

Calvin on the Lord's Supper

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Introduction

Having finished his exposition of infant baptism on the note of the importance of God the Father's love for his children, Calvin opens his exposition of the Lord's Supper in the *Institutes* emphasizing God's work to make believers not only his servants, but also his sons and daughters.¹ Inaugurating his beloved children into his family through baptism, God nourishes them during the length of their Christian life through the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, this Supper is nothing short of a spiritual banquet. This article will examine Calvin's understanding of the nature of the Supper both as he positively articulated it and as he defended it against his theological opponents, before briefly considering Calvin's theological method.

Nature of the Supper

Signs, Seals, and Metonymy

Calvin was passionate that the citizens of Geneva, and readers of the *Institutes*, should understand the nature of this blessed feast.² Through the signs of bread and wine God demonstrates the believer's regeneration and adoption in Christ, who is the only true food for our soul. Furthermore, because Christ calls the Supper the covenant in his blood, it is also a sign of the renewal of the covenant. These signs relate to the believer's union with Christ, which is a deep, incomprehensible mystery.³ While mysterious, using bread and wine for all that believers have in Christ is a good accommodation to our limited capacity.

¹ In the last paragraph of his chapter on infant baptism, he writes of the "the singular fruit of assurance and spiritual joy" of infant baptism: "For how sweet is it to godly minds to be assured, not only by word, but by sight, that they obtain so much favor with the Heavenly Father that their offspring are within his care? For here we can see how he takes on toward us the role of a most provident Father, who even after our death maintains his care for us, providing for and looking after our children." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.16.32, 1359. Then, he begins his chapter on the Lord's Supper saying that "God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life..." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1, 1360.

² He says that "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." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1, 1360.

³ Later, Calvin writes that he desires to defend the true nature of the Lord's Supper "if one may reduce to words so great a mystery, which I see that I do not even sufficiently comprehend with my mind... For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in

Second, for Calvin, while bread and wine are symbols, they are much more than mere symbols.⁴ Through the symbols, it is as if Christ presents himself before us in order to be seen by our eyes and touched by our hands. In his incarnation, death, and resurrection, Christ's body is not so much his—but ours. Christ took on flesh and laid it down not for himself, but for his beloved bride. The bread and wine are analogies for all that Christ gives to believers in his body.⁵

Calvin states many times that believers receive physically nourishing actual bread and wine in the Supper, but, coterminously while the bread and wine nourish our physical bodies, Christ actually feeds our souls from heaven with his flesh. This feeding comes from Christ who descends in the symbols and in the power of the Holy Spirit. While it is intellectually difficult or impossible to connect something so distant as heaven and earth, that is precisely what happens in the Supper.⁶

Basic signs or symbols are easy for us to comprehend. While Calvin did not use this example, a red, octagonal, piece of metal with four letters on it spelling STOP is a sign for a police officer in uniform standing in front of us with his arm parallel to the ground and palm facing us. However, the Lord's Supper is more than a mere sign or symbol, and also more than a simple presentation of the body of Christ. It is also the seal upon our souls that confirms the divine promise of eternal life in Christ's entire redemptive work. That seal comes to believers by faith.

Since the Lord's Supper is much more complex than a mere sign, and even has a mysterious element, it requires particular language to explain it. Desiring to be precise, Calvin says that Christ's words, "this is my body," is what is technically termed a metonymy. A metonymy is a figure of speech in which a thing or concept is referred to by the name of something closely associated with that thing or concept. Such a device is often used in God's word when the issue is a mystery.⁷

Calvin cited many examples of metonymy from scripture. Sometimes a name or thing is transferred from something higher to something lower. For example, Paul commented on Exodus 17:6, "the rock from which water flowed in the desert," at 1 Corinthians 10:4 by adding, "was Christ." Sometimes the name of the visible sign is given to the thing signified, such as when "the Ark of the Covenant is called God or God's face."⁸

Calvin did not discover or invent the literary notion of metonymy. It was already taught by Augustine and others centuries before his own time. In fact, it is still used by us today in non-theological ways, like when we refer to businessmen as "suits."

proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.7, 1367.

⁴ Calvin writes, "Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10, 1370.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.3, 1362-3.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.24, 1390-1.

⁷ Referring to Christ's words, Calvin writes, "I say that this expression is a metonymy, a figure of speech commonly used in Scripture when mysteries are under discussion." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.21, 1385.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.21, 1385.

And yet, understanding “this is my body” as metonymy is not only acceptable but warranted. Since Christ took on true human flesh and such flesh, by definition, cannot be everywhere at all times, then Jesus’ language must be a metonymy, Calvin rightly argued.

Union with the resurrected Christ

Calvin’s second main teaching about the nature of the Supper is that it manifests union with the resurrected Christ. This is important because the body of the God-man Christ is in heaven. Calvin demonstrated from scripture that our Lord taught that he would not be bodily present with his disciples forever.⁹ This is the meaning of Christ’s glorious ascension. Because of that heavenly ascension, Christ is no longer in a state of humiliation on the earth, but his abode is in the celestial realm with the glory of his Father. Calvin was clear: “in his flesh he is contained in heaven until he appears in judgment.”¹⁰

Because some had wrongly claimed patristic authority against his teaching, Calvin included a section from Augustine’s writings that supported him.¹¹ He also addressed those who argued that Christ’s resurrection body does not need to conform to the laws of common nature. His simple conclusion is that Christ abides in heaven and always wants for us to search for and to find him there.¹²

However, the Supper witnesses that in the believers’ union with Christ, that which is Christ’s is also ours. The classic theological word that Calvin uses, and which is so helpful to us, is “exchange.”¹³ His description is sufficiently beautiful to warrant a full quotation:

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.¹⁴

If Christ had only procured this great exchange, he would be worthy of eternal praise. But he has done more! In the Supper, our resurrected Lord wants to lift believers up to himself and he uses these common elements of bread and wine as the seals of his great promises.¹⁵

In the final edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin inserted a very small section emphasizing that Christ’s presence in the Supper does not lie in the bread. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who secretly works to unite believers to Christ. He says specifically that Christ does not come down to us but that he lifts us up to himself in heaven. He does not try to explain this union but describes it as a heavenly

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.26, 1393-94.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.30, 1403.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.28, 1395-98.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.29, 1398-1401.

¹³ For more information, see Richard C. Gamble, “The Great Exchange,” *Tabletalk Magazine* 33, no. 11 (July 2009): 12-13.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.2, 1362.

¹⁵ Calvin writes that “it is God’s plan (as I often reiterate) to lift us to himself” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.15, 1377. He asserts in the next section “For [those who hold to ubiquity] think they only communicate with [Christ’s body] if it descends into bread; but they do not understand the manner of descent by which he lifts us up to himself.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.16, 1379.

mystery: “it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is God’s truth, so he rests safely in it.¹⁷ The union between Christ and the believer is so real that our flesh “in a sense partakes of his immortality.”¹⁸ However, there is no mixture or transfusion of Christ’s flesh with the believer’s soul. Christ’s actual flesh does not enter us.¹⁹ Nevertheless, “I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them [his body and blood] and that I receive them.”²⁰

Something That We Should Feel

Calvin’s next aspect of the nature of the Lord’s Supper is particularly beautiful. When we partake of the bread and wine, Calvin insists that we should actually feel the working of Christ’s sacrifice.²¹ He was convinced that for his congregation in Geneva to “eat Christ duly” (his words) they must grasp his death on the cross in their living experience.²² His wording in the *Institutes* is at times quite graphic. Because Christ was made the bread of life, and bread tastes good and gives us strength, then in the Supper we can feel the power of that heavenly bread.²³ Calvin is convinced that the beautiful outward sign and seal of the Supper is intended to be inwardly fulfilled.²⁴ He said: “[T]he soul must truly and deeply become partaker of Christ that it may be quickened to spiritual life by his power.”²⁵ He rightly grants that his puny mind cannot comprehend it, and yet his heart rejoices in it: “And to speak more plainly I rather experience than understand it.”²⁶

Because we feel Christ’s love and power toward us in the Supper, there is to be a change in our heart attitude toward others in the congregation. We feel that Christ is our life which deeply moves us to thanksgiving toward God as well as deeper love for other members of the church.²⁷ Since, in the Supper, Christ is made completely one with the Church, and we with him, believers are motivated in that meal to personal piety as well as to unity within Christ’s body. In fact, Calvin

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.31, 1403.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32, 1403.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32, 1404.

¹⁹ “Meanwhile, I frankly confess that I reject their teaching of the mixture, or transfusion, of Christ’s flesh with our soul. For it is enough for us that, from the substance of his flesh Christ breathes life into our souls—indeed, pours forth his very life into us—even though Christ’s flesh itself does not enter into us.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32, 1404.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32, 1404. Furthermore, “it is through his [the Holy Spirit’s] incomprehensible power that we come to partake of Christ’s flesh and blood.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33, 1405.

²¹ “We now understand the purpose of this mystical blessing, namely, to confirm for us the fact that the Lord’s body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice; and that his blood was once so shed for us in order to be our perpetual drink.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.1, 1361.

²² “For we do not eat Christ duly and unto salvation unless he is crucified, when in living experience we grasp the efficacy of his death.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.4, 1363.

²³ Therefore, the Sacrament does not cause Christ to begin to be the bread of life; but when it reminds us that he was made the bread of life, which we continually eat, and which gives us a relish and savor of that bread, it causes us to feel the power of that bread.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.5, 1364.

²⁴ “Once for all, therefore, he gave his body to be made bread when he yielded himself to be crucified for the redemption of the world; daily he gives it when by the word of the gospel he offers it for us to partake, inasmuch as it was crucified, when he seals such giving of himself by the sacred mystery of the Supper, and when he inwardly fulfills what he outwardly designates.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.5, 1364.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.5, 1365.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32, 1403.

²⁷ “We see that this sacred bread of the Lord’s Supper is spiritual food, as sweet and delicate as it is healthful for pious worshipers of God, who, in tasting it, feel that Christ is their life, whom it moves to thanksgiving, for whom it is an exhortation to mutual love among themselves.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.40, 1417.

believes that there should be no disagreement or division within the visible Church. Believers will be inclined toward unity when we realize that if we injure someone or disagree with someone in Christ's body, we do it to Christ. Furthermore, living in a dark era of brutal and bloody persecution, he was convinced that believers must love and feel compassion toward others when they suffer any pain.²⁸

Proper Celebration

In his sixteenth-century context, Calvin was beginning at ground zero relative to constructing a proper worship service and particularly to celebrating the Lord's Supper. Therefore, Calvin also explained the nature of the Supper by showing the manner in which it was to be celebrated.

First, Calvin thought that it should be frequently celebrated. The Roman Catholic Church mandated partaking only once per year, but Calvin wanted at least weekly celebration.²⁹ He used the authority of Augustine and Chrysostom to support his argument.³⁰ He rightly summarized that "All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast."³¹

Second, proper celebration is done simply—with singing psalms, a confession of faith, the celebration of the Supper, a sermonic exhortation, and a benediction.³² The *Institutes* only have a few lines on the practical application of celebrating the Supper. However, Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541 fully outline the nature and the parts of the worship service.

An important and very practical question related to proper celebration concerns who is worthy to receive this blessed sacrament. This is an area where there continues to be considerable disagreement even among Reformed churches.

The Roman Catholic Church asserted that being in a state of grace was requisite for worthy participation in the Supper. Thirteenth-century theologian Alexander of Hales taught that to be in a state of grace meant to be pure and purged of all sin. To obtain this state of grace required examining ourselves, accounting for all our deeds, and expiating our unworthiness by contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Calvin was rightly convinced that such a system brought nothing but sheer terror because no one would dare assure himself that he has done his best in all of these areas. No one could possibly have assurance of their worthiness to partake.³³

In contrast, Calvin said that believers can only come with knowledge of their unworthiness so that by grace he may make us worthy of him. Calvin beautifully said that "we, as being poor, come to a kindly giver; as sick, to a physician; as sinners to the Author of righteousness; finally as dead to him who gives us life."³⁴ Nevertheless, Calvin gave practical guidance as to the nature of requisite self-examination. One should rest on Christ's purchased salvation, verbally confess that salvation,

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.38, 1414-16.

²⁹ "Now, to get rid of this great pile of ceremonies, the Supper could have been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43, 1421.

³⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.45.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.46, 1424.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.43.

³³ "For if it is a question of our seeking worthiness by ourselves, we are undone; only despair and deadly ruin remain to us." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.41. "Surely the devil could find no speedier means of destroying men than by so maddening them that they could not taste and savor this food with which their most gracious Heavenly Father had willed to feed them." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.42, 1419.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.42, 1420.

aspire to imitate Christ in holiness and innocence, share what he has with his brethren, and desire to help and protect them as well.³⁵

While Calvin's teaching on the nature of the Supper is both beautiful and complex, it was sadly not embraced by all theologians of the sixteenth century. Calvin spends quite a bit of time in the *Institutes* chiding those theologians in the church who failed to comprehend Christ's intentions in the Supper. The next section will examine Calvin's opponents, both Catholics and Protestants.

Opponents

General Christological and Methodological Errors

The words of institution are, "this is my body." The question is whether that phrase should be taken metaphorically and figuratively, or whether it must be taken literally. Calvin's correct answer is that the words certainly must not be taken literally, as noted in his analysis of the Lord's Supper as a metonymy.

However, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians insisted then, and do today, that the words of institution are literal. According to that interpretation, Christ is somehow attached to the elements of bread and wine, which is a perverse error for Calvin. He rightly charges that those theologians are guilty of basic Christological errors and pinpoints the reason for their mistakes in a faulty theological and hermeneutical method.

The notion that the sacramental elements are changed from normal bread and wine (through either transubstantiation or consubstantiation) is simply unnecessary. Christ bestows benefits on believers through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. One simply needs to comprehend Paul's teaching at Romans 8:9b ("And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ") to know that Christ dwells in believers by the Spirit, and that the Spirit "causes us to possess Christ completely and have him dwelling in us."³⁶

Also, neither group argues that a physical change takes place in the waters of baptism, as should be the case if a physical change takes place in the bread and wine, since they are both New Testament sacraments. The waters of baptism must remain water and the bread and wine of the Supper must remain the bread and wine because the earthly element corresponds as a mode of signification to the heavenly thing. The issue, as Calvin repeats, is that Christ wants to lift believers up to himself and that he uses these physical elements as signs and seals of his divine promises.³⁷

Calvin summarizes that, first, believers should never reduce Christ's heavenly glory as is done when he is in any fashion bound to the elements of this world, and second, we must preserve Christ's full human nature which makes it impossible for his body to be in a number of places at once.³⁸

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.40, 1418.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.12, 1373.

³⁷ See earlier references in Footnote 15.

³⁸ "Let us never (I say) allow these two limitations to be taken away from us: (1) Let nothing be withdrawn from Christ's heavenly glory—as happens when he is brought under the corruptible elements of this world, or bound to any earthly creatures. (2) Let nothing inappropriate to human nature be ascribed to his body, as happens when it is said either to be infinite or to be put in a number of places at once." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.19, 1381-2.

Roman Catholic Errors

Moving on from Calvin's general critique of both Roman Catholics and Lutherans, let us now turn to consider specific Roman Catholic errors. The first error applies to the Roman Catholic notion of transubstantiation. The church, using an Aristotelian notion, had taught since the Middle Ages that, while the elements taste like bread and wine, the substance of those elements has transformed into Christ's true body and blood.

Calvin believed that the cause of the Roman Catholic notion of transubstantiation was a crude imagination that ecclesiastical consecration of the elements was the equivalent of some type of magical incantation. He refuted Roman Catholic attempts from scripture to justify their fallacious argument. As expected, his condemnation of transubstantiation is comprehensive.³⁹

Second, Calvin dealt with unworthy participation in the Supper by unbelievers. Roman Catholics from the time of the medieval theologian Peter Lombard held that the impious and wicked, totally estranged from Christ, still ate Christ's body in the Supper.

Calvin will have none of this error, and his refutation is quite clever. "Christ's flesh itself in the mystery of the Supper is a thing no less spiritual than our eternal salvation." Therefore, "all those who are devoid of Christ's Spirit can no more eat Christ's flesh than drink wine that has no taste. Surely, Christ is too unworthily torn apart if his body, lifeless and powerless, is prostituted to unbelievers."⁴⁰ He concludes, "just as rain falling upon a hard rock flows off because no entrance opens into the stone, the wicked by their hardness so repel God's grace that it does not reach them... to say that Christ may be received without faith is as inappropriate as to say that a seed may germinate in fire."⁴¹

It is actually quite important to address the question of those who unworthily partake of the Lord's Supper, and Calvin has a sure answer. While Christ offers true spiritual food to all who partake—some actually refuse to feed upon him. The wicked may partake of the bread and wine, but they leave the table spiritually empty. The unbeliever's own hardness of heart prevents Christ from

³⁹ With "barbarous impiety ... they then devise a mode which they neither understand themselves nor can explain to others" with the end result that "through this ingenious subtlety bread came to be taken for God." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.13, 1373-4. "They therefore had to take refuge in the fiction that a conversion of the bread into the body takes place" and therefore "they unveiled that monster." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.14, 1374-75. "They could never have been so foully deluded by Satan's tricks unless they had already been bewitched by this error, that Christ's body, enclosed in bread, is transmitted by the mouth of the body into the stomach. The cause of such crude imagination was that among them consecration was virtually equivalent to magic incantation." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.15, 1376-7. "And yet those who give vent to such monstrosities are so unashamed of their own disgrace..." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.17, 1380. "In short, it has nothing in it to offend unless that in certain periods—when the ignorance and barbarism of the Sophists reigned in the church—such clear light and revealed truth was unworthily oppressed." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.19, 1382. "[T]his fiction of theirs is utterly foreign to the proper meaning... Others ... take refuge in a more forced and violently distorted gloss." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20, 1383. Concerning Westphal, but without naming him: "But it is an intolerable blasphemy to declare literally of an ephemeral and corruptible element that it is Christ." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20, 1384. The Lutherans "unfairly burden us with [this] reproach..." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.22, 1388. "[T]hey are blinded by a spell from the devil, so that they conjure for themselves dark enigmas, while the interpretation of this striking figure is obvious." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.23, 1389. "For here either they are too stupidly mistaken or they are basely lying." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.24, 1391.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33, 1406.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33, 1407.

coming to them. In fact, they are guilty of the Lord's body and blood and are cast down with even greater ruin.⁴²

Since there are places where Augustine says that unbelievers eat Christ's body, Calvin included a section examining Augustine and carefully demonstrated that Augustine's position and his own were compatible.⁴³

Calvin's closing four sections in the *Institutes* oppose the Roman Catholic practice of forbidding lay people the wine, sometimes called celebration in one kind. This practice was based on the doctrine of concomitance, which asserted that since Christ's blood was also in his flesh then lay people didn't need both. Calvin presented five arguments against the Roman practice.⁴⁴ First, the scriptures clearly teach against it. Second, church tradition for a thousand years is against it. Third, Christ said specifically that all should drink, of which Calvin notes, "it is as if he deliberately intended to oppose Satan's craftiness."⁴⁵ Fourth, the Roman Catholic Church should not presume to celebrate the way that they do because they have neither a command, nor an example, from the Lord. Finally, Paul rightly claimed at 1 Corinthians 11 that he received instruction from the Lord—so how can they break with divine command? He concluded strongly:

And still they dare to cloak such abominations with the name church and defend them on that pretext! It is as if these Antichrists, who so readily trample, scatter, and abolish the teaching and ordinances of Christ, were the church; or the apostolic church, in which religion flourished in full vigor, were not the church!⁴⁶

Lutheran Errors

Calvin spends just as much time opposing Lutheran errors on the Supper. Lutherans properly rejected the Roman Catholic notion of transubstantiation but invented consubstantiation to take its place. According to this view, the elements are not transformed, but Christ is still bodily in, with, around, and through the elements. Then they made up the notion of Christ's ubiquity to explain that Christ's physical body can be consubstantially present in the elements. Ubiquity is the doctrine that at the resurrection Christ's physical body was given supernatural properties that it can be everywhere in the universe at all times. Calvin rightly describes this as a monstrous notion: "And surely certain men would rather manifest their ignorance to their great shame than yield even the least particle of their error. I am not speaking of the papists, whose doctrine is more tolerable, or at least more modest."⁴⁷ He charges that it is, "utterly unlawful" to imagine that Christ's resurrection body can be present everywhere.⁴⁸

⁴² "But I reply that they are not condemned because they have eaten, but only for having profaned the mystery by trampling underfoot the pledge of sacred union with God, which they ought reverently to have received." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.33, 1408. "On the other hand, it is turned into a deadly poison for all those whose faith it does not nourish and strengthen, and whom it does not arouse to thanksgiving³² and to love." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.40, 1417.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.34, 1408-11.

⁴⁴ Calvin also briefly critiques the Roman Catholic notion of concomitance which is used to withhold wine from Eucharistic recipients in Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.18.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.50, 1428.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.50, 1428.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.30, 1402.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.12, 1372-73. Calvin also includes an entire section refuting the Lutherans at Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.30.

One Lutheran critic, Joachim Westphal of Hamburg, was an absolute literalist who asserted that the bread of the Supper is Christ's body.⁴⁹ Calvin clearly grants that there is a true communication of Christ's body in the Supper but is compelled "to refute the foolish stubbornness with which they wrangle so violently over words."⁵⁰

Other Protestant Errors

Having addressed Roman Catholic and Lutheran errors, Calvin still needed to address other protestant errors. Some Protestants incorrectly said that to eat the Supper is simply to believe. For them the Supper is mere knowledge or an outward profession of faith; they simply remember what Christ has done. By contrast, Calvin said that we eat Christ's flesh in believing. That is, "for them eating is faith; for me it seems rather to follow from faith."⁵¹ It is by faith that Christ's life becomes our life—just like bread, when eaten, gives strength to the body.

Calvin also mentioned, without naming names, that he disagreed with certain Protestants who required a highly perfected faith and a manifestation of love equal to the love that Christ has shown to believers. Although there is no reference by the editor of the English translation of the *Institutes*, the critical Latin text has a footnote reference to both Zwingli and some Anabaptists.⁵² The English editor should have included this information.

For Calvin, Christ is truly the word of God and bread of life. He opened a number of passages from 1 John 4 and John's gospel to demonstrate that he is "the Word of life" and "the bread of life" who took on flesh that his power may flow to us. It is by Christ's flesh and blood that believers are nourished to eternal life and that flesh and blood is truly life-giving. This is what John meant at 5:26 when Christ asserts that he had life in himself. The reference is not to his position as second Person of the Trinity, but rather to the gifts that he has after the incarnation. Communion with Christ in his resurrected body is essential to our heavenly life.⁵³

Calvin, in proper biblical-theological fashion, moved to Paul's presentation and said that Paul in Ephesians and Corinthians is in harmony with John when he teaches that the church is the body of Christ and that individual persons are members of Christ's body—even his bones and flesh. He rightly concluded: "It would be extreme madness to recognize no communion of believers with

⁴⁹ Calvin rejected this strange teaching and concluded without mentioning Westphal's name at all: "From this it follows that Christ's words are not subject to the common rule and ought not to be tested by grammar." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20, 1384.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20, 1384. Calvin had extensive controversies with Westphal that go way beyond what he says in the *Institutes*. The first was a booklet from 1555 entitled *A Sound and Orthodox Defense of the Sacraments*, and the second a 172-page treatise the following year titled *Second Defense*. Nonetheless, a number of sections in the *Institutes* directly refute Westphal. For more information on this fascinating controversy, see Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin's Controversies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jean Calvin*, ed. Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 194–96.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.5, 1365.

⁵² Joannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta* ed. Barth et Niesel, Volumen V:408 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1936). The English is Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.42, 1420.

⁵³ "But the flesh of Christ does not of itself have a power so great as to quicken us, for in its first condition it was subject to mortality; and now, endowed with immortality, it does not live through itself. Nevertheless, since it is pervaded with fullness of life to be transmitted to us, it is rightly called 'life-giving.' In this sense I interpret with Cyril that saying of Christ's: 'As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself' [John 5:26, cf. Vg.]. For there he is properly speaking not of those gifts which he had in the Father's presence from the beginning, but of those with which he was adorned in that very flesh wherein he appeared." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.9, 1369.

the flesh and blood of the Lord, which the apostle declares to be so great that he prefers to marvel at it rather than to explain it.”⁵⁴

Calvin summarized his position: “our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life.”⁵⁵ While the reality of Christ being so far away in heaven makes it seem impossible that his flesh can penetrate our bones and marrow on earth, believers must remember the Holy Spirit’s secret power. Here is a good, one-sentence summary: “What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.”⁵⁶

At the same time, even though there is a true partaking of Christ, the bread and the wine in the Supper are called either signs or symbols. They are not the thing itself. Calvin spent some time elaborating this important and complex topic. He argues that the Supper has physical signs which are different from the spiritual truths they signify. Christ’s redemptive work is the center. Pointing to that redemptive work are “the promises, which are ... implicit in the signs”, and flowing from that redemptive work are “redemption, righteousness, sanctification, and eternal life, and all the other benefits Christ gives to us.”⁵⁷ There are then two divine goals from the Supper—that believers may grow into his body and that we may “feel his power,” to use Calvin’s words, as we become partakers of his substance.⁵⁸

Theological Method

Having considered the nature of the Supper and a defense of that nature against his theological opponents, let us move to the final and shortest section, which deals with theological method. Calvin revealed his theological method when he demonstrated how a doctrine of the Lord’s Supper should be constructed. First, it should be “drawn from the pure Word of God and rest upon its authority.”⁵⁹ As a subset of his first point, when reason is at odds with the doctrine of scripture, then reason must stand aside.⁶⁰ Second, the doctrine should be presented plainly and with brevity.⁶¹

Calvin’s opposition to the Roman Catholic notion of concomitance demonstrated both aspects of his theological method. Thomas Aquinas had taught that when the believer partakes of the Eucharistic bread, Christ’s whole body, including his blood, is in it. This concomitance seems reasonable at first. However, it is not exegetically based. In fact, exegetically, our Lord commanded both elements to be used in the Supper.⁶² Calvin clearly articulated the first methodological principle when he said, “But those who receive the Sacrament as God had commended ... are confident that they are not turning aside from God’s command. There is

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.9, 1370.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10, 1370.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10, 1370.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10, 1372.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.10, 1372.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.26, 1393.

⁶⁰ “For as Christ’s whole Kingdom is spiritual, whatever he does with his church must not be subjected to the reason of this world.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.32, 1404.

⁶¹ “But because nothing will be more effective to strengthen the faith of the pious than to have learned that the doctrine which we have put forward has been drawn from the pure Word of God, and rests upon its authority—I shall also make this plain with as much brevity as I can.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.26, 1393.

⁶² “But if with becoming humility they had kept all their thoughts under the Word of God, they would surely have heard what he said, “Take, eat, drink” [Matt. 26:26–27], and would have obeyed this command, by which he bids us receive the Sacrament, not adore it.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.35, 1412.

nothing better than his assurance when we undertake any task.”⁶³ He articulated both principles a few lines later: “how unsafe it is in things so lofty to wander from God’s simple word to the fantasies of our own brains.”⁶⁴

Similarly, because the Roman Catholic Church falsely believes that the priest consecrates the host, they further believe that the host may then be distributed to the sick outside of the worship service and the preaching of the word. For Calvin, however, proper administration of the sacrament requires preaching and even though the practice of such distribution goes back to the Ancient Church, “in so great a matter, one in which error entails great peril, nothing is safer than to follow the truth itself.”⁶⁵

Conclusion

Having examined Calvin’s presentation of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in the *Institutes*, it is time for a conclusion and some critical remarks. First, the *Institutes* was a living document that was edited, changed, and reorganized many times. For example, after publishing the first edition Calvin wrote his important Romans commentary—and the second edition was significantly revised because of what he learned from his deep exegesis there. Likewise, Calvin participated in extensive debates throughout his life with Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians on the nature of the Supper. At times, paragraphs were added to the *Institutes* in light of those larger and more extensive polemical writings.

His theological method in the *Institutes* was *brevitas et facilitas*, always attempting to be simple and concise, which served him very well.⁶⁶ There are no footnotes or references to his massive polemical tracts against Westphall and others nor his positive presentations on the Supper.

Sadly, however, he did not entirely restructure and rewrite his most mature understanding of the Supper in the *Institutes* themselves. Thus, if someone limits him or herself to reading the *Institutes* alone, they are left with a fairly disjointed and incomplete presentation.

Nevertheless, following Calvin’s method of *brevitas et facilitas*, I would be remiss for not providing a more clear and concise summary of Calvin’s conception of what happens in the Lord’s Supper and how prospective pastors should be able to explain it to their congregations. My sources go well beyond the *Institutes* to the 416 pages of tracts on the Supper found in Calvin’s *Selected Works*.⁶⁷

When first celebrated, Jesus gave his disciples physical wine and grain-based bread. Neither element was special for this meal. What Christ offered was salvation based upon faith in his soon-to-be-shed blood.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.35, 1412.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.36, 1412. Those who adore the Sacrament “have not only dreamed it by themselves apart from Scripture ... but also, with Scripture crying out against it, they have forsaken the living God and fashioned a God after their own desire.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.36, 1413.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.39, 1416-17. At 4.17.43, 1421: “God so esteems obedience to his Word that he would have us judge both his angels and the whole world in its light.”

⁶⁶ See Richard C. Gamble, “Brevitas et Facilitas: Toward an Understanding of Calvin’s Hermeneutic,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 1 (Spring 1985).

⁶⁷ Those sources include: *Little treatise on the Lord’s Supper* from 1540, the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1554, multiple works against Westphal and Heshusius, and *Best Method of Concord on the Sacraments*.

Christ has now completed his work on the cross and has been gloriously lifted into the heavens. He will no longer offer bread with his own hand and will never shed his blood again, for which we are thankful, because he is exalted in heaven.

Given that Christ's body is not leaving heaven until his triumphant return, what does he offer to believers in sixteenth-century Geneva as well as to us in the 21st century? Here is my own three-sentence summary of Calvin's teaching on how to understand the Lord's Supper when it is offered to you:

With the eyes of faith alone, instead of the minister offering bread and wine to you, it is Christ himself who offers you himself in the same way that he offered himself to his disciples. With the eyes of faith alone you transcend time and space and move from wherever you are to the very gates of paradise. With the eyes of faith, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, you see and feel yourself no longer here, but already resurrected to the heavens in your union with Christ, tasting the sweetness of our Lord's redemption, and drinking deeply from the fountain of Christ's blood shed for you.