

THE DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER IN THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS

by Cornelis P. Venema

Introduction

ROLAND H. BAINTON, in his fine biography of the life of the Reformer, Martin Luther, offers a vivid account of Luther's first celebration of the mass. At the time, Luther was fully persuaded that he was about to re-enact the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, which would involve the miracle of the bread and wine of the sacrament becoming the body and blood of Christ himself. This was a holy act unlike any performed upon the earth, an act superior to any other in its spiritual efficacy to communicate eternal salvation to sinners. Luther was about to stand as a priest before the altar and prepare to enjoy sacramental communion with the crucified and risen Christ. Bainton records Luther's description of his anxiety, when he came in the introductory portion of the mass to the words, "We offer unto thee, the living, the true, the eternal God":

At these words I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, "With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him. At his nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pygmy, say 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes

and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God.”¹

In our profane and post-Christian culture, we are apt to smile condescendingly at Luther’s primitive (pre-modern) fear of Christ’s holy presence in the sacrament of the mass. Not only do few fear the holy presence of the Triune God, but even fewer believe that presence is mediated in any significant fashion through the sacraments of the church. Moreover, for Protestant believers who repudiate the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which teaches that in the act of consecration by the priest the elements of bread and wine become in substance (though not in “accidents”) the actual body and blood of Christ, Luther’s anxiety on this occasion will be attributed to his improper identification of the sacramental sign and the reality signified.² If Luther had known, as we know, that the sacramental elements are *merely* visible tokens or symbols of an invisible grace, then he would not have trembled in holy awe before the altar. Perhaps the kind of awe and fear Luther experienced at the altar would be appropriate in the presence of the preaching of the Word, which for Reformed believers is the preeminent means of grace or the God-appointed instrument for communicating the gospel of God’s grace in Christ.³ But it seems inappropriate and

¹*Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950; repr. Festival edition, 1978), 30.

²The classic Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation was first formulated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and later was given dogmatic form at the Council of Trent. Cf. “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” Thirteenth Session, Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, 1 (quoted from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. II: *The Greek and Latin Creeds* [Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985], 126): “In the first place, the holy Synod teaches, and openly and simply professes, that, in the august sacrament of the holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really, and substantially contained under the species of those visible things.” For a more recent statement of the doctrine, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994), par. 1373-81.

³Cf. James Daane, *Preaching With Confidence: A Theological Essay on the Power of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 8, who makes the point that the

exaggerated in the context of the sacraments, including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

I do not refer to this episode from Luther's life in order to suggest that his understanding of the sacrament of the mass at the time was a valid one. Nor do I mention it in order to argue that the sacraments, which accompany as visible signs and seals the preaching of the Word of the gospel, are on a par with preaching as means to communicate the grace of Christ. As I have argued in my two previous articles on the means of grace in the Reformed confessions,⁴ the lively preaching of the Word of God has always had pride of place in a Reformed understanding of the God-appointed means of grace. The sacraments do not stand alone but accompany and confirm the Word first communicated through preaching. Thus, apart from the preaching of the gospel, the sacraments would be empty and meaningless signs.

However, the pre-eminence of preaching is not to be understood in a way that diminishes the importance and use of the sacraments. The sacraments of the new covenant in Christ, Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper, are instruments that Christ has appointed to use in the power of his Spirit to initiate and maintain fellowship with his people. Christian baptism is an effective means whereby Christ through the Spirit signifies and seals to believers and their children their incorporation into him and the body of his church. In baptism believers receive a powerful, visible attestation of the promise of salvation through Christ, and of their membership in the visible fellowship of his church. Baptism as Christ's visible sign and seal is not to be diminished as to its significance throughout the whole course of the life of the believer. Moreover, to this sacrament Christ has added another, the Lord's Supper, as an equally powerful means

pulpit is the holy place in a Reformed understanding of worship and the communication of the gospel. If there is a place for trembling in Reformed worship, then, it should be at the pulpit.

⁴"The Doctrine of Preaching According to the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 135-83; "Sacraments and Baptism in the Reformed Confessions," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 2-86.

to nourish and strengthen believers in their fellowship with himself. Though the Reformed churches do not teach that Christ's presence in the Supper is effected by a miracle of transubstantiation, they certainly maintain, as we shall see in the following survey of the classical Reformed confessions, that Christ is truly present through the sacrament when received by the mouth of faith.

The difference, then, between the Roman Catholic view of the sacraments and a Reformed view, is not that the former emphasizes the sacraments while the latter diminishes them. The difference, rather, is that the Roman Catholic view fails to appreciate properly the first and pre-eminent use of preaching as a means of grace. And in so doing the Roman view misunderstands the nature and function of the sacraments. But the Reformed view, though it rightly emphasizes preaching, does not thereby belittle the sacraments. Even though the practice of many Reformed churches may belie their confession, the confessions of the Reformed churches make quite clear the indispensable role of the sacraments in the Christian life. The preaching of the Word is a holy and awesome affair, for Christ dwells among his people through the preaching of the gospel. But no less holy and awesome are the sacramental signs and seals that accompany the gospel. For in the sacraments Christ is pleased to give himself to his people, in a manner distinct from that of preaching but not to be ignored. Indeed, the problem with the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper⁵ is not that it stresses the *presence* of Christ in the

⁵Throughout this article I will commonly refer to the sacrament as the "Lord's Supper." In the Reformed tradition, this is the usual language, though reference is also often made to "Holy Communion" or simply "the Supper." In the Roman Catholic tradition, the language of the "mass" is most common, though the sacrament is also called "holy communion" or "the Eucharist" (thanksgiving). The term "mass" comes from a Latin root and finds its roots in the ancient language used for the "dismissal" (*Ite, missa est*) of communicant members from the service of worship after the sacrament was administered. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the sacrament is often termed "the divine liturgy" or "union" (*synaxis*). Among the Reformed confessions, we will see that the Second Helvetic is unique in its special consideration of the various

sacrament. *That* Christ is present in the sacraments of baptism, and most especially in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is the common testimony of the Reformed confessions. The mode of Christ's presence is understood rather differently, as is the manner in which Christ is received through the sacrament. However, here the Reformed churches echo the conviction of the holy catholic and apostolic church: Christ is pleased to commune with his people under the veil of the earthly elements of the sacrament. This communion is genuine and vital.

In the following exposition of the Reformed confessions on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, I will be utilizing the same approach as in my prior articles on the doctrine of preaching and the sacrament of baptism. Rather than attempting to describe the complex historical setting within which these confessions were written, I will be treating them as a distillation of the official teaching, on the basis of Scripture, of the Reformed churches on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.⁶ Though these confessions are subordinate to Scripture (something they also attest) and need to be tested continually by the study of the biblical Word, this will not be my purpose. My aim is to summarize the traditional doctrine of the Lord's Supper that has shaped the ministry of Reformed churches since the time of the Reformation. Again, as in the case of my previous articles, my procedure will be to treat these confessions distinctly in their chronological order, noting what is common as well as distinctive to each of them. My analysis will be *diachronic* and *analytical*, expounding and interpreting the primary confessional statements regarding the

names for the sacrament. For a recent consideration of the different terms for the sacrament, see Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 2-3, 55-68.

⁶In this article, I will not repeat some of the comments from the previous two articles, which briefly consider some elements of the historical context and structure of these respective confessions. The reader is encouraged to consult these articles for such information. For a historical study of the conflicts in the sixteenth century over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, see Ernst Bizer, *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits im 16. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1940).

Lord's Supper.⁷ Only in the concluding portion of the study will I attempt to treat the doctrine set forth in these confessions in a more *synthetic* and *topical* manner. For this purpose, the study will conclude with a summary of the primary themes regarding the Lord's Supper in these confessions, as well as some observations regarding their implications for the contemporary practice of the churches.

The French Confession of Faith of 1559

ARTICLE XXXVI. *We confess that the Lord's Supper, which is the second sacrament, is a witness of the union which we have with Christ, inasmuch as he not only died and rose again for us once, but also feeds and nourishes us truly with his flesh and blood, so that we may be one in him, and that our life may be in common. Although he be in heaven until he come to judge all the earth, still we believe that by the secret and incomprehensible power of his Spirit he feeds and strengthens us with the substance of his body and of his blood. We hold that this is done spiritually, not because we put imagination and fancy in the place of fact and truth, but because the greatness of this mystery exceeds the measure of our senses and the laws of nature. In short, because it is heavenly, it can only be apprehended by faith.*

ARTICLE XXXVII. *We believe, as has been said, that in the Lord's Supper, as well as in baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets forth to us; and that consequently with these signs is given the true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us. And thus all who bring a pure faith, like a vessel, to the sacred table of Christ, receive truly that of which it is a sign; for the body and the blood of Jesus Christ give food and drink to the soul, no less than bread and wine nourish the body.*

ARTICLE XXXVIII. *Thus we hold that water, being a feeble element, still testifies to us in truth the inward cleansing of our souls in the blood of Jesus Christ by the efficacy of his Spirit, and that the bread and wine given to us in the sacrament serve to our spiritual nourishment, inasmuch as they show, as to our sight, that the*

⁷There are at least two studies in English of the Reformed confessions and their doctrine of the Lord's Supper that take a more synthetic or topical approach. They are: Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); and B. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), chap. 7, "Sign and Reality: The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," 118-30.

*body of Christ is our meat, and his blood our drink. And we reject the Enthusiasts and Sacramentarians who will not receive such signs and marks, although our Saviour said: "This is my body, and this is my blood."*⁸

* * * * *

The Gallican (French) Confession of 1560 treats the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in a relatively brief manner, without any significant elaboration of the doctrine in the context

⁸The English translation of the Gallican Confession, cited here and in what follows, is taken from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*. Vol. III: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds With Translations* (Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 356-82. The French quotations are taken from a standard collection of the Reformed confessions: Wilhelm Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (A. G. Zollikon-Zürich, 1938), 65-79. Quotations from Niesel's collection throughout this article are referenced by page number and line number (e.g., 65.17 refers to page 65, line 17). In addition to these sources, important collections of the Reformed confessions, either in the original languages or in English translation, include: E.F.K. Müller, *Die Bekennnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* (Leipzig, 1903); Paul Jacobs, *Reformierte Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen in deutscher Übersetzung* (Neukirchen, 1949); Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1963); Mark A. Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); *The Book of Confessions*, 2nd ed. (Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1966, 1967); Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959); J.K.S. Reid, ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); I. John Hesselink, ed., *Calvin's First Catechism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); and Joel R. Beeke & Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Reformed Confessions Harmonized. With an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), a recent helpful harmony of the confessions. I should also mention a collection of the Reformed confessions in English or English translation that has been produced by Mid-America Reformed Seminary: *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions* (Classroom Edition; Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991). In the following, I will indicate which source and translation I am using for each respective confession.

of the extensive debates of the sixteenth century.⁹ Though this Confession distinguishes its teaching from the Roman Catholic and Anabaptist alternatives, it presents a simple summary of the Reformed view, which reflects the profound influence of Calvin's teaching. When considering the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in this Confession, it is important to remember that John Calvin was the primary author of its original draft. When he wrote this Confession, Calvin was coming to the close of his reformatory labor in which he had on a number of occasions polemically engaged the subject of the sacrament.¹⁰ Thus, the doctrine of the Confession represents an epitome of Calvin's view.

⁹Cf. Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 219: "An extensive critique of the Mass is to be found only in the early confessions, for an understandable reason. After the Mass was completely done away with in the Reformed church, its treatment no longer had an object." Not only is the Gallican Confession something of an exception to this rule, but Rohl's observation also seems overstated. As we shall see, all of the classic Reformed confessions, including the Westminster Standards of the seventeenth century, offer a considerable critique of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass.

¹⁰It is hardly possible to overstate the influence of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper upon the magisterial Reformed tradition embodied in its confessions. Though we shall have occasion to contrast this doctrine with that of Zwingli in the following, there can be no doubt that Calvin's, not Zwingli's, view of the Lord's Supper prevailed. For Calvin's statement of his view of the sacrament, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.xiv, xvii-xviii; idem, "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Calvin Translation Society, 1849; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), vol. 2:163-98; idem, "Second Defense of the Sacraments," in *Selected Works*, 2:245-345; "Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal," in *Selected Works*, 2:346-494; and idem, "True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ," in *Selected Works*, 2:495-572. For a treatment of Calvin's view, see G. S. M. Walker, "The Lord's Supper in the Theology and Practice of Calvin," in *John Calvin: A Collection of Distinguished Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 131-48; W. Niesel, *Calvin's Lehre von Abendmahl* (Munich, 1935); Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993; and idem, *The Old Protestantism and the New*, chapter 6, "Gospel and Eucharist: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper," 106-117.

According to the Gallican Confession, Christ is pleased to communicate himself and his saving graces through the ministry and fellowship of the church. The church is distinguished by the two marks of the ministry of the Word and the sacraments: “there can be no Church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments” (Art. XXVIII). God has added the sacraments to the Word “for more ample confirmation, that they may be to us pledges and seals of the grace of God (*gages et marreaux de la grace de Dieu*, 74.9), and by this means aid and comfort our faith, because of the infirmity which is in us” (Art. XXXIV). In the new covenant church, there are two sacraments which the Lord has appointed, holy baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Art. XXXV). The first of these, holy baptism, is a pledge and seal of the believer’s incorporation into Christ and his church. Because of its significance as an initiatory rite, baptism is administered only once, though its use and efficacy encompass the whole life of the believer.

What distinguishes the Lord’s Supper as a sacrament is that it continually nourishes and strengthens faith. It is “a witness of the union which we have with Christ, inasmuch as he not only died and rose again for us once, but also feeds and nourishes us truly with his flesh and blood, so that we may be in him, and that our life may be in common” (Art. XXXVI). In the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, believers are repeatedly confirmed in their fellowship or communion with Christ whose body and blood are their spiritual food and drink.

Two emphases stand out in the Gallican Confession’s brief exposition of this sacrament: the genuineness of the sacrament’s communication of Christ himself to those who participate, and the necessity of faith to a proper reception of what the sacrament imparts.

On the question of the nature of Christ’s presence in the sacrament, the Confession uses language that is distinctly Calvinian: “Although he be in heaven until he come to judge all the earth, still we believe that by the secret and incomprehensible power of his Spirit he feeds and strengthens us with the

substance of his body and his blood” (Art. XXXVI).¹¹ Christ is “spiritually” present through the sacrament, not in the sense of “imagination and fancy” but in that of “fact and truth.”¹² The Spirit of Christ working through the sacrament grants it efficacy, and accounts for the miracle of Christ’s presence. Indeed, though the “greatness of this mystery exceeds the measure of our senses and the laws of nature,” it is no less real than were it effected by alternative means.¹³ This presence is not “local” in the sense that Christ’s body is brought from heaven to earth, or, through a miracle like that of transubstantiation or consubstantiation, that it becomes present “in” the sacramental elements.¹⁴ But neither is it spiritual in the sense that the “substance” of Christ’s body and blood is not truly communicated to the believing participant. Thus, it is not simply the power or efficacy of Christ’s saving work that is imparted sacramentally through the Lord’s Supper. Christ himself is communicated, and there is a real sacramental union effected between him and those who belong to him. Those

¹¹French: “Or combien qu’il soit au ciel iusques à ce qu’il viene pour iuger tout le monde: toutesfois nous croyon que par la vertu secrete et incomprehensible de son Esprit, il nous nourrit et vivifie de la substance de son corps et de son sang” (74:35-39).

¹²French: “non pas pour mettre au lieu de l’effect et de la verité, imagination ne pensee” (74.40-41).

¹³French: “mais de’autant que ce mystere surmonte en sa hauteesse la mesure de nostre sens, et tout ordre de nature” (74.41-3).

¹⁴Though the Gallican Confession teaches that the substance of Christ’s body is given “with” the sacramental elements, it implicitly rejects the Lutheran teaching of a local presence of the body of Christ “in, with, and under” the elements. This Lutheran doctrine, especially as it was to be formulated in The Formula of Concord, reflects a certain Christological viewpoint in which, by virtue of the “communion of the attributes” (*communicatio idiomata*), the glorified body of Christ has the quality of “ubiquity.” For a statement of the classic Lutheran view of Christ’s presence in the Supper, see The Formula of Concord, Art. VII, “Of the Lord’s Supper,” and Art. VIII, “Of the Person of Christ” (in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:135-59). For a discussion of the history and debate between Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed regarding the Christological implications of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, see G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), chap. 11, “The Unity of the Person,” 271-304.

who disparage the sacrament by emptying the signs and elements, separating too much between the sacramental sign and the thing signified, are to be condemned. Accordingly, the Gallican Confession concludes with an explicit criticism of the Anabaptist's belittling of the sacrament and obliquely refers to the Zwinglian reduction of the sacrament to a mere visible symbolization of the believer's faith communion with Christ.¹⁵

In order for the sacramental sign and seal of Christ's body and blood to be a means of communion with Christ, the sacrament must be received with a "pure faith" which functions "like a vessel" (*comme un vaisseau*, 75.1) in appropriating Christ. Just as bread and wine nourish the body, so the body and blood of Christ, sacramentally signified and visibly exhibited to faith, are the nourishment of the believer's soul. Faith serves, therefore, as a receptive instrument to receive Christ as he is communicated sacramentally in the same way that the preaching of the Word calls for faith on the part of the one who hears.

The Scots Confession of 1560¹⁶

¹⁵The Gallican Confession identifies Zwinglians or those who affirm a merely symbolical view of Christ's presence in the Supper as "Sacramentarians" (*sacramentaires*, Art. XXXVIII). This language may have been first used by Luther against the Zwinglian view and was later used by Lutherans in The Formula of Concord as a term of opprobrium against the Reformed view in all of its forms. It is instructive, therefore, that the Gallican Confession seeks to disassociate its view of Christ's real presence from that of the "sacramentarians." Cf. Christopher Elwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 181, n.25: "The term 'sacramentarian' was coined probably by Martin Luther in his controversy with the Swiss over the manner of Christ's presence in the eucharist and the interpretation of Christ's words of institution as a derogatory description of the position of those who denied the bodily presence of Christ in the sacrament."

¹⁶The following text of the Scots Confession of 1560 is taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 2nd ed. (Office of the General Assembly of the UPC in the USA, 1967), 3.18.

CHAPTER XXI. THE SACRAMENTS. *As the fathers under the Law, besides the reality of the sacrifices, had two chief sacraments, that is, circumcision and the passover, and those who rejected these were not reckoned among God's people; so do we acknowledge and confess that now in the time of the gospel we have two chief sacraments, which alone were instituted by the Lord Jesus and commanded to be used by all who will be counted members of his body, that is, Baptism and the Supper or Table of the Lord Jesus, also called the Communion of His Body and Blood. These sacraments, both of the Old Testament and of the New, were instituted by God not only to make a visible distinction between his people and those who were without the Covenant, but also to exercise the faith of his children and, by participation of these sacraments, to seal in their hearts the assurance of his promise, and of that most blessed conjunction, union, and society, which the chosen have with their Head, Christ Jesus. And so we utterly condemn the vanity of those who affirm the sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs. No, we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted, and also that in the Supper rightly used, Christ Jesus is so joined with us that he becomes the very nourishment and food of our souls. Not that we imagine any transubstantiation of bread into Christ's body, and of wine into his natural blood, as the Romanists have perniciously taught and wrongly believed; but this union and conjunction which we have with the body and blood of Christ Jesus, in the right use of the sacraments is wrought by means of the Holy Ghost, who by true faith carries us above all things that are visible, carnal and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, once broken and shed for us but now in heaven, and appearing for us in the presence of his Father. Notwithstanding the distance between his glorified body in heaven and mortal men on earth, yet we must assuredly believe that the bread which we break is the communion of Christ's body and the cup which we bless the communion of his blood. Thus we confess and believe without doubt that the faithful, in the right use of the Lord's Table, do so eat the body and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus that he remains in them and they in him; they are so made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone that as the eternal Godhood has given to the flesh of Christ Jesus, which by nature was corruptible and mortal, life and immortality, so the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Christ Jesus does the like for us. We grant that this is neither given to us merely at the time nor by the power and virtue of the sacrament alone, but we affirm that the faithful, in the right use of the Lord's Table, have such union with Christ Jesus as the natural man cannot apprehend. Further we affirm that although the faithful, hindered by negligence and human weakness, do not profit as much as they ought in the actual moment of the Supper, yet afterwards it shall bring forth fruit, being living seed sown in good ground; for the Holy Spirit, who can never be separated from the right institution of*

the Lord Jesus, will not deprive the faithful of the fruit of that mystical action. Yet all this, we say again, comes of that true faith which apprehends Christ Jesus, who alone makes the sacrament effective in us. Therefore, if anyone slanders us by saying that we affirm or believe the sacraments to be symbols and nothing more, they are libelous and speak against the plain facts. On the other hand we readily admit that we make a distinction between Christ Jesus in his eternal substance and the elements of the sacramental signs. So we neither worship the elements, in place of that which they signify, nor yet do we despise them or undervalue them, but we use them with great reverence, examining ourselves diligently before we participate, since we are assured by the mouth of the apostle that “whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.”

CHAPTER XXII. THE RIGHT ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENTS. *Two things are necessary for the right administration of the sacraments. The first is that they should be ministered by lawful ministers, and we declare that these are men appointed to preach the Word, unto whom God has given the power to preach the gospel, and who are lawfully called by some Kirk. The second is that they should be ministered in the elements and manner which God has appointed. Otherwise they cease to be the sacraments of Christ Jesus. This is why we abandon the teaching of the Roman Church and withdraw from its sacraments; firstly, because their ministers are not true ministers of Christ Jesus (indeed they even allow women, whom the Holy Ghost will not permit to preach in the congregation to baptize) and, secondly, because they have so adulterated both the sacraments with their own additions that no part of Christ's original act remains in its original simplicity. The addition of oil, salt, spittle, and such like in baptism, are merely human additions. To adore or venerate the sacrament, to carry it through streets and towns in procession, or to reserve it in a special case, is not the proper use of Christ's sacrament but an abuse of it. Christ Jesus said, “Take ye, eat ye,” and “Do this in remembrance of Me.” By these words and commands he sanctified bread and wine to be the sacrament of his holy body and blood, so that the one should be eaten and that all should drink of the other, and not that they should be reserved for worship or honored as God, as the Romanists do. Further, in withdrawing one part of the sacrament—the blessed cup—from the people, they have committed sacrilege. Moreover, if the sacraments are to be rightly used it is essential that the end and purpose of their institution should be understood, not only by the minister but by the recipients. For if the recipient does not understand what is being done, the sacrament is not being rightly used, as is seen in the case of the Old Testament sacrifices. Similarly, if the teacher teaches false doctrine which is hateful to God, even though the sacraments are his own ordinance, they are not rightly used, since wicked men have used them for another end than what God commanded. We affirm that this*

has been done to the sacraments in the Roman Church, for there the whole action of the Lord Jesus is adulterated in form, purpose, and meaning. What Christ Jesus did, and commanded to be done, is evident from the Gospels and from St. Paul; what the priest does at the altar we do not need to tell. The end and purpose of Christ's institution, for which it should be used, is set forth in the words, "Do this in remembrance of Me," and "For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup ye do show"—that is, extol, preach, magnify, and praise—"the Lord's death, till he come." But let the words of the mass, and their own doctors and teaching witness, what is the purpose and meaning of the mass; it is that, as mediators between Christ and his Kirk, they should offer to God the Father, a sacrifice in propitiation for the sins of the living and of the dead. This doctrine is blasphemous to Christ Jesus and would deprive his unique sacrifice, once offered on the cross for the cleansing of all who are to be sanctified, of its sufficiency; so we detest and renounce it.

CHAPTER XXIII. TO WHOM SACRAMENTS APPERTAIN. *We hold that baptism applies as much to the children of the faithful as to those who are of age and discretion, and so we condemn the error of the Anabaptists, who deny that children should be baptized before they have faith and understanding. But we hold that the Supper of the Lord is only for those who are of the household of faith and can try and examine themselves both in their faith and their duty to their neighbors. Those who eat and drink at that holy table without faith, or without peace and goodwill to their brethren, eat unworthily. This is the reason why ministers in our Kirk make public and individual examination of those who are to be admitted to the table of the Lord Jesus.*

* * * * *

Compared to the relatively concise statement of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Gallican Confession, the Scots Confession of 1560 is far more expansive and detailed. This expansiveness is particularly focused upon drawing sharp lines of distinction between the Reformed and alternative views of the sacrament. In that respect, the Scots Confession attests more openly than the Gallican Confession the vigor of the sixteenth-century debates regarding the sacraments in general, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in particular.

In its extended statement outlining the general doctrine of the sacraments, the Scots Confession steers a careful course between two alternatives. On the one hand, it is noted early in

this statement that the two sacraments which the Lord Jesus has instituted for his church are not “naked and bare signs” (Chap. XXI). The sacraments truly effect the believer’s engrafting into Christ (baptism) and nourish through their continual use (Lord’s Supper) the believer’s fellowship and union with him. Through the Lord’s Supper believers are “so joined” with Christ that he becomes “the very nourishment and food of our souls.” This Confession is anxious to reply to the slander of those who maintain that the Reformed church teaches that the sacraments are mere “symbols and nothing more.” On the other hand, however, the Scots Confession is at some pains to distinguish its understanding of Christ’s real presence in the sacrament from the view commonly taught in the Roman Catholic church.

Negatively stated, Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper is not to be accounted for by means of a doctrine of transubstantiation. The sacramental signs of bread and wine, however closely united to the body and blood of Christ which they signify and represent, are not to be identified with the actual or natural body and blood of Christ. Rather than accounting for the presence of Christ in the sacrament by means of this doctrine, the Scots Confession ascribes the “union and conjunction which we have with the body and blood of Christ Jesus in the right use of the sacraments” to the working of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the One “who by faith carries us above all things that are visible, carnal, and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, once broken and shed for us but now in heaven, and appearing for us in the presence of his Father.” By this “mystical action” of the Holy Spirit, believers “do so eat the body and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus that he remains in them and they in him. . . .” Despite the “distance between his [Christ’s] glorified body in heaven and mortal men on earth,” Christians who partake of the sacrament enjoy a genuine communion with the body and blood of Christ which are their spiritual food. Though the sacramental signs are not to be identified with what they signify, neither may they be separated so as to become “symbols and nothing more.”

After this ringing affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Scots Confession addresses the subjects of the right administration of the sacraments and the identity of their recipients. The sacraments, because they accompany and confirm the gospel which is pre-eminently communicated through preaching, must be administered by "lawful ministers" and "in the elements and manner which God has appointed" (Chap. XXII). Neither of these essential components are present in the Roman Catholic administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the sacrament of the mass, the consecrated elements are adored or venerated, as if the elements or signs were altogether identical with the body and blood of Christ which they signify. Furthermore, one of the two indispensable elements, the blessed cup, is withheld from the people. Rather than confirming the pure Word of the gospel, the mass is administered by priests who teach false doctrine and act as "mediators" between Christ and his church. When the mass is celebrated, the priests offer to God a "propitiation for the sins of the living and the dead," a propitiation which, in the nature of the case, "is blasphemous to Jesus Christ and would deprive his unique sacrifice, once offered on the cross for the cleansing of all who are to be sanctified, of its sufficiency. . . ." ¹⁷

In a closing chapter on the subject as to whom the sacraments appertain, it is noted that the sacrament requires faith, particularly a believing apprehension, of the grace signified and sealed in it. This requires that, in any proper administration of the

¹⁷Though the Council of Trent endeavors to treat the mass, not so much as a repetition of Christ's sacrifice upon the cross as its re-presentation or re-enactment, it nonetheless regards it as an "unbloody" sacrifice that merits or obtains additional grace for its beneficiaries. This is evident from the following statement of the Council in its Twenty-Second Session, "Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass" (Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 2.179): "And forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner who once offered himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory, and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy. . . ."

sacrament of the Lord's Supper, that the recipients "try and examine themselves both in their faith and their duty to their neighbors" (Chap. XXIII). Such self-examination is a prerequisite to a believing reception of the sacramental elements, and demands that those who present themselves for the sacrament undergo a "public and individual examination" by the ministers of the church. Unless such an examination is undertaken prior to the reception of the sacrament, the recipients would partake unworthily, whether because of the absence of proper faith or the absence of a proper relationship of "peace and goodwill to their brethren."¹⁸

Belgic Confession of 1561¹⁹

ARTICLE XXXV. THE HOLY SUPPER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST. *We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ did ordain and institute the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and support those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church.*

Now those who are regenerated have in them a twofold life, the one corporal and temporal, which they have from the first birth and is common to all men; the other spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth, which is

¹⁸The question of what is sometimes termed the "fencing" or "guarding" of the Table of the Lord is one which, as we shall see, is addressed in several of the Reformed confessions. I will return to this question in my conclusion and comment on the implications of the teaching of the confessions for the practice of "fencing" or supervising the Table of the Lord. For a treatment of the administration of the Lord's Supper, including the practice of fencing the table, in the Scottish and English Presbyterian tradition, see Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Dacre Press, 1948; reprint, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 204-16; and George B. Burnet, *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), esp. 64-87, 158-200.

¹⁹The following English translation is taken from *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, 317-36. The citations from the French are taken from Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 383-436. The English translations of the Belgic Confession have historically been based upon a Latin translation which was commissioned by the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. This Latin text is found in Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, pp. 119-36. In a break with this tradition, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted a translation based upon the French text of 1619.

effected by the Word of the gospel, in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is not common, but is peculiar to God's elect. In like manner God has given us, for the support of the bodily and earthly life, earthly and common bread, which is subservient thereto and is common to all men, even as life itself. But for the support of the spiritual and heavenly life which believers have He has sent a living bread, which descended from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, when they appropriate and receive Him by faith in the spirit.

In order that He might represent unto us this spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body, and wine as a sacrament of His blood, to testify by them unto us that, as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterwards nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only Savior in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.

Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ has not enjoined to us the use of His sacraments in vain, so He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs, though the manner surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Spirit are hidden and incomprehensible. In the meantime we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith. Thus, then, though Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens, yet does He not therefore cease to make us partakers of Himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death; nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood.

Further, though the sacraments are connected with the thing signified, nevertheless both are not received by all men. The ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament, even as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament but not Christ who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers.

Lastly, we receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, with thanksgiving, making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God and our neighbor.

* * * * *

Compared to the relatively brief statement of the Gallican Confession, the Belgic Confession follows closely the pattern of the Scots Confession of 1560 in its elaboration of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Guido de Brès, the primary author of this Confession, which became a standard of the Dutch Reformed churches, used the Gallican Confession as a prototype in formulating this Confession. However, on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper he chose to provide a vigorous and extensive statement of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. Perhaps more emphatically than any of the standard symbols of the Reformed churches, this Confession articulates a bold and unambiguous affirmation of the manner in which Christ communicates himself to his people in the Lord's Supper.

In the article on the Lord's Supper, the Belgic Confession begins by noting the difference between the sacrament of baptism, which is administered but once as a sign and seal of incorporation into Christ, and the Lord's Supper, which Christ ordained to "nourish and support those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family." Baptism is a sacrament of initiation into the company of Christ's church. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of continual nourishment and strengthening of believers. Drawing upon the imagery of the discourse of John 6 regarding the eating of Christ's body and drinking of his blood, the Belgic Confession distinguishes two kinds of life, the one "corporal and temporal," the other "spiritual and heavenly." Just as the former kind of life is sustained by "earthly and common bread," so the latter is sustained by a "living bread." Jesus Christ, who descended from heaven as the spiritual food or bread of his people, is given to believers through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper "when they appropriate and receive Him by faith in the spirit." He becomes thereby the source and fountain of the spiritual vitality of those who belong to him, and who receive him through the sacramental means he has appointed.

Particularly significant in the Belgic Confession's handling of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is its statement of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. As signs and seals of Christ's body and blood, the sacramental elements of bread and wine are a visible attestation that believers receive by their means "the true body and blood Christ."²⁰ This reception of Christ is "by faith," since faith is the "hand and mouth of our soul." Indeed, without faith there can be no reception of the truth of the sacrament, however closely linked may be the sacramental signs and the thing they signify. But where faith actively receives Christ communicated through the sacrament, we may be sure that "He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs. . . ." Though the "manner" of Christ's sacramental presence may surpass our understanding and comprehension—"as the operations of the Holy Spirit are hidden and incomprehensible"—we may nonetheless affirm that "what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ."²¹ Though Christ is presently seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, this does not prevent his communicating himself with all his benefits to believers by means of the sacrament. When believers receive the sacramental signs and seals of Christ's body and blood by the mouth of faith, they truly enjoy a strengthening and nourishing fellowship with Christ. They sacramentally eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood.

In a closing paragraph, the Belgic Confession emphasizes the proper ecclesiastical setting for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This sacrament belongs, in the nature of the case, to the whole body of the church, representing the communion that believers have with Christ and thereby with each other. It is to be

²⁰French: "*le vrai corps et le vrai sang de Christ.*"

²¹French: "encore que la manière outre-passe notre entendement, et nous soit incompréhensible, comme l'opération de l'Esprit de Dieu est secrète et incompréhensible. Cependant nous ne nous trompon pas en disant que ce qui est mangé est le propre et naturel corps de Christ, et son propre sang ce qui est bu." The strength of this affirmation of Christ's real presence in the sacrament was impressed upon me a number of years ago when, to my embarrassment, I identified this language as Roman Catholic during an oral examination for my Bachelor of Divinity degree at Calvin Theological Seminary.

administered, accordingly, “in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, with thanksgiving, making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion.” Those who partake of this Supper must do so only after having examined themselves, in order that they might be moved by the sacrament to a greater love for God and their neighbor.

Heidelberg Catechism of 1563²²

75. Q: How is it signified and sealed unto you in the holy supper that you partake of the one sacrifice of Christ, accomplished on the cross, and of all His benefits?

A: *Thus, that Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and to drink of this cup in remembrance of Him, and has added these promises: first, that His body was offered and broken on the cross for me, and His blood shed for me, as certainly as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me, and the cup communicated to me; and further, that with His crucified body and shed blood He Himself feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life as assuredly as I receive from the hand of the minister, and taste with my mouth, the bread and cup of the Lord as sure signs of the body and blood of Christ.*

76. Q: What is it to eat the crucified body and drink the shed blood of Christ?

A: *It is not only to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and the death of Christ, and thereby to obtain the forgiveness of sins and life eternal, but, further, also to become more and more united to His sacred body, by the Holy Spirit, who dwells both in Christ and in us, so that, though Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones, and live and are governed by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul.*

77. Q: Where has Christ promised that He will as certainly feed and nourish believers with His body and blood as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup?

²²The English translation in what follows is taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 37-58. The German text cited is taken from Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 149-181.

A: *In the institution of the supper, which reads thus:* The Lord Jesus in the nights in which he was betrayed took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, This is my body, which is for you; this do in remembrance of me. In like manner also the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood; this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come, *1 Cor. 11:23-26. This promise is repeated by St. Paul, where he says:* The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the body of Christ? seeing that we, who are many, are one bread, one body; for we all partake of the one bread, *1 Cor. 10:16,17.*

78. Q: Do, then, the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Christ?

A: *No, but as the water in baptism neither is changed into the blood of Christ, nor is the washing away of sins itself, being only the divine token and confirmation thereof, so likewise the bread in the Lord's supper does not become the real body of Christ, though agreeably to the nature and property of sacraments it is called the body of Christ Jesus.*

79. Q: Why, then, does Christ call the bread *His body*, and the cup *His blood* or *the new covenant in His blood*, and Paul, *a communion of the body and blood of Christ*?

A: *Christ speaks thus not without great cause; namely, not only to teach us thereby that, as bread and wine sustain this temporal life, so also His crucified body and shed blood are the true food and drink of our souls unto eternal life; but much more, by these visible signs and pledges to assure us that we are as really partakers of His true body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit, as we receive by the mouth of the body these holy tokens in remembrance of Him; and that all His sufferings and obedience are as certainly ours as if we ourselves had in our own persons suffered and made satisfaction to God for our sins.*

80. Q: What difference is there between the Lord's supper and the popish mass?

A: *The Lord's supper testifies to us that we have full pardon of all our sins by the only sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself has once accomplished on the cross; and that by the Holy Spirit we are ingrafted into Christ, who according to His human nature is now not on earth but in heaven, at the right hand of God His Father, and wills there to be worshipped by us; but the mass teaches that the living and the dead have not the forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ unless*

Christ is still daily offered for them by the priests; and that Christ is bodily present under the form of bread and wine and is therefore to be worshipped in them. And thus the mass, at bottom, is nothing else than a denial of the one sacrifice and passion of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.

81. Q: For whom is the Lord's supper instituted?

A: For those who are truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ, and that their remaining infirmity is covered by His passion and death; who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and such as turn not to God with sincere hearts eat and drink judgment to themselves.

82. Q: Are they also to be admitted to this supper who, by their confession and life, show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly?

A: No; for in this way the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation; wherefore the Christian Church is in duty bound, according to the ordinance of Christ and His apostles, to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they show amendment of life.

* * * * *

The Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper clearly reflects the context in which it was written. The history of the Reformation of the sixteenth century included not only a number of disputes between Protestants and Roman Catholics on the subject of the Lord's Supper, but also a number of vigorous debates among different branches of the Reformation. The Heidelberg Catechism, written at the order of Elector Frederick III in 1562, was prepared to further confessional unity among the churches of the Palatinate in Germany. The need for the furtherance of confessional unity was especially pressing because of a history of disagreement between the Lutheran and Reformed parties. This disagreement was significantly focused upon the doctrine of the Lord's Supper and related issues. In the Palatinate, Elector Frederick III was confronted by the inflexibility of strict Lutherans like Hesshus, who worked to win the churches to the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper, particularly its understanding of the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament and the corollary doctrine of

the “ubiquity” of Christ’s glorified body.²³ There were also disputes among the Reformed between those who held to Calvin’s view of the Supper and others who were influenced by Zwingli. The history of these disputes regarding the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper accounts for the extensive and detailed handling of the subject in the Catechism.²⁴

The treatment of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in the Heidelberg Catechism can be distinguished into three general parts. In the first set of questions and answers regarding this sacrament, the Catechism provides a positive statement of what it signifies and seals to believers. In the second set of questions, the subject of the nature of Christ’s presence in the Supper, particularly as this is distinguished from the Roman Catholic view, is addressed. Then in the third set of questions, the Catechism considers the issue of the proper recipients of the sacrament and the need for church discipline in excluding unbelieving and impenitent persons from participation.

In the opening exposition of the meaning and significance of the Lord’s Supper, the Heidelberg Catechism stresses its function as a visible representation of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross and the saving benefits of his mediatorial work. When believers partake of the Supper, they are provided a visible token and pledge that Christ’s body was offered and his blood shed for them. The sacrament visibly confirms believers in their participation in Christ, that his sacrifice benefits them and that

²³For a firsthand account of these disputes, particularly Calvin’s answer to the arguments of the Lutherans, Westphal and Hesshus, see John Calvin, “True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper,” in *Selected Works*, 2:495-572.

²⁴For a treatment of the history and background of the Heidelberg Catechism, see Fred H. Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism: Origin and History* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987/1988); Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. I: *The History of Creeds* (Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 529-54; Bard Thompson, “Historical Background of the Catechism,” in *Essays on the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Bard Thompson et al. (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1963), 8-30; John Williamson Nevin, *History and Genius of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Chambersburg, 1847), 9-56; and Bizer, *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits*, 300-62.

his crucified body and shed blood are their spiritual food. Because of the intimate conjunction of the sacramental sign and the grace signified, believers may be persuaded that they are members of Christ “as certainly” as they see the sacramental elements with their eyes and “as assuredly” as they receive them from the hand of the minister. Furthermore, since the sacrament visibly represents the gospel, which is firstly and chiefly administered through the lively preaching of the gospel, it demands a believing reception on the part of its recipient. Unless the recipient acknowledges the truth of the gospel promise, which is visibly signified in the sacrament, it is not possible that the sacrament should serve as a means to nourish and strengthen faith. However, when believers “embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings and the death of Christ,” they obtain a greater assurance of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, and grow into a deeper and more intimate fellowship with Christ. Through the sacrament, the believer becomes “more and more united to his [Christ’s] body, by the Holy Spirit, who dwells both in Christ and in us, so that, though Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones, and live and are governed by one Spirit, as members of the same body are by one soul” (Q. & A. 76).²⁵

When it comes to the disputed question of the nature of Christ’s presence in the Supper, the Heidelberg Catechism frames its doctrine between the alternatives of Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism. Though Elector Frederick III hoped to unite the churches of the Palatinate in their confession of the catholic Christian faith, his Reformed sensitivities on the subject of the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper clearly influenced the formulations of the Catechism. In the Catechism’s exposition of the local presence of the body of the ascended

²⁵German: “... durch den heiligen Geist / der zu gleich in Christo vnnd in vns wohnet / also mit seinem gebenedeyten leib je mehr vnnd mehr vereiniget werden, dass wir / ob gleich er im Himmel / vnnd wir auff Erden sin: dennoch fleisch von seinem fleisch / vnnd bein von seinen beinen sind / vnnd von einem geist (wie die glieder vnsers leibs von einer seelen) ewig leben vnnd regieret werden.”

Christ, for example, it gives an answer that implicitly rejects the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ's glorified body. Because the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation requires the local presence of Christ's body wherever the sacrament is administered, it represents, from the point of view of the Heidelberg Catechism, a failure to maintain the distinct properties of the human and divine natures of Christ.²⁶ To affirm that, by virtue of the union of the human nature with the divine nature of the exalted Christ, the body of Christ becomes ubiquitous, is to move in the direction of a Eutychian Christology by confusing the properties of humanity and deity. Moreover,

²⁶The Reformed view of the local presence of Christ's body, which denies the Lutheran teaching of its ubiquity, is clearly expressed elsewhere in the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 48: "But if His human nature is not present wherever His Godhead is, are not then these two natures in Christ separated from one another? Not at all; for since the Godhead is illimitable and omnipresent, it must follow that it is beyond the bounds of the human nature [German: "ausserhalb ihrer angenommen"; Latin: "extra humanum naturam"] it has assumed, and yet none the less is in this human nature and remains personally united to it." The Latin translation and expression, *extra humanum naturam* ("beyond the human nature"), became the occasion historically for Lutheran theologians to speak of "that Calvinistic extra" (*extra-calvinisticum*). For a treatment of this Christological issue and its significance in the debates between Reformed and Lutheran theology historically, see John Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiii.4 and II.xvi.14; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, 93-95; idem, *The Work of Christ* (trans. C. Lambregste; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 234-41; E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966); Thomas F. Torrance, "Calvin and the Knowledge of God," *The Christian Century* 81/22 (May 27, 1964): 696-99; Richard Muller, s.v. "communicatio idiomatum/ communicatio proprietatum," in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 72-75; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), IV/1:180-81. In his study of Calvin's Christology, Willis argues that the Reformed insistence upon the local, non-ubiquitous presence, of Christ's human nature was no innovation of Calvin's or the Reformed tradition. It was truly an *extra catholicum*, which affirms the presence of the whole Person of Christ (*totus Christus*) in all his words and works, but not the presence of the whole of Christ's two natures (*totum Christi*). This Christology accords with the formulation of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A. D. (the two natures are neither to be confused nor separated, but retain their respective properties in the union of the one Person). It finds expression in a long tradition spanning the writings of Augustine, John of Damascus, and Peter Lombard (*Sentences*).

Question and Answer 80, which expressly condemn the Roman Catholic understanding of the mass, were added to the second edition of the Catechism at Elector Frederick's direction.²⁷ By identifying the sacramental elements with the body and blood of Christ that they signify, the Roman Catholic view encourages the worship or adoration of Christ in the elements. This, in the strong language of the Catechism, makes the mass an "accursed idolatry."²⁸

The rejection of Lutheran and Roman Catholic doctrine on the real presence of Christ in the sacrament does not mean that the Heidelberg Catechism provides no positive statement of this presence. After denying that the bread and wine become the "real body and blood of Christ" in Question and Answer 79, the Catechism emphasizes the close sacramental conjunction of the sign and the thing signified. The "visible signs and pledges" of the sacrament do assure us "that we are as really partakers of His [Christ's] true body and blood, through the working of the Holy Spirit, as we receive by the mouth of the body these holy tokens in remembrance of Him."²⁹ Christ by the working of the Spirit in and through the sacramental signs genuinely imparts himself to believers, and thereby becomes more intimately joined with them. The problem with the Roman Catholic understanding of Christ's presence in the mass is that it involves a new and "daily" offering of Christ's body in an unbloody manner. The mass teaches that the priest, who ministers at the altar, offers Christ anew as a sacrifice for sin, and that Christ, inasmuch as he is "bodily present under the form of bread and wine," "is therefore to be worshipped in them" (Q. & A. 80). According to the

²⁷For an account of the addition and significance of this question and answer, see Klooster, *The Heidelberg Catechism*, 180-89; and Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:535-6. Schaff notes that "[t]his question was inserted by the express command of the Elector, perhaps by his own hand, as a Protestant counter-blast to the Romish anathemas of the Council of Trent, which closed its sessions Dec. 4, 1563."

²⁸German: "ein vermaledeyte Abgötterey."

²⁹German: "... dass wir so warhafftig seines waren leibs vnd bluts durch würckung des heiligen Geists theilhafftig werden / als wir diese heilige warzeichen / mit dem leiblichen mund zu seiner gedechtnuss empfangen."

Catechism, this is tantamount to a denial of “the one sacrifice” of Christ, and represents an idolatrous worship of the earthly elements of bread and wine. Rather than Christ being present under the form of bread and wine, we should recognize that the Spirit, by means of the sacrament, lifts the believer up to Christ “who according to His human nature is now not on earth but in heaven, at the right hand of God His Father, and wills there to be worshipped by us.”³⁰

In its consideration of the proper recipients of the sacrament, the Catechism offers a clear statement regarding those for whom the sacrament was instituted. Only those who are “truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ” may partake of the Lord’s Supper (Q. & A. 81). Moreover, believers who find forgiveness through the passion and death of Christ must also “desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life.” By contrast hypocrites and those who do not turn to God with sincere hearts must abstain from participation, lest they eat and drink judgment to themselves. Indeed, the unbelieving and ungodly must be disciplined by the church and warned to keep themselves from the table of the Lord, unless and until they show amendment of life. For this reason, after the Catechism treats the subject of the proper recipients of the sacrament, it turns to the subject of church discipline with which the second part of the Catechism concludes.

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566³¹

CHAPTER XXI. OF THE HOLY SUPPER OF THE LORD.

THE SUPPER OF THE LORD. *The Supper of the Lord (which is called the Lord’s Table, and the Eucharist, that is, a Thanksgiving), is, therefore, usually*

³⁰German: “... der jetzund mit seinem waren leib im Himmel zur Rechten des Vatters is / vnd daselbst wil angebetet werden.”

³¹The English translation of the Second Helvetic Confession in what follows is taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 5.001-5.260. The Latin text is found in Niesel, *Bekennnisschriften*, 219-275.

called a supper, because it was instituted by Christ at his last supper, and still represents it, and because in it the faithful are spiritually fed and given drink.

THE AUTHOR AND CONSECRATOR OF THE SUPPER. *For the author of the Supper of the Lord is not an angel or any man, but the Son of God himself, our Lord Jesus Christ, who first consecrated it to his Church. And the same consecration or blessing still remains among all those who celebrate no other but that very Supper which the Lord instituted, and at which they repeat the words of the Lord's Supper, and in all things look to the one Christ by a true faith, from whose hands they receive, as it were, what they receive through the ministry of the ministers of the Church.*

A MEMORIAL OF GOD'S BENEFITS. *By this sacred rite the Lord wishes to keep in fresh remembrance that greatest benefit which he showed to mortal men, namely, that by having given his body and shed his blood he has pardoned all our sins, and redeemed us from eternal death and the power of the devil, and now feeds us with his flesh, and gives us his blood to drink, which, being received spiritually by true faith, nourish us to eternal life. And this so great a benefit is renewed as often as the Lord's Supper is celebrated. For the Lord said: "Do this in remembrance of me." This holy Supper also seals to us that the very body of Christ was truly given for us, and his blood shed for the remission of our sins, lest our faith should in any way waver.*

THE SIGN AND THING SIGNIFIED. *And this is visibly represented by this sacrament outwardly through the ministers, and, as it were, presented to our eyes to be seen, which is invisibly wrought by the Holy Spirit inwardly in the soul. Bread is outwardly offered by the minister, and the words of the Lord are heard: "Take, eat; this is my body"; and, "Take and divide among you. Drink of it, all of you; this is my blood." Therefore the faithful receive what is given by the ministers of the Lord, and they eat the bread of the Lord and drink of the Lord's cup. At the same time by the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit they also inwardly receive the flesh and blood of the Lord, and are thereby nourished unto life eternal. For the flesh and blood of Christ is the true food and drink unto life eternal; and Christ himself, since he was given for us and is our Savior, is the principal thing in the Supper, and we do not permit anything else to be substituted in his place.*

But in order to understand better and more clearly how the flesh and blood of Christ are the food and drink of the faithful, and are received by the faithful unto eternal life, we would add these few things. There is more than one kind of eating. There is corporeal eating whereby food is taken into the mouth, is chewed with the teeth, and swallowed into the stomach. In times past the Capernaïtes thought that the flesh of the Lord should be eaten in this way, but they are refuted by him in

John, ch. 6. For as the flesh of Christ cannot be eaten corporeally without infamy and savagery, so it is not food for the stomach. All men are forced to admit this. We therefore disapprove of that canon in the Pope's decrees, Ego Berengarius (De Consecrat., Dist. 2). For neither did godly antiquity believe, nor do we believe, that the body of Christ is to be eaten corporeally and essentially with a bodily mouth.

SPIRITUAL EATING OF THE LORD. *There is also a spiritual eating of Christ's body; not such that we think that thereby the food itself is to be changed into spirit, but whereby the body and blood of the Lord, while remaining in their own essence and property, are spiritually communicated to us, certainly not in a corporeal but in a spiritual way, by the Holy Spirit, who applies and bestows upon us these things which have been prepared for us by the sacrifice of the Lord's body and blood for us, namely, the remission of sins, deliverance, and eternal life; so that Christ lives in us and we live in him, and he causes us to receive him by true faith to this end that he may become for us such spiritual food and drink, that is, our life.*

CHRIST AS OUR FOOD SUSTAINS US IN LIFE. *For even as bodily food and drink not only refresh and strengthen our bodies, but also keeps them alive, so the flesh of Christ delivered for us, and his blood shed for us, not only refresh and strengthen our souls, but also preserve them alive, not in so far as they are corporeally eaten and drunken, but in so far as they are communicated unto us spiritually by the Spirit of God, as the Lord said: "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51), and "the flesh" (namely what is eaten bodily) "is of no avail; it is the spirit that gives life" (v. 63). And: "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."*

CHRIST RECEIVED BY FAITH. *And as we must by eating receive food into our bodies in order that it may work in us, and prove its efficacy in us—since it profits us nothing when it remains outside us—so it is necessary that we receive Christ by faith, that he may become ours, and he may live in us and we in him. For he says: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35); and also, "He who eats me will live because of me . . . he abides in me, I in him" (vs. 57, 56).*

SPIRITUAL FOOD. *From all this it is clear that by spiritual food we do not mean some imaginary food I know not what, but the very body of the Lord given to us, which nevertheless is received by the faithful not corporeally, but spiritually by faith. In this matter we follow the teaching of the Savior himself, Christ the Lord, according to John, ch. 6.*

EATING NECESSARY FOR SALVATION. *And this eating of the flesh and drinking of the blood of the Lord is so necessary for salvation that without it no man can be saved. But this spiritual eating and drinking also occurs apart from the Supper of the Lord, and as often and wherever a man believes in Christ. To which that sentence of St. Augustine's perhaps applies: "Why do you provide for your teeth and your stomach? Believe, and you have eaten."*

SACRAMENTAL EATING OF THE LORD. *Besides the higher spiritual eating there is also a sacramental eating of the body of the Lord by which not only spiritually and internally the believer truly participates in the true body and blood of the Lord, but also, by coming to the Table of the Lord, outwardly receives the visible sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord. To be sure, when the believer believed, he first received the life-giving food, and still enjoys it. But therefore, when he now receives the sacrament, he does not receive nothing. For he progresses in continuing to communicate in the body and blood of the Lord, and so his faith is kindled and grows more and more, and is refreshed by spiritual food. For while we live, faith is continually increased. And he who outwardly receives the sacrament by true faith, not only receives the sign, but also, as we said, enjoys the thing itself. Moreover, he obeys the Lord's institution and commandment, and with a joyful mind gives thanks for his redemption and that of all mankind, and makes a faithful memorial to the Lord's death, and gives a witness before the Church, of whose body he is a member. Assurance is also given to those who receive the sacrament that the body of the Lord was given and his blood shed, not only for men in general, but particularly for every faithful communicant, to whom it is food and drink unto eternal life.*

UNBELIEVERS TAKE THE SACRAMENT TO THEIR JUDGMENT. *But he who comes to this sacred Table of the Lord without faith, communicates only in the sacrament and does not receive the substance of the sacrament whence comes life and salvation; and such men unworthily eat of the Lord's Table. Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, and eats and drinks judgment upon himself (I Cor. 11:26-29). For when they do not approach with true faith, they dishonor the death of Christ, and therefore eat and drink condemnation to themselves.*

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE SUPPER. *We do not, therefore, so join the body of the Lord and his blood with the bread and wine as to say that the bread itself is the body of Christ except in a sacramental way; or that the body of Christ is hidden corporeally under the bread, so that it ought to be worshipped under the form of bread; or yet that whoever receives the sign, receives also the thing itself. The body of Christ is in heaven at the right hand of the Father; and therefore our hearts are to be lifted up on high, and not to be fixed on the bread, neither is the*

Lord to be worshipped in the bread. Yet the Lord is not absent from his Church when she celebrates the Supper. The sun, which is absent from us in the heavens, is notwithstanding effectually present among us. How much more is the Sun of Righteousness, Christ, although in his body he is absent from us in heaven, present with us, not corporeally, but spiritually, by his vivifying operation, and as he himself explained at his Last Supper that he would be present with us (John, chs. 14; 15; and 16). Whence it follows that we do not have the Supper without Christ, and yet at the same time have an unbloody and mystical Supper, as it was universally called by antiquity.

OTHER PURPOSES OF THE LORD'S SUPPER. *Moreover, we are admonished in the celebration of the Supper of the Lord to be mindful of whose body we have become members, and that, therefore, we may be of one mind with all the brethren, live a holy life, and not pollute ourselves with wickedness and strange religions; but, persevering in the true faith to the end of our life, strive to excel in holiness of life.*

PREPARATION FOR THE SUPPER. *It is therefore fitting that when we would come to the Supper, we first examine ourselves according to the commandment of the apostle, especially as to the kind of faith we have, whether we believe that Christ has come to save sinners and to call them to repentance, and whether each man believes that he is in the number of those who have been delivered by Christ and saved; and whether he is determined to change his wicked life, to lead a holy life, and with the Lord's help to persevere in the true religion and in harmony with the brethren, and to give due thanks to God for his deliverance.*

THE OBSERVANCE OF THE SUPPER WITH BOTH BREAD AND WINE. *We think that rite, manner, or form of the Supper to be the most simple and excellent which comes nearest to the first institution of the Lord and to the apostles' doctrine. It consists in proclaiming the Word of God, in godly prayers, in the action of the Lord himself, and its repetition, in the eating of the Lord's body and drinking of his blood; in a fitting remembrance of the Lord's death, and a faithful thanksgiving; and in a holy fellowship in the union of the body of the Church.*

We therefore disapprove of those who have taken from the faithful one species of the sacrament, namely, the Lord's cup. For these seriously offend against the institution of the Lord who says: "Drink ye all of this"; which he did not so expressly say of the bread.

We are not now discussing what kind of mass once existed among the fathers, whether it is to be tolerated or not. But this we say freely that the mass which is now used throughout the Roman Church has been abolished in our churches for many

and very good reasons which, for brevity's sake, we do not now enumerate in detail. We certainly could not approve of making a wholesome action into a vain spectacle and a means of gaining merit, and of celebrating it for a price. Nor could we approve of saying that in it the priest is said to effect the very body of the Lord, and really to offer it for the remission of the sins of the living and the dead, and in addition, for the honor, veneration and remembrance of the saints in heaven, etc.

* * * * *

When it comes to determining the consensus Reformed doctrine of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Second Helvetic Confession is a particularly important confession. Since it was written by Heinrich Bullinger, who succeeded Ulrich Zwingli as a leading pastor of the Swiss Reformed churches in Zürich and the Rhinelands, it provides an important testimony regarding the extent to which Calvin's doctrine prevailed over that of Zwingli even among those churches originally influenced by Zwingli's view. Though cautiously and moderately stated, the doctrine of the Lord's Supper set forth in this confession has evidently more affinity with that of Calvin than of Zwingli. It reflects especially the influence of the compromise formula, the *Consensus Tigurinus*.³²

³²The Consensus Tigurinus was, as its name indicates, a consensus statement on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper of the ministers of Zürich and John Calvin of Geneva. This statement distinguished the position of the Swiss Reformed churches from that of Luther on the one hand, and of Zwingli on the other. For an English translation, see "Mutual Consent in regard to The Sacraments," in Calvin, *Selected Works*, 2:212-20. For a historical study of the Consensus, see Bizer, *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits im 16. Jahrhundert*, 234-99. For Zwingli's view of the sacrament, see Ulrich Zwingli, "On the Lord's Supper," in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XXIV: *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. John Baille et al. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 176-238; and Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 163-169. Gerrish notes that for Zwingli the sacramental signs are "not instrumental, but indicative or declarative. They have a twofold use: they signal the fact that something has already been accomplished by the activity of God, and they declare the commitment of the redeemed to live in faithfulness to God who has redeemed them" (164). Thus, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper does not serve instrumentally to communicate Christ to the recipient, but declaratively to remind believers of Christ's work and to profess their faith in this work (as a

The Second Helvetic Confession opens its handling of the Lord's Supper with a comment on its name and author. This sacrament is usually called a supper because it was instituted by Christ at his last supper and "because in it the faithful are spiritually fed and given drink" (Chap. XXI). It is also called a "Eucharist" because it is a thanksgiving for the spiritual blessings that belong to believers through Christ. The sanctity of the Supper derives from its divine origin. No angel or person has instituted this meal as a sacrament of the new covenant, but Christ alone has consecrated it to its proper and holy use as a means of grace. For this reason, the ministers of the church are obligated to administer the sacrament in accordance with the Lord's words of institution and in a manner conformed to the teaching of the Word of God.

In its first paragraph outlining the significance of the Lord's Supper, the Second Helvetic Confession appears to emphasize the Zwinglian view of the sacrament as a memorial feast. By means of this "sacred rite," says the Confession,

the Lord wishes to keep in fresh remembrance that greatest benefit which he showed to mortal men, namely, that by having given his body and shed his blood he has pardoned all our sins, and redeemed us from eternal death and the power of the devil, and now feeds us with his flesh, and gives us his blood to drink,

"badge" of profession). Gerrish, "Sign and Reality: The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," 128-30, argues that there are three principal Reformed views of the sacraments expressed in the confessions: "symbolic memorialism" (Zwingli), "symbolic parallelism" (Bullinger) and "symbolic instrumentalism" (Calvin). He finds the second of these views, symbolic parallelism (Christ is given alongside the sacramental elements) represented in the Second Helvetic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. According to Gerrish, this is a mediating position between Zwingli's memorialism and Calvin's doctrine of Christ's presence *with* and especially *through* the sacramental elements. For our purpose, however, it is important to note that Gerrish places the second and third views together as representing the consensus of the Reformed confessions over against the Zwinglian view: Christ is communicated by means of the sacrament. He concludes that "*all* the leading confessions place the emphasis on communication rather than commemoration, but *some* reflect a certain shyness toward the idea of the means of grace" (emphasis his, 128).

which, being received spiritually by true faith, nourishes us unto eternal life.

If this were all the Confession taught regarding the sacrament, it would reduce it to little more than an act of faith, remembering and declaring that Christ's body was given and his blood shed for the sake of acquiring the forgiveness of sins. However, after this paragraph, the Second Helvetic Confession affirms that there is an intimate conjunction between the sacramental sign and reality, so that believers receive Christ himself with the sacramental elements.

In order to account for the manner in which Christ is present and received through the sacrament, the Confession distinguishes without separating between the outward and visible sign, and the inward and invisible reality. "At the same time" that the believer receives the elements of bread and wine, "by the work of Christ through the Holy Spirit they also inwardly receive the flesh and blood of the Lord, and are thereby nourished unto life eternal."³³ Christ is the "principal thing" (*praecipuum*) communicated through the sacrament, and therefore the believer is invited to look beyond the visible tokens of his body and blood and eat "spiritually" of Christ himself. This does not mean that Christ is "eaten corporeally and essentially with a bodily mouth" (*corpus Christi manducari ore corporis corporaliter, vel essentialiter*, 264.24-5), as in the Roman Catholic teaching. This is the ancient error of the Capernaïtes who taught a "corporeal eating whereby food is taken into the mouth, is chewed with the teeth, and swallowed into the stomach."³⁴ Rather, we should conceive of the eating and drinking of Christ in the sacrament as a "spiritual eating." In this kind of spiritual eating, the "body and blood of the Lord, while remaining in their own essence and property, are spiritually communicated to us, certainly not in a corporeal but in a spiritual way, by the Holy Spirit, who applies and bestows upon us these

³³Latin: "intus interim opera Christi per spiritum sanctum, percipiunt etiam carnem et sanguinem domini, et pascuntur his in vitam aeternam" (264.7-9).

³⁴Latin: "manducatio corporalis, qua cibus in os percipitur ab homine, dentibus atteritur, et in ventrem deglutitur" (264.16-17).

things which have been prepared for us by the sacrifice of the Lord's body and blood."³⁵

Though this language could be taken to suggest that Christ's presence in the Supper is merely a presence of the power or virtue of his sacrifice and saving work, a subsequent paragraph in the Second Helvetic Confession, which is specifically addressed to the nature of his presence, makes clear that it is a substantial or real presence of Christ himself. To be sure, the Roman Catholic doctrine that the bread and wine become the actual body of Christ, not in form but in substance, confuses the sacramental elements with Christ whom they represent. When the bread and wine are denominated the body and blood of Christ, this is said "in a sacramental way," the sign being taken for the thing signified. In the Roman Catholic view, the sign becomes an improper object of worship and is so identified with Christ that "whoever receives the sign, receives the thing itself" (*quicumque signum percipiat, idem et rem percipiat ipsam*, 265.46). Contrary to this view of Christ's presence, the Second Helvetic Confession, following the pattern previously seen in other Reformed confessions, insists that it is effected through an inexpressible work of the Spirit. By virtue of the Spirit's working in the sacrament, "the Lord is not absent from his Church when she celebrates the Supper." Even though the body of Christ remains "in heaven at the right hand of the Father," when believers' hearts are "lifted up on high" as they receive the sacramental elements Christ is truly and effectually present. In order to aid our understanding of this sacramental presence, the Second Helvetic Confession employs the analogy of the Sun: "The sun, which is absent from us in the heavens, is notwithstanding effectually present among us. How much more is the Sun of Righteousness, Christ, although in his body he is absent from us in heaven, present with us, not corporeally, but

³⁵Latin: "... manente in sua essentia et proprietate corpore et sanguine Domini, ea nobis communicantur spiritualiter, utique non corporali modo, sed spirituali, per spiritum sanctum, qui videlicet ea, quae per carnem et sanguinem Domini pro nobis in mortem tradita, parata sunt ..." (264.28-32).

spiritually, by his vivifying operation.”³⁶ In this way the Supper is not “without Christ,” but is a “unbloody and mystical Supper” (*coenam incruentam et mysticam*) in which Christ is truly present and received by believers as their spiritual food and drink.

One point that is especially developed in the Second Helvetic Confession is the necessity and work of faith in the right use of the sacrament. Christ, who is the spiritual food and drink communicated through the sacrament, is not received “corporeally, but spiritually by faith” (*non corporaliter, sed spiritualiter per fidem*, 265.6). The appropriation of Christ by faith, moreover, is a basic and necessary act whereby believers become members of Christ and partake of his saving benefits. This appropriation of Christ by faith occurs “wherever a man believes in Christ.” Thus, it cannot be restricted to or become wholly dependent upon the administration of the sacrament and the believing reception of what it administers. The sacrament, however, has been provided for the purpose of nourishing and strengthening faith. When the believer receives the sacrament he “progresses in continuing to communicate in the body and blood of the Lord, and so his faith is kindled and grows more and more, and is refreshed by spiritual food.” The believing reception of the sacrament is performed in obedience to the institution and commandment of Christ, and truly grants believers an enjoyment of Christ himself. As an act of faith, this reception is a eucharistic act of thanksgiving, “a faithful memorial to the Lord’s death,” and a “witness before the Church.”³⁷

In the concluding sections of its summary of the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, the Second Helvetic Confession addresses several issues relating to its administration and use. In addition to its purpose as a means of communicating Christ and his saving benefits to believers, the Lord’s Supper serves the additional

³⁶Latin: “Sol absens a nobis in coelo, nihilominus efficaciter praesens est nobis: quanto magis sol iustitiae Christus, corpore in coelis absens nobis, praesens est nobis, non corporaliter quidem, sed spiritualiter per vivificam operationem . . .” (266.2-5).

³⁷Though the Second Helvetic Confession is not, as we noted above, Zwinglian in its doctrine, these kinds of statements echo Zwingli’s emphases.

purposes of uniting believers with each other in mutual service, consecrating them to a holy life, and preserving them in true faith to the end of their lives. Because the sacrament requires a spiritual eating and drinking of Christ by faith, believers are obligated to prepare themselves for its reception. Preparation for the sacrament includes a self-examination “as to the kind of faith we have, whether we believe Christ has come to save sinners and to call them to repentance.” It also requires that the believer consider whether he acknowledges Christ as his own deliverer, resolves to live a holy life, and endeavors to live in harmony with other believers.

When the sacrament is administered, it must be administered in careful conformity to the Bible’s teaching and the Lord’s institution. The practice, consequently, of withholding the cup from believers must be condemned as a serious offense against the Lord’s institution, which included the express commandment, “Drink ye all of this.” Moreover, the unbiblical elements, which have been added to the administration of the mass in the Roman Catholic Church, must be eliminated. Among the most objectionable of these elements are the practices of turning the sacrament into a “spectacle,” “celebrating it for a price,” and using it as a “means of gaining merit.” In no respect should the sacrament be conceived as a kind of unbloody sacrifice, in which the priest effects the presence of Christ’s body or offers it to God for the remission of the sins of the living and the dead.

Canons of Dort of 1618-19³⁸

THE FIFTH MAIN POINT OF DOCTRINE: The Perseverance of the Saints

³⁸The English translation of the Canons of Dort is one that was adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1986 and is included in the volume, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 59-82. The Latin text is found in Schaff, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 550-79.

Article 14. God's Use of Means in Perseverance.

And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.

* * * * *

Unlike the Reformed confessions that we have considered thus far, the Canons of Dort do not claim to be a comprehensive statement of the faith of the church. Written to address the five opinions (*Sententiae*) of the Remonstrant or Arminian party, particularly in respect to the proper interpretation of Article 16 of the Belgic Confession on the subject of divine election, the Canons of Dort offer no specific doctrine of the sacraments. It would be possible, therefore, to pass over this symbol of the Reformed churches without comment.

However, it is significant that the Canons of Dort speak of the use of the sacraments, including the Lord's Supper, in the context of their consideration of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. By mentioning the use of the sacraments in this context, the Canons of Dort underscore their importance as a means of grace. After commencing his work of grace in the life of the believer by means of the proclamation of the gospel, God continues to complete his saving work, not only by the hearing and reading of the gospel, but also by the use of the sacraments. Believers persevere in the faith until God's work is completed in them, not because of any inherent capacity for steadfastness and faithfulness on their part, but because of God's persistence in grace and provision of those means which prevent believers from falling away in unbelief and disobedience. This means that the sacraments are divinely instituted and effective instruments to preserve, continue, and complete God's work in believers. Or, to state the matter somewhat negatively, believers may not dispense with the proper use of the sacraments, including the Lord's Supper, without despising God's grace and arrogantly presuming a strength to persevere that they do not possess. Only in the way

of God's persisting grace, and in the proper use of the means he has mercifully instituted for this purpose, can believers be confident of their perseverance in the faith.

The Westminster Confession of 1647³⁹

CHAPTER XXIX. OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

I. *Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.*

II. *In this sacrament, Christ is not offered up to his Father; nor any real sacrifice made at all, for remission of sins of the quick or dead; but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all: and a spiritual oblation of all possible praise unto God, for the same: so that the popish sacrifice of the mass (as they call it) is most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of his elect.*

III. *The Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people; to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to an holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants; but to none who are not then present in the congregation.*

IV. *Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone; as likewise, the denial of the cup to the people, worshiping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about, for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.*

V. *The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that, truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ; albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before.*

³⁹The text of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms that I am using is found in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 87-168.

VI. *That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries.*

VII. *Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.*

VIII. *Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament; yet, they receive not the thing signified thereby; but, by their unworthy coming thereunto, are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore, all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table; and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto.*

The Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648

168. Q. What is the Lord's Supper?

A. *The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace; have their union and communion with him confirmed; testify and renew their thankfulness, and engagement to God, and their mutual love and fellowship each with other, as members of the same mystical body.*

169. Q. How hath Christ appointed bread and wine to be given and received in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

A. *Christ hath appointed the ministers of his Word, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to set apart the bread and wine from common use, by the word of institution, thanksgiving, and prayer; to take and break the bread, and to give both the bread and the wine to the communicants: who are, by the same appointment, to take and eat the bread, and to drink the wine, in thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed, for them.*

170. Q. How do they that worthily communicate in the Lord's Supper feed upon the body and blood of Christ therein?

A. *As the body and blood of Christ are not corporally or carnally present in, with, or under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, and yet are spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses; so they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death.*

171. Q. How are they that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to prepare themselves before they come unto it?

A. *They that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience; and renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer.*

172. Q. May one who doubteth of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation, come to the Lord's Supper?

A. *One who doubteth of his being in Christ, or of his due preparation to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, may have true interest in Christ, though he be not yet assured thereof; and in God's account hath it, if he be duly affected with the apprehension of the want of it, and unfeignedly desires to be found in Christ, and to depart from iniquity: in which case (because promises are made, and this sacrament is appointed, for the relief even of weak and doubting Christians) he is to bewail his unbelief, and labor to have his doubts resolved; and, so doing, he may and ought to come to the Lord's Supper, that he may be further strengthened.*

173. Q. May any who profess the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's Supper, be kept from it?

A. *Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's Supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation.*

174. Q. What is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the time of the administration of it?

A. *It is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, that, during the time of the administration of it, with all holy reverence and attention they*

wait upon God in that ordinance, diligently observe the sacramental elements and actions, heedfully discern the Lord's body, and affectionately meditate on his death and sufferings, and thereby stir up themselves to a vigorous exercise of their graces; in judging themselves, and sorrowing for sin; in earnest hungering and thirsting after Christ, feeding on him by faith, receiving of his fulness, trusting in his merits, rejoicing in his love, giving thanks for his grace; in renewing of their covenant with God, and love to all the saints.

175. Q. What is the duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

A. The duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, is seriously to consider how they have behaved themselves therein, and with what success; if they find quickening and comfort, to bless God for it, beg the continuance of it, watch against relapses, fulfill their vows, and encourage themselves to a frequent attendance on that ordinance: but if they find no present benefit, more exactly to review their preparation to, and carriage at, the sacrament; in both which, if they can approve themselves to God and their own consciences, they are to wait for the fruit of it in due time; but, if they see they have failed in either, they are to be humbled, and to attend upon it afterwards with more care and diligence.

176. Q. Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper agree?

A. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper agree, in that the author of both is God; the spiritual part of both is Christ and his benefits; both are seals of the same covenant, are to be dispenses by ministers of the gospel, and by none other; and to be continued in the church of Christ until his second coming.

177. Q. Wherein do the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's supper differ?

A. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper differ, in that Baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's Supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1648

96. Q. What is the Lord's Supper?

A. *The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ's appointment, his death is showed forth; and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace.*

97. Q. What is required for the worthy receiving of the Lord's Supper?

A. *It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience; lest, coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves.*

* * * * *

The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms provide as thorough and careful a statement of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper as any of the great confessions of the Reformed churches. Consistent with its general doctrine of the sacraments, the Westminster standards especially emphasize the regular use of the sacraments and the manner of their administration and reception. These emphases correspond to the particular concern of the Presbyterian and Puritan tradition with the careful regulation of the worship of the Christian church by the teaching of the Word of God.⁴⁰ If the entire worship of the church must be regulated by the Word of God, then the administration of the sacraments as an integral aspect of worship must likewise be in conformity to Scriptural precept and example.⁴¹

⁴⁰For a treatment of the historical context for the Westminster Standards, including the debates between Puritan and Anglican parties on the subject of the sacraments, see Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*. Vol. 1: *From Cranmer to Hooker* (Princeton University Press, 1970; combined ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 76-126; and Burnet, *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland*.

⁴¹The "regulative principle," as it is termed in the Presbyterian tradition, is classically stated in Chapters I.vi, XX.ii, and XXI.i-viii of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The statement in Chap. XXI.i captures the principle well: "But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan,

In the opening section of the Westminster Standards on the Lord's Supper, it is noted that the sacrament was instituted by the Lord himself to serve several purposes. These purposes include not only the communication of Christ himself to his people, but the proclamation and remembrance of his death. By means of the sacrament, Christ has set apart the elements of bread and wine from a common to a sacred use, to represent his body and blood as the believer's spiritual food and to confirm the believer's participation in and union with him. When believers receive the sacrament, moreover, they are reminded of their engagement to Christ and to those who are members of his body. The sacrament is a communion, then, with Christ and, by virtue of this communion with Christ, also with those who belong to him. It obligates believers to live in relation to fellow believers in "mutual love and fellowship each with others, as members of the same mystical body."

When the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is administered, it is to be administered by ministers of the Word who follow the pattern set forth in the Lord's institution of the Supper. The sacrament requires the consecration of the elements of bread and wine to a sacred use by means of a recitation of the words of institution, the giving of thanks and prayer. Believers who partake of the sacrament are obligated to receive both of the elements, and to do so with "thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed, for them" (WLC, Q. & A. 169). By contrast to this biblical administration, the sacrament of the mass of the Roman Catholic Church involves a number of unbiblical practices. "Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone; as likewise, the denial of the cup to the people, worshipping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about, for adoration, and the reserving them for pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ" (WCF, XXIX.iv). These practices violate the nature of the sacrament as a participation or communion with Christ either by transferring to

under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture."

the sacramental sign the adoration that is owed to Christ alone, or by preventing believers from a full reception of the sacramental elements. They also are contemptuous of the sufficiency and perfection of Christ's one sacrifice upon the cross, which the sacrament proclaims and commemorates but does not in an unbloody way repeat as a renewed sacrifice. For this reason, "the popish sacrifice of the mass . . . is most abominably injurious to Christ's one, only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of his elect" (WCF, XXIX.ii).

In their summary of the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, the Westminster Standards follow for the most part the precedent of the classic Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation, respectively, are rejected. And on the other, Christ's real, albeit spiritual and sacramental presence, is affirmed. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Roman Catholic view is explicitly identified and repudiated: "That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of the bread and wine, into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant, not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense, and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament, and hath been, and is, the cause of manifold superstitions; yea, of gross idolatries" (WCF, XXIX.vi). Likewise, in a manner that is more explicit and thus unique among the Reformed confessions, the Larger Catechism adds a condemnation of the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation, though without using the name: "... the body and blood of Christ are not corporally or carnally present in, with, or under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper" (Q. & A. 170).⁴² These critical statements regarding the presence of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament are as strong as any in the classic confessions of the Reformed churches. However, they do not follow the pattern of many of the confessions we have considered by identifying the particular

⁴²Similar language is used in WCF, XXIX.vii: ". . . not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine."

Christological questions that doctrines of Christ's local, bodily presence in or with the sacramental elements entail.

In their positive statements of the way we are to construe Christ's presence in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Westminster Standards are somewhat more reserved than, for example, the Gallican Confession or the Belgic Confession. The "outward elements" of bread and wine are related "sacramentally only" to Christ, and are not to be confused with the spiritual reality they represent (WCF, XXIX.v). Though they may be denominated in a sacramental manner of speaking as the body and blood of Christ, they "still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before." However, believers, when they receive the sacramental signs of Christ's body and blood, truly receive Christ "spiritually." They are given a sacramental participation in "Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death." Though language is used that is similar to that of the Second Helvetic Confession, which distinguishes a carnal from a spiritual eating and drinking of Christ, nothing is said about the work of the Holy Spirit in effecting Christ's presence through the sacrament.⁴³ Nor is there language used that speaks of the presence of the "natural" body and blood of Christ (Belgic Confession), or the presence of the "substance" of his body and blood (Gallican Confession). In these respects, the Westminster

⁴³The reserve of the Westminster Standards at this point may reflect the difference which Gerrish ("Sign and Reality," 128) posits between "symbolic parallelism" and "symbolic instrumentalism" on the manner of Christ's presence. Similar to the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Standards affirm that Christ is imparted *along with* the sacramental elements, but not *through* the sacramental elements. This subtle difference of emphasis does not change the fact that the Westminster Standards affirm the sacramental communication of Christ to his people. It may explain, however, why Charles Hodge, in his expositions of the Lord's Supper, sought to articulate a mediating position between Zwingli and Calvin, in which Christ's presence in the Supper is a presence of his "virtue" and "benefits," but not of the body and blood of Christ himself. On Hodge's view, see Charles Hodge, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857); and Peter J. Wallace, "History and Sacrament: John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge on the Lord's Supper," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 171-201.

standards affirm the presence Christ in the sacrament, but refrain from any substantial comment on or elucidation of the nature of that presence.

One theme that comes to particular prominence in the Westminster Standards is the necessity of a proper preparation for and reception of the sacrament. Though all of the Reformed confessions insist upon the believing reception of the grace signified and confirmed through the sacrament, the Westminster standards are quite detailed in their description of the kind of faith required for participation in the sacrament. This is especially the case in the questions and answers of the Larger Catechism. In answer to the question “How are they that receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to prepare themselves before they come unto it?” the Larger Catechism declares:

They that receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience; and renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer. (Q. & A. 171)

Before coming to the table of the Lord, the believer is obligated, accordingly, to test or examine his faith. This self-examination includes an acknowledgement of sin and the necessity of Christ’s saving work, a recognition that salvation depends upon fellowship with Christ, and a readiness to live a life in keeping with the gospel. In connection with this process of self-examination and preparation for the sacrament, the Larger Catechism adds a question regarding the propriety of participation on the part of those who may have doubts regarding their “being in Christ.” Though some believers may not enjoy the full assurance of their salvation in Christ, this ought not to prevent them from receiving the sacrament, so long as they

have an awareness of their sin, a desire to be found in Christ, and a readiness to “depart from iniquity” (Q. & A. 172).⁴⁴

The question of who may participate in the reception of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is not merely to be answered by the individual believer. Next to the obligation of self-examination that the recipient assumes, the ministers of the church, who are obliged to administer the sacrament according to the Lord’s institution, have a responsibility to supervise the table. In reply to the question whether any “who profess faith, and desire to come to the Lord’s Supper” may be kept from it, the Larger Catechism maintains that “[s]uch as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith ... may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction, and manifest their reformation” (Q. & A. 173). The officers of the church of Christ are required to insure the sanctity of the sacrament, and to see to it that it is administered according to the requirements of the Word of God. Because the sacrament was ordained to nourish and strengthen the faith of believers, it can only be received by those whose faith is competent to proclaim and remember the death of Christ, and to embrace the benefits of Christ communicated by the sacramental means.

Consistent with its pattern of extensive elaboration and commentary on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, the Larger Catechism also address two further issues. One of these concerns the particular obligations of participants in the sacrament during its administration and thereafter. Believing participants in the sacrament are required to receive the sacrament in a spirit of reverence and careful attention. In order for the sacrament to

⁴⁴This acknowledgement that true believers may sometimes lack full assurance corresponds to the affirmations of Chapter XVIII (“Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation”) of the Westminster Confession of Faith. For example, Chap. XVIII.iii states that “infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto.”

nourish faith, it must be actively received in a believing manner, by recipients who mediate upon and acknowledge the significance and benefits of Christ's saving work. Moreover, after receiving the sacrament, believers are called to exercise their faith and walk in a manner conformed to that communion with Christ and fellow believers which the sacrament represents. The other issue concerns the agreement and difference between the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These sacraments agree in respect to their divine Author, their reference to Christ and his saving benefits, their sealing of the covenant of grace, their administration by lawful ministers, and their continuance until Christ's coming again. However, they differ in respect to their frequency of administration, their sacramental signs, and their proper recipients. Unlike the sacrament of baptism, which signifies and seals to believers and their children their incorporation into Christ, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, because it requires a believing and active reception, may only be administered to "such as are of years and ability to examine themselves."⁴⁵

Summary Observations and Conclusion

I began this article by recounting the awe and anxiety felt by Martin Luther, when as a priest of the Roman Catholic Church he was about to celebrate his first mass. Luther was overwhelmed by the thought that he was about to offer an unbloody sacrifice of Christ upon the altar. When Protestants contemplate this episode in Luther's life, they are apt to regard it as little more than the product at the time of his mistaken view of the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament. For many evangelical and Reformed believers, the sacraments in general, and the Lord's Supper in particular, have undergone a process of desacralization. What matters in Christian worship are such things as the preaching of the gospel, the singing of God's praise, and the

⁴⁵I will briefly return to and comment on the issue of paedocommunion in my conclusion. The Westminster Standards are most clear in their implication that this practice is unwarranted.

presentation of the worshipping community's offerings of thanksgiving. There is little place for holy reverence and exultation in the administration of the grace of Christ through the sacraments of the church.

If nothing else, our survey of the confessions of the Reformed churches and their doctrine of the Lord's Supper should be enough to suggest that there is something of a gap between the present practice of many Reformed churches and their historic confessions. Whatever criticisms these confessions offer against the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass—and these criticisms, as we have seen, are considerable—they are not offered in the name of a diminished view of the importance of the sacraments to the life of the church and her members. Nothing could be further from the truth. These confessions wholeheartedly embrace the catholic conviction of the Christian church that an integral part of Christ's dwelling with and imparting of himself to his people in saving grace belongs to the sacramental meal of holy communion.

There are, accordingly, some significant implications of the confessions' understanding of the Lord's Supper for the renewal and reformation of the practice of the Reformed churches in our day. However, before we turn to these, I would like to begin with a series of observations, which aim to summarize the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in these confessions.

Summary Observations Regarding the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

First, with respect to the frequency of its administration and reception, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is clearly distinguished in the Reformed confessions from the sacrament of baptism. Whereas baptism is a rite of initiation or incorporation into Christ and his body, the church, the Lord's Supper is a rite of continual confirmation, nourishment, and strengthening of the faith of believers. Baptism is by its nature a one-time ordinance. The Lord's Supper is by its nature a sacrament that needs to be repeated and thereby continually used by believers.

Though the Reformed confessions do not explicitly comment on the frequency of the administration of the Lord's Supper, they in principle favor a practice where the sacrament of the Lord's Supper ordinarily accompanies the preaching of the gospel.⁴⁶ Stated negatively, there are no clear confessional reasons that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper should not regularly be appended to the administration of the gospel in preaching. The requirements for a proper participation in the Supper—self-examination and the guarding of the Table against its profanation by unworthy participation on the part of the unbelieving and impenitent—might well present practical impediments to the regular, even weekly, celebration of the Supper. But, with the exception of the Westminster Larger Catechism, which provides a detailed description regarding the preparation for and use of the sacrament, none of the great confessions of the Reformed churches offers any argument against frequent communion. Indeed, the burden of the confessions' statements respecting this sacrament argues for a practice that, in obedience to Christ's

⁴⁶The desirability of a frequent use of the sacrament was already set forth in Calvin's "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances" of 1537 (in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954], 66): "Since the Supper was instituted for us by our Lord to be frequently used, and also was so observed in the ancient Church until the devil turned everything upside down, erecting the mass in its place, it is a fault in need of correction, to celebrate it so seldom." Cf. G. W. Bromiley, *Sacramental Teaching and Practice in the Reformation Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 74: "The general view of the Reformers was that, considering scriptural precedent and the purpose and meaning of the sacrament, it ought to be administered each week, or monthly at the very least." For a recent defense of a more frequent celebration of the Supper, which argues on the basis of Calvin's doctrine and the standpoint of the Reformed confessions, see Michael J. Horton, "At Least Weekly: The Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper and of Its Frequent Celebration," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 11 (2000): 147-69. It is an irony of history that, whereas several of the church orders of the Reformed churches stipulate the administration of the sacrament *at least* four times per year, this became the standard practice. Historically, this stipulation was a compromise intended to *increase* the frequency of participation in the face of the Medieval practice going back to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 requiring reception of the mass at least once per year (the normal practice of many).

institution, administers the Supper as a regular accompaniment of the preaching of the Word.

Second, in the Reformed confessions the Lord's Supper is variously described and several purposes are identified as integral to its institution.

Perhaps the most basic metaphor governing the descriptions of the Lord's Supper is that of *a sacred meal*, which was instituted to confirm and nourish believers in their communion with Christ. The sacramental elements of bread and wine were consecrated to serve as tokens and pledges of Christ himself, whose body given and blood shed are the spiritual sustenance and life of believers. By sharing this sacramental meal, believers enjoy a rich communion with Christ and with all his members. They commune with Christ under the veil of the sacramental elements, and acknowledge him to be their food and drink unto life eternal. Reflecting this emphasis upon the sacrament as a nourishing meal, the Reformed confessions typically denominate the sacrament as "the Lord's Supper" or "the Lord's table." Even as the physical body is strengthened by bread and wine, so the spiritual life of believers is strengthened by the eating and drinking of Christ, who is the spiritual food of those who belong to him by faith.

Consistent with the understanding of the Lord's Supper as a spiritual meal in which the believer enjoys communion with and is nourished by the Lord, the Reformed confessions also speak of the sacrament as *a memorial* of Christ's death and sacrifice upon the cross. Though the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is not merely a memorial or occasion for thanksgiving to God (the Zwinglian doctrine of the sacrament is uniformly, though often only implicitly, repudiated as inadequate), through it the church commemorates and proclaims Christ's death until he comes again at the end of the age. For this reason, the sacrament is also an occasion for thanksgiving and praise—a eucharistic meal whose character is not only one of reverent commemoration but also one of joyful thankfulness. When believers receive the elements as tokens of Christ's body and blood, they do so in gratitude to

God for all of the benefits of salvation which are theirs through Christ.

The sacrament, which as an invisible sign of an invisible grace serves to confirm and strengthen faith in the promises of the gospel, also evokes thanksgiving by *assuring* believers of their participation in Christ and his saving work. To use the language of the confessions, as assuredly as believers take the bread and the wine from the hand of Christ's ministers, so assuredly are they given to believe that Christ's work was for them. Indeed, it was for this reason that the Lord graciously and mercifully appointed the sacrament. Knowing the weakness and uncertainty that often characterize the faith of believers, the Lord instituted this sacramental meal as a visible representation of his work on their behalf. Lest the gospel promise, first announced through the preaching of the Word, be doubted, God has graciously condescended to our weakness in appointing this means to aid our faith.

Because the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper is a *holy communion* with Christ, it also serves the purposes of uniting believers more intimately with him and calling them to a life of loving obedience and holy consecration. Believers, when they commemorate and proclaim the reconciling work of Christ in the sacrament, are reminded of their calling to be united to and reconciled with fellow believers. Those who are joined through the sacrament in communion with Christ are likewise joined with all who are his members. Furthermore, as members who enjoy the most intimate and full communion with Christ, they are engaged to a life that is marked by love and obedience to him. Those who share this meal with Christ are called to live in greater intimacy with Christ and his members. Failure to live in communion with Christ or to love those who share this communion with him is a manifest denial of the nature and significance of this sacred meal.

Third, on the much-disputed question of the nature of Christ's *real presence* in the sacrament, the Reformed confessions typically affirm this presence in strong terms. But they do so with

an accompanying denial of the explanations of that presence offered by the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran tradition.

According to the Reformed confessions, those who receive Christ through the sacrament with the mouth of faith genuinely partake of him. Believers enjoy through the sacrament a true participation in and reception of the body and blood of Christ. The sacramental signs of bread and wine, though not to be confused or identified with the actual body and blood of Christ, genuinely communicate Christ to believers. The sacramental acts of eating and drinking are instrumental to a communication of Christ *with* the sacramental signs. In several of the confessions we have considered, the language used to describe Christ's presence is quite robust. Believers are said to partake through the sacrament of the "substance" of Christ's body and blood (Gallican Confession). What is eaten and drunk in the sacrament is said to be nothing other than "the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ" (Belgic Confession). The spiritual eating and drinking that takes place in the sacrament involves such an intimate participation in Christ that the believer becomes altogether one with him, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh (Scots Confession of 1560, Heidelberg Catechism).

However, when it comes to providing an explanation of the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, the Reformed Confessions object vigorously to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation and the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation. The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation improperly identifies the sacramental elements with the spiritual reality that they represent. The earthly elements of the sacrament become the actual body and blood of Christ, though remaining under the form or appearance of bread and wine. Whether received by faith or not, the consecrated elements are objectively the body and blood of Christ, and remain what they have become until they are properly consumed.⁴⁷ Moreover, in this doctrine the

⁴⁷This kind of "objectivism" in the understanding of Christ's presence in the sacramental elements is clearly expressed in the decisions of the Council of Trent on the sacrament of the mass. Cf. "The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent," Thirteenth Session, Decree Concerning the Most Holy

eating and drinking of Christ is a physical act, an “eating with the mouth” (*manducatio oralis*) which is a physical rather than a spiritual participation in Christ. Likewise, though the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation does not improperly identify the sacramental signs with the thing signified, nonetheless it teaches that the actual body and blood of Christ are *locally* present in the sacrament. This doctrine also affirms an “eating with the mouth” (*manducatio oralis*) that fails to appreciate the spiritual nature of the believer’s participation in Christ through the sacrament. Contrary to these doctrines of Christ’s presence, therefore, the Reformed confessions simply affirm the believers’ eating and drinking of the natural body and blood of Christ. This occurs through an inexpressible and incomprehensible working of the Spirit of Christ, who draws believers through the sacrament up to Christ who is in heaven in order that they might be joined in communion with him.

Fourth, in their criticism of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Christ’s presence in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the Reformed confessions typically express several key objections to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass. The objection to the doctrine of transubstantiation is not only addressed to the problem of the adoration of the consecrated elements, which is a form of idolatry and an inappropriate identification of the sign with the thing signified. But it is also addressed to the idea that Christ’s presence in the sacrament is the basis for the unbloody sacrifice of Christ in the mass. The priest who ministers at the altar in the Roman Catholic mass offers Christ himself as a propitiation and sacrifice for sin. Though this sacrifice is an unbloody representation of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross, it obtains further grace and merit for those who participate and even for those who may not be present (the dead). Furthermore,

Sacrament of the Eucharist, Canon IV (Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 1:137): “If any one saith, that, after the consecration is completed, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are not in the admirable sacrament of the Eucharist, but only during the use, whilst it is being taken, and not either before or after; and, in the hosts, or consecrated particles, which are reserved or which remain after communion, the true body of the Lord remaineth not: let him be anathema.”

the administration of the mass includes or permits a number of unbiblical practices: the elevation and adoration of the host, the withholding of the cup from the laity, the communing on the part of the priests or clergy without the presence or participation of the laity, and private masses for individuals or portions of the whole body of the church. These and a host of additional ceremonies constitute an affront to the exclusive priesthood of Christ, whose one sacrifice is sufficient to the needs of his people, and betray a superstitious and magical view of the working of the sacrament.

Fifth, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, because it is a visible representation and confirmation of the gospel promise in Christ, *requires faith* on the part of its participants. Because the sacrament visibly signifies and seals the promises of the gospel, it demands the same response as the gospel. No more than the gospel Word does the sacrament work merely by virtue of its administration (*ex opere operato*). Only by a spiritual eating and drinking by the mouth of faith does the sacrament work to communicate Christ to his people. Thus, the Roman Catholic teaching of an objective presence of Christ in the sacramental elements, irrespective of a believing response to the gospel Word which the sacrament confirms, is rejected. Not only does this Roman Catholic view improperly identify the sacramental sign and the spiritual reality it signifies, but it maintains that Christ is objectively present before, during, and even after the administration of the elements whether or not those participating (or not participating) actively accept the gospel in faith and repentance.

In the Reformed confessions, moreover, the kind of faith that is competent to remember, proclaim, and receive Christ through the Lord's Supper is carefully defined. Before members of the church may receive the sacrament, they have a biblical mandate to engage in self-examination. This self-examination involves the believers' testing of their faith against the normative requirements of the Word of God. Essential to such faith are the acknowledgement of our sin and unworthiness, the recognition that Christ alone by his mediatorial work has made atonement for

the sins of his people, and a resolution to live in holiness and obedience to his will. In this way believers are called actively to embrace the promises of the gospel which the sacrament visibly confirms in the same way as they respond to the preaching of the gospel. Furthermore, it is the duty of the ministers and elders of the church to oversee the administration of the sacrament, preventing so far as they are able those from participating who are unbelieving and living an ungodly life. Since Christ has instituted the sacrament for the purpose of nourishing the faith of believers, it would violate the nature of the sacrament to invite the unbelieving or the impenitent to partake. Unworthy participation, that is, participation on the part of those who have not properly examined themselves or who are unbelieving, would profane the table of the Lord and be contemptuous of its ordained purpose.

And sixth, one of the evident concerns in the confessions of the Reformed churches is that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper be administered in accord with its biblical institution. The ministers of the church, when they administer the sacrament, ought to do so according to the biblical pattern. For this reason, the service of holy communion, to the extent that it is described in the confessions, reflects a kind of biblical simplicity, without the addition of unbiblical elements and practices. The sacrament should be administered in both kinds, and these should be distributed to the congregation with appropriate prayers, expressions of thanksgiving, and particularly the use of the biblical words of institution. Because the sacrament is a sacred meal with Christ as its host and substance, the ministers are required to speak and act in Christ's name, inviting believers to lift up their hearts to Christ and to receive him with the bread and the wine.⁴⁸ Such ministers are not to act as priests ministering

⁴⁸Cf. Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 223-24, who notes that, though the confessions typically assume the use of "natural" bread and wine, the Church Order of Julich and Berg "observes that 'those who by nature are put off by wine, so that they can tolerate neither the smell nor the taste, ought to receive from the hand of the church's minister, along with the bread, the kind of drink to which they are accustomed.'" The substitution of another element for the bread or the wine, so long it represented one of the "basic means of

at an altar, but as servants of Christ who minister at a table, which represents the once-for-all and sufficient sacrifice of Christ for his people upon the cross.⁴⁹

The Confessions and the Present Practice of the Reformed Churches

The doctrine of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed confessions is catholic in its breadth and depth. The many-sided richness of this sacred meal, which the Lord instituted for the benefit of his church, is nicely embraced within the various confessions of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. In their treatment of the Lord's Supper, these confessions present strong objections to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass. But these are not born of any lesser conviction regarding the importance of this sacrament to the ministry of the church or in the lives of believers. Perhaps this is the first lesson that we need to learn from these confessions: the Lord's Supper is integral to Christ's communion with his people, a rich and powerful means of grace in the ministry of the church. There are other lessons, however, that the Reformed churches need to take from these confessions as well.

One of these lessons is that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is *far more than a memorial* of Christ's death. It is a memorial, to be sure—in the sacrament believers commemorate Christ's cross and the sacrifice which purchased their

nourishment," would be irregular but would not necessarily invalidate the sacrament's administration.

⁴⁹This has implications for the furnishing of the place of worship. Not only should the communion table find its place in front of (or near) the pulpit, but it should also be *a table*, not an altar. For a treatment of the traditional liturgy and administration of the Supper in the Reformed churches, see Howard G. Hageman, *Pulpit and Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962), "A Tale of Two Cities," 13-35. The title of Hageman's chapter reflects his thesis that Geneva (Calvin) and Zürich (Zwingli) represent two distinct views of the Lord's Supper and its liturgical administration. In Hageman's view, despite the predominance of Calvin's doctrine of the sacrament, historic Reformed liturgies were significantly influenced by the Zwinglian pattern. This includes the separation of pulpit and table in the practice of infrequent communion.

redemption. But the sacrament is also a Christ-appointed and spiritually effective means of strengthening the communion between Christ and his people. It involves a joyful and festive fellowship with the living Christ into whose presence believers are lifted up by the Spirit working through the sacrament. As a sacramental means of visibly confirming and sealing to believers the promises of the gospel, the Lord's Supper nourishes and fortifies faith. As a sacred meal in which believers eat and drink with the mouth of faith the sacramental tokens of Christ's body and blood, believers are nourished and spiritually furnished with the finest of foods, Christ himself, who is the bread of life. These features of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, regrettably, are often diminished in many Reformed churches by an overemphasis upon its commemorative purpose.⁵⁰ Were they to be restored to their proper place, a more balanced (confessionally speaking) understanding and administration of the sacrament would likely result.

The infrequency of the administration of the Lord's Supper illustrates in a rather striking way the distance between the affirmations of the Reformed confessions and the practice of many Reformed churches. As I suggested in the preceding series of observations, the Reformed confessions encourage a practice in which the sacrament *ordinarily accompanies* the preaching of the Word. This was, of course, the traditional practice of the catholic Christian church in the centuries prior to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. It is interesting to note that none of the Reformed confessions offers this as a criticism of the Roman Catholic Church, namely, that it administers the Lord's Supper too frequently. The burden of proof, accordingly, rests with those in the Reformed tradition who argue for, or who are content with, a practice of infrequent celebration of the Lord's Supper.

⁵⁰The practice of some Reformed churches of celebrating the Lord's Supper during their Good Friday services rather than on the following (Easter) Lord's Day may be symptomatic of this imbalance. Similarly, the somber mood that marks the administration of the sacrament may reflect not simply a proper reverence in the remembrance of Christ's great sacrifice for our sins, but also a largely commemorative focus to the service.

Perhaps the most profound way in which the Reformed churches could recapture their confession regarding the Lord's Supper would be to reintroduce the ancient church's practice of regularly following the preaching of the Word with the administration of the sacrament.⁵¹

In recent years, a number of Reformed denominations and churches have debated the issue of paedocommunion.⁵² Should the children of believing parents, by virtue of their inclusion within the covenant people of God, receive the sacrament? Though it is not my purpose to enter into this debate here, the confessions of the Reformed churches clearly speak to this issue. As we have seen in our exposition of these confessions, they uniformly maintain that the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is

⁵¹There are, of course, impediments to the frequent administration of the sacrament that are owing to local customs or practical obstacles. The liturgical forms for the administration of the Supper, for example, are often too long and unnecessarily didactic for frequent use. The practices of requiring preparatory and applicatory sermons, or of insisting upon lengthy periods of preparation (with the elders calling on all church members before the sacrament is administered), militate against frequent communion as well. Even were these obstacles overcome, some will object that frequent communion diminishes the significance of the sacrament. One can only respond to this last objection by noting that it is a little like objecting to eating food regularly on the ground that thereby its significance would be diminished!

⁵²For examples of the kinds of arguments employed for and against this practice, see Christian L. Keidel, "Is the Lord's Supper for Children," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37/3 (Spring, 1975):301-41; Roger T. Beckwith, "The Age of Admission to the Lord's Supper," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38/2 (Winter, 1976): 123-51; Leonard J. Coppes, *Daddy, May I Take Communion?* (Thornton, CO: Leonard J. Coppes, 1988); A. A. Langdon, *Communion for Children? The Current Debate* (Oxford: Latimer Studies, 1988). The only church communion that has historically practiced paedocommunion in the sense of infant communion is the Eastern Orthodox Church. The strict view of paedocommunion, which argues that membership in the covenant community is a sufficient basis for admission to the Lord's Table and members should partake so soon as they are able, should be distinguished from the view which maintains that younger children are able to make the kind of profession of faith that qualifies them for communicant membership. The former idea advocates participation as soon as the child is physically able; the latter may only maintain that the practice of delaying profession of faith until late adolescence is problematic.

distinguished from the sacrament of baptism as a means of regularly nourishing the faith of church members. It belongs to the nature of this sacrament that those who participate *actively receive with the mouth of faith* the sacramental communication of Christ. Accordingly, the obligations of self-examination on the part of its recipients and the supervision of the table by the ministers and elders, prevent any practice that would invite all members of the congregation to participate without exception. Believers whose faith measures up to the biblical norms of self-examination and discerning the body of Christ are graciously summoned to come to the Table of the Lord. The children of believing parents, therefore, are obligated to profess that kind of faith before the church prior to their admission to the table. This constitutes the biblical warrant for the practice of requiring a public profession of faith, in which the believer openly embraces the gospel promise and resolves to live a gratefully obedient life, before the privilege of full communion with Christ and his church may be exercised. Though there may be some debate respecting the optimum age for making such a profession or the quality of the faith required for admission to the Table, there can be no doubt that the Reformed churches are committed confessionally to a practice that demands faith as a prerequisite to participation. The advocacy of paedocommunion, at least in some of its forms, is inconsistent, therefore, with the confessions of the Reformed churches.

The subject of paedocommunion relates to one, final matter which our survey of the confessions raises in respect to the reformation of the practice of the Reformed churches—the supervision, and in particular what is often called, the “fencing” of the Table. Among the Reformed churches historically, there has been a considerable divergence of approach to this practice. Some churches simply supervise the table by means of a verbal admonition and warning to those who partake that they must examine themselves by the standards of Scripture, lest they eat and drink judgment to themselves. In this practice, which is sometimes called “open” communion, the onus falls almost exclusively upon the participant to refrain from an unworthy and

improper participation. Other churches, believing that this practice does not adequately guard the table against abuse, practice a form of supervised or “close” communion. In this practice, the ministers and elders of the church seek in various ways to ascertain whether those who partake are believers whose faith answers to the biblical requirements and who are members in good standing of a true church of Jesus Christ.⁵³ Still other churches, anxious that the sacrament be properly administered and the table of the Lord preserved from profanation, practice an even more restricted policy of what is sometimes called “closed” communion. The practice of closed communion only admits to the Table those who are members in good standing of the local congregation or of another congregation which is in close fellowship with it. For church members to be admitted to the Table of the Lord, they have to offer attestation that they are members of a church which is in full communion with the local congregation, and that they are not under any formal discipline by the ministers and elders of that church.

Though it is not possible to sort through all the divergencies of practice regarding the supervision of the Table of the Lord among the Reformed churches, the confessions do shed some light on the subject. If these confessions are interpreted in their historical context, taking into account the practice of the Reformed churches since the Reformation, then they commend an approach to the supervision of the Lord's Supper that is represented by the second of these practices. All of these confessions require, minimally, that those who come to the Table of the Lord be reminded of its nature and significance and called to careful self-examination. However, they also affirm the need for the ministers and elders of the church to make sure, so far as

⁵³There are, of course, various ways in which this supervision could be exercised, including such practices as: the distribution of communion “tokens”; the provision of “letters of attestation” by the elders of a local church; the request that visitors fill out a written statement of church membership and profession; an interview by elders of visitors to the service who request permission to partake. There are no “foolproof” means of fencing the table. When attempts are made to devise such means, the tendency is to make the invitation to partake too restrictive.

they are competent to do so, that those who participate are not under the official discipline of the church. Because the first formal step of discipline of church members ordinarily bars them from the use of the sacraments, those responsible for the discipline and government of the church must insist that this disciplinary measure be honored. The supervision of the Table of the Lord includes, therefore, a verbal fencing and an official oversight of the ministers and elders.

It is not evident, however, that the practice of “closed” communion is commended by these confessions. This practice shifts the burden too much from the participant in the Lord’s Supper to the ministers and elders who oversee its administration. Though it rightly seeks to prevent the profaning of the Lord’s Table, it expects too much from the ministers and elders. No method of guarding the Table, however restrictive, can ensure that only true believers will participate. However, what is most problematic with this approach is that it risks acting contrary to the very nature of the sacrament as a *sacrament of communion*. The Table of the Lord, it must always be remembered, is the *Table of the Lord*. It belongs to the Lord, and because it belongs to the Lord, it likewise belongs to all who belong to him. To exclude from the Table of the Lord those who are genuinely believers and members of the true church, is to risk making it the Table of a particular church or denomination. This compromises what is essential to the sacrament: the union and communion of believers with Christ, and with all who are members of Christ. However objectionable may be the practice of what is known as “inter-communion” in more liberal, ecumenical church contexts, therefore, it is not consistent with the Reformed confessions for any church to treat the Lord’s Supper in a *sectarian* manner.

No doubt these comments on the implications of the Reformed confessions for the practice of the Reformed churches are merely suggestive. They may raise as many questions as they provide answers. What they do, however, is illustrate the need for a greater appropriation of the biblical insights and riches of the confessions for the churches’ practice. One place to begin is at the Table of the Lord where believers are continually invited to

taste and see that the Lord is good, and that his mercies in Christ are never failing.