

SOME PASTORS AND TEACHERS

*Reflecting a Biblical Vision of What
Every Minister is Called to Be*



SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

—EPHESIANS 4:11-13



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

CHAPTER NINE

CALVIN ON THE LORD'S SUPPER AND COMMUNION WITH CHRIST

As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.

SO Calvin notes in a famous passage at the beginning of *Institutes* Book III, and adds that this saving union with Christ takes place only through 'the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits'.¹

Central to this understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in our salvation is the principle that the Spirit takes what belongs to Christ and makes it known to us (John 16:14). The same Spirit who accompanied Jesus from conception to ascension descends on the church at Pentecost in his specific identity as the Spirit of Jesus Christ. For the correlation between the Spirit and Christ is now such that all that Christ has done for us lies in the possession of the Spirit, and is brought from Christ to the church by him. Thus the empty mouth of faith eats and drinks Christ and the empty hands of faith are filled with every spiritual blessing.²

Furthermore, for Calvin the 'first' or supreme title of the Spirit is 'Spirit of sonship'.³ Consequently, through his work believers come to experience the assurance of God's fatherly benevolence and experience communion with God.⁴

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.1.

² See, for example, Calvin's *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* (Geneva, 1541), 10; tr. J. K. S. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (London: SCM, 1954), p. 148.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.3.

⁴ Cf. *Comm. 1 Corinthians*, p. 60 (on 1 Cor. 2:12).

Preaching and sacraments

The objective channels through which this communion and assurance come are the word of God (particularly, but not exclusively, the preached word) and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Standing as he does in the Augustinian tradition, Calvin sees significant parallels between the audible word expounded in preaching and the visible word received in the sacraments.¹ Just as Christ is the *scopus*, the goal and, indeed, the focus of the Scriptures, so he is also the *scopus*² as well as the focus, the matter and substance³ of the sacraments. Thus, for example, baptism is into the name of Christ, because he is its *scopus*. Its whole strength (*virtus*) lies in him. In this dynamic relation between the sacrament and Christ, a double movement takes place in which the meaning of the sacrament opens out towards Christ and in that event Christ makes himself known to and communicates (engages in communion) with the believer.

In the preached word, then, Christ speaks to us and we respond in faith to his living voice. This in itself is enough for us; but God recognizes that our faith is weak and in need of his strengthening. So he further provides the visible words of baptism and the Lord's Supper where Christ puts his grace on display in order to bring us into a more assured communion with him through the Spirit's work and our responding faith.⁴

Focus on Christ himself

Here already we have a hint of the theme which constantly underlies Calvin's thinking and gives rise to the polemical thrust in his teaching: Christ himself is the heart of the sacraments. They should not be expounded in terms of the *res* (the element in itself—water, bread or wine), but in terms of the *persona* (the person who is presented to us, i.e. Jesus himself). If attention is focused on the sacramental 'thing' (water, bread and wine), and hearts are not lifted beyond the sign to the person of Jesus signified in the sign and revealed by the Spirit through the sign, then the true meaning of the sacraments is bound to become distorted.

¹ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.6.

² Cf. *Comm. Acts*, I:319 (on Acts 10:48): 'Christ is the proper goal of baptism' (*proprius Baptismi scopus*).

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iv.16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV.xiv.8.

This understanding of how sacraments 'work' explains Calvin's concern to expound the role of the Spirit in their administration. It is directly analogous to his role in preaching. The Spirit does not transform the words of the Bible but employs them to bring us to Christ; so too, in the administration of the sacraments, the elements are not transformed, but rather employed by the Spirit to realize in us all that is symbolized to us. Nothing 'changes' the elements.

This note is particularly dominant in Calvin's teaching on the Lord's Supper. For, in his view, while men can employ the *res* of the Lord's Supper, breaking the bread and offering the wine, only the divine Spirit is qualified to communicate the person of Jesus Christ to us by these means.

A Christo-dynamic view of the Supper

For Calvin, then, sacraments are not mere or bare signs (*signa nuda*) but, like the audible 'signs' of the words of Scripture, when received in faith they function as communicative signs. By means of them the very realities they symbolize are actually communicated to and experienced by the recipients as they respond in faith. The Spirit is the connection, the bond (*vinculum*) between the *res* (bread and wine), the *persona* (Jesus himself), and ourselves as the recipients.

If we fail to grasp this, error and confusion follow: either (i) the sign is confused with the thing signified, and an *ex opere operato* doctrine of the sacraments results, as though we could receive Christ simply by the act of eating and drinking; or (ii) the sign is divorced from what it signifies (Jesus Christ, clothed in the gospel) and the Supper thus tends to be little more than an *aide-mémoire*, falling far short of Spirit-given communion with Christ.

Calvin's Christo-dynamic view of the sacraments (if we may thus describe it) constantly seeks to turn the recipient's eyes to Jesus Christ himself. The communion in view is with Christ, and the feasting is on Jesus himself. What the sacramental signs externally signify is internally effected by the Spirit.¹

This understanding protects us from the implications of the two errors noted above:

¹ See Calvin, *Comm. Titus*, pp. 382-83 (on Titus 3:5).

- (1) It prevents us from adorning the sign (possibly even adoring it!), as though the sign itself were or could become the reality it represents (the danger of an *ex opere operato* view, in which the priest's action is sufficient of itself to make Christ present, apart from the free, sovereign and dynamic activity of the Spirit).
- (2) It safeguards us from emptying the sign of its ability to bring us to Christ when so employed by the Spirit. This is the danger of *signa nuda*, reducing the bread and the wine to 'bare signs', in which human faith alone is active and nothing is attributed to the Spirit.

Calvin here distances himself from Rome on the right and the Anabaptists on the left, but also by implication from both Luther and Zwingli. Self-consciously he provided a *via media* between the latter two. He did so, however, not by adopting the common factors between them, but by expounding what he saw as a biblical, that is a pneumatic (Holy Spirit-empowered), doctrine of the sacraments. Only this, he believed, preserves the biblical conjunction of the sign and the reality of the thing (or better, *person*) signified, and safeguards the necessity of the Spirit's ministry and also of our faith. Without this inner dynamic in the Supper, the biblical correlation between Christ, the sacramental symbols, and our faith collapses.

Thus he believes that the Roman Church (papal *magisterium* and priestly acts) has usurped, whereas Zwingli and Luther have minimized, the ministry which belongs to the Holy Spirit.

Polemical emphases.

Because Calvin expounds the doctrine of the Supper in a variety of polemical contexts, his teaching is contextualized in different ways.

- (1) When dealing with those who boast in the sign, he tends to stress the emptiness of the sign in and of itself.
- (2) When addressing the criticisms of both Rome and the Anabaptists (one stressing the necessity of priestly ordination and power, the other stressing the personal status of the administrant), he stresses the essential insignificance of the human administrant.

- (3) When addressing believers he stresses the dynamic connection of the sign with what it signifies—the so-called sacramental union.

But in each of these reactions, Calvin returns basically to the same central theme: the efficacy of the sacraments depends on the dynamic ministry of the Holy Spirit uniting the recipients to the reality which the sacraments objectively signify, namely the person of Jesus Christ clothed in the garments of salvation. He enlightens the mind with faith, he seals in the heart the adoption of God, he regenerates us to new life, and he grafts us into the body of Christ so that we come to live in him and he in us.¹

The display of Christ, the substance of the Supper

The function of the sacraments, then, can be summed up in two Latin terms Calvin employs:

(1) Exhibere

The signs display or exhibit Christ to the eyes and to the sense of vision, just as the word displays Christ to the ears and to the sense of hearing as the Spirit takes what belongs to Christ and shows or exhibits it to us. In this sense Calvin sees sacraments as appendices to the promise of the gospel, confirming it to faith.² Pictures may display what the weak in faith are not able to read easily in the word. They thus help to remove our ignorance and doubt of God's grace toward us, and strengthen our weak faith.

In this respect, it is important to notice the way Calvin balances the famous definition of faith he had given earlier in his *Institutes*³ by what he says here about faith's existential weakness:

God's truth is of itself firm and sure enough. ... But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here

¹ Cf. Calvin, *Comm. Hebrews*, p. 149.

² Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.5-6.

³ *Ibid.*, II.ii.7: 'We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.'

our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself, even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.¹

Calvin is therefore very far from the quasi-perfectionism he detected in some left-wing Reformation thinking that viewed the sacraments as unnecessary for those who had real faith and could feed inwardly on Christ.² Rather, he holds that through the visible words of the sacraments, the Spirit penetrates our hard hearts, moves our jaded affections and opens our souls to receive the Christ who is exhibited by means of the signs.

(2) *Substantia*

Calvin contends that the sacraments communicate to believers the ‘substance’ of Jesus Christ, in his saving humanity. The precise manner in which this takes place is, as we shall see, one of the most significant and distinctive elements in Calvin’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper, and one that has provoked considerable comment. We shall return to it.

The ‘real’ presence of Christ

As with all the magisterial Reformers, the central controversy of the Lord’s Supper (and subsequently the context in which Calvin enlarged on the role of the Holy Spirit) was the question of the nature of the presence of the body and blood of Christ and the manner of our communion with him. Here he seeks to avoid two opposite, if not quite equal, errors:

- (1) That our communion is with the flesh and blood of Christ localized in the bread and wine of the Supper.
- (2) That our communion is not with the actual body and blood of Christ, but is merely a spiritual one, in the sense that the

¹ *Ibid.*, IV.xiv.3.

² For example, Caspar Schwenckfeld. See G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 106ff.

Supper prompts us to reflect back on our conversion and enables us to meditate on what Jesus Christ has done for us, or on our commitment and love to him. The Supper, thus conceived, has a rather subjective orientation.¹

Against both these positions, Calvin argues that we have true communion with the actual flesh and blood of Christ, whose *virtus*, strength, is ours by Spirit-born faith. Christ who is in heaven thus feeds those who are on the earth from his own flesh. All this is accomplished—admittedly mysteriously—through the Spirit. This, for Calvin, is the true partaking of the flesh and blood of Christ. In fact, he says, in this ministry the Spirit is like a channel ‘through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us’.²

It is here that we can see how central to Calvin’s thinking about the Supper is the way he views the distinctive role of the Holy Spirit. On the one hand (over against Rome), he asserts the permanent bodily presence of Christ in heaven, and denies his physical presence in the bread and wine; but equally (over against a mere memorialism) he insists that the substantial presence of Christ, in the event of the Supper as a whole, is experienced through the power of the Spirit.

Implications

Three important consequences emerge as a result of Calvin’s thinking:

(i) The body and blood of Christ are not, and cannot be, shut up (*inclusus*) in the bread and the wine of the Lord’s Supper. The ascension of Christ is a real, physical, once-for-all, irreversible, redemptive-historical event. Whatever is meant, therefore, by our communion with the body and blood of Christ, they cannot be thought of as locally present in the elements of the Supper since they are at the right hand of God, in heaven, where Jesus has ascended. Calvin regards this much as clear on the basis of Acts 3:21 (‘He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything’).

It would be a major departure from the Scriptures to hold, as Rome did, that, as a result of the priestly words *Hoc est corpus meum* (‘This is

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.7.

² *Ibid.*, IV.xvii.12.

my body'), an act of transubstantiation takes place so that the bread and wine are changed as to their substance into the body and blood of Christ which are consequently contained by and located within the bread and the wine. Calvin's fundamental objection to the idea that, while the *accidents* or properties of bread and wine remain, their *substance* has become the flesh and blood of Christ, is that it compromises the heavenly glory of Christ, and fails to give due weight to the significance of the ascension.

Rather the exhortation appropriate to communion, 'lift up your hearts' (*sursum corda*), indicates that we look beyond the physical eating and drinking to enjoy communion with an ascended and glorified Lord in the flesh and blood he assumed and continues to possess.¹

(2) On the other hand, to adopt the Lutheran (so-called consubstantiation) view was an equal error. Luther held, in the light of his doctrine of the ubiquity (omnipresence) of the resurrected humanity of Christ, that his body and blood could be received 'in, with, and under' the bread and the wine. To Calvin this was essentially to deny the reality of Christ's humanity and its real identity with ours. For ubiquity is not a property of humanity as such. If Christ's humanity is ubiquitous, it cannot truly be 'our' humanity, and the grammatical rules which make the incarnation a saving event have been transgressed: a humanity so unlike ours cannot be the means of the salvation of the humanity which is ours.

The seriousness of the flaw in the Lutheran view, as far as Calvin is concerned, is that ultimately it undermines orthodox Christology (which stated that the two natures were united in one person, not united directly in such a way that their properties mingled with each other). The Christ of this doctrine would be a 'phantasm', and this, for Calvin, meant that a consistent soteriology and a genuine sacramental theology would become impossible. Theologically what was at stake here was not merely the doctrine of the sacraments or even the finer points of Christology, but the very possibility of salvation itself. For only one who is truly one of us can become a Saviour for us.

(3) But again, over against a reactionary memorialism which reduces the action in the Supper to that of the recipient, Calvin insists that the

Spirit works in order to give believers a genuine share in Christ's real body and blood, not because of its local presence, nor by its infinite extension in space, but by the power of the Spirit. This pneumatological dimension of the Supper is one which Calvin believes his opponents essentially ignore. For him, however, it is the key to the whole thing.

True communion with Christ

How then does communion with Christ take place? In Calvin's view, the space-time gap between believers and Christ is bridged by the Holy Spirit. It is his office to unite believers on earth to Christ in heaven, bringing together realities which are spatially distanced.¹ Through the Spirit we are raised up into the heavenly presence of Christ and feed on him. This is the secret and wonderful work of the Spirit. We cannot measure it; indeed it would be sinful to try. Calvin himself admits this is incredible. It is beyond our understanding that the Spirit should join together things separated spatially; but nevertheless we experience the reality of it even if we do not comprehend the mystery of it. Here, far from being coldly rationalistic, Calvin subscribes to the view that certain aspects of grace are, apparently, 'better felt than told'.

Calvin's eucharistic doctrine, therefore, in denying the local, enclosed presence of Christ, emphasizes what is sometimes called his spiritual presence. But here being present 'spiritually' means 'the presence of the incarnate and exalted Son of God *by the Spirit*'. Unwilling to surrender to Rome's claim that only by transubstantiation can believers enjoy the 'real presence' of Christ in the eucharist, Calvin affirms that it is only by the Spirit that believers can know Christ's real presence in the sense of his 'true presence' as a body-and-blood-presence.

Calvin's concern here is to expound the mystery of personal communion with a physical (flesh-and-blood), but glorified, Christ. For him there is no other Christ, and the polemic in his sacramental teaching draws its violence from the fact that his opponents' errors distort a true biblical Christology. After all, communion with a person does not involve eating their body carnally, but communion with that person-in-flesh-and-blood personally. Since Christ is a person, we

¹ *Institutes*, IV.xvii.36.

¹ Cf. *Comm. 1 Corinthians*, pp. 246-47.

enjoy fellowship with him in an embodied-person to embodied-person manner—through the ministry of the Spirit.

Thus our communion is not merely with the Spirit, but with the ascended, bodily Christ, not merely with Christ's benefits, but with Christ himself. 'Christ's flesh, separated from such great distance', says Calvin, 'penetrates to our flesh',¹ so that although it dwells in heaven, our spiritual life is drawn from his flesh:

It is declared in my writings more than a hundred times, that so far am I from rejecting the term substance, that I ingenuously and readily declare, that by the incomprehensible agency of the Spirit, spiritual life is infused into us from the substance of the flesh of Christ. I also constantly admit that we are substantially fed on the flesh and blood of Christ, though I discard the gross fiction of a local intermingling.²

Language like this is now so rare that to modern ears it sounds unexpectedly realistic, even shocking. Here, and in the *Institutes* where he similarly speaks about life being 'infused into us from the substance of his flesh',³ Calvin is obviously struggling to express in words the mystery of what the Holy Spirit actually accomplishes in the Supper. It is just at this point that he has sometimes been criticized by theologians within the very Reformed tradition to which he gave birth. William Cunningham, for example, regarded Calvin's formulation as both incomprehensible and impossible.⁴ R. L. Dabney thought it 'as real a violation of my intuitive reason in this doctrine as when transubstantiation requires me to believe that the flesh of Christ is present, indivisible, and unextended in each crumb or drop of the elements'.⁵ It is, consequently, rare to find Calvin's teaching expressed today.

¹ *Institutes*, IV.xvii.10.

² These words are drawn from Calvin's 1561 treatise, *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper to Dissipate the Mists of Tileman Hesbusius*, in Beveridge, *Tracts and Treatises*, II:502.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.4.

⁴ See William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1862), p. 240. Cunningham calls Calvin's views here 'perhaps, the greatest blot in the history of Calvin's labours as a public instructor'.

⁵ R. L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 182.

While one might hesitate to say dogmatically that Calvin's teaching has been misunderstood, it may be that the vigorous language in which he expresses himself has obscured the point he is making. For he makes it clear that Christ's flesh as such is not mingled with ours, but rather that, by the Spirit, Christ breathes his new life into us from the substance of that flesh, that is from all that he, the Son of God, now is in our humanity. This is Calvin's way of saying that as the last Adam who has become life-giving Spirit and Lord of the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:18), Christ gives to us both himself and all he has gained for us.

The essential point for Calvin here is that, at the end of the day, this is the only Christ there is. The Christ from whom all spiritual blessings flow is Christ physically risen and ascended, bearing our flesh albeit now glorified. If salvation and blessing are to be found only in Christ (Eph. 1:3ff), then this Christ, flesh and blood as he remains, is the only possible source from which the Spirit can bring salvation and the only Saviour to whom he can unite us.

The general point made earlier, namely that the key to understanding Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is found in his doctrine of the correlativity of the ascended yet still incarnate Christ and the descending Spirit, here comes into its own. Grasp this, Calvin believes, and the realism of his doctrine of the Supper becomes less problematic.

What we find in Calvin's eucharistic theology is essentially what we find again and again in his writings: salvation is ours only in Christ incarnate, crucified, buried, raised, ascended, and reigning in our flesh.⁶ This salvation is ours only by faith, and this, in turn, is the same as saying that salvation is ours only through the Spirit, because it is the Spirit who brings from Christ to us all that is in Christ for us, and it is the Spirit who creates the faith in Christ, by means of which all that is his is experientially realized in us. All that is planned by the Father and fulfilled in the Son comes to us through the Holy Spirit.

Drawn into the Reformation eucharistic debates as he was, Calvin makes statements both about the nature of Christ and about our fellowship with him which may seem to be less heavily accented elsewhere in his writings. Nevertheless his Christology is one and the

⁶ A point made most graphically and in lyrical style in Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xvi.19.

same. Only one who is genuinely incarnate, sharing our flesh and blood, is qualified to be our Saviour. There are no other resources in heaven or earth for our salvation than those which are possessed by this Saviour wearing and possessing our flesh. There is, therefore, no other source from which salvation can be brought to us by the Holy Spirit than from that glorified flesh of Christ. Faith communion through the ministry of either word or sacraments is communion with the enfleshed but now glorified Christ and none other.

Calvin's Christ is a substantial flesh-and-blood Christ. For Calvin, salvation is a substantial, not merely a forensic, matter; hence his thoroughgoing emphasis on Christ's union with us in our flesh, and the resultant salvation-transformation of our flesh in final salvation. Here he seems to combine elements of the emphases of the Greek as well as the Latin Fathers of the church. It should not surprise us if his view of the Lord's Supper reflects this substantial Christ.

Calvin's Christologically-focused eucharistic theology found its way into the blood-stream of the Church of Scotland in the sixteenth century. Thus, in his famous 1589 sermons in St Giles, Edinburgh, Robert Bruce expressed the point perfectly when he noted that we do not get a different or better Christ at the Supper than we get in the preaching of the word; but because the Supper-sign is added to the word preached, by God's grace and the Spirit's ministry we may get the same Christ better, and, sensing the firmness of his grasp of grace on us, get a firmer grasp on him.¹

It is this Calvin-Bruce tradition that Horatius Bonar so well expressed in the nineteenth century:

Here, O my Lord, I see Thee face to face;
Here would I touch and handle things unseen,
Here grasp with firmer hand the eternal grace,
And all my weariness upon Thee lean.

Thus we experience Christ gripping us in the word and the same Christ—incarnate, crucified, raised, ascended, glorified, reigning, and returning—made known at the Table, and there sometimes better grasped.

¹ See Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, ed. T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1958), p. 64.