

Calvin on the Eucharist

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Both Luther and Zwingli had crucial points to make in the debate over the Lord's Supper, but in my judgment, it was John Calvin who best resolved the question. Calvin began by agreeing with both sides on certain matters. He agreed with Zwingli that Christ is ascended and that his body is in heaven. He agreed with Zwingli that faith must be central in any adequate doctrine of the Lord's Supper; it is only by faith that we can receive a blessing. But Calvin's heart was really much closer to Luther because Calvin believed deeply and passionately that the Lord's Supper is God's gift to us. It is primarily God who acts in the Lord's Supper. God is the giver; we receive that gift. With great passion Calvin agreed with Luther that we must seek our redemption in the body and blood of Christ and in his sacrificial death. We are united to Christ in his body and blood by the Holy Spirit. But that union is so intense, so real that we can rightly say we are "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (*Institutes* III:1:3; cf. Gen. 2:23). Calvin said that we are embodied in Christ, as Ephesians 5:30 declares: "We are members of his body." That is where our redemption comes from, Calvin insisted. Salvation is that union with Christ.

Calvin's view, however, was not just that of a compromiser, taking bits and pieces from different people and fitting them together. He had his own distinct, important, and, I think, clear statement of what the Sacrament was about.

First, he insisted that the Word is crucial. The preached Word makes the Sacrament intelligible, he said. It is only in union with the Word that we know the Lord's blessing. It is only by the Spirit working through the Word that the blessing is ministered to us and sealed upon us. Yet—and this is the second point—the blessing is represented and presented to us in the bread and the wine. What are bread and wine? They are food, nourishment. So, says Calvin, that is what they represent spiritually; spiritual food. As by the mouth we receive bread and wine to the nourishment of our bodies, so by faith (which is the mouth of the soul) we receive the body and blood of Christ unto everlasting life.

That food is Jesus Christ himself. We will only find life in Christ when we seek the substance of Christ in his flesh. For as soon as we depart from the sacrifice of his death we encounter nothing but death. In Christ's flesh was accomplished man's redemption. In it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sin in an obedience yielded to God to reconcile him to us. That flesh of Christ is our food, Calvin insists.

We are to feed upon the Word, to be sure. But Calvin would say we must feed upon Christ too—on Jesus himself, who offers himself and all his benefits to us in the Supper—because it is only by being in and with Jesus that we can find redemption. That is why the Supper is so important to us, so central in our life. It draws us back to the center and heart of the gospel. It is, you see, a visible Word; and the visible Word declares to us that there is salvation only in the body and

blood of Christ. That body and blood are not just once and for all offered on the cross as a past and finished thing, but that body and blood, that real Christ, continue to be the life-giving spirit among us. It is our present union with Christ that builds us up and strengthens us. It is only as we seek union with the true Christ that we can be built up in that way.

Moreover, as Calvin says, that promise of communion with Christ is offered in the Sacrament to everyone. He says, "Truly he offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true gratefulness of heart" (*Institutes* IV:17:10). He says that the Sacrament is like rain from heaven. It comes down as the offer and promise of God of new life in Christ. But, like rain, it falls on different kinds of ground. When it hits ground prepared by faith it comes as blessing, nourishment, and a source of growth. When it hits the hard rock of unbelief, it is still the same offer and promise, but it flows away with no profit to the soul (see *Institutes* IV:17:33).

Faith remains crucial to Calvin's doctrine. It is only the faithful who know Christ. But when the faithful come to the table, they meet Christ himself. What Christ represents in the bread and wine he presents to faith as life-giving nourishment.

Frequency of Observance

On this basis, Calvin reflected on how often we ought to receive the Sacrament. Zwingli was in favor of administering the Sacrament once a year; and, of course, if you are having a memorial service, once a year is probably adequate. It is like Christmas. Christmas is delightful once a year, but it would be a bit much once a week. It is good once a year to spend some special time thinking about the birth of our Lord. But to do that every week would be impossible.

Calvin, on the other hand, said that the Sacrament is much more than just a memorial. It is not just a time when we sit and think good thoughts. It is a time in which we are fed, nourished. We meet the risen Christ. Therefore, it should be frequent. How often should you pray? Once a year? No, we should pray and feed upon the Word frequently. So, said Calvin, we should feed upon Christ himself frequently. In the *Institutes* he says twice, "The Lord's Supper should be administered at least once a week" (IV:17:44 and 46).

Many Reformed Christians today administer communion only four times a year. We do that for a "good" reason. Geneva's city council refused to let Calvin administer the Sacrament once a week and would only let him offer it four times a year. So we follow the spiritual wisdom of those wise men, the city councilmen of Geneva, and ignore Calvin himself.

For those of you who are more influenced by things British, it is interesting to note that in the 1644 Directory of Public Worship drawn up by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, it is said that the administration of communion should be frequent. Still, most Presbyterians have also followed something close to the wisdom of the Geneva councilmen.

The frequency of administration may say something about what we expect to find at that table (or, maybe I should say, whom we expect to find at that table) and what the blessing of meeting Jesus Christ there really is. Calvin himself was the first to admit that the ins and outs of that

blessing were a mystery. In fact, Calvin, who so often is represented as sort of a grim logician, reveals quite a mystical streak at this point. He says, "It is a mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout which is by nature incomprehensible. If anybody should ask me how this communion takes place, I am not ashamed to confess that that 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" (*Institutes*, IV:17:32).

There is a shock! Good Presbyterians do not experience anything. We are God's frozen people. But Calvin found such a meeting with Christ in the Lord's Supper and such great blessings attached to it that his heart was filled by the Spirit. He found Christ and all his benefits. He found joy. He was gladdened by meeting his Lord, gladdened that he could come to the table and have his faith strengthened by that sure promise of God represented there.

Indeed, Calvin becomes so mystical that he speaks of the believer, as he receives the bread and wine actually being lifted up to heaven. Christ does not descend into the bread, but by the Holy Spirit the believer ascends into heaven, there to commune with the glorified Christ and all the blessings of his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension (*Institutes* IV:17:32; cf. Eph. 2:5-6).

Here again we can see Calvin's use of the idea of God ministering to our weakness in the Sacrament. We come to the table with nothing to offer God, but we come to be blessed by the Lord.

We come "to offer our vileness and our unworthiness to him so that his mercy may make us worthy of him: we come to despair in ourselves so that we may be comforted in him; to abase ourselves so that we may be lifted up by him; to accuse ourselves so that we may be justified by him; moreover, we come to aspire to that unity which he commends to us in his Supper; and as he makes all of us one in himself to desire one soul, one heart, one tongue for us all" (*Institutes* IV:17:42).

Calvin felt the pull of unity in the Sacrament, and he labored all his life to see that this unity was expressed. It grieved him deeply to see Protestant warring with Protestant over the Supper.

God's Help and Media

Sacraments, as Calvin put it, are "God's help and media." When I ran across that quotation it set my mind to whirring. "Media" is just an untranslated word from the Latin; it should be "means." The Sacraments are God's means. But I thought that in our day of emphasis upon media that it is rather nice perhaps to leave it in the Latin. God gave his Church media, visible statements of his promise. And those visible statements are a way in which we can receive the blessing of the Lord.

Luther, in reflecting on this, once said, "For 'we must have something new.' [Luther always sounds so contemporary, does he not?] Christ's death and resurrection, faith and love, are old and just ordinary things; that is why they must count for nothing, and so we weigh ourselves down with big piles of new teaching" ("On Councils and the Church," *Works*, Vol. 41, 127-128).

That is just what has happened and will continue to happen. How easy it is for us to develop twitching ears that love to hear new things on the periphery of our faith or perhaps beyond the periphery of our faith—fascinating things that pique the interest. How we have a tendency to say,

“Jesus’ death and resurrection, faith and love. That’s all sort of “ho hum.’ We’ve heard all that before. We know all about that stuff. We’ve got to get on to bigger and better things.” The Reformers call us back to the center and say that there is nothing bigger and better. There is nothing more important. There is nothing more central. There is nothing more necessary at every point in our Christian life than to go back to this: our redemption is in the body and blood of Christ.

I sometimes wonder how it might affect preachers if every sermon had to end in the Lord’s Supper. Would it give a healthy new dimension to the way our sermons develop and conclude? Would it force us back to the central things of the gospel? I ask in one of my classes: Is it possible that to some extent the development of the altar call in evangelicalism is a response to the felt inadequacy of our services when they do not end in the heart of the gospel? Is it perhaps an unspoken desire to have that central message made in the Sacrament that God has instituted? Might not our Church life be strengthened by frequent communion? To be sure, there can be nothing magical here. There are Churches that have the Lord’s Supper every week and have no blessing from it. But when we come to the Lord’s table properly, we will experience that communion with Christ by faith. Calvin commented most eloquently on this when he said:

Let us carefully observe then, when we wish to use the sacraments as God has ordained, that they should be like ladders, for raising us on high. For we are heavy and cumbersome, held down by earthly things. Thus, because we are unable to fly high enough to draw near to God, he has ordained sacraments for us like ladders. If a man wishes to leap on high, he will break his neck in the attempt; but if he has steps, he is able to proceed with confidence. So also if we are to reach our God. Let’s use the means which he has instituted for us, since he knows what is suitable for us (cited in Marcel, 179-180).

Christian growth is a gradual process. The Sacraments are one key element in that process when rightly used. They are like ladders that we may go up one rung at a time, coming ever to deeper fellowship with our Lord, to deeper knowledge of his redemption, to deeper gladness and strength in what he has promised. We never outgrow the Sacraments. On the contrary, as we climb we come more and more to appreciate the ladder just as firemen do as they go up and up. We come more and more to be glad that the ladder on which we stand is stable, sure, and firm.

I hope as time goes on and you participate in the Sacraments—observe (and recall your) baptism, receive the Lord’s Supper—that you will think on these things and realize what a great blessing the Lord has given to us in them. The Sacraments, like the Word, present and offer Christ and when received in faith give us Christ and all his blessings.