

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER¹

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THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN doctrine is far less an arbitrary and capricious interplay of unrelated opinions than it is a necessary process of ideational development. Even the sixteenth-century struggle waged by the Reformers over the Lord's Supper, a skirmish that in some sense remains regrettable to this day, may not and can not be explained on the basis of the personal intolerance and stubbornness of the Reformers. This struggle was deeply rooted in differing principles undergirding the German and the Swiss Reformations. The most incisive difference distinguishing the Reformation in Wittenberg from that in Zurich was concentrated and embodied most clearly and consciously in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

Whereas Luther had enjoyed a scholastic training, Zwingli had undergone a humanist education. Luther was born and raised in monarchical, aristocratic Germany, whereas Zwingli was a son of free and democratic Switzerland. Whereas Luther was driven to the task of reformation by a painful struggle of soul, Zwingli came on the scene as a reformer moved by the appallingly treacherous and immoral circumstances he had observed in church, state, and society. Luther raised the question, How do I become saved?, and found the answer in justification by faith alone. Zwingli sought reformation of doctrine and life through the truth he had discovered in Scripture. Regarding the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Luther had reached his firm conviction on this matter in his struggle not against Rome, but against Carlstadt. Zwingli had developed his doctrine from the start in opposition to the papal mass.

Later Luther told how he had earlier been inclined to reject, along with the teaching of transubstantiation, the local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper as well, a doctrine whose impulse he ascribed to the

¹ Trans. note: The following essay presents in English for the first time the incisive exposition of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper by the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck. It appeared in Dutch as "Calvin's leer over het avondmaal," in *Kennis en Leven. Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren*. Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1922, 165-83 (reprinted from *De Vrije Kerk* 13 [1887]: 459-87). See also the related material in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:540-85 (which was translated from §§ 539-47 of the Dutch original).

enticements of the old Adam. Especially since 1524, however, in opposition to Hoen, the Waldensians, and Carlstadt Luther put all his emphasis, on the physical local presence of Christ in the signs of bread and wine. Carlstadt understood the pronoun used in the words of institution (“*This is my body*”) to refer to Jesus’ body, resulting in a meaningless sentence. Luther properly understood the pronoun to refer to the bread, but explained this to mean that the bread contains Jesus’ body. Luther understood the phrase “which is given for you” to refer to Christ’s body having been given not on the cross but in the Lord’s Supper. On the cross forgiveness was obtained; in the Lord’s Supper forgiveness was dispensed. So too he explained that little word *is* not literally but figuratively, in the sense of *contains*. To clarify his point, Luther spoke of the warmth that is present in the flame, even as the divine nature is present in the human nature of Christ. In distinction from the Reformed doctrine, then, the Lutheran teaching is marked by these three features: (1) Christ is present physically and locally in the bread and wine. (2) Jesus’ body and blood are received not only spiritually through faith, but also with the physical mouth. (3) Not only those who eat and drink worthily, but also those who eat unworthily and unbelievably receive the proper, true body and blood of Christ, even though the latter do so to their destruction.

Zwingli’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is frequently misunderstood and presented incorrectly. One does him an injustice by supposing that he saw nothing more in the Lord’s Supper than a memorial meal, thereby assigning him a place with the Rationalists. No, Zwingli taught quite properly that Christ is the only food for our souls and is also received as such in the Lord’s Supper. But he faced entirely different conflicts than Luther. Zwingli placed in the foreground the claim that the Lord’s Supper is no repetition of Christ’s sacrifice, as Rome argues, but a remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. What yields benefit is not the physical eating of the Christ sacrificed anew, but receiving through faith the Christ once sacrificed on the cross. The flesh profits nothing, not even the flesh of Christ as such; only the Spirit makes alive through faith. The flesh of Christ is of value for us not as something chewed with the physical mouth, but as the One crucified for us and received as such. Such receiving of Christ crucified for us occurs not only in the Lord’s Supper, but it surely does occur there. When we sit at the table of the Lord, we remember the death of Christ and place all our trust in that death; this is what it means to eat Christ’s body and drink his blood. So Zwingli in no way denied that Christ is present spiritually in the Lord’s Supper, or that he is received spiritually through faith. But—and this is the actual point of difference between Zwingli and Calvin—according to his exegesis of John 6, to eat Christ’s body and drink his blood is nothing else and nothing more than to believe in Christ as the crucified one, appropriating the merits obtained by Christ on the cross. At the same time Zwingli also taught that the Lord’s Supper is a confession of our faith, valuable not so much for us ourselves as for the ecclesiastical fellowship. Occasionally he placed a disproportionate emphasis on this confessing character. But this did not push his aforementioned convictions out of alignment, and this feature is

acknowledged as a benefit of the Lord's Supper by all Reformed theologians, including Calvin. Moreover, he arrived at this conviction by coming to see that the sacrament provided nothing beyond the Word. Even apart from the Lord's Supper we also receive Christ's body and blood. So in the Lord's Supper we make confession of what we receive internally through faith.

So when presented accurately, Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper retains a deep, rich, and glorious significance, even if the refinement provided by Calvin is not accepted. But in this respect, too, the Reformer of Geneva developed and refined the work of his predecessor. The opinion that Calvin opposed and rejected Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is incorrect. For Zwingli, the Lord's Supper was not merely a memorial meal. The Zwinglian Basel Confession of 1534 expresses the matter clearly in article 6, that Christ himself is the food of believers unto eternal life, and that through genuine faith our souls are fed and nourished with his flesh and blood, so that we who are members of his body live in him and he in us.²

Nevertheless Calvin was dissatisfied no less with Zwingli's doctrine than with that of Luther. He acknowledged the truth in both, and went on to refine the doctrine of the Lord's Supper still further. Regarding both of Calvin's predecessors one can speak with no more eloquence and appreciation than Calvin himself. Calvin saw both Luther and Zwingli as men whom God raised up to reform his church according to the Word of God, but Calvin was fully conscious of his own calling. The reformation they had been leading in Wittenberg and Zurich Calvin introduced, developed, and organized in Geneva. Calvin was neither German nor Swiss by birth, but French, and was blessed with an extraordinarily keen understanding and force of will. He was indefatigable in teaching and defending, in admonishing and reproving, in governing and leading virtually the entire Reformation movement. As such, Calvin combined the *depth* of Luther's reformation with the *breadth* of Zwingli's contribution. He regretted the difference and the struggle between the Reformers. But he took comfort in knowing that God occasionally permits his servants to err and quarrel in order to teach them humility and make them sense their need for his grace. It is no wonder, Calvin said, when we observe the deep darkness that formerly dominated the church, that at first they did not see everything in the same way. What is truly wondrous, instead, is that they so quickly delivered themselves and us from so many errors.

According to Calvin, Zwingli and Oecolampadius correctly argued against transubstantiation and along with that, against the physical and local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The core truth in their struggle was their opposition against divinizing the signs. But they became imbalanced in that opposition; negatively they were entirely correct, but positively they missed the mark. For though they did not deny the positive truth in the Lord's Supper, they nonetheless did not teach it

² See *Part Four: Creeds and Confessions of the Reformation Era* (vol. II of *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, edited Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003]), 272-79, where this confession is presented under the title "The First Confession of Basel, 1534."

clearly enough. By placing all the emphasis on bread and wine as *signs* that do not contain the actual body and blood of Christ, they forgot to add that Christ is indeed objectively present and received in the Lord's Supper.

On the other side, while rejecting transubstantiation, Luther was right to continue accepting an objective and real communication of Christ, of his flesh and blood, and to oppose as strongly as possible the view that bread and wine are merely empty symbols and signs. But Luther erred when he proceeded from this truth to the teaching of a physical and local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, and sought to clarify this with coarse analogies.³

Calvin adopted this mediating and conciliatory position toward Luther and Zwingli from the beginning. Already in the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) he says that the body and blood of Christ are communicated to us in the Lord's Supper in a genuine and a real manner, but not in a natural manner. Nevertheless his difference from Zwingli's doctrine does not come to clearest expression yet at this point. Calvin explains further that what is bestowed is not the substance of Christ's body but all the benefits he obtained in his body.⁴ What was lacking in Zwingli's doctrine soon became entirely evident to him. And at that point Calvin set forth his doctrine of the Lord's Supper in a series of writings, and defended it against the attacks to which it was exposed from both the Zwinglian and the Lutheran sides. The most prominent writings that come to our attention, besides *Institutes* IV, chapter xvii, and the commentaries on various passages, especially on Matthew 26:26, John 6, and 1 Corinthians 11, are these: the *Confessio fidei de Eucharistia*⁵ of 1537, the *Catechismus major*⁶ of 1541, the *Tractatus de Coena*,⁷ Letters to Bullinger in Zürich, especially from 1548 and 1549, to Melancthon and others,⁸ the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549⁹; finally three polemical writings against the Lutheran minister in Hamburg, Westphal, and one against Heshusius.¹⁰ All of Calvin's labor in this matter led to agreement

³ See the conclusion of the *Tractatus de Coena Domini*; Bavinck cites *Ioannis Calvini noviodunensis Opera omnia, in novem tomos digesta* (Amsterdam: Johann Jacob Schipper, 1667-71), VIII: 1-9. In English, "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Saviour Jesus Christ," (1540) in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, Library of Christian Classics, general eds. John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954), 142-166; and "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ," in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, eds. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), II: 163-198.

⁴ Only recently has the first German translation of that first edition appeared: *Joh. Calvins Christliche Glaubenslehre*, by Bernhard Spiess (Wiesbaden, 1887); see p. 189.

⁵ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., IX: 181ff. See *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 167-177.

⁶ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., VIII: 11-28, esp. 25-28. See *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 83-139, esp. 133, 135-139; *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, II: 33-94, esp. 84f., 89-94.

⁷ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., VIII: 1-9. See *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 142-166; *Selected Works of John Calvin* II, 163-198.

⁸ See *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, IV-VII.

⁹ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., VIII: 648-653. See *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, II: 199-244.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., VIII: 653-723. See *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, II: 245-494; 495-572; and *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 257-324. Cf.

between the church of Geneva and those of Zurich and Bern. But due to the vigorous opposition of Westphal, union with the Lutheran Church was no longer possible thereafter. In 1554 Calvin wrote to Marbach: that had Luther lived longer, he would not have been so sharp and intractable, but would have agreed with the confession that the sacraments truly impart to us that which they symbolize, so that in the Lord's Supper we share in the body and blood of Christ.¹¹ From the other side, Pezel told the not entirely reliable story of Luther supposedly having said that he could have entrusted the entire controversy about the Lord's Supper to such a learned and pious man as Calvin; if Zwingli and Oecolampadius had expressed themselves similarly we would never have succumbed to such wide-ranging disputes.¹² This indeed accounts for the mutual respect between both reformers, but the theologians coming after Luther, wanting to be more Lutheran than Luther himself, rendered union permanently impossible.

In his discussion of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper Calvin proceeded from the beautiful ideal that God has received us through baptism into his church, that is, into his house. He has welcomed us there not as bondservants but as his children. Like a good father in the home he fulfills the obligation to feed us and to provide everything we need in order to live. For that reason he provides not only for our physical needs, but because the life unto which he has regenerated us is spiritual, the food with which he nourishes this life needs to be spiritual as well. Therefore by the hand of his Son, God has blessed us with a spiritual meal in the Lord's Supper, where Christ presents himself as the living bread that feeds our souls unto true and saving immortality.

Christ is, after all, the only food for our souls. He is the substance and essence held forth in the Lord's Supper. Not simply Christ in himself, however, but specifically as the one crucified for us and handed over unto death. In the words of institution—given for you, shed for you—lies the paramount and virtually entire power of the sacrament. If the body and blood had not been sacrificed once for our redemption and salvation, the distribution of the same would not impart any advantage to us. We eat Christ, properly and redemptively, only when we eat him crucified and when we grasp the effectual working of his death with a lively awareness. Christ would not have been the bread of life for us if he had not been born for us and died for us; and he would not now be the bread of life if the effectual working and fruit of his birth, death, and resurrection were not eternal and immortal. Indeed, precisely for that reason he surrendered his body for us unto death, so that it would become for us bread for nourishing our spiritual life. The essence or substance of the Lord's Supper, therefore, is Christ with his death and resurrection.

This is not to say that Christ becomes our food for the first time in the Lord's Supper; he is offered to us and imparted to us as the bread of

Johannes Heinrich August Ebrard, *Das Dogma vom heiligen Abenmahl und seine Geschichte*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt a. M.: Heinrich Zimmer, 1845-46), 2: 402-574.

¹¹ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., IX: 84.

¹² Cf. Ernst Stähelin, *Johannes Calvin: Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, 2 vols. (Elberfeld: R.L. Friderichs, 1863), I: 225-227.

life also through the Word of the gospel. The mystical union, that hidden and secret life-union with Christ, exists not only in the moment when we partake of the Lord's Supper. According to Ephesians 5:30, John 6:51, and John 17:21, even apart from the Lord's Supper we are and remain one with Christ, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones. The nature of this life-union remains the same. The sacrament adds nothing new to the Word, and is nothing apart from the Word. If we were entirely spiritual like the angels, then we could suffice with the Word. But as long as we live in a physical body we need symbols and mirrors to show us spiritual and heavenly realities. Because we were so weak and powerless that we were unable to accept Christ with firm confidence as he was merely preached to us, God in his mercy added a sign to the Word, suited to our weakness, one that can be observed with our eyes. Thus, the Word already offers Christ to us and imparts him to us, but the Lord's Supper does this still more clearly (*illustrius*). In the Lord's Supper our fellowship with Christ is confirmed and increased. For—so we read explicitly in the Geneva Catechism (1536)—even though Christ is extended to us both in baptism and in the gospel, nevertheless we do not receive him fully, but only in part.

In a manner that is different and still clearer than in the gospel, Christ is presented to us in the Lord's Supper as the only food for our souls. In the signs of bread and wine he himself is truly and essentially present; in the Lord's Supper we properly receive Christ's own body and his own blood. Through eating the bread and drinking of the cup, we become partakers not merely of the Spirit of Christ and his benefits obtained through his dying, but specifically of the proper flesh and blood of the crucified and now glorified Savior. With this objective view of the sacrament, Calvin stands decidedly on the side of Rome and the Lutherans. As vigorously as possible he opposes the notion that the Lord's Supper is merely a confession of our faith or a remembrance of the Lord's death. He can hardly find words strong enough to express his conviction concerning the real, essential, genuine presence of Christ's own flesh and of his own blood in the Lord's Supper. He declares explicitly that the issue between him and his Roman Catholic and Lutheran opponents involves only the *manner* of that presence.

What then is the difference? The opponents could conceive of no other fellowship with Christ and no other presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper than a local, sensory, material presence, the kind of presence whereby the body and blood of Christ descend from heaven and are changed into or contained within the bread and wine. This kind of presence is strenuously opposed by Calvin. This is in conflict with what Holy Scripture teaches us about the truly human nature of Christ, about his ascension and glorification at the right hand of the Father. Christ is still truly human, [a humanity that is] finite, limited, governed by space and therefore located in heaven. It is wholly false when these opponents can imagine no other fellowship with Christ's flesh and blood than one which consists in the merging of Christ with them in the same location. But that is a kind of presence that ties Christ to and contains him within the elements of bread and wine. Such a presence robs him of his greatness

and majesty and glory, one that detracts from his human nature. Flesh must remain flesh, and the human must remain human. Calvin opposes this Roman Catholic and Lutheran doctrine not first of all because transubstantiation and consubstantiation are impossible, but because they *detract from the genuineness and glory* of Christ's human nature.

But even though *this particular manner* of Christ's presence was rejected by Calvin, he did not deny that presence itself. He gladly accepted everything that could serve to express our true and substantial fellowship with the body and blood of Christ, just as long as it was the kind of presence that did not rob Christ of his majesty. Indeed, Calvin teaches a *much more genuine and much more essential* presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the Lord's Supper than the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. But the latter appeared unable and unwilling to grasp the nature and the manner of the presence of Christ that Calvin was teaching. And that lay in the differing meaning people attached to the word *spiritual*. When Calvin opposes the physical, local presence and over against that teaches that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper in a spiritual manner (*spiritualiter*), then his opponents understood him to be teaching merely a non-essential, deceptive, imaginary presence, a presence within the mind, in the imagination, in the remembrance. Calvin himself had complained of that misunderstanding already in his struggle against Westphal and Heshusius.¹³ Westphal could not distinguish between an imaginary (*imaginarium spectrum*) and a spiritual fellowship with Christ; and his comrades in faith suffer the same limitation to this day. For Westphal, fellowship with Christ consisted in the fact that Christ's flesh entered his mouth and stomach. Nevertheless, the term *spiritual* stands in contrast not with *genuine* and *essential*, but over against *physical* and *material*.

The spiritual presence that Calvin taught is much more of an essential presence than the physical presence of the Roman Catholics and Lutherans, which by itself is wholly unprofitable. And that presence does not exist merely in the imagination or in the mind, but in the Lord's Supper we become partakers of the proper flesh and blood of Christ in reality and in truth.

Already from this we may infer how Calvin would have evaluated the prevalent, sober formulation claiming that the sacrament signified and sealed the general and objective truth that there is grace, there is forgiveness, there is eternal life in Christ for everyone who believes. No, the signs in the sacrament are no mere symbols, but genuine pledges and guarantees that the body of the Lord was sacrificed once and is now food for us. In the Lord's Supper God does not merely signify and confirm to us forgiveness and eternal life in Christ, but he also gives and imparts and offers them to us. The strongest possible expressions are employed by Calvin to maintain this objectivity of the sacrament; he uses verbs like *offerre*, *exhibere*, *porrigere*, *implere*, *praestare*, etc. Viret criticized the

¹³ Calvin, *Opera omnia*, Schipper ed., VIII: 657, 667, 744.

verb *exhibere* (exhibit), but Calvin refused to surrender the term.¹⁴ In the Geneva Catechism the question is asked: Have we in the Supper only a figure (*significatio*) of the benefits, or are they themselves indeed exhibited (*exhibentur*)? The answer: Seeing that our Lord Jesus Christ is truth itself, there can be no doubt that he at the same time (*simul*) fulfils the promises which he there gives us; wherefore I doubt not that as he testifies with words and signs, so too he makes us partakers of his substance, that thus we may grow together in one life with him. Calvin does not hesitate to call the sacraments *organs* whereby God effectually works in those who are his. Even though we must distinguish between the sign and the thing signified, even though both may never be identified or mixed, even less may they be separated or rent asunder. What God promises he also performs and confers.

This is why in the sacrament Christ with his benefits is offered and given to unbelievers as well. Unbelief does not invalidate God's truth. The sacraments retain their power. From God's side, nothing has changed. Food and drink retain their nature, even though they are rejected with disdain. Christ extends spiritual food and drink to all, but there is a distinction between something being offered and something being received. Rain falls everywhere, but it does not saturate a rock. Christ is to be received in no other way than by faith; the eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood bears a spiritual character, and Christ's flesh itself is also a spiritual thing. Thus unbelievers do not partake of Christ even though he is offered to them just as he is to believers; the use of the sacrament is unto their destruction.

In this way Calvin maintains the objectivity of the sacrament and the truthfulness of God's promises. But in yet another respect Calvin's doctrine varies from the view held by many who are sometimes praised as being Reformed. Here we come to the heart and core of Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments, to that very point where Calvin departs specifically from his predecessor. Zwingli taught no other fellowship with Christ in the Lord's Supper than sharing his benefits obtained on the cross. That did not satisfy Calvin. There was a still different, deeper fellowship: a sharing not only in the benefits but also in the person of Christ himself, with his own flesh and blood.

Thereby Calvin was proceeding from the idea that the blessings and benefits do not belong to us unless Christ has first become ours. Both are not the same; they can certainly not be separated from each other, but they can nonetheless be distinguished. The mystical union, the hidden fellowship of believers with Christ, is in the first place a most intimate, incomprehensible union with the person of Christ, with his divine and human nature, with his soul and body, with his flesh and blood, and only thereafter a participation in his treasures and gifts. This twofold reality is accordingly signified and sealed to us in the Lord's Supper. Christ himself is the essence and substance of the sacrament, while the benefits and blessings that we receive through him are the power and

¹⁴ See Karl Bernhard Hundeshagen, *Die Konflikte des Zwinglianismus, Lutherthums und Calvinismus in der bernischen Landeskirche von 1532-1558* (Bern: Verlag von C.A. Jenni, Sohn, 1842), § 245.

efficacy (*vis et efficacia*). Christ is the foundation, while the power of his death and every other blessing flowing forth from him are the fruit of the Lord's Supper. In this way the goal of this covenant seal is first that we share in *Christ* as the *fountain* of all blessings, then that we are reconciled with God through the *benefits* of his death, renewed by his Spirit unto holy living and so obtain righteousness and salvation. Just as in baptism we must look first to Christ with his blood, then to the washing away of sins in the newness of life.

But what is the nature of that sharing in the person of the Lord, bestowed and received in the Lord's Supper, and in what respect is it to be distinguished from sharing in his benefits? Calvin begins by answering that this is a great secret that he could far better experience than understand, that he could more easily imagine than put into words. But even though it is not understood, even ridiculed and profaned, it is nonetheless true. In John 6 Jesus declares explicitly: My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink; and everyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. So Calvin formulates his view concerning that fellowship in the following way: already from the very beginning and even before his incarnation, Christ was the life and the light of men. This life-fellowship with the Word was broken by sin. So the Son had to become man in order to receive humanity once again into his fellowship and to restore to him the hope of immortality. Still more, Christ made his flesh a life-giving flesh, so that through sharing in it we are fed unto immortality. That flesh of Christ does not have power in itself to make us alive, but according to John 5:26, a verse that according to Calvin does not speak of the Son's eternal generation but of the gifts granted by the Father to the Son in the flesh, Christ has the fullness of life dwelling also in his human nature. The flesh of Christ is a rich and inexhaustible fountain that imparts within us the life that wells up from the deity. By descending to earth Christ has in his flesh poured forth that power of life which he possessed as the Word, so that from there the fellowship of such life should flow forth unto us.

In the fellowship with Christ conferred and confirmed in the Lord's Supper, we are then also made partakers of his own life. He makes life to overflow in us. He pours out that life within us, he breathes into us his own (*proprium*) life. Such fellowship is a fellowship of substance, not merely a fellowship with the Spirit and with the benefits, but also with the actual person of Christ, with the entire person, also with his flesh and blood. For he does not simply say, my Spirit or my Divinity, but my flesh and my blood are true food and drink. With confidence Calvin adopts the formulation of Augustine: just as Eve was created from the rib of Adam, so too the origin and principle of life flow to us from the side of Christ. Indeed, he explicitly rejects the view that the flesh of Christ would be life-giving merely because by it salvation was acquired for us once for all. No, that flesh breathes and infuses life into us; for out of the hidden fountain of the Deity, life was infused into the flesh of Christ in a miraculous way, so that from there it would flow unto us.

This explains the expression appearing repeatedly in Calvin, that in the Lord's Supper we become partakers of the *substance* of the flesh and

blood of Christ, and thereby we grow together with him in one life. The explanation of this expression that Ebrard gives¹⁵ is surely unacceptable. Ebrard sees Calvin, in regard to this point, to be a forerunner of Leibniz, and thinks that according to him a glorified body is no longer material, but nothing more than power. If this were so, Calvin could hardly have been able still to speak of a communication of the proper *flesh* and *blood* of Christ! Such a construction would be in conflict with his entire Christology! But the usual Lutheran explanation is just as unacceptable, that Calvin's difference with Zwingli involves ambiguous words but not the matter itself, and that this substance need refer to nothing else than the power flowing forth to believers from the crucified body of Christ.¹⁶

Now it is true that Calvin often replaced and further explained the formulation that Christ communicates his own life, the substance of his flesh and blood, by referring to the *power* (*vis, vigor, virtus*) conferred to us from the flesh and blood of Christ. If we connect this with what Calvin repeatedly explains, that Christ is our food for the very reason that he was crucified and died for us, then indeed it seems that we need to think of this substance as referring to nothing else than the life-giving power dwelling in the body of Christ as that was delivered for us unto death, referring thus to the same thing that Zwingli also insisted was being received in the Lord's Supper. This supposition is further strengthened by the repeatedly supplied explanation that the infusing of the life of Christ may not be understood as a mixing or transfusing of Christ's flesh with and into our souls, as though Christ's flesh entered into us. Calvin consistently denied that sense of a substantial presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Add to this, finally, the fact that we also read in Calvin that believers in the Old Testament received essentially the same thing as those in the New Testament; the flesh of Christ, although not yet existing, was food also for them and was efficacious in them as well.

Nevertheless it is clear that Calvin sought in the Lord's Supper something different and deeper than Zwingli did. I take no responsibility for every expression with which Calvin tried to clarify the nature of the fellowship between Christ and believers. Taken in their mildest sense, expressions like those mentioned above, that Christ transfuses his *own* life from his divine nature into his human nature and from there into believers, are susceptible to serious misunderstanding, and were in fact corrected by the warning of Calvin himself against every transfusing and mixing of the substances of Christ and of his own people. He did not explain how, on the one hand, Christ in and for himself is food for our souls, while on the other hand Christ is food for our souls only as the one who was crucified and who died. He was certainly correct in saying that this was a mystery he could far better experience than understand, that he could more easily imagine than put into words. Indeed, Calvin

¹⁵ Ebrard, *Das Dogma vom heiligen Abendmahl und seine Geschichte*, 2: 415, 430, 459, 526, 556.

¹⁶ This is how Calvin's Lutheran opponents, Westphal and Heshusius, expressed themselves in his day. This was also the evaluation of Friedrich A. Philippi, *Kirchliche Glaubenslehre 5: Die Zueignung der Gottesgemeinschaft; 2. Die Lehre von den Gnadenmitteln, oder die Lehre vom Worte, von der Taufe und vom Abendmahle* (Stuttgart: Liesching, 1871), 297f., 322f.

did not succeed in clarifying the distinction between sharing in Christ's person and sharing in his benefits.

But this is Calvin's signal contribution, that he identified the distinction between both of these, that he gave a place in his theology and within Reformed theology for the doctrine of the mystical union, the hidden union of Christ with believers, taught repeatedly in Holy Scripture, especially in the Gospel of John. This fellowship with Christ entails not merely a sharing in his benefits, nor does it consist merely in a bare agreement in thinking, feeling, and willing, a unanimity, a consensus, but is indeed a most intimate union of person with person, of the entire Christ in terms of divine and human natures, in terms of soul and body, with the person of the believer similarly in terms of soul and body. It is no mixture, no transfer of substances, and thus in this sense not a substantial union, but nonetheless a fellowship of substances themselves, not only of their properties and operations. The character of this fellowship is hidden to us, and we cannot find words to express it; Holy Scripture always speaks of it with metaphors, supplying us with several analogies when it speaks of the union of vine and branches, of husband and wife, of bride and groom, etc. How should we understand this union, since Jesus himself says that the unity between him and his own people is like that between him and the Father? Having received an eye for that, and having been saturated with the glory of this hidden fellowship, Calvin could not be satisfied with Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The latter's view was indeed true, but it had not been developed deeply enough. There is no sharing in the benefits of Christ except after and through sharing in his person—that is what Zwingli forgot and that is what Calvin placed in the foreground.

This explains why Calvin expressed his difference with Zwingli as he did; according to some (Zwingli and his followers) eating of Christ's flesh and drinking of his blood, spoken of in John 6, is nothing else than believing. But something higher lies embedded in those words. Not beholding but eating of bread nourishes the body. There is no eating of Christ's flesh and blood except by faith. But whereas according to them, believing and eating are entirely identical, eating is (according to Calvin) the fruit and the result of believing, just as the indwelling of Christ in believers (Eph. 3:17) occurs by faith, but is not the same thing as faith. In a word: the Lutherans, from Westphal and Heshusius on, pressed Calvin with the argument that there is no other choice than Luther or Zwingli; that there is no middle position between the physical local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper and a presence of Christ merely in spirit, in the mind of the Table participant; that there is no middle position between eating of Christ's flesh and blood with the physical mouth and eating of Christ in the sense of believing in him as the crucified one. To this Calvin responds by denying these claims in the strongest of terms, saying that there is yet a presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper that is objective, real, and essential, a presence of both his human and his divine natures in a spiritual manner; there is yet an eating of Christ's flesh, i.e., a sharing in the entire Christ also according to his human nature, which is indeed mediated through faith but is not identical to faith.

Such a union, such a fellowship of the believer in terms of soul and body with the person of Christ, particularly also with Christ's flesh and blood—for no one comes to the deity of Christ except through his death and resurrection, through the man Christ—such a fellowship is now possible, according to Calvin, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Even though Christ's body is immeasurably far removed from us locally, even though the doctrine of a local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is to be decisively rejected as being in conflict with his exaltation, nevertheless his flesh and blood are and can truly be food for us here on earth. The Holy Spirit is the bond who, despite the distance of locality, unites us most intimately with Christ; he is the one who pours forth within us fellowship with Christ's flesh and blood. That fellowship does not come into existence by Christ descending from heaven to reside locally in the signs of bread and wine, which change into his body or contain his body. Rather, such fellowship is worked through our seeking Christ not below upon earth but above in heaven, as we lift up our eyes and hearts toward heaven, through Christ himself making us ascend to him in heaven. This frequent formulation was also misunderstood by many. People thought that with this formulation Calvin taught a magical rising or relocation of believers into heaven, effected by the Holy Spirit. Nothing is farther from his thinking. In his last polemical tract against Westphal Calvin himself explains that by this formulation he understands nothing else than that each one must remember that this is a spiritual mystery, one that according to the nature of the kingdom of Christ must be distinguished from all earthly activities. Without doubt he thereby meant not merely an ascending of our thoughts to Christ in heaven, but an internal, secret union of believers with Christ in heaven. Christ's flesh remains in heaven but the Holy Spirit knows no distances; and just as he objectively binds the souls of believers with Christ, so he effects and strengthens subjectively within us that faith through which such fellowship is mediated, and whereby we ascend to heaven.

This fellowship, which moreover exists and is enjoyed by believers apart from the sacrament, is not merely symbolized and signified in the Lord's Supper, but also confirmed and strengthened. As we saw earlier, Calvin declares as strongly as possible that the sacraments confer what they symbolize. On the basis of the promises of God, believers may not doubt this. Christ is not physically and locally contained in the signs, but by virtue of God's institution such an indissoluble connection exists between the sign and the thing signified that together with the former the latter—namely, Christ himself with his benefits—is given. Nevertheless, however, Calvin did not always see the reception of the thing signified as coinciding with the use of the sign. The sacrament assumes faith; unbelief rejects the grace being offered. Just as children who are baptized in their infancy are sometimes regenerated initially in their younger years or even in their older years, such that the profitability of baptism extends throughout their whole life, so too with the Lord's Supper. The profitability we derive may not be restricted in any way to the time when we use the sacrament. It can happen that the Lord's Supper, which was of little profit on account of our dullness or laziness, bears its fruit later.

Those fruits are many. When Calvin is speaking technically, he distinguishes between the matter, the substance, and the fruits received by the Lord's Supper. The substance is Christ. The fruits are salvation, justification, sanctification, eternal life, and other benefits. By our very fellowship with Christ, and as a result thereof, we become partakers of the fruits of his death, we are washed by his blood and by his resurrection we are raised unto the hope of eternal life. Among those fruits one deserves special mention, namely, that in the Lord's Supper through fellowship in Christ's body and blood we are assured of our immortality, also in regard to our *body*. Our body is made alive through the immortal flesh of Christ, and in a certain sense therefore shares in his immortality. In the Lord's Supper the redemptive resurrection of our bodies is confirmed as through a sure pledge. Without a doubt this is also a fruit of the Lord's Supper; the mystical union involves the whole believer, including his body. We should not confuse this, however, with the "neo-Lutheran" view of the efficacy of the Lord's Supper with respect to the body. Many Lutheran theologians teach that the Lord's Supper exercises in the present time an effectual working with respect to the nature of the human soul and body; for in that sacrament the actual body of Christ is communicated to our body, it penetrates our body, and works in our body with creating power. By using the Lord's Supper, not only our soul but also our body receives powers of the resurrection; the resurrection body is planted in seed form within us and in that way is being prepared. This doctrine does not appear in the Lutheran confessions. But it cannot be denied that the Lutheran dogma regarding the eating of Christ's flesh and blood with the physical mouth is less the cause than the occasion for the appearance of this error, one that is taught quite early, in the Saxon articles of visitation (1592), to say nothing of a couple of strong expressions of Luther. Calvin's teaching is far removed from such a construction that lacks any basis whatsoever in Holy Scripture. By contrast, Calvin correctly maintains that the Lord's Supper has significance also for our body; by this sacrament the body too is assured of eternal life, of the saving resurrection.

This doctrine of Calvin regarding the Lord's Supper, whose central features we have attempted to sketch briefly, was then taken up in our Confessions.¹⁷ The Heidelberg Catechism, question 75, teaches an indissoluble connection between the sign and the thing signified: Christ himself feeds and nourishes my soul with his crucified body and shed blood *as certainly* as I receive the bread and cup of the Lord from the minister's hand; this safeguards the objectivity of the sacrament. In question 76 the eating of Christ's body and the drinking of his blood are explained entirely in Calvin's line; this does not simply mean, as Zwingli taught, to accept and receive the benefits Christ obtained by his death, but additionally to be so united more and more *to his sacred body* by the Holy Spirit, who dwells both in Christ and in us, that, although he is in heaven and we on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, etc. So Christ's body remains in heaven; the catechism is not

¹⁷ Calvin's formulation that in the Lord's Supper we receive the *substance* of Christ's body and blood even appears literally in the French Confession of Faith (1559), art. 36.

teaching a local presence of his body in the Lord's Supper, but there is through the Holy Spirit a fellowship of believers with Christ nonetheless. In question 79 this is explained still further when it says that not only *are* Christ's *crucified* body and shed blood the true food of our souls, but we *are* partakers of his *true* body and blood by the working of the Holy Spirit as really as we receive these signs with the mouth.

Our Belgic Confession, article 35, agrees with this entirely. The Lord's Supper was instituted to nourish and support those already regenerated and incorporated into God's family—the same starting point as with Calvin. The connection between the sign and the thing signified lies firm and sure in God's promises: as *certainly* as we receive the sacrament we also as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the *true* body and blood of Christ. People have often stumbled over this formulation, asking: How can the true *natural* body of Christ be eaten with a *spiritual* organ (faith)? After having set forth Calvin's doctrine, this question needs no further answer. In the Lord's Supper we are through faith truly and essentially made partakers not only of Christ's merits, but also of his human nature, his own true flesh and blood. The Belgic continues by putting it still more strongly: Christ *works* in us all that he represents to us by these signs such that in an incomprehensible manner, through faith we eat and drink the *proper* and *natural* body and the *proper* blood of Christ.

We find the same teaching in our liturgical Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper. Christ feeds and refreshes us with his crucified body and shed blood *as certainly* as each one receives this bread and this cup. Through the Holy Spirit we have genuine fellowship *with Christ himself* and we become partakers of all his benefits. In the prayer the petition is made that by the power of the Holy Spirit our burdened and contrite hearts may be nourished and refreshed with his *true* body and body, yea with *him*, true God and man.

If I am not mistaken, the uniqueness of the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments, both of the Lord's Supper and of baptism, is often not understood clearly. Certainly the sacrament is not a sealing of [something in] the recipient, but of the promises of God. The questions facing us, however, are: What are those promises and what do they contain? This refers not simply in general to the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ the Savior of sinners. Rather, more pointedly it is this: The Lord says, *I will be your God* and the God of your descendants forever. Therefore the objective, certain, and to that degree also rich comfort residing in the covenant seals is frequently misperceived. The sacraments were instituted for believers, for covenant recipients, and they confirm and strengthen with visible¹⁸ signs that in Christ God is and eternally will remain their God. The expressions in our Confessions may not be weakened, which state that we thus truly receive Christ's body and blood when we eat of the bread and drink of the wine.

¹⁸ Trans. note: the original reads "De Sacramenten zijn voor de geloovigen, voor de Bondgenooten ingesteld en bevestigen en bekrachtigen het in *onzichtbare* teekenen, dat God hun God in Christus is en eeuwig blijven zal" (italics added). Bavinck must surely have intended the italicized word to be *zichtbare*, visible.

Moreover, it should be noted that the Reformed actually accept an essential, genuine presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, yes, also of his proper natural flesh and blood. They differ regarding the *character* and the *manner* of this presence, but not regarding the reality of this presence. The Reformed teach a presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper just as much as do the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. According to the Reformed, it is a *spiritual* presence, not a bodily, sensory, material, local presence. But precisely for that reason such a presence is not less but *all the more* true and essential. Suppose for a moment, with Rome and Luther, that Christ's flesh and blood are locally changed into or locally contained within the signs of bread and wine; what does it profit you to eat thereof without faith? If with the bread or the wafer you eat the proper flesh of Christ, and chew it with your teeth, and swallow it—by itself it is absolutely useless, bringing about no fellowship with Christ, just as for Jesus' contemporaries it profited nothing to be with him in the same banquet hall or to sit with him at the same table. We can receive Christ unto a blessing only in a *spiritual* manner; physical nearness, local proximity, eating of Christ's flesh with the physical mouth, is not profitable. Moreover, the benefits Christ has obtained, such as the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, are not something physical, they are not a material or spiritual substance that can be contained in bread and wine whereby they enter into our bodies. But they are spiritual in character and can be received and enjoyed only in a spiritual manner, through the mouth of faith. Several Lutherans in this century believe that by using the Lord's Supper a seed of the resurrection body is implanted within the recipient, but this error finds not the least support in Holy Scripture and is to be explained more readily to arise from a Gnostic and theosophist worldview.

Over against that we posit a genuine fellowship consisting of being united with Christ in a spiritual manner by the Holy Spirit, a genuine fellowship with his natural body and blood, a fellowship that can not be broken by any distance or time, by any death or hell. In his doctrine of the Lord's Supper Calvin sought above all to include and impart that rich material Scripture supplies us regarding the hidden union between Christ and his own. Much of this has not yet been incorporated adequately within the discipline of theological dogmatics.

Of special interest is this teaching currently being developed by Professor Ritschl, which in the name of pietism opposes and denies altogether this mystical union of believers with Christ. His disciple, Professor Herrmann in Marburg, has even discussed the character of the fellowship of believers with God in a separate publication.¹⁹ According to him, the mystical has absolutely no place in religion, and to speak of a "healthy mysticism" is a contradiction in terms. Orthodox theologians believe that in addition to enjoying fellowship objectively with the historical Christ, there exists yet a subjective, unmediated fellowship of the soul with God, or with the exalted Christ. But according to Professor

¹⁹ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Der Verkehr des Christen mit Gott, im Anschluss an Luther dargestellt* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1886). Cf. by contrast Christoph Ernst Luthardt in *Zeitschrift für kirchliche Wissenschaft und kirchliches Leben*, 12 (1886): 632f.

Herrmann, this is incorrect. The Christian's concourse with God has nothing to do with mustering a certain sentiment, in mystical contemplation, in personal and unmediated concourse of souls with God. If that were the case, then such moments would have to be pursued, to the extent that living out one's calling and living in the world would need to be neglected and surrendered because they disturb such fellowship.

Our fellowship with God, however, consists objectively in fellowship with the historical Christ, not in a certain arousing of feelings that have nothing to do with Christ. God comes to us, makes himself to be known and to be received by us, in the historical Christ. In this objective fact God opens up concourse with us, such that he forgives us our sin, becomes our God, and effects our moral liberation. Fellowship with God is nothing else and nothing more than *faith*, i.e., trusting in the historical appearance of Christ, something we can constantly exercise while we perform our calling as well. So our moral activity does not lie outside of fellowship with God, but is contained within it; yes, faith, i.e., concourse with God, spurs us to that moral activity, to working in the kingdom of God. In short, we have to seek God not in isolated contemplation, in the world of fantasy, but in our fulsome living, in the real world, in the historical Christ.

Professor Herrmann has sought to focus the conflict between the school of Ritschl and its opponents on this weighty point. The great significance of this point of difference is certainly recognized by everyone and deserves a special investigation. It not only touches upon an important chapter in dogmatics, but is of the highest importance for the practice of godliness, for the hidden life of the soul with God. The difficulties that appear in this realm of subjective faith-life are proportionally greater still than those appearing in the realm of faith-doctrine, even though it is the case that the study of the former with Scripture in hand is being neglected in the present day more than the study of dogmatics.