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*This book is dedicated to my son,
Joseph Michael Mathison.*

*The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice,
And he who begets a wise child will delight in him.
Let your father and your mother be glad,
And let her who bore you rejoice.
(Prov. 23:24-25)*



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FOREWORD BY R. C. SPROUL

Recently I visited a newly constructed church building. The interior was spacious and beautifully decorated. However, I was stunned by what was not visible to my eye. There was no pulpit and no communion table.

The absence of a fixed pulpit was not too much of a cultural shock for me as I have seen countless churches wherein plexiglas lecterns serve as portable pulpits, easily removed to make room for the drama presentation. The ancient and historic use of the elevated pulpit that symbolizes the lofty import of the word of God preached, is now relegated to the realm of the vestigial remnants of the dark ages. The furniture itself is an art form. Indeed all forms are art forms and all art forms communicate something. What this shift in art form from elevated pulpit to plexiglas lectern means may be left to the reader's imagination.

During the sixteenth-century Reformation some dramatic changes occurred in church architecture and adornment. One of the most dramatic changes was the shift from the altar to the communion table. The altar was usually fixed against the back wall. The priest stood in front of it, facing the altar with his back to the congregation. In this posture the priest was presenting an offering—a sacrifice (albeit “unbloody”) of Christ to the Father on behalf of the people.

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When the Reformers rejected the idea of the Lord's Supper as a propitiatory sacrifice, the placing and use of the communion table changed. In most Protestant churches the altar was no longer viewed as an altar (a place for sacrifices) but was now viewed as a table from which a meal could be served. The offering was not to God but to the people.

The sixteenth century witnessed a massive debate concerning the meaning and function of the sacrament. The magisterial Reformers were by no means in monolithic agreement on serious issues regarding the Lord's Supper. Yet as divided as they were on some issues, the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists were solidly in agreement on two vital issues—that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace and that Christ was really and truly present in the sacrament. All three affirmed that the believer is actually nurtured by the risen body and blood of Christ.

Since the sixteenth century there has been a gradual but steady erosion of the Reformed view of the sacrament so that in the present era the doctrine of the real presence is decidedly a minority report.

From the earliest times of Christian history there has been a close link between the church's understanding of the nature of the sacrament and her attention to it. Its use tends to follow its perceived significance. When the sacrament is reduced to the level of a "naked sign" or "nude symbol," its importance and its practice all but disappear from the life of the church.

I am convinced that where the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is taken lightly the people of God are sorely impoverished. Without both Word and sacrament we face a spiritual famine.

The light of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is in eclipse. The shadows of postmodern relativism have covered the table. For the Lord's Supper to be restored to the spiritual life of the church there must be an awakening to its meaning, significance, and power. I know of no greater instrument apart from Scripture itself to bring this renewal to pass than the pages of this book.

This volume represents the best and most comprehensive treatment of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper I have ever seen. When I read it for the first time (and D.V. not the last time), I

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said to Keith Mathison, “You may die now.” Keith gave me a puzzled look as he was not ready to sing the *Nunc Dimittis*. I explained that if he made no other contribution to the church for the rest of his life, he has already provided a legacy for future generations by writing this book.

The term “must read” may be overused and therefore trivialized. But if ever there was a genuine “must read” book, it is this one. Read it quickly before the communion table disappears from your church.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a lot of people many thanks in connection with the writing of this book. First, I must thank my dear wife Tricia for once again being supportive and offering constant encouragement, especially during those times when the hurdles appeared insurmountable. I'd like to thank my daughter Sarah for her constant and unquenchable joy. My son Joseph was born during the writing of this book and deserves thanks for providing me with numerous excuses to take lengthy breaks from research and writing.

I want to thank Allan Fisher for asking me to write this book. I know that it is his hope, as well as mine, that this work will contribute in some way to even more and deeper reflection on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I want to thank Paul Fields, Frank James, Don Kistler, Richard Gamble, and Brian Nicholson for helping to find materials and for providing access to obscure books and articles; R. C. Sproul Jr., Greg Bailey, and Burk Parsons for providing helpful feedback on various subjects discussed in the book; and Tim Dick for his encouragement and assistance in the later stages of this project. I would like to offer my special thanks and gratitude to Grace Mullen, librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Without her help, this book simply could not have been com-

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pleted. She graciously assisted me in locating numerous books and articles. She took the time to copy and send many of them to me when I was unable to obtain them locally. Her Christian service has been a humbling example for which I am extremely grateful. Finally, I would like to thank R. C. Sproul for encouraging me to keep writing.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting phenomena that one encounters when comparing the writings of the sixteenth-century Reformers with the writings of their twentieth-century heirs is the different amount of attention devoted to the Lord's Supper. The Reformers devoted volumes of books, letters, tracts, and sermons to the subject. The sixteenth century was a time of heated controversy over such crucial doctrines as the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone, yet the doctrine that was discussed more often than any other was that of the Lord's Supper. In our own day, however, the Lord's Supper is rarely the subject of books or sermons. One of the secondary purposes of this book is to address the neglect of this sacrament.

The primary purpose of this book is to introduce, explain, and defend a particular doctrine of the Lord's Supper—the doctrine taught by John Calvin and most of the sixteenth-century Reformed confessions. This is not the doctrine taught in most Reformed churches today. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries two distinct views of the Lord's Supper gained some measure of confessional authority in the Reformed church.¹ The first view traces its

1. See, e.g., Paul E. Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549): Did Calvin Compromise?" in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor: Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 90.

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roots to John Calvin, while the second traces its roots to Ulrich Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger. Zwingli's own strictly memorialist view was generally disowned by the Reformed churches and confessions of the sixteenth century.² However, from the seventeenth century onward, it has gradually become the dominant view in the Reformed church.

It is the thesis of this book that the gradual adoption of Zwingli's doctrine has been a move away from the biblical and Reformed view of the Lord's Supper. This book will argue that Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is the biblical doctrine, the basic doctrine of the sixteenth-century Reformed churches, and the doctrine that should be reclaimed and proclaimed in the Reformed church today.

Part 1 of the book traces the historical development of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In chapter 1, John Calvin's own doctrine of the Lord's Supper is explained in some detail. In chapter 2, the teaching of other sixteenth-century Reformed leaders and confessions is explored. In chapter 3, the developments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are examined. Particular attention is paid to the English Puritans and the Westminster Confession of Faith. And in chapter 4, some of the developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are explored—most notably the nineteenth-century controversy between John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge.

In Part 2, the most relevant biblical passages are examined. Chapter 5 discusses the Old Testament passages that point in different ways to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In chapter 6, the most important passages in the New Testament are closely examined.

Part 3 of the book is devoted to theological and practical questions concerning the Lord's Supper. In chapter 7, a critique of the Zwinglian, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic doctrines of the Lord's Supper is presented. In chapter 8, a summary of the Calvinistic doctrine of the Lord's Supper is outlined. Issues such as the real presence, union with Christ, eucharistic sacrifice, and the efficacy of the sacrament are addressed. In chapter 9, several practical questions

2. B. A. Gerrish, "John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 238.

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about the observance of the Lord's Supper are addressed, namely the frequency of communion, the elements to be used, and paedocommunion.

Jesus Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as the sacrament of union and communion with himself. It was instituted as a sacrament of unity, yet it has become the source of numerous divisions within the body of Christ. It is to our shame that we have rent asunder what God has united in Christ. It is not the purpose of this book to encourage further self-mutilation by the bride of Christ. It is not intended as a polemical attack on any group of believers. Instead, it is my prayer that it will simply encourage prayerful reflection on, and discussion of, this often neglected sacrament. It is my prayer that our Lord Jesus Christ may use it in some small way for his glory and for the furtherance of his kingdom.



Part 1

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT



JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

John Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is rich, complex, and often surprising. His writings on the subject span the entire course of his career as a reformer and are found in sermons, tracts, commentaries, and theological treatises. Calvin was continually interacting not only with Roman Catholics, but also with Lutherans and Zwinglians. And although Calvin outlined the essential features of his doctrine early in his career, these ongoing debates with others would help to sharpen and clarify his views on a number of points.¹

In order to comprehend Calvin's arguments, it is important to understand something of the historical context of the eucharistic discussions of the sixteenth century.² The debates had been going on for several years before Calvin entered the scene in the late 1530s. In 1520, Martin Luther had strongly criticized the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments in his book *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.³ Luther challenged the Roman claim that there

1. For a good introduction to Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, see Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953).

2. For a thorough overview of the historical context, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 7:603–82.

3. For an overview of Luther's eucharistic doctrine, see Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959); cf. Bernhard

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were seven sacraments, insisting that Jesus Christ had instituted only two (or perhaps three). He also argued that the Roman view overemphasized the role of the priesthood in the sacraments. He focused his attention on three errors of the Roman church:

1. The withholding of the cup from the laity.
2. The doctrine of transubstantiation.
3. The idea that, in the Eucharist, the priest performs a good work or sacrifice on behalf of the people.

Luther considered each of these ideas to be blatantly unbiblical. Despite all of his criticisms of the Roman Mass, however, Luther did not challenge the idea that the consecrated bread and wine were somehow the body and blood of Christ.⁴

A controversy soon erupted between the Lutherans and those who followed Ulrich Zwingli. According to Zwingli, the sacraments were a means by which the Christian pledged and demonstrated his allegiance to the church. He argued that the Eucharist was essentially a commemoration of the death of Christ.⁵ He based his view on a different interpretation of Christ's words of institution, "This is my body." According to Zwingli, the word "is" in this sentence really means "signifies" or "represents." Luther reacted in a strongly negative way to this interpretation.⁶

The different views led to an ongoing dispute between the German Reformers and their Swiss counterparts. An attempt to resolve the disagreement was made at the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529. Unfortunately, although the participants were able to come to agreement on fourteen articles, they were unable to agree on one point of the fifteenth article, namely, whether the true flesh and blood of Christ are bodily present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.⁷

Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 127–36, 169–77, 306–13.

4. The Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Zwinglian views will be discussed in chapter 7.

5. There is some debate as to whether Zwingli's eucharistic views were actually "Zwinglian." There are obscure hints in his later writings that he allowed more than a purely memorialist symbolism in the sacrament. For more on his thought, see W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

6. Cf. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 169–77.

7. Throughout this book, the term *Eucharist* is used interchangeably with the term *Lord's Supper*.

JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

According to Luther, Jesus Christ is bodily present in the Eucharist, but according to Zwingli, he is present only in the hearts of believers.⁸

The failure at Marburg served as an incentive to Calvin. He wanted to achieve what Luther and Zwingli had not been able to achieve—common ground among the different branches of the Reformation.⁹ Calvin seems to have deliberately sought to find a biblical middle ground between the Lutheran and Zwinglian positions. It would be a mistake, however, to say that Calvin's mediating position was as close to Zwingli's view as it was to Luther's view. Calvin sympathized with Luther's position. He did not have the same enthusiasm for Zwingli's position.¹⁰ As David Steinmetz explains,

Among the non-Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth century, none was more reluctant to disagree with Martin Luther or more eager to find common ground with him than John Calvin. At the colloquy between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians held at Regensburg in 1541, Calvin, recently accredited as a delegate from Strasbourg, aligned himself with Philip Melancthon and the Lutheran party by signing the Augsburg Confession, an action that provoked unfavorable comment among some non-Lutheran theologians.¹¹

The point is that Calvin's position on the Lord's Supper was much closer to that of Luther than it was to that of Zwingli.¹² This is important to remember, because in later centuries many of the heirs of Calvin would gradually move away from his position toward a more Zwinglian doctrine.

8. Cf. Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 178–81.

9. See David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172; cf. Joseph N. Tylenda, "The Ecumenical Intention of Calvin's Early Eucharistic Teaching," in *Reformatio Perennis: Essays on Calvin and the Reformation in Honor of Ford Lewis Battles*, ed. B. A. Gerrish (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1981), 27–28.

10. See François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1963), 332–33.

11. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 172.

12. Wendel, *Calvin*, 330–31.

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CALVIN'S INFLUENCES

Luther's influence on Calvin's understanding of the Eucharist was strong, but Luther was not alone in shaping the thoughts of the young reformer. Calvin was also strongly influenced by Augustine, Martin Bucer, and others. The influence of Augustine on Calvin's eucharistic thought was especially pervasive.¹³ Calvin appealed to him in support of several basic elements of his doctrine:

1. The nature of signs and their relationship to the reality that is signified.
2. The figurative nature of the words of institution.
3. The unprofitable nature of unworthy reception.
4. The heavenly location of Christ's natural body.
5. The relationship between the sacraments of both testaments to Christ.¹⁴

The influence of Augustine is encountered at virtually every point in Calvin's eucharistic doctrine.

Bucer's influence can also be seen at several points in Calvin's doctrine. As François Wendel notes, "The parallel that is drawn [by Calvin] between the receiving of the elements and the nourishment of the soul by the body of Christ is already to be found in Bucer's *Evangelical Commentary*."¹⁵ There were others, such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, who not only influenced Calvin, but also were influenced by him. It is important to note who influenced Calvin because, although he was attempting to find a biblical common ground, he was not attempting to do so independently of others. He searched the Scriptures, but he also searched the writings of other believers for insight into this difficult doctrine.

13. *Ibid.*, 313; cf. Joseph Fitzer, "The Augustinian Roots of Calvin's Eucharistic Thought," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 165.

14. Fitzer, "Augustinian Roots," 168; cf. G. R. Evans, "Calvin on Signs: An Augustinian Dilemma," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 154.

15. Wendel, *Calvin*, 332.

JOHN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

CALVIN ON THE SACRAMENTS

As we turn to Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, we note that he worked it out within the broader context of his doctrine of the sacraments. It is helpful, therefore, to observe first how he understood the general nature of the sacraments. Calvin provides a comprehensive definition of the sacraments in the fourth book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Calvin begins his chapter on the sacraments with some basic definitions and a discussion of how the sacraments function as signs and seals. He first offers a brief definition of what a sacrament is:

It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is, 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. Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward *sign*, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him. Whichever of these definitions you may choose, it does not differ in meaning from that of Augustine, who teaches that a sacrament is "a visible *sign* of a sacred thing," or "a visible form of an invisible grace," but it better and more clearly explains the thing itself.¹⁶

Calvin also followed Augustine by defining sacraments as "visible words" of God.¹⁷ But we see already in his longer definition the introduction of the concept of the sacraments as "signs" that seal certain promises.

Calvin develops his definition of the basic concepts by explaining the origin of the term *sacrament*. He explains that the ancient Latin fathers used this term to translate the Greek word *mysterion*. The term was "applied to those signs which reverently represented sub-

16. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.14.1 (emphasis added).

17. B. A. Gerrish, "John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 232.

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lime and spiritual things.”¹⁸ The Greek-speaking Christians continued to use the Greek term, so that what the Latin Christians called “sacraments” the Greeks called “mysteries.”

Calvin turns his attention next to the relationship between the word and the sacraments. He points out that “from the definition that I have set forth we understand that a sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it.”¹⁹ For Calvin, the word and the sacraments are inseparably joined, and the sacraments generally accomplish that which the word accomplishes—being different means to the same end. Both the word and the sacraments “offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”²⁰

The connection between the word and the sacraments is quite strong in Calvin’s thought. According to Calvin, the sacraments must include the word in order to be sacraments.²¹ He quotes Augustine, who says, “Let the word be added to the element and it will become a sacrament.”²² Elsewhere, as Ronald Wallace notes, Calvin defines the sacraments as “true visible representations of the invisible spiritual things to which the Word directs us.”²³ To emphasize this truth, Calvin says, “The testimony of the Gospel is engraven upon the sacraments.”²⁴ And not only does Calvin argue that the sacrament cannot exist without the word; he also points out that the word alone does not have its intended effect apart from the sacrament.²⁵

When Calvin turns to a discussion of the way in which the sacraments function as seals, he is forced to answer a potential objection to his doctrine. Some were arguing that if the sacraments generally accomplish the same thing that the word accomplishes, then they must be superfluous. Calvin responds by saying,

18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.2.

19. *Ibid.*, 4.14.3.

20. *Ibid.*, 4.14.17.

21. *Ibid.*, 4.14.3–4. Cf. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 135–37.

22. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.4.

23. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 139–40.

24. Calvin, commentary on 2 Cor. 5:19, cited in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 139–40.

25. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 137.

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To this our answer would be in brief: the seals which are attached to government documents and other public acts are nothing taken by themselves, for they would be attached in vain if the parchment had nothing written on it. Yet, when added to the writing, they do not on that account fail to confirm and seal what is written.²⁶

He adds that “the sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life.”²⁷

The sacraments are not only seals of the promises of God, but also signs of his covenant. Calvin explains what this means:

Since the Lord calls his promises “covenants” [Gen. 6:18; 9:9; 17:2] and his sacraments “tokens” of the covenants, a simile can be taken from the covenants of men. What can the slaughter of a sow accomplish unless words accompany the act, indeed, unless they precede it? For sows are often slain apart from any inner or loftier mystery. What can giving the right hand accomplish when hands are often joined in battle? Yet when words precede, the laws of covenants are by such signs ratified, although they were first conceived, established, and decreed in words. The sacraments, therefore, are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word.²⁸

In the same section, Calvin also compares the sacraments to “pillars” and “columns,” as well as to “mirrors in which we may contemplate the riches of God’s grace, which he lavishes upon us.”²⁹

Calvin turns his attention next to the way in which the sacraments confirm faith as instruments of the Holy Spirit. He first notes that the importance of the sacraments is not affected by the fact that they are received by the wicked. The sacraments may be received

26. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.5.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 4.14.6.

29. *Ibid.*

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by all, but they are efficacious only for those who receive them with faith. He explains:

It is therefore certain that the Lord offers us mercy and the pledge of his grace both in his Sacred Word and in his sacraments. But it is understood only by those who take Word and sacraments with sure faith, just as Christ is offered and held forth by the Father to all unto salvation, yet not all acknowledge and receive him.³⁰

In other words, the offer in the sacraments is objective, but it can be received only by faith.

One of the most important functions of the sacraments, according to Calvin, is to confirm and increase faith. He writes:

As to the confirmation and increase of faith . . . I assign this particular ministry to the sacraments. Not that I suppose there is some secret force or other perpetually seated in them by which they are able to promote or confirm faith by themselves. Rather, I consider that they have been instituted by the Lord to the end that they may serve to establish and increase faith.³¹

Calvin takes great pains to distance himself from any “magical” understanding of the sacraments. He insists that there is no force or power that resides inherently in the elements themselves. What power they have comes from the working of the Holy Spirit:

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. If the Spirit be lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears. Therefore, I make such a division between Spirit and sacraments that the power to act rests with the for-

30. *Ibid.*, 4.14.7.

31. *Ibid.*, 4.14.9.

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mer, and the ministry alone is left to the latter—a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power.³²

In Calvin's understanding, the Holy Spirit plays an essential role in the ministry of the sacraments. In order that "the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain, the Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of the Lord."³³ Apart from the Spirit's work, the sacraments profit nothing. When the Spirit does work, he "transmits those outward words and sacraments from our ears to our soul."³⁴

Although the sacraments are used in this way by God, we are not to place our confidence directly in them. They are instruments, and so they have value only insofar as God uses them as his instruments. As Calvin puts it, "God uses means and instruments which he himself sees to be expedient, that all things may serve his glory, since he is Lord and Judge of all."³⁵ And just as we are not to put our confidence in any of God's other creatures that have been designed for our use, "neither ought our confidence to inhere in the sacraments, nor the glory of God be transferred to them."³⁶ In the use of the sacraments, as in the use of all things, God is to be given all the glory.

Furthermore, the sacraments do not, in and of themselves, impart grace. Instead, like the word of God, they present Christ to us. Calvin strongly criticizes the Roman Catholics for saying that "the sacraments of the new law (those now used in the Christian church) justify and confer grace, provided we do not set up a barrier of mortal sin."³⁷ According to Calvin, any view such as this, which promises righteousness apart from faith, "hurls souls headlong to destruc-

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 4.14.10.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 4.14.12.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 4.14.14.

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tion.”³⁸ Citing Augustine again, he argues that “there can be invisible sanctification without a visible sign, and on the other hand a visible sign without true sanctification.”³⁹

The Augustinian distinction between a sacrament and the matter of a sacrament is very important in Calvin’s thought. He explains, “The distinction signifies not only that the figure and the truth are contained in the sacrament, but that they are not so linked that they cannot be separated; and that even in the union itself the matter must always be distinguished from the sign, that we may not transfer to the one what belongs to the other.”⁴⁰ He quotes Augustine, who wrote, “In the elect alone the sacraments effect what they represent.”⁴¹

But what is the matter or substance of the sacraments? Calvin answers, “Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him.”⁴² He explains further how the sacraments are effective:

The sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there.⁴³

In response to those who might argue that this view implies that the wicked who receive the sacraments render them null and void, Calvin offers the following:

What I have said is not to be understood as if the force and truth of the sacrament depended upon the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however men may vary. For

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, 4.14.15.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 4.14.16.

43. *Ibid.*

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since it is one thing to offer, another to receive, nothing prevents the symbol consecrated by the Lord's Word from being actually what it is called, and from keeping its own force. Yet this does not benefit a wicked or impious man. But Augustine has well solved this question in a few words: "If you receive carnally, it does not cease to be spiritual, but it is not so for you."⁴⁴

We see this careful distinction between the sign and the thing signified emphasized repeatedly throughout Calvin's writings on the sacraments. As we will see, it is an especially crucial element of his eucharistic doctrine.

We have already noted Calvin's assertion that apart from the work of the Spirit, the sacraments profit nothing. At this point in his discussion, he elaborates further on what this means. He says of the sacraments,

They do not bestow any grace of themselves, but announce and tell us, and (as they are guarantees and tokens) ratify among us, those things given us by divine bounty. The Holy Spirit . . . is he who brings the graces of God with him, gives a place for the sacraments among us, and makes them bear fruit.⁴⁵

This is important for several reasons. Calvin explains the first reason at some length:

We do not deny that God himself is present in his institution by the very-present power of his Spirit. Nevertheless, that the administration of the sacraments which he has ordained may not be unfruitful and void, we declare that the inner grace of the Spirit, as distinct from the outward ministry, ought to be considered and pondered separately. *God therefore truly executes whatever he promises and represents in signs; nor do the signs*

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 4.14.17.

46. Ibid. (emphasis added).

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lack their own effect in proving their Author truthful and faithful.⁴⁶

This concept destroys the false notion that “justification and the power of the Holy Spirit are enclosed in elements.”⁴⁷

Another aspect of Calvin’s doctrine is that God truly executes what he represents in signs. There is a connection between the action of the minister administering the sacraments and the action of God. Calvin writes, “God accomplishes within what the minister represents and attests by outward action.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere he defends the view “that God, moreover, as he is true and faithful, performs by the secret virtue of his Spirit that which he figures by external signs, and, accordingly, that on the part of God himself, not empty signs are set before us, but the reality and efficacy at the same time conjoined with them.”⁴⁹ In Calvin’s view, what is promised in the sacraments is really and truly given.⁵⁰ It is important for Calvin to note, however, that although God ordinarily gives the reality at the same time that the signs are presented by the minister, there are exceptions to this rule:

The nature of baptism or the Supper must not be tied down to an instant of time. God, whenever he sees meet, fulfils and exhibits in immediate effect that which he figures in the sacrament. But no necessity must be imagined so as to prevent his grace from sometimes preceding, sometimes following, the use of the sign.⁵¹

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. “The Best Method of Obtaining Concord,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2:573.

50. François Wendel says that there is a striking similarity between the parallelism inherent in Calvin’s view and the parallelism found in the contemporary Franciscan view. According to both, “there was a parallelism between the reception of the elements in the Supper and the action of the Spirit of Christ, but the elements and the Spirit remained distinct” (*Calvin*, 344–45).

51. Calvin, “Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith Concerning the Sacraments, in Answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, 2:342.

52. Ibid., 343. That a separation in time between the receiving of the sign and the receiving of the grace signified is the exception rather than the rule can be readily seen in Calvin’s rejection of Westphal’s criticism of his understanding of baptism. Westphal accused Calvin of denying that men are born again by the washing of baptism. Calvin calls this accusation a figment of Westphal’s imagination