). The question is not so much one of exegesis as the hermeneutical assumptions that are brought to the text. If the reader wants to read a physical presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper it is possible to do so. Likewise, if the reader wants to abandon any sense of a real presence, an allegorical reading is easily had.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.14.17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.17.7.

4. THE SACRAMENTS

Calvin declares that there are two ordinary sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, that are the marks of the church.⁴³ The sacraments according to Calvin are "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men."⁴⁴ Calvin offers us a simpler definition as "a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him."⁴⁵ In Calvin's thought, the chief purpose of a sacrament is to remind us of spiritual realities through physical means. The sacrament is not the means of attaining the benefits of Christ's redemptive work, rather is a means of reminding us or testifying to us that Christ has redeemed us.

Calvin further explains the nature of this testimony. "The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in."⁴⁶ As discussed in the previous section, the Holy Spirit is the acting power in the sacraments. The work of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments is "to conceive, sustain, nourish, and establish faith."⁴⁷ We should not lose sight here of Calvin's insistence that "the sacrament requires preaching to beget faith."⁴⁸ As Calvin declares, "let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of

⁴³ Ibid., 4.1.9-10, 4:14:19.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4.14.1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.14.9.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 4.14.4.

heavenly grace. But they avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.”⁴⁹ The efficacy in a sacrament is in understanding what it signifies, not in the material sacrament itself. The sacrament does not stand alone. It requires an act of faith on the part of the recipient in concert with the work of the Holy Spirit.

5. THE LORD’S SUPPER AND THE NATURE OF THE PRESENCE

To this point, consistent with Calvin’s ordering, we have established the ascension of Jesus Christ, the present work of the Holy Spirit and the role of the sacraments as “a testimony of divine grace toward us,” received by faith.⁵⁰ Turning to the specifics of the Supper itself, Calvin differentiates himself from Luther declaring, “unless the body of Christ can be everywhere at once, without limitation of place, it will not be credible that he lies hidden under the bread in the Supper.”⁵¹ He goes so far as to suggest that we “must not dream of such a presence of Christ in the Sacrament... as if the body of Christ, by local presence, were put to be swallowed by the mouth.”⁵² Calvin, however, does not reject the notion of a presence in the Supper. In fact, Calvin curiously insists on Christ’s presence, but rejects any description that “fastens” or “encloses him in bread.”⁵³ The problem as Calvin sees it is not a discussion of a presence, but the mode.⁵⁴

Moreover, we must beware lest we be led into a similar error through what was written a little too extravagantly by the ancients to enhance the dignity of the sacraments. That is, to think that a hidden power is joined and fastened to the sacraments by which they of themselves confer the graces of the Holy Spirit upon us, as wine is given in a cup; while the only function divinely imparted to them is to attest and ratify for us God’s good will toward us.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ibid., 4.14.17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.14.1.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.17.30.

⁵² Ibid., 4.17.11.

⁵³ Ibid., 4.17.19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 4.17.5.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 4.14.17.

The Holy Spirit is efficacious in the sacrament. Calvin states, “The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in.”⁵⁶ On this basis Calvin says:

Thus, when bread is given as a symbol of Christ’s body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ’s body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ’s blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.⁵⁷

As Milner rightly posits, Calvin “does not think of the supper as a ‘simple figure or remembrance’ but as the symbol ‘by which the reality is presented to us.’”⁵⁸ Wallace suggests that Calvin believed that “Jesus was not speaking in a purely figurative way when He instituted the Supper. There is a mystery of sacramental union here indicated that lifts His language far above being legitimately called ‘figurative’ without any qualification.”⁵⁹ Wallace pushes the point further positing that Calvin “agrees with his opponents that the flesh of Christ is given in the sacrament.”⁶⁰ As Calvin affirms, “That we really feed in the Holy Supper on the flesh and blood of Christ, no otherwise than as bread and wine are aliments of our body, I freely confess.”⁶¹ As Vander Zee explains,

For Calvin, the Physical and natural properties of bread and wine, their ability to strengthen and gladden for example, become part of the symbolic action of the sacrament. The Symbols participate in the reality for which they stand. This symbolic connection depends on the ability of the physical sign to bear the spiritual reality.⁶²

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.14.9.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.17.3.

⁵⁸ Milner Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, 128. Milner is quoting from Calvin’s commentary on 1 Cor. 11:24.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 197.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 199.

⁶¹ Ibid. Wallace is citing the *Corpus Reformatorum*, 20:73.

⁶² Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 33.

Calvin argues this can only happen if there is a presence of the body in the bread. Calvin offers here, one of his few—and largely undefended—explanations of the need for a presence in the Supper.

Such is the presence of the body (I say) that the nature of the Sacrament requires a presence which we say manifests itself here with a power and effectiveness so great that it not only brings an undoubted assurance of eternal life to our minds, but also assures us of the immortality of our flesh.⁶³

This is an important point of departure from Zwingli. For Zwingli the bread and the wine are purely symbols that point to a reality, whereas Calvin saw the bread and the wine as “a means to communicate what they symbolize.”⁶⁴ At the grave risk of unduly mixing metaphors, permit this explanation. Here we must clearly understand “communicate” in a way more in terms of a paper letter than a phone call.⁶⁵ The paper, the medium, contains and communicates the message. While the paper is not the message, the message is not communicated without the paper, including its feel, smell and appearance. Calvin views the bread and the wine as the medium of communication and Christ is in a spiritual sense, the message. Zwingli on the other hand sees the bread and the wine as pointers to, not containers or carriers of the message. The symbols are like a code word that recalls a previously communicated message. The bread and the wine merely point to Christ. In both instances, the work of the Holy Spirit is evident, but for Calvin, Christ is made present by the Holy Spirit by means of the sacrament. Zwingli, presumably, would simply argue that the Holy Spirit is present with or without the Supper.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32.

⁶⁴ Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 33.

⁶⁵ I. John. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary: Featuring Ford Lewis Battles' Translation of the 1538 Catechism* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), 222. Hesselink rightly posits that we need to understand Calvin's use of communication or *commuicatio* in its “far richer significance in Latin.”

The question remains, what are the conditions for the presence. Calvin clearly teaches that the sacraments “avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.”⁶⁶ Gordon Pruett interprets Calvin’s position such that “only the internal conviction of God’s presence and activity on man’s behalf in Christ could render the Supper meaningful.”⁶⁷ Pruett is responding to Calvin’s insistence that the sacraments are received by faith and is empty apart from the knowledge of what it signifies. Martin Bucer, a contemporary of Calvin, concurred with him that there was a real presence, but it was only experienced by “the faithful.”⁶⁸ The implication is that any presence is dependent on the receiver’s faith. Can it then be said to be a “real presence”? Pruett also affirms that Calvin taught “Christ’s natural body and blood were present in the Supper,” but that then makes Christ’s bodily presence dependent on a human act of faith.⁶⁹ Granted, Pruett argues that Calvin insisted on the presence is effected by the Holy Spirit, yet it is no more consistent with Calvin to say that the presence or act of the Holy Spirit is dependent on human faith.⁷⁰ It is almost unthinkable in Calvin’s greater corpus to presume that God depends on man’s act, let alone faith.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

⁶⁷ Gordon E. Pruett, "A Protestant Doctrine of the Eucharistic Presence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 (1975): 145.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷¹ Calvin’s doctrines of providence and election exceed the scope of this paper, however, suffice to say that Calvin attributes all of humanities acts—and by extension faith—to the providential work of God. To quote Calvin, “To sum up, since God’s will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate to obedience.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.2

6. CONCLUSION: THE INCOHERENCE OF CALVIN'S DOCTRINE

There are a number of issues that could be addressed with Calvin, but here we will focus on two. First, does Calvin consistently let Christology maintain priority over ecclesiology and ecclesiology maintain priority over the Lord's Supper? Second, does Calvin maintain a coherent application of his Christology and Pneumatology?

Calvin's unquestioned insistence of demonstrating a way for Christ to be present in the Lord's Supper even when he had determined Christ's absence suggests that he let his *a priori* understanding of the presence in the Lord's Supper to exercise at least some priority over his Christology. The presence is not a conclusion that he must arrive at out of his Christology and ecclesiology. His presupposition informed the reading of key Biblical passages and the writings of the early church fathers, making his method essentially one of adopting a compatible hermeneutic to support his position. Wallace claims that had Calvin held that "a too literal interpretation would actually lead to a statement of doctrine which would endanger the real presence of Christ in the sacrament," yet Zwingli surely would have argued that Calvin adopted a too literal interpretation.⁷² It could be argued that Calvin adopted a reading that was neither strictly literal nor figurative. Perhaps it is appropriate to call it dialectical, but that is reading into Calvin what he does not necessarily say of himself.

Turning to Calvin's Christology and Pneumatology, Calvin asserts that the only means of the ascended Christ being present is through the Holy Spirit. This same Holy Spirit is active in both preaching and the sacraments. If this is so, what need is there for the Holy Spirit to be present "spiritually" in the bread and the wine? This is not to say that the Spirit can or cannot be

⁷² Wallace, *Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 199.

present, or even to disregard the possibility of such a presence. It is to argue that it is not a foregone conclusion. We might also ask if Calvin so equates Christ and the Holy Spirit such that the presence of the Holy Spirit is the presence of Christ as to confuse the Trinity. If Calvin assumed *filioque*, then perhaps what he saw as a very close economic association between the Son and Spirit is defensible. These questions cannot be easily or lightly answered. We must address, however, if it is coherent for Calvin to affirm the ascension, reject Christ's ubiquity, and then speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Supper received by faith, as the presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, spiritually or otherwise. Why not simply argue for the Holy Spirit's presence? The answer comes at least in part from Calvin's Biblical interpretation and deep respect for Augustine, not his theological process.

Calvin's standard, and unsatisfactory, resolution of irresolvable conflicts is to call them a mystery. Calvin's position remains clouded, but not by lack of reflection on the Christological and Pneumatological issues surrounding the debate. Calvin has provided important Christological and Pneumatological insights into the Lord's Supper. His priority of ecclesiology over the Eucharist is equally important. Unfortunately, by not asking the question why is a doctrine of the presence necessary, Calvin has failed to provide a coherent argument for his position on the Lord's Supper. In the centuries that followed, "many of the heirs of Calvin would gradually move away from his position to a more Zwinglian doctrine."⁷³ Whether this was a correction of Calvin's conclusions or a capitulation to the Anabaptists is beyond the scope of this paper. Perhaps, had Calvin adequately defended his position rather than calling it a mystery, "the heirs of Calvin" would not have set aside Calvin's doctrine of a real presence.

⁷³ Mathison, *Given for You*, 5.

7. EPILOGUE

Permit a few personal reflections on this debate. If we say that insistence of a real presence in the Supper leads to undue exaltation of a simple memorial, then we should also confess that reducing the Supper to a mere memorial has led many Evangelicals to neglect the same. In an age of eclectic scientific realism and grasping at mystery, it behooves the Church to seriously reconsider the Supper in all of its facets. Calvin's reclining in the lap of 'mystery' is unsatisfactory. Perhaps it is entirely correct to hold to a presence of the absent Jesus Christ. Perhaps we cannot comprehend the dialectic, but does that necessarily demand a bodily presence in the bread and wine, spiritual or otherwise?

That at the heart of the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a turning of the mind and heart to Jesus Christ seems to be undisputed. Certainly, it was seen as a unifying act in the early church, unifying the church as a local assembly and unifying them with Jesus Christ. Unity is no less a struggle in the Church today than at any other time in the Church's history. Possibly Calvin's concern that the Supper would be lost to nominalism leading to what is far too common in Evangelical churches today is what made him grasp on to a deeper mystery in the bread and the wine. In any case, he was right to be concerned.

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