

**‘LIFT UP YOUR HEARTS’: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE
UNDERSTANDING OF JOHN CALVIN’S TEACHING ON THE
EUCCHARIST AND ITS SETTING WITHIN HIS THEOLOGY.**

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the possibility that, flowing from his broader theological framework and historical background, John Calvin's eucharistic theology 're-invents' a doctrine where the 'substance' (meaning) of the elements becomes the body and blood of Christ, and the believer who receives them is drawn, through understanding, into participation in Christ.

The study begins with the historical setting and the second chapter sketches Calvin's life. Chapter 3 considers epistemology and the impact of classical rhetoric on Calvin's approach to knowledge. The following chapter considers Calvin's understanding of our relationship with the Father, and of Christ as Mediator and as means of salvation. Chapter 5 considers the work of the Spirit in nurturing faith, a 'higher knowledge', through preparing us for knowledge of Christ and mediating our understanding of and participation in him. In this manner the Spirit acts as an instrument of revelation to enable us to participate in Christ. Chapters 6 and 7 move to consider Calvin's writing on the Sacraments, their nature as sign and seals of the promise made in Christ, their substance and their role in our participation in Christ and, in the light of the *duplex gratia*, as gateways to participation.

In Chapter 8 Calvin's teaching is examined in terms of his opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation, and his understanding of substance is considered. The possibility that Calvin 're-invents' the doctrine is proposed. This is not to suggest that there is a conscious copying of the doctrine, but that through the process of forming his doctrine, using an alternate philosophical framework, Calvin's understanding bears significant similarities to the doctrine he so deeply opposed. His key opposition to transubstantiation can then be seen to be to the materialist interpretations that impede the ability of the believer to lift his attention beyond the physical elements to the divine offer they represent.

The study concludes by briefly considering the significance of Calvin's 'reinvention' for contemporary understandings.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Why John Calvin's eucharistic theology?

My interest was first drawn to the question of Calvin's Eucharistic theology by my background as an ordained minister in the United Reformed Church (URC). The theology of the URC, which has its origins in the Presbyterian, Congregational and Churches of Christ traditions, is rooted to the continental Reformation in general and to the theology of John Calvin in particular. It did not take much investigation to realise that there was a disconnection between the contemporary Reformed theology of the Sacraments as experienced in the life of the Church (which would appear to be 'practical Zwinglianism'¹) and that of John Calvin.

As I continued to look into this it struck me that there was a parallel between what Calvin tries to do as he formulates his eucharistic theology (where his concern can be seen as maintaining the effectiveness of the Sacrament, while denying a local material presence) and what the doctrine of transubstantiation was trying to do: to explain the idea that we are truly offered Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament and not simply being reminded of a past event. At this stage I was introduced to the work of Edward Schillebeeckx who sought much the same goals in his development of the idea of 'transignification'. While by no means has Schillebeeckx's transignification been accepted as official Catholic doctrine, it did indicate that there were those within the modern Catholic tradition who found the teaching on transubstantiation to be

¹ The term 'practical Zwinglianism,' can be traced back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century, for example in William Scott and Francis Garden, Rev. of Notes of a traveller, on the social and political state of France, Prussia, Switzerland and Italy, and other parts of Europe during the present century, by Samuel Laing. *The Christian Remembrancer* 3.4 (1842), 399. 'Practical Zwinglianism' seems to be a useful way to describe what is often an unconscious position rather than a considered theological stance. It is interesting to note that in the example cited the reference is to a move in the theological stance of the Lutheran Church.

unsatisfactory and suggested that there might be scope for a reading that would allow the possibility of dialogue with Calvin's understanding.

The question remained, why did Calvin choose to develop his eucharistic theology along the lines that he did? What stood at the root of Calvin's opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation and his objections to the practices of the Roman Church? Here a number of factors come into play: Calvin's education, his epistemology and soteriology and the degree to which he felt that the teaching of the Church had been corrupted in its practice. One of the deeper (and perhaps more easily overlooked) roots is, perhaps, in Calvin's early life. His upbringing had strong Catholic influence, with a devout mother and engagement in the ceremonies, rituals and (as he would later see it) superstitions of popular Catholic piety. This would have had a significant formative role in his understanding of the Church and its worship. As he was forced to separate from the Roman Church he took a stance that indicated his desire to purify the worship of the Church, especially the Church in France. In this Calvin took on what he understood as a prophetic role. But it is not simply his early education that was formative in this respect. His studies, initially with a view to the priesthood but later in preparation for a career in law, brought him into contact with humanist elements. He may well have been influenced by the resurgence of Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophy but perhaps more significantly it is clear that he was exposed to the idea of a classical rhetoric. One aspect of this would appear in his epistemology, that knowledge is affective rather than simple possession of information. Such an understanding shaped his insistence on the link between Word and Sacrament, his understanding of what it meant to participate in the Sacraments and, indeed, his whole approach to liturgy.

1.2 Setting Calvin's understanding in a theological context

Here I hope to show that Calvin, in his desire to re-establish the true Church, develops an understanding of the Sacrament that could be termed a 're-invention' of the doctrine to which he is most vehemently opposed, transubstantiation. This is by no means a simple reproduction of the contemporary Roman Catholic understanding, rather it is a recasting of the doctrine in a particular philosophical and epistemological framework that allows it to hold divine accommodation and human participation in tension, while avoiding the danger of materialist interpretation and thus of idolatry (the failure of the Catholic doctrine which draws Calvin's most vehement criticism).

The form of worship, the expression of both the pious life and the life of the community of Christ's followers, that Calvin desired was not isolated from his theological understanding, but intimately tied to it. Carlos Eire observes that for Calvin the knowledge of God is inseparable from worship of him, in that it is impossible to come to know God 'without yielding some worship to him.'² There is a fundamental linkage of Word and Sacrament in Calvin's understanding that was reflected in his desire to celebrate the Eucharist at every service.³ Even when the service is non-eucharistic it is important to remember the effect it should have upon the worship of the people.⁴

² Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols. The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 197.

³ Wallace observes how Calvin argues for the Sacraments to be celebrated 'with such a frequency as will befit their importance.' Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), 252. Calvin argues that the Supper should be celebrated 'at least once a week' (*Inst.* 4.17.43) and indeed that 'no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving.' (*Inst.* 4.17.44). Despite such a clear desire on his part, Calvin was unable to persuade the Genevan Council to accept even the monthly celebration proposed in the *Articles* of 1537 or the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541, and he was forced to accept a quarterly celebration which even as late as 1561 he appears to have considered 'defective.' Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 1980 ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 190.

⁴ J. M. Barklay, *The Worship of the Reformed Church. An Exposition and Critical Analysis of the Eucharistic, Baptismal, and Confirmation Rites in the Scottish, English-Welsh, and Irish Liturgies* (London: Lutterworth, 1966), 16.

Discerning Calvin's understanding of the theology of worship in general or the Eucharist specifically is not necessarily an easy task. At one stage Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, seen by some as 'a clear and systematic exposition of Calvin's fundamental beliefs,'⁵ would have been considered a sufficient text in itself.⁶ However the *Institutes* are neither a systematic work in the modern sense nor a concise summary of the entirety of Calvin's theology,⁷ and form only a small part of the volume of his published work.⁸ The importance of this becomes obvious when one takes into account the nature of sixteenth-century theology as being forged in dispute. While theological systems in that period would frequently take the form of 'common places' (*Loci communes*)⁹ – theological topics drawn out of disputation and exegesis – the influence of the disputes amongst the churches would have also contributed to the formation of particular understandings as theologians sought to clarify and justify their views. Even a cursory inspection of the published work of Calvin shows that a significant amount of his work formed part of ongoing disputes.¹⁰ Calvin's theology did not arise full-grown,

⁵ e.g. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, 'The Institutes,' *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 707.

⁶ A line of Luchsius Smits is often quoted to sum up this unfortunate attitude, 'Calvin was a man of a single book.' Luchsius Smits, *Saint Augustine Dans L'oeuvre De Jean Calvin: Étude De Critique Littéraire*, vol. 1 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1956). Taking account of Calvin's prolific output the view of Willem van't Spijker that 'the Reformer of Geneva wrote more in the space of thirty years than one person can adequately study and digest in an entire lifetime,' seems more appropriate. Foreword, Wulfert De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide* (Louisville & London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), ix.

⁷ Bouwsma argues that to apply the term 'systematic' to sixteenth-century theology would be an anachronism: 'I do not believe that Calvin even aspired to the construction of a system, as the term 'system' is commonly understood; as a biblical theologian, he despised what passed for systematic theology in his own time. ... Beyond this, the intellectual and cultural resources of the sixteenth century made the production of 'systematic thought' almost inconceivable, a circumstance that students of Calvin have not always kept in mind. A systematic Calvin would be an anachronism; there are no 'systematic' thinkers of many significance in the sixteenth century.' William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

⁸ Muller, for example, notes that the *Institutes* are 'equalled in size by Calvin's sermons on Job and dwarfed by the sermons on Deuteronomy, as well as by the individual commentaries on Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Pentateuch.' Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin. Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

⁹ For example Philip Melancthon's *Loci communes theologici*, Wolfgang Musculus' *Loci communes* and Andreas Hyperius' *De theologo, seu ratione studii theologici, libri III*

¹⁰ The overview of Calvin's writings from Wulfert de Greef is particularly useful here. Setting aside his letters Calvin debates or disputes with (among others) the Nicodemites, Roman Catholics (including the Albertus Pighuis, the Council of Trent and the Sorbonne), Anabaptists, Libertines, Lutherans (including Westphal and Heshusius) and Zwinglians. De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*.

but was developing through dialogue, discussion and dispute throughout his ministry. His views were not static but developing and have had an impact that has continued long beyond his lifetime.¹¹

At times Calvin's meaning is not always clear. In his book *Grace and Gratitude*, Brian Gerrish notes that 'even within the very first edition of the Institutes, taken by itself, it is not difficult to discover reasons why Calvin's critics might think his views uncertain, ambiguous, perhaps devious.'¹² Part of this problem may reside in the tendency to impose modern theological perspectives on his sixteenth-century thinking, or in failing to understand the eclectic nature of sixteenth-century culture,¹³ but the perspectives of development and disputation might be helpful in discerning his understanding. In this respect Charles Partee's observation that 'attempting to understand Calvin requires a starting point, behind which is always a stand point,' is a useful warning for any analysis as is his broad categorization of the standpoints to be found as opponents,

¹¹ Calvin's work, it can be argued, lays the foundation for modern systematic theology. Thomas Torrance writes: 'It was he [Calvin] who in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* laid the foundations for biblical and dogmatic theology as they are now pursued, and he who ... paved the way for the systematic interpretation of the Holy Scriptures in which so many great scholars have engaged ever since. ... Not the least of Calvin's contributions was the disciplined method which he brought to both these [biblical and theological] studies and the way in which he related them to one another.' Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, Monograph Supplements to the Scottish Journal of Theology, eds. A.I.C. Heron and I.R. Torrance (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 61.

¹² Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude. The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 10.

¹³ Bouwsma suggests that, 'Like other major thinkers of the sixteenth century, and indeed for some time before, Calvin was complex and eclectic, engaged in an effort to marshal and manage a bundle of contradictory intellectual impulses and resources. ... Scholars have wasted a lot of time arguing that Calvin was "really" a Stoic or Neoplatonist because they did not realize that every sixteenth-century intellectual was something of both, as well as a good deal else.' William J. Bouwsma, 'Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact,' *John Calvin & the Church. A Prism of Reform.*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 30. Similarly Muller, in discussing the difficulties of understanding the relationship between Calvin and scholasticism, observes that Calvin's theology did not arise in a 'sixteenth-century vacuum' and notes the problem of the 'tendency of much twentieth-century Protestant theology and historiography to view scholasticism as a highly speculative and rationalistic system of thought bound to Aristotelianism and to certain specific theological and philosophical conclusions, characteristic of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries, the primary goal of which was to produce a synthesis of Christian theology and Greek philosophy.' Richard A. Muller, 'Scholasticism in Calvin: A Question of Relation and Disjunction,' *Calvinus Sinceriorus Religionis Vindex*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, *Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies* (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 247-51.

proponents and ‘misponents’: the latter category refers to those who misunderstand Calvin and those who ‘often believe he says what they want to hear.’¹⁴

Calvin’s writing then is purposeful – the *Institutes*, for example, are intended as the basis for the training ministers (at least in later editions),¹⁵ the various treatises have specific targets – and the intention may well shape the arguments he uses. His intention was not to teach *new* doctrine but *true* doctrine (the doctrine of the true Church).¹⁶ Indeed Calvin’s doctrine has been described as ‘derivative,’ not in a derogatory sense but in that it is ‘generated from his earnest reflection on Scripture, the tradition of the Church, and the thought of his contemporaries, each source informing the other.’¹⁷ In this, of course, Calvin was not alone: his contemporaries would similarly have seen themselves as bearers of the true tradition of the Church and not intent on developing novel doctrine. Nevertheless, it needs to be kept in mind that Calvin was seeking to purify the Church by returning to the truth held by the early Church and obscured by layers of invention. To a large extent this can be seen in his liturgical policy with its hallmark of simplicity, its model being the ‘ancient Church’ – that which existed before the papacy.¹⁸ The result was perhaps initially deceptive: Howard Hageman notes that while the form of worship might seem to be a radical change, abandoning ‘almost entirely ... the traditional elements and ceremonies,’ and suggests that Calvin managed to preserve the shape of the ancient liturgy far more than Zwingli had done.¹⁹

¹⁴ Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 5.

¹⁵ In his address ‘To the Reader’, Calvin declares that ‘it has been my purpose in this labour to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling.’

¹⁶ Muller observes that his success in this ‘must be sought more in his manner of presenting Christian doctrine, in the way he received, incorporated, or modified forms and arguments of patristic and medieval theology, in his particular fusion of older theological substance either with his own exegetical results or with Renaissance rhetorical forms, and in the nuances he gave to the elements of extant tradition.’ Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 7.

¹⁷ Sue A. Rozeboom, ‘Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper: Calvin’s Theology and Its Early Reception,’ *Calvin’s Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities.*, eds. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 146.

¹⁸ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 194.

¹⁹ Howard Hageman, *Pulpit and Table* (London: SCM, 1962), 35.

For any one seeking to make a useful contribution to the understanding of John Calvin's eucharistic theology there is then a considerable challenge. Richard Muller sums this up well when he says that Calvin's life and thought 'have been presented on so many pages in such a wide variety of books that, at first glance, one might well wonder whether anything new can be said.'²⁰ As he goes on to point out, 'Calvin's thought has been avidly deconstructed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers in search of a theological or religious ally,'²¹ and it is only to be hoped that twenty-first-century writers will be willing to listen a little more attentively not only to his voice as left to us in many texts, but also to his sixteenth-century context. In that respect any attempt to understand Calvin's theology, or part of it, needs to be historical theology. That is not to say that modern theology need have no part, but simply that its limitations in interpreting an understanding separated by five hundred years, and considerable social and technological change, should be recognised and the imposition of modern theological 'grids' avoided. Mark Garcia observes how the application of 'Schleiermacherian, Barthian, existentialist, post-liberal, and Eastern readings' of Calvin are readily found in the literature. Calvin can serve too often as a 'wax nose' – capable of being twisted as desired – and making entry into the scholarly literature more difficult.²²

1.3 *The Eucharist in Calvin studies*

Brian Gerrish's terminology for the eucharistic doctrines within Reformed theology has become almost a *de facto* standard amongst Calvin scholars. He proposed three categories of eucharistic doctrine which he termed 'symbolic memorialism,' 'symbolic

²⁰ Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²² Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ. Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology*, Studies in Christian History and Thought, eds. Alan. P.F. Sell, David Bebbington, Clyde Binfield, Gerald Bray and Grayson Carter (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 11.

parallelism’ and ‘symbolic instrumentalism.’²³ The first of these, symbolic memorialism, describes the approach exemplified by Zwingli. Gerrish observes that in Zwingli’s *Sixty-Seven Articles* of 1523 two basic notions regarding the Eucharist are already present: that the mass is ‘not a sacrifice but a commemoration of the sacrifice once offered on the cross and a pledge of the redemption made manifest by Christ.’²⁴ Zwingli rejected any suggestion of the presence of the natural body of Christ in the Eucharist and of any manner of oral reception. He placed the emphasis on the idea of a memorial, bringing to mind the sacrifice of Christ with its promise of salvation, deepening faith and strengthening the bonds of a common confession.²⁵ The sacramental signs are just that – signs – and do not convey or offer the reality themselves. Gerrish argues that ‘Zwingli was reluctant to acknowledge any other causality than that of God, the first cause.’²⁶ Therefore the signs cannot be instrumental, but rather are ‘indicative and declarative.’²⁷ They indicate that which has already been achieved by God and declare the thankful response of commitment to a life of faith.

Symbolic parallelism, which can be seen as describing the eucharistic understanding of Heinrich Bullinger, moves beyond Zwingli’s view to suggest a sacramental union of sign and reality. Thus, as Gerrish summarizes, ‘outwardly we eat the bread, while inwardly *at the same time* we also feed upon Christ’s body.’²⁸ This form of eucharistic doctrine allows for something more than a simple bringing to mind, but stops short of suggesting that the Sacraments are effective in and of themselves. This understanding

²³ Brian A. Gerrish, ‘Sign and Reality: The Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Confessions,’ *The Old Protestantism and the New. Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 128. The article was originally published as ‘The Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Confessions,’ *Theology Today* 23.2 (1966), 224-43.

²⁴ Gerrish, ‘Sign and Reality’, 119.

²⁵ ‘That is what the elements “say” to Zwingli (his own expression): they proclaim that salvation is from God, they exercise our faith, and they draw us together in a common confession. In other words, they have to do with our threefold relationship to God, self and neighbour.’ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁶ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Gerrish, ‘Sign and Reality’, 124. Gerrish picks up on the Bullinger’s terminology in the Second Helvetic Confession, where the connection between sign and reality is indicated by the words ‘*intus interim*’ – ‘meanwhile, inside’.

was not novel, and indeed François Wendel's assertion of an affinity with the parallelism of the Franciscans and Duns Scotus in opposing the teaching of Thomas Aquinas applies more to Bullinger than to Calvin.²⁹

The third category that Gerrish proposed, symbolic instrumentalism, is that in which he includes Calvin's doctrine. Here while the sign and the reality it signifies are distinct, the sign bestows what it signifies. There is evidence in the First Helvetic Confession (1536) that what Gerrish takes to indicate a strand of symbolic instrumentalism exists in Reformed eucharistic theology prior to Calvin.³⁰ Here the Sacraments are 'not bare signs,' but consist of 'signs and things' simultaneously.³¹ The reality signified is the communion of the body of Christ, salvation won and sins forgiven received through faith as the corporeal signs are received.³² It is the 'true body and blood' that is offered, not 'food of the stomach' but 'the food of eternal life.'³³ It is interesting that Gerrish describes the symbolic instrumentalist approach as 'Thomistic,' as opposed to symbolic parallelism which he terms 'Franciscan.'³⁴ The signs, in this understanding, 'convey and offer the spiritual things they signify.'³⁵ However, there is little evidence to suggest that Calvin was directly influenced by the work of Aquinas.³⁶

²⁹ François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1965), 344-5.

³⁰ Gerrish, 'Sign and Reality', 123. Gerrish prefers to use the German translation of Leo Jud which Schaff notes as being 'of equal authority with the Latin, although it is a free and enlarged translation.' Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1881-2), 3.211.

³¹ Article 21 includes the statement: '*Hæc rerum arcanarum symbola non nudis signis, sed signis simul et rebus constant.*' Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3.223.

³² '*In eucharistia panis et vinum signa sunt, res autem communicatio corporis Domini, parta salus, et peccatorum remissio. Quæ quidem, ut ore corporis signa, sic fide spiritus percipiuntur.*' Ibid., 3.211.

³³ Article 23. '*Sed quod panis et vinum ex institutione Domini symbola sint, quibus ab ipso Domino per ecclesiæ ministerium vera corporis et sanguinis ejus communicatio, non in perituum ventris cibum, sed in æternæ vitæ alimoniam exhibeatur.*' Ibid., 3.225.

³⁴ Gerrish, 'Sign and Reality', 128.

³⁵ Ibid., 123.

³⁶ The question of the degree to which Calvin is directly influenced by Aquinas is drawn out by Tony Lane, who observes that Aquinas is only named twice in the 1559 *Institutes*, and just twice more in polemical works (where he is referring to his opponent's use of Thomas). He concludes that 'it is possible that Calvin never read Thomas for himself and that the two citations in the *Institutio* are derived from intermediate sources.' Anthony N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh & New York: T&T Clark, 1999), 45.

This broad classification has become well established, and indeed has considerable value, but needs to be considered as descriptive rather than definitive. The doctrines were under development throughout this period and it is possible to find places where the lines between the categories are blurred. For example Gerrish notes that Zwingli, while rejecting the idea of the Sacraments as a means of grace in *Fideo Ratio* (1530), still develops his doctrine ‘in the direction of a kind of parallelism’ where ‘an inward spiritual occurrence is symbolically represented by a parallel outward and physical occurrence.’³⁷ Similarly Calvin’s understanding expressed in the 1536 *Institutes* is open to a more memorialist reading, where ‘from the physical things set forth in the Sacraments we ought to be led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things,’³⁸ it ‘sends us to the cross of Christ’ and ‘assures us that all things that Christ did or suffered were done or suffered to quicken us.’³⁹ But, in the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin emphasises that it is the *benefits* of Christ rather than the ‘very substance [*substantiam*] of his body or the true and natural body of Christ’ that is given in the Eucharist.⁴⁰

Gerrish argues that for Calvin ‘man’ is ‘eucharistic man’, and ‘authentic humanity is constituted by the act of thanksgiving to the Maker of heaven and earth.’⁴¹ In such a light Calvin’s eucharistic theology would take a more central position than it has been allowed to at times, the Eucharist being ‘the liturgical enactment of the theme of grace and gratitude that lies at the heart Calvin’s entire theology.’⁴² Certainly it should be seen

³⁷ Gerrish, ‘Sign and Reality’, 120.

³⁸ *Inst.* 1536 4.25.

³⁹ *Inst.* 1536 4.26.

⁴⁰ *Inst.* 1536 4.30, *CO* 4.123. This is not the stance he takes in the later editions of the *Institutes* or other later works.

⁴¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 50. Gerrish attributes the term ‘eucharistic man’ to Gregory Dix, although he rejects Dix’s interpretation of Calvin’s doctrine as individualistic and internal. Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: A & C Black), xviii-xix & 632-33.

⁴² Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 20.

as an outworking of his theology, even ‘an essential and promising’ one.⁴³ For Gerrish, ‘the theme of grace and gratitude, presented in the words and actions of the Eucharist, shapes [Calvin’s] entire theology and makes it from beginning to end a eucharistic theology.’⁴⁴ While this is, in many respects, an attractive approach, it raises questions regarding the possibility of assuming that Calvin’s thinking can be analysed in terms of specific centres or a more modern working out from a series of fundamental concepts. The tendency to look for a single central motif, or even a number of motifs, has drawn significant criticism from scholars such as Richard Muller.⁴⁵ There have been challenges to the imposition by commentators of their own theological understandings onto Calvin for some considerable time,⁴⁶ it has been widely accepted that for Calvin ‘no doctrine is elevated to the position of being a “controlling principle.”’⁴⁷ The use by Gerrish of the work of John Williamson Nevin, a nineteenth-century commentator, serves to deepen the concern that here is an imposed reading.⁴⁸

Gerrish does strongly emphasize the twin themes of ‘Grace and Gratitude’ in his work of the same name, and is perhaps prone to downplaying the value of Calvin’s polemical writings,⁴⁹ and even of neglecting the influence of other Reformed theologians on

⁴³ As suggested by Michael S. Horton, ‘Union and Communion: Calvin’s Theology of Word and Sacrament,’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.4 (2009), 399.

⁴⁴ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, vii.

⁴⁵ Richard A. Muller, Rev. of *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*, by Brian A. Gerrish. *Journal of Religion* 75.1 (1995), 119-21. Gerrish indicates elsewhere that he is aware of the danger, stating that ‘The truth seems to be that Calvin did not teach the kind of theological system in which everything is inferred from some basic principle or principles.’ Gerrish, ‘Gospel and Eucharist’, 108.

⁴⁶ T.H.L. Parker observed seven decades ago that while Calvin was attempting a ‘comprehensive summary and orderly arrangement’ of doctrine, this is ‘a very different matter from building a system of theology starting from one foundation.’ T.H.L. Parker, ‘The Approach to Calvin,’ *Evangelical Quarterly* 16.3 (1944), 169. Cited in Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 4.

⁴⁷ Anthony N.S. Lane, ‘The Quest for the Historical Calvin,’ *Evangelical Quarterly* 55.2 (1982), 95.

⁴⁸ The use of Nevin by Gerrish may be influenced by the former’s debt to Schleiermacher, to whom Gerrish compares Calvin at one point, suggesting that Calvin ‘was a systematic theologian in exactly the same sense as Schleiermacher: he looked assiduously for the interconnections between doctrines, the way they “hang together” (their *Zusammenhang*).’ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 16.

⁴⁹ Gerrish refers to Calvin’s treatment of the Eucharist being ‘increasingly burdened over the years’ by ‘polemical digressions’ and that to avoid Calvin’s concerns being overwhelmed by those of his critics suggests that it is necessary to ‘look amid the polemics’ for Calvin’s own thought and vision. *Ibid.*, 126. Elsewhere he refers to ‘tedious and acrimonious polemic’ as unhelpful in developing a ‘sound

Calvin (including Bucer and Melancthon)⁵⁰ but there is considerable value in Gerrish's emphasis on the responsive element in Calvin's understanding of salvation and the significance of the Eucharist in his overall scheme which has served to open up areas of consideration for Calvin studies in recent years. Furthermore Gerrish does not propose a 'central dogma' based on these themes; his suggestion is a more subtle idea of a theme indicating something that influences rather than a dogma that controls doctrine. Gerrish's proposal is, in effect, that the themes of 'grace' and 'gratitude' are 'singularly determinative' (to use Mark Garcia's term⁵¹) of Calvin's soteriology but need not be considered a central dogma. In part Gerrish wishes to use this 'primary theme' as a counter to the historical emphasis on predestination,⁵² but it is as a framework for a broader interpretation of Calvin's soteriology that it has particular value. In terms of grace, it points towards the action of God in accommodating to human limitations, to the necessity of divine revelation, to the importance of the union with Christ and to the work of the spirit. In terms of gratitude it points towards the responsive aspect of salvation, to the rhetorical aspect of knowledge and to the shape of worship and the life of piety.⁵³

interpretation' of the Eucharist doctrine in the *Institutes*. Ibid., 144. There are two issues here, firstly that even in the *Institutes* there is an explicit polemic intent which cannot be ignored and secondly that the nature of polemic could just as easily be interpreted as making the understanding of the proponents clearer by their response to criticism rather than obscuring it with the concerns of their opponents.

⁵⁰ These are three of Muller's key criticisms in his review of Gerrish cited above.

⁵¹ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 18.

⁵² Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 1-2, 24.

⁵³ Strictly speaking, of course, it is not possible for there to be multiple themes which are *singularly* determinative, and the line between a 'singularly determinative theme' and a 'central dogma' is perilously thin. However, the proposals of both Gerrish and Garcia are both useful as analytical devices to understand certain aspects of Calvin's theology. Kilian McDonnell, in discussing Calvin's dialectical methods speaks of him using a number of 'centralities' which are 'worked into a theological unity' standing over and against each other, 'each a central concern, and each demanding the attention accorded to an absolute or near absolute.' He warns against seeing one as always being Calvin's 'point of departure and the tool of his systemization.' He points in particular to Calvin's use of paradox where he holds two opposing ideas (*opposita*) in tension and suggests that, for Calvin, 'theology is not the clarification of a principle but rather the clarification of a mystery which is set forth in a dialogic form, where each pole of the mystery speaks an imperative, which is spoken back by the other pole of the mystery, but in terms of its own absolute.' It is from the tension between the *opposita* that, McDonnell suggests, that clarification and ultimately a unified theology comes. Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 156-60. With this in mind both the themes of 'grace and gratitude' and 'union with Christ and the *duplex gratia*' both become 'centralities,' determinative, but not singularly so, and part of a wider and more complex theology.

To go deeper into Calvin's eucharistic doctrine it is worth turning back to the work of Ronald Wallace in *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament*.⁵⁴ Wallace begins with Calvin's basic assumption that 'direct revelation' between God and man is impossible and that this means that God communicates with man by adapting himself to our capacity.⁵⁵ Wallace is by no means alone in pointing to this element of Calvin's thinking, Edward Dowey's earlier treatment of Calvin's epistemology similarly begins with a description of the accommodated nature of knowledge of God.⁵⁶ The theme of accommodation in the thought of Calvin receives a fuller treatment in the more recent work of Jon Balsarak.⁵⁷ In accommodating to human shortcomings then God must 'veil' his presence to some extent, at the same time as he 'unveils' it, in revealing himself so that we are not overcome.⁵⁸ This can be seen in the use of signs and symbols, especially in the Old Testament to indicate God's presence,⁵⁹ the sign or symbol 'holds the attention of the worshipper and obscures the glory of the one who is seeking to reveal himself by means of it.'⁶⁰ This accommodation means that the worship of the Church changes as God adapts to his people's needs: Balsarak observes that Calvin argues for

⁵⁴ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*. Although this classic work by Wallace lacks engagement with Calvin scholarship, at least on an explicit level, it has much to commend it for its engagement with a breadth of Calvin's work especially his commentaries and sermons as well as the *Institutes*. It perhaps deserves to be better recognised than it seems to be in modern Calvin studies, where more often than not it seems to be simply noted in passing as a 'helpful' or 'important' study.

⁵⁵ Wallace notes that for Calvin, the divide between the holiness of God and sinfulness of man is a 'gulf' which has to be bridged by God's action, indeed this is the only way in which this can be done. 'God can reveal himself so that man, without being annihilated or brought to despair, can come to really know and enter communion with him. Moreover, so full and satisfying is the revelation thus given that man can indeed be said to see God "face to face."' Ibid., 3.

⁵⁶ Dowey observes that 'God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.' He categorises this accommodation in two ways: a 'universal and necessary' accommodation to finite comprehension, and a 'special, gracious' accommodation to human sinfulness. Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology*, Expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 3-17.

⁵⁷ Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised. A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin*, Studies in Early Modern Religious Reforms, ed. Irena Backus, vol. 5 (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006).

⁵⁸ 'We can say that there takes place when God reveals himself a veiling and unveiling. Calvin is never weary of repeating that God covers over his face when he reveals himself.' Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 7.

⁵⁹ 'This symbolic form which God takes upon himself in the act of revealing himself can be thought of as a veil through the putting on of which the light of the glory of God is obscured yet nevertheless transmitted to the beholder.' Ibid., 4.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

God ‘adjusting the “diverse forms” of cultic practice to the “different ages” of the Church without altering the doctrine or making himself subject to change.’⁶¹ An aspect of the knowledge of God that Wallace seems to overlook is Dowey’s identification of it as being ‘existential’ in nature; in that it ‘determines the existence of the knower.’⁶²

Both Wallace and Dowey make it clear that the ultimate accommodation of God is in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Whereas in the Old Testament God assumed ‘symbolic forms’ to reveal his presence, in the New Testament God reveals himself in what Wallace refers to as an act of ‘self-humiliation.’⁶³ Dowey points to the importance in ‘special accommodation’ of the incarnation, in that ‘there is no redemptive knowledge of God ... apart from the mediatorial office of Christ.’⁶⁴ A vivid image which Wallace draws from Calvin’s Commentary on Philippians 2:7 is that of the humanity of Christ serving as a ‘veil’ of God’s glory and majesty to accommodate the otherwise overpowering divine presence to human capacity.⁶⁵ If the revelation of salvation is founded on the incarnation it does not mean that the revelation under the Old Testament differed substantially from under the New: Wallace cites *Inst.* 2.10.2 to show that Calvin considered the covenant made in the Old Testament to be the same in ‘substance and reality’ (*substantia et re*) as that in the New.⁶⁶ Gerrish underlines this by an

⁶¹ Balserak, *Divinity Compromised*, 76.

⁶² Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 26. ‘Existential’ knowledge is thus not neutral or disinterested but impact on the whole person.

⁶³ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 11-12.

⁶⁴ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 10.

⁶⁵ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 12-13. ‘The abasement of the flesh was, notwithstanding, like a veil, by which his divine majesty was concealed.’ *CTS Phil., Col. & Thess.* 57. ‘*Carnis humilitatem nihilominus suisse instar veli, quo divina maiestas tegebatur.*’ *CO* 52.26. While Calvin uses this image in *Inst.* 2.13.2 saying, ‘He took the image of a servant, and content with such lowness, allowed his divinity to be hidden by a “veil of flesh,”’ and, for example, in his commentary on John 5:22 where he says that in Christ’s face ‘God the Father, who would otherwise have been hidden and at a distance, appears to us so that the unveiled majesty of God does not swallow us up by its inconceivable brightness.’ (*CTS John* 1.201) but it would be overextending the textual evidence to suggest that this was more than a common image used by Calvin to describe hiddenness or obscurity, thus Calvin can equally refer to the ‘Schoolmen’ who have ‘drawn a veil over Christ to hide him.’ (*Inst.* 3.2.2) Here the emphasis is on Christ’s making God ‘visible’ while his ‘hidden divinity or essence remained unchanged.’ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 16.

⁶⁶ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 27. *CO* 2.313.

important distinction, the Incarnation is not the first ‘manifestation’ of God’s love for humanity, rather it is the ‘pledge’ of it.⁶⁷

Word and Sacraments, then, are a means of revelation, as Calvin holds that ‘the same self-revealing Lord who showed himself to the people of Israel in many and varied forms, ceremonies, dreams and visions, confronts us today when the Word is preached and the Sacraments administered, and it is to the Word and Sacraments that we must turn if we wish to enter in to communion with him.’⁶⁸ An image that Calvin uses to describe this is as a way in which we can see the glory of God reflected as in a mirror.⁶⁹ Word and sign combine in revelation, the Word interprets and gives meaning to the sign and without the Word the sign would be ineffective – even when the ‘sign’ is a vision ‘for mute visions are cold; therefore the Word of the Lord is as the soul which quickens them.’ God ‘illustrates and adorns his Word by external symbols, that both greater clearness and authority may be added to it’⁷⁰ and, as Balsarak observes, Calvin sees God ‘making use of senses other than hearing to try to drive home his message to his benighted people.’⁷¹ The sign reinforces the word that is spoken, confirming the promise or command given by its function to ‘draw attention to the importance and truth of what is being said.’⁷² In preaching God is held to speak ‘through a sovereign and free act of the Holy Spirit’⁷³ and the word of the preacher is then the Word of God: more than a sign of the presence of God, but a ‘means whereby Christ establishes his

⁶⁷ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 60.

⁶⁸ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 22.

⁶⁹ Wallace refers to this being a ‘frequent’ image being used by Calvin to describe the function of Word and Sacrament and draws a number of examples from Calvin’s Commentaries. *Ibid.*, 24. While this may suggest a greater use of the image in connection to Word and Sacrament than is apparent from a search of the Latin texts of *CO*. However it is clear that Calvin does use this image not only for the Word and Sacraments but, as Dowey notes, for the witness of creation to the glory of God and, as Gerrish observes, for the image of God in humanity. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 143; Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 43.

⁷⁰ CTS *Genesis* 2.114 (on Gen 28:13).

⁷¹ Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*, 48.

⁷² Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 74.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 89.

rule in the hearts of his people.⁷⁴ It is not just in preaching that God acts in this manner, as Randall Zachman observes; it is the ‘ceremonies of worship’ that are ‘the means by which God allures us to Godself, in order to raise us up to God.’⁷⁵

The Sacraments as signs are linked to the Word because they seal the promises that God makes. Thus Calvin makes the link between the Word and Sacrament ‘by comparing a Sacrament to the official seal attached to documents of state: the Word is the pledge of favour, and the Sacrament is the seal appended to the Word for the sake of ratification.’⁷⁶ But as well as ‘sealing’ the promise, the Sacraments indicate acceptance of the promise that they seal. The revelation that the Sacrament offers requires faith in the recipient for its reception, but it also nurtures faith, although Wallace observes that faith is ‘not a natural response to the Word of God but is an entirely miraculous act of the Holy Spirit.’⁷⁷

The sacramental signs ‘bring before our eyes’ the promise given in the Word ‘of our mystical union with the body of Christ.’⁷⁸ The idea of a ‘mystical union’ is identified by Gerrish as a ‘pivotal theme’ for Calvin’s understanding of the Eucharist⁷⁹ and, while it receives only relatively brief consideration by Dowey,⁸⁰ it is considered by Wallace to be ‘one of the most important doctrines’ in terms of Calvin’s understanding of Christian

⁷⁴ Ibid., 85. Wallace here suggests that Calvin sees effective preaching as a sign of the presence of God, quoting from *Inst.* 4.14.26, ‘Words are nothing else but signs.’ However this phrase, which Calvin has drawn from Augustine, is taken somewhat out of context as Calvin was making a comparison between the different sacraments of the Old Testament to the New by noting the mutability of language: ‘it is the same with different signs as it is with different words; for words change their sounds from time to time; and words are nothing but signs.’

⁷⁵ Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 346.

⁷⁶ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 102.

⁷⁷ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 127.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 72.

⁸⁰ Dowey’s chief concern is to show ‘that the noetic aspect of faith is imbedded inextricably in a total work of the Spirit that includes both world and intellect and finally body as well as soul,’ and also to emphasize that this is a present, not exclusively eschatological, aspect of faith.’ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 198.

faith and life.⁸¹ Wallace further notes that this understanding rests in our salvation having been worked out in Christ ‘in and through his human body and human nature,’ and the benefits of his work being only available for us if we are brought into union with his human nature.⁸² Gerrish picks up the use by Calvin of the ‘mystical union’ of believers with Christ, and sees this union as the effect of faith. He observes that Calvin ‘insists that faith does not merely look at Christ in the distance, so to speak, but embraces him so that he may become ours and dwell within us.’⁸³ Thus, with Christ as the mediator of our reconciliation with the Father our union with him means that we become partakers of every good thing.

Mark Garcia, in his extensive study of union with Christ in Calvin’s theology, raises a significant question in regard to what is meant by ‘union’ by Calvin, his contemporaries and their late medieval predecessors.⁸⁴ There has been significant interest in recent years on the influence on Calvin of certain aspects of mysticism in regard to his doctrine of union with Christ. Heiko Oberman has described the types of mysticism of the late medieval period to include ‘marital’ mysticism, where the ‘highest point of union is depicted as an exchange of goods, as prescribed in Roman law for contracting a marriage.’⁸⁵ The influence of this form of mysticism can be seen in Luther, and Garcia observes that Luther can be found using ‘marriage imagery to represent the divine reality of the union of Christ and the believer’ in his ‘mature’ writing as well as in his

⁸¹ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 143. Kilian McDonnell suggests that there is ‘little doubt’ that union with Christ constitutes a central theme in Calvin’s theology, crediting Martin Bucer with significant influence, and notes the wide variety of expressions that Calvin appears to use for this. It seems more likely, as Willelm van’t Spijker suggests, that Calvin and Bucer mutually influenced each other – the evidence suggests that their friendship was such that ‘they knew, pointed out and also tolerated each other’s weaknesses’ yet felt a ‘strong theological and religious affinity’ with each other. McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 177; Willelm van’t Spijker, ‘Bucer’s Influence on Calvin: Church and Community,’ *Martin Bucer: Reforming Church and Community*, ed. D.F. Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32.

⁸² Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 144.

⁸³ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 71.

⁸⁴ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 48.

⁸⁵ Heiko Oberman, ‘The Meaning of Mysticism from Meister Eckhart to Martin Luther,’ trans. Andrew Colin Gow, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 87.

early years.⁸⁶ The influence of medieval mysticism on Calvin has been the subject of a number of studies⁸⁷ and the resonances with several medieval writers, including Bernard of Clairvaux, have been noted.⁸⁸ Calvin's use of the term 'mystical union' is, in fact, limited and he only uses '*unio mystica*' twice in the 1559 *Institutes*, although this does not necessarily reduce the importance of the concept in his work.⁸⁹ Tamburello notes that Calvin's understanding of the term 'correlates directly with his understanding of justification and sanctification' and that it 'revolves around faith,'⁹⁰ while Garcia points to the reciprocity and symbiosis of the relationship between faith and union with Christ where 'faith yields union and yet always depends on union.'⁹¹ Calvin's use of mystical language poses some difficulty, not least because of his clear unease with what Tamburello refers to as 'esoteric phenomena' such as visions or ecstasies.⁹² However, there should not be too much weight placed upon this affinity, for although Bernard's influence may have been significant, it appears to be too diffuse to be readily identified. In fact, Tony Lane has compared it to the influence of 'a mountain stream upon a large river into which it flows.' While the stream enriches the river, 'it would be a bold person who imagined they could point to the specific influences of the stream a mile

⁸⁶ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 64.

⁸⁷ Of particular note in this respect is the work of Dennis Tamburello and Tony Lane: Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Anthony N.S. Lane, *Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History, ed. David Willis (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1996).

⁸⁸ Dowey refers to Calvin having taken over the phrase from classical mysticism, while Wallace observes the common phraseology between Calvin and writers such as 'Richard of St Victor, Tauler, Bernard, Gregory Palamas, Thomas Merton' and suggest that Calvin used the language that 'best fitted his own experiences.' Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 198; Ronald S. Wallace, 'A Christian Theologian: Calvin's Approach to Theology: Revelation in the Old and New Testaments,' *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5.1 (1987), 129. Tony Lane claims that 'Bernard of Clairvaux was one of Calvin's favourite authors, and that 'he quotes him with growing appreciation over the years.' Lane, *Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux*, pxiii. He also observes that Calvin cites Bernard forty-one times between 1539 and 1559 (a period that covers the majority of his literary career). Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 87.

⁸⁹ Tamburello notes the two references as *Inst.* 3.11.10 and 2.12.7, and contrasts this to Bernard's not employing the term in his discussion of union with God. He suggests that the former passage 'embraces many of the themes that are central to Calvin's understanding of union with God or Christ.' Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 84.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84-5.

⁹¹ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 74.

⁹² Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 8. Garcia's criticism that any claim that Calvin had a place for 'esoteric phenomena' is 'at least suspect' is quite reasonable. Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 71.

further down the river.’⁹³ However, Calvin does use marriage-union imagery with considerable effect. Gerrish points to Calvin’s commentary on Ephesians 5:28-33 as key to understanding his fascination by ‘the notion of a sacred wedlock that makes us flesh of Christ’s flesh and bone of his bone.’⁹⁴ The image of marriage-union allows for a description of both transfer of property, and for a ‘mystical’ union between parties that is more than simple fellowship (*societas*).⁹⁵ In one respect at least Calvin can describe this union as a ‘mystery’ because it has no natural analogy, its nature is ‘as unique and unparalleled as the incarnation itself is a unique and unparalleled event.’⁹⁶ It is a ‘sacred union incomprehensible to carnal sense’⁹⁷ and Wallace points to Calvin’s use of the analogy of the hypostatic union, ‘which at least serves to regulate his thinking on this mystery of sacramental union.’⁹⁸

Mark Garcia shows how Calvin’s understanding of union with Christ is connected with the twofold grace (*duplex gratia*) of justification and sanctification through a number of case studies. In Calvin’s *Commentary on Romans* Garcia finds that union with Christ pervades the exposition to an ‘astonishing’ degree and suggests that Calvin’s comments ‘reflect his understanding that union with Christ is basic to the apostle’s teaching on the application of redemption.’⁹⁹ To assist in the interpretation of Calvin’s teaching on saving union in Christ, Garcia proposes a description of the ideas found as Calvin’s ‘replication principle’ – at the heart of which is the idea of ‘a Spirit-created replica in the life of the believer of what was and is true of Christ himself.’¹⁰⁰ This is an engrafting, with both a mortification and vivification, but which ‘is not to be confused

⁹³ Lane, *Calvin and Bernard of Clairvaux*, 101.

⁹⁴ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 73.

⁹⁵ The marriage-union image is not the only way in which Calvin seeks to describe the union with Christ, for example Gerrish points to the image of eating in order to live that Calvin draws from John 6. *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹⁶ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 165.

⁹⁷ *Mutual Consent CTS Tracts* 2.239. ‘*Sacram unitatem, quae nobis est cum Christo, sensui carnis incomprehensibilem fatemur esse.*’ CO 9:31.

⁹⁸ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 167.

⁹⁹ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 93.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

with a modelling activity of the believer in which one strives to follow Christ's example.'¹⁰¹ This is more than a 'conformity of example,' a simple *imitatio Christi*, but a 'hidden union' (*arcanam coniunctionem*) which includes a growing together and a transfusion of power (*virtutem*).¹⁰² As noted above, Wallace points to parallels between this union and the incarnation – 'union of person' in two 'substances' of body and soul but also in hypostatic union ('not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person'), sacramental union not a 'personal' union in this sense but reflects the deeper mystery,¹⁰³ but Garcia's replication principle would shift the emphasis: rather than 'reflecting' this union, it 'replicates' it. The importance of our union with Christ has been seen to override questions of eucharistic presence: for example, Philip Butin observes that for Calvin the key consideration 'was not how Christ was present in the elements; rather it was how God worked in the Eucharist to unite believers to Christ by the Spirit, and the benefits that this union brought.'¹⁰⁴ Given that Calvin is willing to use a variety of language to describe the union with Christ,¹⁰⁵ and indeed can switch between terms such as 'union' (*unio*), 'communion' (*communio*), *koinonia*, and 'participation' (*participare*) to describe the relationship with Christ into which the believer is drawn by faith, the breadth of influence of Calvin's understanding of union with Christ and its impact on his theology as a whole, and in regards to the Sacraments in particular begins to become clear. The nuances of this varied language can present some problems. Todd Billings in *Calvin, Participation and the Gift*, which is for the most part a highly useful study, seeks to make a distinction between 'union with Christ' and 'participation in

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 128-9.

¹⁰² CTS *Romans* . CO 49.106.

¹⁰³ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 167-9.

¹⁰⁴ Philip Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response. Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 114.

¹⁰⁵ For example Gerrish notes the use by Calvin of adjectives such as 'secret' or 'wonderful' as well as 'mystical' or, as he might prefer, 'mysterious' to describe the union.

Christ' albeit recognising their relatedness.¹⁰⁶ Billings makes no claim for either 'union in Christ' or 'participation in Christ' as central dogmas for Calvin. But, in his desire to move away from the 'mystical' dimensions of Calvin's thought as explored by Tamburello, the distinction he makes between 'union' and 'participation' is at least questionable. He wishes to focus on 'the believer's activity in receiving salvation and living in Christ,'¹⁰⁷ but is surely what Calvin understands as the *fruit* of the union with Christ, as Garcia demonstrates – the *duplex gratia* of justification and sanctification.¹⁰⁸ Where the distinction does have value is in emphasising the nature of the union as Calvin understood it. Billings notes the use by Calvin of the language of engrafting to depict the intimacy of the union and the effective transformation that occurs, observing how Calvin 'frequently returns' to the term *koinonia* to depict a union where there is 'mutual interpenetration of Christ and believers.'¹⁰⁹ It would be more helpful to suggest, as Billings does at one point, that 'the notion of "participation" becomes a rich way to speak about a type of communion that involves both a union and a type of interpenetration.'¹¹⁰ 'Participation' then emphasises the result of the union, which is in effect to share in the benefits that Christ has won on our behalf.

If the Sacraments act to bring before our eyes the promise of union with Christ, Calvin saw what Wallace terms a 'parallel relationship' between the sign and the thing signified. This relationship is such that the thing signified can be identified with the sign, but must be regarded as distinct.¹¹¹ Garcia observes this as one of the most

¹⁰⁶ J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology, eds. Sarah Coakley and Richard Cross (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ A pertinent observation by Garcia notes that Calvin, in response to Westphal, clarifies that our union is with Christ (and not his benefits) but also that 'it is precisely because one is united to Christ in his redeeming flesh and blood that one is made, for this reason, partaker in all his blessings.' Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 165.

¹⁰⁹ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 92-4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 95.

¹¹¹ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 164.

prominent structural elements in Calvin's understanding on union with Christ.¹¹² In this it would seem that Calvin is appropriating Augustinian sign theory, and paralleling the Chalcedonian *distinctio sed non separatio* formula. While Zwingli appealed to Augustine to support his understanding of the Sacraments it can be argued, as Gerrish does, that Calvin is more authentically Augustinian in his understanding of signs as a guarantee of a present reality in the Sacraments.¹¹³ Garcia notes that Peter Lombard's discussion of the Sacraments begin with reference to Augustine's theory of signs and the relation of *signa* to *res*, whilst Calvin stresses the 'crucial distinction or difference' between *signa* and *res* in Augustine's teaching – that while the *signum* assists in grasping the *res* it is necessarily not the *res* itself.¹¹⁴ Thus, while a symbol can at times be addressed and thought as having the identity of what it stands for,¹¹⁵ in the Sacraments there is such a close connection between the sign and the reality it represents (the spiritual gift of union with Christ) that we can 'easily pass from one to the other.'¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, Calvin insists that the *signa* are not to be confused with the *res*.¹¹⁷ Here is the crux of the matter for Calvin: the sacramental signs remain signs (*signa*) but with them (or through them) is received the reality (*res*). Thus the signs are instruments by which God works to offer the reality of His promise, hence Gerrish's reference to this as 'symbolic instrumentalism.' Luther, Zwingli and Calvin equally considered that a sign or symbol points to something, but can be seen to differ in their temporality or causality. Gerrish usefully summarizes these views as 'a happening in the past, a happening that simultaneously occurs in the present, or a present happening that

¹¹² Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 161.

¹¹³ Gerrish argues that in terms of his understanding of signification Calvin 'did not only *appeal* to Augustine but also, in this respect as in so many others, *was essentially Augustinian.*' Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 165.

¹¹⁴ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 161-2.

¹¹⁵ For example, Wallace uses the analogy: 'Thus a mother can refer to "John" as being put up on the mantelpiece, when what she means is that John's photograph is being put there.' Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 161.

¹¹⁶ *Inst.* 4.17.21.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, the discussion in Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 161-65.

is actually brought about through the signs.¹¹⁸ Luther took the line that sacramental signs pointed to something ‘invisibly present’ rather than being absent and in this Gerrish sees him leaving behind the Augustinian notion of a sacrament as ‘as sign of a sacred thing.’ Zwingli, on the other hand, ‘was reluctant to acknowledge any other causality than that of God, the first cause.’ Thus for Zwingli signs could not be instrumental, but were indicative or declarative: they point to what God has already done in Christ and indicate the believer’s commitment to live in faith.¹¹⁹ Garcia points to a soteriological concern in both Luther and Zwingli in this area, and an equal soteriological concern in Calvin’s understanding.¹²⁰ For Zwingli the concern is that arguing for a physical presence of Christ in the Supper moves the locus of faith away from the truly saving reality of Christ (which is spiritual and immaterial) to a physical object incapable of bearing salvation, while for Luther there is a concern to emphasise the personal presence of Christ in the Eucharist as the hope of salvation. Calvin’s soteriological concern is seen in his understanding that union with Christ ‘in his flesh and blood’ is the *res* of the Sacraments, this participation in Christ is bound to a correct understanding of the grace in the *res* to which the *signa* refer.¹²¹ The grace in the union with Christ is the *duplex gratia* of justification and sanctification which is promised in Baptism: that God will not hold our sins against us and that he will renew us by the Spirit. In respect of the Eucharist, the believer should understand that they truly participate in Christ’s body and blood, which is necessary for his obedience to be

¹¹⁸ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 167.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164-5.

¹²⁰ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 150-1. Garcia draws support from Peter Stephens’ argument that, in respect of the 1529 Marburg Colloquy, both Luther and Zwingli were animated by concern for salvation rather than the Supper alone. W. Peter Stephens, ‘The Soteriological Motive in the Eucharistic Controversy,’ *Calvin: Erbe und Auftrag: Festschrift für Willelm Neuser Zu Seinem 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Willem van’t Spijker (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), 201-13.

¹²¹ Garcia is not perhaps as clear as might be wished regarding the manner of understanding required: Calvin linked knowledge to faith (*Inst.* 3.2.2) and it is this ‘higher knowledge’ (*Inst.* 3.2.14) that Calvin sees as required in salvation. Furthermore, Thomas Davis has described how Calvin increasingly saw the Eucharist as a source of knowledge, beginning with the 1541 *Short Treatise* and running through the subsequent catechisms and liturgies, commentaries and in the 1543 edition of the *Institutes*. Thomas J. Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God. The Development of Calvin’s Eucharistic Teaching*, AMS Studies in Religious Tradition (New York: AMS, 1995), 145-67. In this light it is clearly *faith*, the higher knowledge, which allows us to understand the gift offered in the Eucharist.

imputed to us. This union is not ‘a completely realized blessing,’ but the Sacraments are intended to nourish faith, and so Garcia argues that they have an ‘intimate and clear’ connection with salvation in that they signify the reality of union with Christ and the twofold grace that flows from that.¹²² Indeed, as Gerrish admits, if it is faith that brings the ‘mystical union’ about, the Lord’s Supper is a ‘dramatic presentation’ of the gospel and its promises which deepens the knowledge of such thus deepening faith and therefore union,¹²³ and it is the work of the Spirit to drive this.

Calvin’s understanding of signs has long been the topic of debate, with a strong emphasis being placed on the primacy of Word over visible images. Indeed there does appear to be ample evidence that Calvin denied the possibility of seeing an invisible God, and looked to the Word of God as the sole means by which to gain knowledge of God. Dowey can describe Calvin’s theology as being ‘overwhelmingly’ a ‘theology of the Word,’ and observe that ‘the only successful medium of intercourse between God and fallen man is the Word.’¹²⁴ David Willis can declare that Calvin ‘emphasizes the priority of hearing over seeing’ in the reception of revelation.¹²⁵ Admittedly this ‘hearing’ should include the written word: Wallace picks up on one of Calvin’s comments from *Inst.* 4.8.2 indicating that it was God’s will ‘that his Word should be committed to writing in order that the priests might derive from it whatever they would communicate to the people’ to show that Scripture is a source of this hearing of God’s Word.¹²⁶ Bouwsma sees in Calvin ‘a bias against visual experience’ and suggests that

¹²² Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 151-3. Developing his idea of Calvin’s ‘replication principle’, Garcia notes that ‘the Lord’s Supper is instituted to teach (*docere*) and assure believers that their souls are being trained in the hope of eternal life (*in spem vitae aeternae*), to confirm and increase their union with Christ.’ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹²³ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 158.

¹²⁴ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3, 13.

¹²⁵ E. David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology*, *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 118.

¹²⁶ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 96.

for Calvin ‘we truly *see* only after we *hear*.’¹²⁷ Indeed Carlos Eire sees in this emphasis on word over image a shift towards ‘an invisible, interior realm’ with Calvinism becoming ‘a cerebral, learned sort of religion, one that only allowed for the Word to stand as an image of the invisible reality of the spiritual dimension.’¹²⁸ This emphasis seen in the literature on the primacy of the *verbal* over the *visual* would suggest a secondary role to the sacramental signs, and perhaps a more memorialist slant. However, in recent years a number of scholars have begun to see an increased importance on visual imagery in Calvin’s writing. In particular Randall Zachman has sought to show that the Word and work of God (‘proclamation and manifestation’) are interdependent in Calvin’s theology and ‘central to the way he thinks theologically.’¹²⁹ In this Zachman argues that Calvin held both visual images and proclamation work together to bring knowledge of God: ‘we must use our eyes and ears in order to behold the living images that God presents to our view, in order to be led from the visible to the invisible, from the earthly to the heavenly, from the present to the future, from the carnal to the spiritual.’¹³⁰ Mary Engel seeks to widen what she considers an overly restrictive understanding of how Calvin viewed the *imago dei* by pointing to how Calvin can speak of contemplating God in the ‘mirrors of the world’ (human bodies, Scripture, exemplary individuals and Christ himself) but noting that the concept of human witnessing appears to go beyond simple reflection to something more active. Further developing this she points to Calvin’s use of the ‘Renaissance image of the world as a theatre’ and suggests that he ‘clearly perceives human beings as actors as well as spectators.’¹³¹ Zachman notes how Gerrish links the signs to the proclaimed

¹²⁷ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 158, (emphasis original).

¹²⁸ Eire, *War against the Idols*, 316.

¹²⁹ Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 7.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin’s Perceptual Anthropology* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 53. Engel is seeking to correct the suggestion of Thomas Torrance that Calvin always thinks of the *imago dei* ‘in terms of a mirror,’ which she considers restricts the *imago* to a form of reflection. Torrance does restrict the idea *imago* to the being a reflection, stating that ‘there is no such thing in Calvin’s thought as an *imago* dissociated from the act of reflecting.’ But he does accept a wider sense of *imago dei* which may

Word, and by implication the *heard* Word, as aids to understanding and sees Calvin assigning ‘this proclaimed Word of promise the very functions that the medieval Church looked for in the Sacraments.’¹³² Sacraments are, according to Gerrish, understood by Calvin as ‘Word, promise or proclamation’ where ‘the efficacy of the Word is brought to light.’ But here Zachman is misjudging Gerrish, who does not see Calvin replacing the Sacraments with the Word but here suggests that the Sacraments are acting ‘like words’ to convey meaning. Zachman, however, does argue that Calvin seeks to replace ‘dead images’ with the ‘living icons’ that God uses to make himself known.¹³³ One aspect of Zachman’s intention is to rebalance the emphasis of our understanding of Calvin’s theology towards ‘seeing’ as well as ‘hearing.’¹³⁴ Thus Zachman notes how Calvin can describe the temporal benefits we enjoy from God as ‘ladders’ by which we might ascend to the eternal blessings of God.¹³⁵ For example, in his commentary on Psalm 9 Calvin admits that it was not enough ‘in those days’ for the faithful to depend on the Word of God and engage in ceremonies of worship ‘unless, aided by external symbols, they elevated their minds above these, and yielded to God spiritual worship.’ The external symbols were to ‘serve as ladders, by which the faithful might ascend even to heaven.’¹³⁶ Similarly miracles are seen by Calvin as ‘signs confirming the Word of God’ even as early as the 1536 *Institutes*, with a broad definition of ‘sacrament’ including such miraculous signs as confirming God’s

be used of ‘anything in the universe created by God.’ It is, he suggests, Calvin’s thought that it is impossible to contemplate the ‘vast and beautiful fabric’ of the world ‘without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory.’ Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 36-38.

¹³² Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 85.

¹³³ Zachman observes that ‘Calvin did not seek to remove “dead images” from places of worship so that there might be no images of God at all but only preaching of the Word. Instead Calvin sought to remove the “dead images” so that the faithful might apply their eyes and ears to the “living icons” that God uses to represent Godself to us.’ Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 8-9.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³⁶ CTS *Psalms* 1.122 Julie Canlis has drawn out the importance of the image of the ladder in Calvin’s theology of ascent, linking it to the use of the image by Irenaeus, to our participation in the flesh of Christ in his ascension and our *koinonia* with the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit. Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder. A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010).

promises.¹³⁷ While these images (the external symbols of worship and miracles) serve to manifest God, the reality presented is seen by Calvin as Christ not least as the fulfilment of the promises of God in the prophets.¹³⁸ The gospel then stands as a parallel image, a ‘mirror or living portrait in which Christ exhibits and offers himself to us with all his benefits.’¹³⁹ Interestingly Zachman points to Calvin’s treatment of certain signs as ‘temporary’, visually ‘sealing’ the gospel promise on a specific occasion but not being intended to permanently accompany the promise,¹⁴⁰ which underlines both the ability of symbols to enhance understanding and the divine accommodation to the human condition. The Sacraments are not ‘temporary’ signs, but the ‘primary visual confirmation’ of the gospel.¹⁴¹ A key aspect of the ‘living image’ in the Supper is that it is effectively linked to the reality it represents: this is the difference between ‘representation’ and ‘exhibition,’ and for Calvin the sacramental signs ‘exhibit’ Christ rather than merely represent him.¹⁴² Zachman makes a good case for a more positive assessment of Calvin’s understanding of visual images, certainly as far as the early editions of the *Institutes* are concerned. However, he relies on the 1536 and 1543 editions for many of his citations of the *Institutes*, without always being clear how Calvin’s language or, more importantly, his theology changes in the later editions. He does draw from a wide range of Calvin’s biblical commentaries and other texts, and the case he makes for a more positive assessment of image in Calvin’s theology is strengthened by this. Certainly Zachman manages to paint a different picture of Calvin’s relationship to visual and physical imagery than one might find in many areas of Calvin literature. The piety of believers is to be seen in bodily gestures as well as speech, kneeling (‘bending the knee’) becomes a mark of worship, as does the lifting of hands

¹³⁷ Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 154.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 338.

in prayer.¹⁴³ All this speaks to how Calvin might see visible signs and expressions influencing the senses, and being part of the way in which God makes himself known. It is just this awareness that underlies Calvin's understanding of 'the perversion of gestures, rites, and ceremonies by ostentation and pomp' and the danger of relying on the 'dead image' seen in overly ornate ceremonies.¹⁴⁴ Zachman's proposal regarding images in Calvin's theology emphasizes the importance of the signs as aids to understanding, but only inasmuch as they are 'living images' used by God to exhibit the promise they are connected with. Human created images – visual, ceremonial or in whatever media – cannot deliver the reality they portray, only the 'living images' created by God can do this. With an awareness of the power of signs to lead our senses, and a concern that we should concentrate on those which would lead us upwards to God, Calvin's drive in his declarations against the understandings which held our attention (in his view) to the *signa* and not lead us beyond to the *res* become clear. While Garcia sees his concern 'with the focus of late medieval piety on objects, on "things" like images and relics' in opposition to 'the gospel reality which comes in the Word preached and heard,' it would be better to understand this as a focus on 'dead images' (those without the power to lead us upwards to God) as opposed to 'living icons' (the images, examples and promises which point us to union with Christ): this is what leads Calvin to 'a rejection of an inappropriately lofty view of the sacramental elements.'¹⁴⁵ The signs and the promises they represent need then to be understood if they are to be effective, that is if they are to be 'living images.' In this we need to look to faith and the role of the Spirit.

The importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments in Calvin's understanding seems to be generally recognised. Wallace points out that, since our

¹⁴³ Ibid., 355-62.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 390-2.

¹⁴⁵ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 161.

union with Christ is brought about only by the ‘secret and wonderful’ work of the Holy Spirit, the Sacraments depend entirely on the Holy Spirit for their efficacy.¹⁴⁶ Cornelis Venema sees this, at least as expressed in *Inst.* 3.1.1, as a reflection of Calvin’s wish to reflect the ‘fully Trinitarian nature of redemption,’ with the office of the Spirit being described in relation to the Father and the Son. So Calvin ascribes to the Holy Spirit ‘the specific work of so uniting us with Christ that all he is and has accomplished becomes ours.’¹⁴⁷ The power of the Spirit who, in the Eucharist ‘raises us to heaven’ and ‘transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ’ is incomprehensible to human reason.¹⁴⁸ In making a number of propositions regarding Calvin’s eucharistic theology, Gerrish appears to separate the eucharistic gift of union by the Holy Spirit with Christ and its reception by faith.¹⁴⁹ This is potentially problematic as Calvin explicitly sees faith as dependent on the Holy Spirit in *Inst.* 3.2.34-36, but Gerrish’s concern seems to be to avoid the suggestion that Christ is only present in spirit and he points to the Sacraments as ‘strictly the Spirit’s means or instruments’ in Calvin’s scheme, for ‘where the Spirit is absent, the Sacraments achieve no more than the sun shining on blind eyes or a voice sounding in deaf ears.’¹⁵⁰ By the same token Gerrish, in proposing that the gift is received by faith, looks to affirm the linkage between Word and Sacrament, for without faith a sacrament ‘cannot be a sacrament correctly understood as an appendage to the divine Word or promise.’¹⁵¹ While Calvin clearly speaks of

¹⁴⁶ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 169.

¹⁴⁷ Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ. The ‘Twofold Grace of God’ and the Interpretation of Calvin’s Theology*, Reformed Historical Theology, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 85.

¹⁴⁸ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 206-7.

¹⁴⁹ The original seven proposition are reprinted in Gerrish, ‘Gospel and Eucharist’, 112-15. Reduced to six (by the omission of the proposition that the eucharistic gift evokes gratitude) they appear with some changes in Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 135-9. In the first proposition, that ‘the Lord’s Supper is a gift’ He astutely points to a key point of difference with the Zwinglian position, the Sacrament is a present gift for Calvin rather than pointing to a past gift (that is, being a commemoration of a gift), although in the third proposition there is a shift from ‘the gift is given *through* the signs’ to ‘the gift is given *with* the signs’ (emphasis mine) which seems counter to Gerrish’s main thrust that Calvin sees the Sacraments as instruments.

¹⁵⁰ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 138.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

receiving the gift through faith,¹⁵² it is tied also to the working of the Spirit. Paul Rorem notes that Calvin ‘rarely fails to credit the precise mode of communion to the secret working, the secret influence or virtue of the Holy Spirit.’¹⁵³ Thus we can see the way in which, as Davis observes, that ‘faith, knowledge, and the Eucharist, *directed by the Holy Spirit*, are bound to one another in such a way that they are interdependent, each strengthening the other, each building the other up, in a dialectical process that makes for progress in the Christian life.’¹⁵⁴

There is general agreement amongst scholars that Calvin saw in the Sacraments God acting through effective, accommodated instruments. The sacramental signs exhibit the promise and the *res* is presented with the *signa* (although without confusing the two). But one element of Calvin’s eucharistic theology that remains for consideration is the question of Christ’s presence or absence in the Eucharist. This was at the heart of the dispute between Luther and Zwingli, and is the ground of considerable debate regarding the Eucharist. Given the degree of controversy at the time it is not unexpected that we should find some variation in how modern scholars perceive Calvin’s views.¹⁵⁵ François Wendel suggests that it is here that Calvin is making a ‘determined effort to set up an original doctrine,’¹⁵⁶ a view which seems to be contrary to Calvin’s own understanding of his work.¹⁵⁷ Wendel does, however, recognize that Calvin sought to find a common ground between Lutheran and Zwinglian extremes, even if he considers him to have ‘remained always much closer to Luther than to Zwingli.’¹⁵⁸ This view might find some support in the ease with which Calvin seems to be able to affirm a ‘presence’ in the

¹⁵² This is made clear, for example, in Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 211-2.

¹⁵³ Paul Rorem, *Calvin and Bullinger on the Lord’s Supper*, Alcuin/Grow Liturgical Studies (Nottingham: Grove, 1989), 8.

¹⁵⁴ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 167. (Emphasis mine.)

¹⁵⁵ Gerrish comments that ‘the modern scholarly literature on Calvin ... mirrors sixteenth-century disagreement over [Calvin’s] place in the eucharistic debate.’ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Wendel, *Calvin*, 329.

¹⁵⁷ As noted previously (page 7), Calvin saw himself as teaching *true* doctrine rather than ‘new’ doctrine.

¹⁵⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 330.

Eucharist: he can say ‘Westphal insists on the presence of the flesh of Christ in the Supper: we do not deny it,’ although he then adds ‘provided he will rise upwards with us by faith.’¹⁵⁹ As McDonnell observes ‘rather than denying the real presence’ Calvin ‘presupposes it.’¹⁶⁰ But Calvin does not follow Luther in respect to the ubiquity of the body Christ and rejects the idea of consubstantiation.¹⁶¹ This does not mean that Calvin sees Christ as absent in what he considers the Zwinglian manner, instead he argues for a ‘spiritual’ presence. It is this suggestion of a ‘spiritual’ presence that has made his understanding difficult to pin down for those who would prefer to see him placed into a clear category of ‘presence’ or ‘absence.’ Calvin certainly doesn’t make this easier by using a variety of terms to describe the gift communicated in the Eucharist. Wallace points out that variously he describes the flesh or body of Christ as the *materia* or *substantia* of the Sacraments, alternatively the gift might simply be ‘Christ,’ then again he can speak of the ‘vivifying flesh and blood’ or of the parallel between physical eating and drinking and spiritual reception of the flesh and blood of Christ.¹⁶² Here McDonnell’s identification of Calvin’s use of *opposita* – opposing concepts held in tension – is useful,¹⁶³ suggesting that Calvin quite specifically wants to hold a middle ground. Calvin holds two opposed limitations in regard to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, to respect ‘Christ’s heavenly glory’ so that it is not reduced ‘as happens when he is brought under the corruptible elements of this world,’ on one hand and that ‘nothing inappropriate to human nature be ascribed to his body, as happens when it is said either to be infinite or to be put in a number of places at once.’¹⁶⁴ Thus in Calvin’s

¹⁵⁹ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.281.

¹⁶⁰ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 224.

¹⁶¹ While the term ‘consubstantiation’ was not used by Luther, and the doctrine was specifically rejected by Lutherans such as Heshusius, McDonnell suggests that it is ‘the desire to preserve the real presence, which Calvin feels is threatened by consubstantiation, that motivates Calvin to reject Lutheran explanations.’ David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 172; McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 224.

¹⁶² Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 199.

¹⁶³ Equally, McDonnell warns of the danger of not understanding the use of this dialectic method by Calvin, and the trap of rejecting one of a pair of *opposita* and assuming that he believed the other because he could not have held both views. McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 160.

¹⁶⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.19.

idea of ‘spiritual’ presence there is a tension between the absence of the human body of Christ, which he accepts with Zwingli is now with the Father, and the presence of Christ, union with whom is promised in the Sacraments. Calvin does not often use the term ‘real presence’ because, as Keith Mathison points out, it carries ‘unwanted connotations ... specifically ideas such as local or corporeal presence.’¹⁶⁵ For Calvin the term ‘real’ could only be used to describe ‘presence’ if it meant ‘true,’ and this is the sense in which he is (more than) willing to recognise a ‘real presence.’

1.4 The question of the Catholicizing Calvin

In recent years much has been made of a ‘Catholicizing’ element in Calvin’s theology.¹⁶⁶ This owes a great deal to the work of Brian Gerrish who draws from the discussion of John Williamson Nevin in the latter’s book *The Mystical Presence: a vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*.¹⁶⁷ This work (first published in 1846), Gerrish considers, ‘... has never been as widely known, even in America, as it should be.’ That is not to say that Nevin’s work was entirely unknown: thirty years before Gerrish’s *Grace and Gratitude*, Howard Hageman was noting Nevin’s contribution both to Reformed liturgy and theology and suggesting that he ranked among the important theologians of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁸

To understand the background against which Nevin worked, it is worth remembering that a number of scholars have noted the drift of Churches within the Calvinist tradition

¹⁶⁵ Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You. Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 27.

¹⁶⁶ Although the term ‘catholicizing’ or similar is often used in recent studies this would appear to be a misnomer as the discussion is generally in terms of situating Calvin as more inclined towards the Lutheran insistence on instrumentalism and presence. The use seems to rely more on the nineteenth-century controversies where the accusation of ‘Catholicism’ could have a pejorative meaning. However, it is used here simply due to note a strand of the current debate.

¹⁶⁷ John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology, eds. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, vol. 4 (Philadelphia & Boston: United Church Press, 1966).

¹⁶⁸ Hageman, *Pulpit and Table*, 97. Hageman similarly argued that Nevin’s work should be better known, not least for its significant (if possibly indirect) influence on Reformed church worship.

into forms of memorialism or practical Zwinglianism over the years that followed Calvin. Mathison suggests that this can be seen as early as the Second Helvetic Confession of 1564 where, although the influence of Calvin on Bullinger means that it moves beyond affirming the Sacraments as mere ‘testimonies’ or ‘signs of grace,’ there is no suggestion of any instrumentality and therefore ‘it does not present the Calvinistic doctrine in its totality.’¹⁶⁹ He proceeds to survey a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Reformed theologians and detects ‘a gradual move away from the doctrine of Calvin and the sixteenth-century Reformed confessions’ to the extent that by the mid-eighteenth-century he sees in New England ‘little left of the original eucharistic theology of Calvin because the emphases of Zwinglian theology have become dominant.’¹⁷⁰ Hageman suggested that this move towards Zwinglian theology ‘became even more apparent in the eighteenth century when the humanistic strain in Zwingli’s thought found wide appeal.’¹⁷¹

At the time of publication, *The Mystical Presence* was sent to Charles Hodge, a leading contemporary American Calvinist, who admitted to having ‘never really read it’ for two years until he finally came to review it.¹⁷² His review was scathing, and he argued that in regard to the ‘real doctrine’ of the Reformed Church he disagreed with Nevin ‘essentially, as to the whole subject, not only as to the historical question, but as to what is true doctrine.’¹⁷³ Gerrish suggests Nevin’s understanding was unacceptable because it portrayed what was seen by Calvinists such as Hodge as a ‘Catholic’ theology.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Mathison, *Given for You*, 90.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁷¹ Hageman, *Pulpit and Table*, 34.

¹⁷² Charles Hodge, ‘Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,’ *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 20.2 (1848), 227.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Gerrish’s suggestion here has some merit, at one point Hodge argues that Nevin’s proposition that the sacrament is a means ‘in itself to convey the life of Christ into our persons’ could find parallels in the work of the Jesuit Cardinal Robert Bellarmine. *Ibid.*, 275. It seems that Nevin’s interpretation was equally unacceptable to some American Lutherans, being dismissed as ‘exploded superstition, semi-Romanism, and equal to Puseyism.’ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 4.

However, the debate between Nevin and Hodge was not a straightforward battle, a number of factors may have added to the degree of acrimony that seems to have been present. One aspect was the sense in which both scholars may have felt aggrieved at the other's stance. Nevin had been a pupil of Hodge whilst at Princeton, even being entrusted with teaching Hodge's biblical courses whilst he was in Europe for two years.¹⁷⁵ Nevin's move to Mercersburg and his apparent championing of the new German learning and Roman Catholicism seems to have incensed Hodge greatly.¹⁷⁶ Equally Nevin may have considered Hodge an ally in the battle against revivalism,¹⁷⁷ a view to which Hodge's review of *The Mystical Presence* clearly put an end. The debate between Nevin and Calvin was heated, protracted and personal.¹⁷⁸ It was exacerbated by the opposition of American evangelical Protestants (of whom Hodge was a prominent voice) to the perceived threat of the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and to the influence of the new German Mediating School (which was influenced by the writings of Hegel and Schliermacher), and by Nevin's attacks on the 'myth' that American evangelical protestants had 'recovered original Christianity.'¹⁷⁹

The Lord's Supper, as Nevin understood it, is not a simple recollection of historical events, nor a mere sharing in the benefits that Christ has won. He argues that there is a communication with Christ, 'not only with the spirit of Christ or with his divine nature but with Christ himself in his whole living person' so that we are 'fed and nourished by

¹⁷⁵ James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 16.

¹⁷⁶ Linden J. De Bie, 'Real Presence or Real Absence? The Spoils of War in Nineteenth-Century American Eucharistic Controversy,' *Pro Ecclesia* 4.4 (1995), 433.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 435.

¹⁷⁸ Bard Thompson and George Bricker note that in response to Hodge's attack, Nevin 'stuffed the *Weekly Messenger* with rebuttal, until the subscribers to that denominational paper complained that they were weary of it all.' Preface, Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 12. A useful biographical account of the interaction between Nevin and Hodge is given in Linden J. De Bie, 'Parallel Lives, Antagonistic Aims,' *Coena Mystica. Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology*, eds. Linden J. de Bie and W. Bradford Littlejohn, Mercersburg Theology Study Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

¹⁷⁹ De Bie, 'Real Presence or Real Absence,' 433.

his very flesh and blood.’¹⁸⁰ It is with the flesh and blood that Nevin finds the heart of Calvin’s doctrine of the Eucharist, where he suggested a ‘living energy, the vivific virtue’ is transferred to the believer,¹⁸¹ this ‘efflux’ from Christ lodges in the inmost core of our personality and becomes the ‘seed’ of our sanctification.¹⁸² He insists, that in a true Calvinistic understanding, there is an objective force to the Sacrament,¹⁸³ with the signs ‘bound to what they represent, not subjectively simply in the thought of the worshipper, but objectively, by the force of a divine appointment.’¹⁸⁴

Nevin was aware that his understanding of Calvin was not in keeping with that of his contemporaries. Although they referred to the Sacraments as seals, exhibiting the grace they represent, he considered that the understanding of substance had been replaced by a more transactional understanding. The Sacraments now represent a covenant between Christ and his people where, ‘if both parties are sincere in the covenant thus sealed, and if both abide by and act according to it, the communicant will be saved.’ Thus while the Sacraments exhibit the grace they represent they lack any ‘actual present substance’ and are reduced to a ‘figure, shadow or sign.’¹⁸⁵ However, Nevin felt that to ignore the objective force of the Sacraments not only went against Calvin’s thought, but also reduced the Sacraments to an occasion for instruction or for the production of an emotional response. He criticises what he sees as the prevailing view, as represented by Timothy Dwight, where the Sacrament becomes entirely subjective and the rite is

¹⁸⁰ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 35.

¹⁸¹ ‘The living energy, the vivific virtue, as Calvin styles it, of Christ’s flesh, is made to flow over into the communicant, making him more and more one with Christ himself, and thus more and more an heir of the same immortality that is brought to light in his person.’ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 164-5.

¹⁸³ ‘The old Reformed doctrine includes always the idea of an objective force in the Sacraments. The sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified is real, and holds in virtue of the constitution of the ordinance itself, not in the faith simply or outward frame of the communicant.’ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 110. Nevin claims that this view was ‘presented very distinctly by Edwards, Hopkins and Bellamy.’

‘contrived’ to impact on ‘the senses, the imagination and the heart,’ as well as to ‘enlighten ... the understanding.’¹⁸⁶

Nevin maintained that Calvin’s understanding of the grace of the Sacraments included a real participation in the person of Christ in its ‘true power and substance.’ He argued that salvation consists of ‘an actual union between Christ and his people, mystical but in the highest sense real’ wherein believers are joined to him and that the power of this is ‘mysteriously concentrated’ in the Eucharist as Christ offers ‘his person itself, as the ground and fountain from which all these other blessings may be expected to flow.’¹⁸⁷ In response, Hodge did not deny a ‘real union’ and he observed there was agreement among the Reformed that, in the Sacraments, we ‘receive Christ himself, and are in Christ, united to him by the indwelling of his Spirit and by a living faith.’¹⁸⁸ However, he maintained that, rather than partaking of the ‘real flesh and blood’ of Christ, ‘all the Reformed’ held that ‘by receiving the body and blood of Christ, is meant receiving their virtue or efficacy.’¹⁸⁹ This was variously held as either a ‘sacrificial virtue’ or a ‘mysterious, supernatural efficacy flowing from the glorified body of Christ in heaven’ and this diversity made it difficult to determine what the true doctrine of the Reformed Church had been.¹⁹⁰ Hodge’s objections to Nevin’s work can be considered broadly as falling into two categories: firstly Hodge’s preference for the eucharistic understanding as he saw expressed in the *Consensus Tigurinus* and the *Second Helvetic Confession*, and secondly his opposition to the influence of the new German theology.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. Nevin here may somewhat understate Dwight’s suggestion that the Sacraments present the sacrificial act of Christ in a manner in which the believer shares in them. Dwight can suggest a more existential understanding of the presentation of the gospel promise in the Eucharist: ‘The symbols are exact, and most lively, portraits of the affecting Original; and present us the crucifixion, and the sufferings, of the great subject of it, as again undergone before our eyes. We are not barely taught; we see, and hear, and, of consequence, feel, that Christ our Passover was slain for us, and died on the Cross, that we might live.’ Timothy Dwight, *Theology: Explained and Defended in a Series of Sermons. With a Memoir of the Life of the Author.*, vol. V (Middletown, Conn.: Clark and Lyman, 1819), 346.

¹⁸⁷ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 111.

¹⁸⁸ Hodge, ‘Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,’ 229.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

Clearly Hodge was outraged by Nevin's suggestion of the 'apostasy of the Reformed Church.'¹⁹¹ This accounts for the tone of his review which sought to establish Calvin as holding a middle ground between the Lutheran and Zwinglian extremes, albeit situated closer to Zwingli than Luther.¹⁹² He explains that the confessions in which Calvinist and Zwinglians concur, and specifically the *Consensus Tigurinus* and the Second Helvetic Confession, are in his opinion the authoritative statements of Reformed doctrine.¹⁹³ In reviewing the teaching of these 'authoritative' sources in regards to the questions in dispute Hodge asserts that Christ's presence is a presence 'to the intelligence so as to be apprehended and enjoyed.'¹⁹⁴ It is a presence 'to the mind' and not a local presence.¹⁹⁵ In terms of the reception of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament, Hodge affirms that 'all parties' agree that 'our union with Christ was a real union, that we receive him and not his benefits merely; that he dwells in his people by his Spirit, whose presence is the presence of Christ.' However he saw Calvin's view that there is 'a vivifying efficacy imparted to the body of Christ by its union with the divine nature, and that by the power of the Holy Ghost, the believer in the Lord's supper and elsewhere, received into his soul and by faith this mysterious and supernatural influence,' as simply one of two views held by the Reformed.¹⁹⁶ Hodge then argues that, as Calvin's view is excluded from the *Consensus Tigurinus* and the Second

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 227.

¹⁹² Hodge did observe that determining Reformed doctrine on the Eucharist in the sixteenth century is difficult aside from the 'mysteriousness' of the subject itself, for a number of reasons: the majority of confessions were 'framed for the express purpose of compromise;' the existence of a variety of views within the Reformed tradition; and the potential use of ambiguous language such that 'while the Reformed held a doctrine which admitted of expression in the language adopted, it might be much more simply and intelligibly expressed in other terms.' Ibid., 229-30.

¹⁹³ Of the *Consensus Tigurinus*, Hodge says 'In these articles there is not a word, which any of the evangelical churches of the present day would desire to alter.' Ibid., 238. Of the Second Helvetic Confession, he claims that 'on some accounts is the most authoritative of all the confessions of the Reformed church!' Ibid., 241.

¹⁹⁴ 'For presence is nothing but the application of an object to the faculty suited to the perception of it. Hence, there is a two-fold presence, viz., of things sensible and of things spiritual. The former are present, as the word imports, when they are *prae sensibus*, so as to be perceived by the senses; the latter, when they are presented to the intelligence so as to be apprehended and enjoyed.' Ibid., 244.

¹⁹⁵ 'The presence is to the mind, the object is not presented to the senses, but apprehended by faith. It is a presence of virtue and efficacy not of propinquity.' Ibid., 245.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 249.

Helvetic Confession, the understanding that the reception of the Sacraments signified Christ's sacrifice on the cross and its efficacy resided in the atonement thus achieved should be considered the proper Reformed understanding. This was not only because of the authority of the two confessions, but also because he claimed that 'the sacrificial view is the only one that harmonizes with the other doctrines of the Church.'¹⁹⁷ Thus a significant part of Hodge's stance against Nevin is not to deny that an objective efficacy of the Sacraments was envisaged by Calvin, but to limit Calvin's authority on the grounds that here he is not representative of the Reformed theology of his time.

With regards to the second category of Hodge's objections, he claimed he saw a dangerous influence from Schleiermacher and that pantheism or Socinianism were the 'legitimate outcome' of Nevin's 'language and doctrine.'¹⁹⁸ Nevin in turn denied the charge of Schleiermachianism quite vehemently, initially in a tract entitled *Antichrist: or the Spirit of Sect and Schism* published in 1848. Here Nevin admits to considering Schleiermacher 'a genius of the highest order' but insisted that he was 'not aware at all of having taken him, in any sense slavishly, for my master and guide.'¹⁹⁹ In fact Nevin seems to have been angered by Hodge's apparent unwillingness to distinguish his work from Hegel and Schleiermacher, when he considered himself aligned with the German Mediating School with Dorner, Ullman Tholuck and Neander.²⁰⁰ He states that 'I had taken all proper pains, as I thought, in the body of my work itself, to show that I stood in no fellowship, either with the errors of Schleiermacher on the one hand, or with those of Hegel on the other.'²⁰¹ To Hodge's charge of Eutychianism, Nevin countered with a claim that Hodge displayed Nestorian tendencies.²⁰² While Nevin's historical analysis

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 250-1.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 266.

¹⁹⁹ John Williamson Nevin, 'Antichrist: Or the Spirit of Sect and Schism,' *The Anxious Bench, Antichrist and the Sermon Catholic Unity*, ed. Augustine Thompson (Wipf & Stock, 2000), 3.

²⁰⁰ De Bie, 'Real Presence or Real Absence,' 436.

²⁰¹ Nevin, 'Antichrist', 6.

²⁰² Ibid., 10.

of Calvin's doctrine was highly effective,²⁰³ the charge of Schleiermadianism or, worse still, of Hegelianism was guaranteed to draw the support of the evangelical wing to Hodge's cause.²⁰⁴ There are elements of Nevin's analysis which suggest that he is reading Calvin through a particular theological lens, even if he is considered innocent of Hodge's charges. He criticises Calvin's 'false psychology,' in the first instance because he fails to make a sufficient distinction between material laws of bodily existence and 'the organic law, which constitutes the proper idea of a human body.'²⁰⁵ This 'force of a life' is more than the individual, material existence and 'capable of reaching beyond all such individual limits.'²⁰⁶ Indeed he sees Calvin placing too great an emphasis on 'the flesh of Christ under local form' and, in so doing, arguably undermines one of Calvin's primary concerns in rejecting 'the dogma of the Roman Church, as well as ... the kindred doctrine of Luther.'²⁰⁷ For Nevin, Calvin is forced by his preoccupation to avoid a local presence to resolve the means of union by a 'special supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit,' which Nevin considers a 'sort of foreign medium introduced to meet the needs of the case.'²⁰⁸ It can be argued, as indeed Hodge did, that Nevin's understanding has a Eutychian tone in places despite his protestations to the contrary. One area on which Nevin is surprisingly quiet is that of the Word, the strong link

²⁰³ The clarity and effectiveness of Nevin's analysis is being increasingly recognised by current Calvin studies. Timothy Hessel-Robinson, for example, declares that 'Nevin's work is remarkable in itself for its analytical depth when surveying the history of the theology of the Lord's Supper. He was able to distinguish Calvin's original thought on the Supper from its later accretions. His whole project stands out for its distinctive views, within Reformed theology of its day, on the catholic and sacramental character of the church.' Timothy Hessel-Robinson, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper: Modern Reception and Contemporary Possibilities,' *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities.*, eds. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 181.

²⁰⁴ De Bie suggests that there is some uncertainty regarding whether Hodge recognized the difference between the Mediating School and the work of Hegel and Schleiermacher but, given that he repeats the charge in later work, it seems likely that he is aware of its value as a rallying call. De Bie, 'Real Presence or Real Absence,' 436.

²⁰⁵ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 151.

²⁰⁶ Nevin uses the example of an acorn growing into an oak, on the one hand capable of being seen as a single life but, through the production by the mature oak of other acorns repeated 'in a whole forest of trees. Still, in the end, life of the forest, in such a case, is nothing more than an expansion of the life that lay involved at first in the original acorn; and the whole general existence thus produced is bound together, inwardly and organically, by as true and close a unity as that which holds in any of the single existences embraced in it, separately considered.' *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

between Word and Sacrament seen in Calvin is hardly, if at all, touched on. Hageman notes this as a general tendency of the Mercersburg theologians, and points to its significance as indicating a failure to recover the idea ‘of the Word mediating the presence of Christ’ seen in Calvin and other early Reformers.²⁰⁹

Despite these (arguably significant) limitations on Nevin’s theological interpretation of the Reformed understanding of the Eucharist his strong historical basis is clear. Indeed the strength of his historical evidence is such that Hodge was forced to concede to the evidence of a ‘Catholicising’ Calvin even if he refused to concede theological ground. But, as Mathison observes, while ‘Nevin won the historical battle, he lost the theological war.’²¹⁰

1.5 The crypto-Zwinglian Calvin?

The nineteenth-century debate between Nevin and Hodge was, by no means the end of the discussion regarding Calvin’s positioning between Luther and Zwingli. The image of the ‘Catholicizing Calvin’ which Nevin identified in his writing is in tension with a Zwinglian tendency: even Nevin was forced to admit that the participation in Christ’s flesh and blood is spiritual in nature and in no sense corporeal or material. There could be no assumption of ‘supernatural’ transfer of the material particles of Christ’s body. Such a view would be a ‘superstition,’²¹¹ and the communication of Christ is greater than that of a limited physical form.²¹² But to consider how this more Zwinglian

²⁰⁹ In some way the omission is understandable as Nevin and the Mercersburg theologians were seeking to re-establish the Sacraments in ‘a church that had come under the complete dominance of the pulpit’ but it does raise the question of the role of preaching beyond ‘Biblical exposition and theological instruction’ in his scheme. Hageman, *Pulpit and Table*, 97.

²¹⁰ Mathison, *Given for You*, 156.

²¹¹ ‘I now come down to the extravagant mixtures that superstition has brought in. For here Satan has disported himself with wonderful subtlety in order to draw men’s minds from heaven and imbue them with a perverse error — imagining that Christ is attached to the element of bread!’ *Inst.* 4.17.12

²¹² ‘We must establish such a presence of Christ in the Supper as may neither fasten him to the element of the bread, nor enclose him in the bread, nor circumscribe him in any way (all which things, it is clear, detract from his heavenly glory).’ *Inst.* 4.17.19.

emphasis in Calvin's understanding came to dominate in the Reformed churches we need look little further than the *Consensus Tigurinus*. Mark Garcia suggests that Calvin's 'most fateful act was not his role in the execution of Servetus but his simple signature on the *Consensus Tigurinus*.²¹³ The 1549 *Consensus Tigurinus*, not only sought to bring some theological settlement between the different strands of Reformed thought (after more than twenty years of debate)²¹⁴ but also cement a stronger relationship between Geneva and Zürich.²¹⁵ The importance of the alliance between Geneva and Zürich can be inferred from the willingness of Calvin to compromise by omitting certain phrases that had previously been essential to his formulations regarding the Sacraments, which had proved stumbling blocks for Bullinger.²¹⁶ Although often cited as Calvin's work, or at least a victory for Calvin's theology, recent scholarship has shown that 'the *Consensus Tigurinus* appears to be the extent to which Calvin was willing to bend his eucharistic opinions in favour of peace among the churches of Switzerland,' with marked reduction in the assessment of his influence.²¹⁷ Calvin himself would be engaged in explaining his signature on the document, clarifying his understanding of the text and defending the agreement from the time of its publication in 1551 and throughout his remaining career, particularly in response to criticism from the like of Westphal and Heshusius. The statement by Wendel that it is 'unsafe' to take

²¹³ Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 153.

²¹⁴ In the introduction to *Second Defence*, Calvin refers to the *Consensus Tigurinus* in this way: 'A dispute unhappily carried on among the learned for more than twenty years on the subject of the Sacraments having been somewhat calmed, and men's minds disposed to moderation, nothing seemed so likely to lead to a full settlement as to give an attested statement in few and simple terms of the doctrine which the Churches of Switzerland follow.' *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.246

²¹⁵ Timothy George, 'John Calvin and the Agreement of Zurich,' *John Calvin and the Church. A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1990). George notes that not only was Calvin advocating an alliance with France, thereby hoping to gain leverage with Henry II to alleviate the persecution of Protestants in his kingdom, but that he was also concerned at the resurgence of Roman Catholic forces.

²¹⁶ Rorem, *Calvin and Bullinger on the Lord's Supper*, 46. Evidence from Calvin's correspondence with Bullinger suggests that part of his purpose in visiting Zürich was, with the permission of the Council, to lobby for an alliance with France. De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 176.

²¹⁷ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 30. Davis goes further, to suggest that 'it might be proper to think of the agreement as more Bullingerian than Calvinist.'

the *Consensus Tigurinus* as a basis for ‘objective study’ of Calvinist teaching appears well founded.²¹⁸

There are, however grounds to see Zwinglian traits in Calvin’s understanding beyond the concessions he made to accommodate Bullinger in the *Consensus Tigurinus*. Davis has ably demonstrated the development of Calvin’s eucharistic theology and a shift not merely in emphasis but in understanding. In the 1536 *Institutes* for example, Calvin states categorically that the body of Christ is not received substantially (*substantiam*) ‘but all those benefits which Christ has supplied in his body.’²¹⁹ This is in contradiction to statements in the 1559 *Institutes* that affirm substantial partaking,²²⁰ and the statement does not pass into the 1539 edition. This is a significant change and is not always recognised as such. Davis suggests that, in some measure, Nevin’s failure to recognise the development of Calvin’s thought has been carried through to later work.²²¹ Perhaps it is reasonable to consider this early expression of Calvin’s doctrine as ‘ambiguous’ as does Ganoczy,²²² but it does suggest something more than a ‘modest development’ takes place in Calvin’s thought.²²³

²¹⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 330.

²¹⁹ ‘By way of teaching, we say he is in truth and in effective working shown forth, but not by nature. By this we obviously mean that the very substance of his body or the true and natural body of Christ is not given there; but all those benefits which Christ has supplied in his body.’ *Inst.* 1536 4.30, *CO* 1:123.

²²⁰ For examples see *Inst.* 4.17.11 & 4.17.19 (*CO* 2:1010 & 2:1017).

²²¹ ‘The methodological assumptions Nevin made as he studied Calvin’s eucharistic teaching have also become part and parcel of Calvin scholarship.’ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 21. Nevin does indeed appear to have excluded the possibility of significant change in Calvin’s eucharistic theology, stating (for example) that in this he was ‘always true to himself’ and that the doctrine expressed in the 1536 *Institutes* was that which ‘he contrived to hold to the end of his life.’ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 47; *ibid.*, 315. Equally Hodge does not seek to use this evidence in his criticisms of Nevin, preferring to focus on the *Consensus Tigurinus*.

²²² Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Provo, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 153.

²²³ Tony Lane refers to Davis’ findings as suggesting a ‘modest development’ in Calvin’s thought. Anthony N.S. Lane, ‘Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?’ *Adaptations of Calvinism in Reformation Europe*, eds. Brian G. Armstrong and Mack P. Holt (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) 21 n. 3. However, this seems seriously to understate the degree of movement that Davis claims, in which Calvin appear to undertake a *volte face* in regards to substantial partaking and the idea of a eucharistic gift.

One element of Calvin's 1536 expression his eucharistic doctrine that Gerrish picks up is the idea of a sacramental meal, describing the way in which the Lord's Supper promises our union, our mutual engrafting, by paralleling it. As bread is a source of physical nourishment, so Christ's body is the source of our spiritual nourishment. As wine brings 'strength, refreshment, and good cheer' to our physical body so Christ's blood brings these to us spiritually.²²⁴ There is an element of parallelism in this aspect of Calvin's writing, which Gerrish admits (at least partially) but sees as less significant in the light of Calvin's insistence elsewhere that the Sacrament actually conveys what it promises – participation in the body and blood of Christ.²²⁵ What Gerrish appears to fail to recognise is the possibility that there is a change in Calvin's understanding as witnessed to by his later writings. This, in turn, means that Gerrish appears unwilling to recognise that here Calvin does not neatly fit in to the category of 'symbolic memorialism' at this stage.²²⁶ Davis, having shown the disparity between Calvin's 1536 teaching and later expressions does not consider the impact that Calvin's apparent initial holding of a view more in keeping with that of Bullinger might have had on his willingness to accept the omission of certain parts of his later doctrine. However, in subsequent work Calvin had to undertake to reinterpret, clarify and explain the agreement in order to align it with his later teaching.²²⁷

While Calvin may have achieved agreement with Zürich in the *Consensus Tigurinus*, any hope for further reconciliation with the Lutherans was quickly dashed as the

²²⁴ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 127. Gerrish here refers to *Inst.* 1536 4.25. Calvin uses a less florid statement in *Inst.* 4.17.1: 'For this very familiar comparison penetrates into even the dullest minds: just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so are souls fed by Christ.'

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

²²⁶ Gerrish explicitly denies the possibility that Calvin held a view that could be considered parallelism because of his emphasis on instrumentalism but seems to overlook the possibility that this emphasis is a later position on Calvin's part. In this he rejects a claim by Wendel that there is an affinity between Calvin and the Franciscan parallelism of the Middle Ages. *Ibid.*, 168 n. 33; Wendel, *Calvin*, 344-5.

²²⁷ Calvin's (re-)interpretation of the *Consensus Tigurinus* is considered in Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 41-57. He suggests that Calvin's *Defence of the Sane and Orthodox Doctrine of the Sacraments and of their Nature, Power, End, Use and Fruit* show that the *Consensus Tigurinus* can only be claimed to represent his views if 'radically reinterpreted.' *Ibid.*, 56. The translation of the *Defence* can be found in *Mutual Consent CTS Tracts* 2.199-244.

agreement was attacked for its ‘Zwinglian’ nature. Even with Calvin’s efforts to reinterpret the agreement, it would be viewed with deep suspicion by the Lutherans, who considered that it indicated either Calvin’s Zwinglian nature or his willingness (in the same manner that they held Bucer willing) to bend the meaning of words to suggest agreement where there was none.²²⁸ Tony Lane has pointed to the core of the dispute being the opinion expressed that Calvin’s doctrine was ‘basically Zwinglian teaching wrapped in Lutheran language.’²²⁹ This charge against Calvin would be expressed in the 1577 *Formula of Concord* as his being a ‘cunning sacramentarian’ appearing to use Lutheran language and believing in ‘a true presence of the true, essential, living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper’ but, by claiming it to take place ‘spiritually, through faith,’ in fact holding that ‘that nothing more than bread and wine is present in the Holy Supper and received there by mouth.’²³⁰ Lane questions the degree to which Calvin can be seen to support a ‘real presence,’ noting that ‘at first sight’ Calvin seems to be aligned with Zwingli and opposed to Luther.²³¹ Understanding, with Zwingli, that Christ’s body is ascended and now remains in heaven being unable to be in more than one place it follows for Calvin that there cannot be a local presence of Christ in, with or under the bread and so we cannot feed on Christ through the mouth. This means he must reject the Lutheran *manducatio oralis* and *manducatio impiorum*. Lane also notes that Calvin seems to avoid use of the term ‘real presence.’²³² Joseph Tylenda suggests that this may be because Calvin associated the term ‘real’ with the connotation of ‘something existent, something objective and in the external order’ and therefore suggesting a local presence of the body and blood of Christ.²³³ This aversion to any suggestion of a local presence is carried through into Calvin’s use of ‘Lutheran-

²²⁸ Ibid., 45.

²²⁹ Lane, ‘Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?’ 21.

²³⁰ R. Kolb and T.J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 504.

²³¹ Lane, ‘Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?’ 28.

²³² Ibid., 28-29.

²³³ Joseph N. Tylenda, ‘Calvin and Christ’s Presence in the Supper — True or Real,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27.1 (1974), 72.

sounding' substance language while trying to exclude the possibility of local presence.²³⁴ Lane further notes an affinity with Zwingli in terms of Calvin's being equally concerned not to restrict feeding on Christ's flesh and blood to the Eucharist alone, and usefully summarizes this as 'while the Supper is a special means of grace, it is not a means of special grace.'²³⁵

While, as Lane observes, 'the case for making Calvin a Zwinglian is stronger than is often realized,' and in terms of the charge of the *Formula of Concord* that the 'cunning sacramentarian' denies the oral reception of Christ's body Calvin does, indeed, stand firmly with Zwingli,²³⁶ it is clear that Calvin wishes to distance himself from the sacramentalist stance. His is a *via media* between the errors of both Luther and Zwingli. Calvin refutes any suggestion that the signs are 'empty,' and insists that the reality is presented with the signs. Lane attempts to illustrate this with a suggestion that the elements are seen by Calvin as possible of being 'compared to a cheque' which while made of paper 'effectively offers to us the sum signified.'²³⁷ Arguably a better illustration would be to compare the elements to the signature on a cheque that seals the 'promise' of the sum signified.²³⁸ Melvin Tinker makes the important point that a seal gives 'a certain force' to the document to which it is attached even though it adds nothing in terms of propositional content. A will, for example, is sufficient to convey a certain state of affairs (what is being bequeathed to whom) but the seal makes it 'a mandatory legal document having imperative power.'²³⁹ In this way a cheque requires

²³⁴ Lane, 'Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?' 32.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²³⁸ Lane's illustration of the Zwinglian standpoint of the elements being comparable to 'Monopoly money,' symbolizing 'real money' but with no value is equally troublesome, not least because Monopoly money does have value albeit the agreed value within the context of the game of Monopoly. However, given Lane's comment that the Sacraments for Zwingli act as reminders of God's grace, it might be closer to the mark to compare the sacrament to a bank statement, which brings to mind the transfer of funds already effected on our behalf. *Ibid.*

²³⁹ Melvin Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments. Was Calvin's View of the Lord's Supper Right?' *Churchman* 112.2 (1998), 148.

the signature to have force, and in the Sacraments the signs give force to the gospel promise. There is thus an undeniable instrumentalist element to Calvin's mature eucharistic theology which is at odds with a reading in terms of memorialism or parallelism, along with an insistence of a union with the body of Christ that make it difficult to sustain the charge of 'cunning sacramentalism' and, as Lane points out, Calvin certainly did not see himself as a 'crypto-Zwinglian.'²⁴⁰

So where does Calvin sit in regards to Luther and Zwingli? Much will depend on how the question is framed. As Lane observes, 'for Zwinglians and Lutherans alike, the key issue is whether or not Christ's body and blood are present in the Supper.'²⁴¹ In these terms, if 'presence' is restricted to a material, physical or carnal sense, Calvin does sit with Zwingli. But such an assessment disregards Calvin's concern in this debate. While he holds out against anything that might suggest a local presence, he wishes to affirm a 'true' presence mediated by the Spirit and move well beyond the idea of the signs enabling the believer to 'remember vividly' the work of God.²⁴² Davis describes this in terms of Calvin's unwillingness 'to solve the dilemma of presence and absence by letting one pole be dissolved into the other.'²⁴³ The debate on Calvin's position regarding the 'real' presence is always in danger of overshadowing the other elements in Calvin's eucharistic doctrine and the evidence that Calvin's interest was not in the question of *how* Christ was present, but in *what* the Sacrament offered. The mechanism was a 'mystery' beyond human capacity,²⁴⁴ but the benefits a cause for genuine thanksgiving. To focus on the question of presence misses the point that Calvin is, by

²⁴⁰ Lane, 'Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?' 40.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴² Wilhelm Niesel's phrase 'remember vividly' in describing Zwingli's stance is useful in that it suggests he possibility that Zwingli has a more positive aspect of rhetorical engagement that is often apparent from discussions of 'bare signs.'

²⁴³ Thomas J. Davis, *This Is My Body. The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 129.

²⁴⁴ Calvin can say, 'Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue to express.' *Inst.* 4.17.7.

holding both the physical absence and the effective presence in tension offers a radical alternative which, as T.H.L Parker puts it, ‘at one stroke renders irrelevant, not merely the contemporary controversy, but the whole laborious scholastic investigation since about the twelfth century.’²⁴⁵ As early as the 1536 *Institutes* Calvin declares the root of eucharistic disagreement to be that a significant question has been omitted from the debate: ‘How Christ’s body, as it was given for us, became ours; how his blood, which was shed for us, became ours.’²⁴⁶ In this respect at least it can be argued that Calvin’s eucharistic theology was consistent across the other developments of his understanding, his interest lay in the union with Christ and the blessing that union entailed and with purifying the worship of the Church from unhelpful accretions. An interesting suggestion by Parker is that Calvin, in moving the focal point away from the question of real presence is ‘inviting the Church to go back some five, or even seven, centuries before the doctrine had become fixed, and to take up the discussion from there.’²⁴⁷ There is a suggestion here that Calvin is looking back to an earlier point in the eucharistic debate to be a starting point for ecumenical agreement. The suggestion of influence of a ‘previous mode of thought’ in Calvin’s thinking was also brought up by Hodge, although he suggested that the ‘uncongenial foreign element’ of instrumentalism in Calvin’s thinking was down to a Lutheran influence and a desire to get ‘as near to them as possible, along with a ‘too liberal interpretation of certain passages of Scripture.’²⁴⁸ Perhaps Hodge might have considered looking even further back for the ‘previous mode of thought,’ remembering that Calvin was not averse to considering himself to be part of the ‘Catholic Church’ (as opposed to the ‘Roman Catholic Church’) at certain points in his career.²⁴⁹ Thus we come to the possibility that Calvin

²⁴⁵ T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Letchworth, Herts: Dent, 1975), 44.

²⁴⁶ *Inst.* 1536 4.27, *CO* 1:120-1.

²⁴⁷ Parker, *John Calvin*, 44.

²⁴⁸ Hodge, ‘Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,’ 251.

²⁴⁹ A survey of Calvin’s use of the term ‘catholic,’ by Tony Lane notes that ‘Calvin continued to speak positively of the Catholic Church throughout his career.’ However, it seems that as the Roman Church became increasingly successful in appropriating the term for itself along with accusations that the

may have been looking back to earlier understandings, with a sense of the ‘Catholic Church’ before the corruption of its worship which exercised him so greatly in the contemporary Roman Church. Gerrish suggests that the question of whether Calvin was inclined towards Luther or a subtle Zwinglian, or something in-between, has never been quite resolved.²⁵⁰ In this thesis, I will argue that Calvin is seeking to be ‘Catholic’ in the broader sense of the term, which means that such a discussion may be less helpful, and that his experience of the Church, Catholic and Reformed, may have shaped, and been shaped by, his desire to see God worshipped purely.

1.6 The shape of this study

This study will be divided into three parts, in turn considering historical aspects of Calvin’s life (both his personal history and his setting in the broader sixteenth-century context), his theological preoccupations and then his eucharistic theology. The concern of Part 1 (Chapter 2) will be to illustrate the influence of Calvin’s historical setting on his theology, and to draw out the significance of his upbringing in the Roman Catholic Church. It will also consider something of the setting of sixteenth-century life and in particular the claim of William Bouwsma that Calvin lived in an ‘age of anxiety’ and how this may have affected his outlook. It will seek to show that Calvin was influenced by his upbringing and by continued interaction with the Roman Catholic Church. It will also seek to show that his perception of himself in a prophetic role, calling out the ‘remnant’ from the corruption of that Church is compatible with an understanding of him as a ‘reformed Catholic.’

Reformers had abandoned catholicity Calvin became ‘less enthusiastic’ in making the claim for himself. Anthony N.S. Lane, ‘Calvin’s Attitude to Catholicity,’ *Calvinus Clarissimus Theologus. Papers of the Tenth International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 224-5.

²⁵⁰ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 3. Strictly speaking, Gerrish makes the comparison between ‘crypto-Catholic’ and ‘subtle Zwinglian’ but, as alluded to earlier (page 33 n166), it would seem more accurate to see the debate in terms of placing Calvin between Lutheran and Zwinglian extremes.

The concern of Part 2 will be to explore some of Calvin's theological preoccupations in order to establish the foundations of his eucharistic theology. Chapter 3 will consider the place of knowledge and the influence of rhetoric on both Calvin's theological style and his epistemology. The aim will be both to establish the need to understand Calvin's background, and specifically his education in classical rhetoric, and the way his takes his epistemology beyond a noetic understanding into something more existential. Chapter 4 considers the purpose of our knowledge of God, to draw us into worship and thankful acceptance of the benefits that Christ has won on our behalf. Chapter 5 then considers the work of the Spirit in enabling faith, which Calvin can describe as a 'higher knowledge.' The aim of these chapters is to consider Gerrish's claim that 'man' in Calvin's understanding is 'eucharistic man,' that the proper response to God's accommodated revelation of himself is gratitude and repentance.

Part 3 will then move to consider aspects of Calvin's eucharistic doctrine more directly. Chapter 6 considers the nature of the Sacraments as 'signs and seals' of the Word, consider Calvin's use of 'substance' and 'participation', and will aim to show that Calvin understood the Sacraments as instruments by which brings us to participate in the knowledge of our salvation which comes from participation in Christ. Chapter 7 will consider the question of what benefits the Sacraments offer. In particular they will discuss the *duplex gratia* as the outcome of the union with Christ. Chapter 8 will then consider how Calvin's eucharistic theology might be considered to parallel certain modern Catholic interpretations of transubstantiation, and whether his use of a rhetorical sense of 'substance' allows him to 'reinvent' the doctrine that he seemed to most fervently oppose.

A final, concluding chapter will then draw out some of the implications of these findings. In particular it will consider the need to continue Calvin's work to reform

worship, to take account of ecumenical possibilities and to sketch out some further work that could be undertaken.

PART 1: CALVIN'S HISTORICAL SETTING

Chapter 2. Some historical considerations.

2.1 Introduction: a man of his time

There would appear to be a significant lack of consideration of the impact of Calvin's Catholic roots in Calvin literature. In a recent collection of articles considering Calvin's relationship to the Roman Catholic Church,¹ although there is a recognition that Calvin did not see himself as founding a new tradition but 'sought to restore the Catholic Church to what he called its "purer form" under the apostles and early Church writers,'² the consideration of the influence of Calvin's early upbringing as a Catholic is largely limited to some discussion of the content of Catholic biographies of Calvin,³ Calvin's interaction with three of the 'Nicodemites,'⁴ a passing reference that 'Calvin knew Catholicism from the inside out,' mention of the funding of his education from ecclesiastical benefices and to an observation about Catholic piety he makes in *The Inventory of Relics*.⁵ In general the interest shown in the lasting impact of this period of his life may have had on his theological outlook seems to be slight. Admittedly the evidence on which to base discussion may be somewhat limited, especially as Calvin seems to be particularly reluctant to discuss his younger days, and the early biographies tend to vary between hagiography, in the case of his followers and friends, and 'negative and even slanderous' accounts, in the case of his opponents.⁶ The aim of this

¹ Randall C. Zachman, ed., *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism. Critique and Engagement, Then and Now* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

² Zachman, 'Introduction' *ibid.*, 9.

³ Irena Backus, 'Roman Catholic Lives of Calvin from Bolsec to Richlelieu,' *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism. Critique and Engagement, Then and Now*, ed. Randall C. Zachman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁴ George H. Tavard, 'Calvin and the Nicodemites,' *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism*, ed. Randall C. Zachman (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008). 'Nicodemite' is the term Calvin uses to describe those who conceal their evangelical views and continue involvement in Roman Catholic worship.

⁵ Carlos M. N. Eire, 'John Calvin, Accidental Anthropologist,' *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism. Critique and Engagement, Then and Now*, ed. Randall C. Zachman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 146-7.

⁶ Backus, 'Roman Catholic Lives of Calvin', 25. Backus' survey of the more influential Catholic biographies of Calvin is intriguing, and details the extent to which some Catholic biographers went to undermine the image of Calvin. Bolsec, for example 'all but admits to relying on fabrication, rumour and hearsay' and even conflates the lives of at least two people from Noyon with the name 'Jean Cauvin',

chapter is to consider Calvin's early life and to show that his personal history, and his historical situation, shaped his theology to significant degree. We might phrase this question quite simply: who was John Calvin and where did he come from?

2.2 *The Catholic Calvin? The influence of his early years and education.*

One of the influences on Calvin that needs to be considered in regards to the development of his theology is his upbringing as a Roman Catholic. Born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, Northern France,⁷ Calvin's father, Gérard Cauvin (as the family name was spelt in French) had risen to become one of the town's registrars, Secretary to the Bishop of Noyon and lawyer to the Cathedral chapter. His mother, Jeanne Lefranc, came from a notable family in the town. Jeanne died when Calvin was just six years old, and although little is known about her, it appears that she was a woman of great piety.⁸ As at least one biographer has noted the glimpses we have from Calvin himself of his childhood are of 'exciting little religious treats and feasts.'⁹ He recalls that he went on a pilgrimage with his mother to Ourscamp Abbey, where he was allowed to kiss the holy relic of St. Anne (mother of the Virgin Mary),¹⁰ and remembers observing the Christmas and Michaelmas celebrations at the parish church of Sainte-Godebert.¹¹ With a devout and well-connected family, it was natural that Calvin was considered destined for an ecclesiastical career and the priesthood. At the age of twelve he was given a share of the chaplaincy of the altar of La Gésine (The Nativity) at the Cathedral of Nôtre

claims Calvin had been convicted of sodomy and was guilty of adultery 'under the cover of pastoral guidance.' *Ibid.*, 29, 31.

⁷ There are numerous biographical accounts of Calvin, but a useful selection from among the more recent offerings would include: Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011); Bouwsma, *John Calvin*; Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*; Charlotte Methuen, *Luther and Calvin: Religious Revolutionaries* (Oxford: Lion, 2011); Parker, *John Calvin*; Wendel, *Calvin*.

⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 17.

⁹ Parker, *John Calvin*, 2.

¹⁰ Calvin notes in *Treatise on Relics*, 265, that 'I myself kissed one of her [St. Anne's] relics, kept at the abbey of Orcamps near Noyon, on the occasion of a grand festival held in its honour.'

¹¹ 'I remember when I was a little boy what took place in our parish. On the festival day of St Stephen, the images of the tyrants who stoned him (for they are thus called by the common people) were adorned as much as that of the saint himself. Many women, seeing these tyrants thus decked out, mistook them for the saint's companions, and offered the homage of candles to each of them.' *Treatise on Relics*, 281

Dame at Noyon and in 1527 he was also given the curate's income from the parish of St Martin de Martheville (twenty five miles from Noyon) which was replaced two years later by that of Pont l'Evêque (a village just outside Noyon, from which his father's family had come). He drew this income until 1534, and although the posts did not require him to offer his services to these parishes directly, it seems that they financed his education to a large degree – an ironic situation considering his later comments on ecclesiastical absenteeism.¹²

Calvin's education took him in due course to study at the Collège Montaigu.¹³ This would have likely been considered a highly suitable choice for a future theological student for it was a 'stronghold of orthodoxy.'¹⁴ Along with scholastic theology and the Fathers (especially Augustine), Calvin may have been introduced to the ideas of Luther at this stage.¹⁵ Montaigu was a stronghold of opposition to Luther's ideas (which had been condemned by the Sorbonne in 1521), part of a marked parochialism on the part of the leaders of the college to the extent that Noel Bédier, formerly Principal and still effectively running the college in Calvin's time, reputedly fastened on new doctrines and ended all argument by labelling them 'Lutheran'.¹⁶ However, Calvin showed no inclination towards evangelical theology at this time and made no overt complaint about

¹² Methuen, *Luther and Calvin*, 114. For Calvin's comments against clerical absenteeism see, for example, *Inst.* 4.5.11 where he complains that many clergy 'devour the revenues of the churches without ever coming to the point of even taking a look at them,' while others 'come once a year or send a steward, so that nothing in their revenues should be lost.'

¹³ His education had started in Noyons, where he was taught with the bishop's nephews with whom he then travelled to Paris to study, initially at the Collège de la Marche.

¹⁴ Wendel, *Calvin*, 18. There has been some speculation on the influences on Calvin from his time at Montaigu, especially in regard to his possible contact with John Major, the nominalist theologian. However there is little evidence to support such speculation and Anthony Lane, in investigating some of the claims, is forced to conclude that it is far easier (and safer) to suggest that he may have been influenced by nominalism (as a school of thought) rather than by John Major personally. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 16-25.

¹⁵ Luther's writings would have been readily available in French translation at this time.

¹⁶ Parker, *John Calvin*, 7.

his education at Montaigu.¹⁷ Calvin left Paris for Orléans, where he was to study civil law,¹⁸ and subsequently moved to Bourges in 1529.¹⁹

The context in which Calvin was introduced to humanism had a tone of controversy. His cousin, Pierre Olivétan,²⁰ had been forced to flee to Strassburg in 1528 because of concern over his ‘Lutheran’ views. Guillaume Farel²¹ had fled to Basel in 1524. As Phillip Schaff observes:

Reformation was in the air. ... How could a young scholar of such precocious mind and intense studiousness as Calvin be indifferent to the religious question which agitated the universities of Orleans, Bourges, and Paris?²²

Calvin’s religious allegiance begins to change noticeably after his father’s death. The nature and timing of Calvin’s ‘conversion’ is open to some debate. He only makes direct reference to it in the Preface to his Commentary on the Book of Psalms, where he describes a ‘sudden conversion’ which ‘brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life,’ and so having ‘received some taste and knowledge of true godliness,’ he was ‘immediately inflamed’ with a desire for such ‘godliness’ that ‘I was quite surprised to find that before a year had elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, although I myself was as yet but a

¹⁷ Unlike Erasmus and the satirist François Rabelais, both of whom were scathing in their criticisms. For example Rabelais referred to Montaigu as ‘that verminous college’ where the regime was on of ‘enormous cruelty and villany.’ Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 6.

¹⁸ It seems that Calvin’s change of career stemmed from a change of heart by his father who now ‘considered that the legal profession commonly raised those who followed it to wealth.’ CTS Psalms 1.xl.

¹⁹ His time at Bourges came to a sudden end with news that his father had fallen seriously ill and Calvin returned to Noyon in time to be present for the last moments of his Father’s life and for the difficult arguments that took place with the Chapter there to allow him to be buried in consecrated ground on account of his excommunication (which had resulted from his dispute with the Chapter). Whether these events had significant on Calvin’s attachment to Rome would be speculation, but it would seem plausible that they at least coloured his views on the Church.

²⁰ Calvin would write the foreword to Olivétan’s French translation of the Bible of 1535

²¹ Farel was ‘the first of the ‘Bibliens’ of Meaux to carry Lefèvre’s Christian humanist critique of false worship to the point of outright rupture with the Roman Church’ Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 78.

²² Phillip Schaff, *Modern Christianity. The Swiss Reformation*, History of the Christian Church, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids. MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 310.

mere novice and tyro.’²³ Although this one reference to ‘conversion’ is often seen as a specific event, the evidence presented by this one passage is not strong, and it is easy to agree with Bouwsma’s assessment that:

By “conversion” Calvin meant only a shift and quickening of his interests. He said nothing about any *belief* that would later be associated with him, indeed nothing incompatible with the evangelical humanism of a whole generation of students at Paris, most of whom remained faithful to Rome in spite of their antagonism to what they commonly described as “superstitions” in the Church. All that we can be sure of, from this account, is that much later in his life, Calvin believed that at his time he became more open—“teachable” is his Word.²⁴

This would be in keeping with someone who had come to a new standpoint ‘little by little.’²⁵ Calvin’s involvement in the organisation by the Chapter of Noyon of a procession against the plague in August 1533, suggests that he had not completely disassociated himself from Rome at that stage. Nevertheless, Calvin’s return to Paris is the point at which his position begins to change, and by the winter of 1533-4 Calvin is known as a supporter of evangelical reform.

During 1535 the situation in Paris changed: a number of events brought the Reform party under scrutiny and Calvin was forced to flee. He spent much of the following two years travelling and this period, doubtless an anxious one, is understandably less well documented than Calvin’s biographers would perhaps wish. It has been tempting to speculate on some of the details. While Parker’s suggestion that he was ‘never one of

²³ CTS *Psalms* 1.xl-xli.

²⁴ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 10-11.

²⁵ The phrase ‘little by little’ is used by Calvin to describe the turning of both individuals and God’s people as a whole in CTS *Jer. & Lam.* 4.99 (*on Jer.* 31:18). ‘Men never so repent but that they have need of the continual aid of God; for we must be renewed from day to day, and by degrees renounce the lusts of our flesh; nor is it in one day that we put off the old man. ... We turn, as I have already said, by little and little to God, and by various steps; for repentance has its progress.’

the Nicodemites ... whom he reproved in later years²⁶ seems more hopeful than well founded, if Calvin was indeed progressing 'little by little' towards his later understanding of the correct form of worship it would not be unreasonable to suspect that he may have found himself at times worshipping in a manner that he would later denounce. If this were the case, then it might well have had some influence on the vigour of his opposition to compromise in matters of worship.²⁷

When Calvin published the first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536 he had two purposes, which are indicated in a lengthy dedication to Francis I. Firstly it was a handbook of faith, through which he hoped to 'transmit certain rudiments by which those who are touched with any zeal for religion might be shaped to true godliness.'²⁸ The second purpose of the Institutes was more political in nature. It is an appeal on behalf of the persecuted evangelicals in France. Calvin's intent was to show the evangelicals as distinct from the more radical groups that had sprung up across Europe, and to show that they were not a political threat. In particular it seems to have been to clear them of any association with the Anabaptists.²⁹ It was crucial for Calvin to differentiate the French Evangelical cause from Anabaptism, for Francis had made this link in his justification to the German (Lutheran) princes in 1535 of the suppression of reform in France.³⁰

²⁶ Parker, *John Calvin*, 30. 'Nicodemites' was the term Calvin gave to those who sought to conceal their evangelical leanings by taking part in Catholic worship (after Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night to conceal his interest from the Jewish authorities).

²⁷ The question of how much Calvin's vehemence against the Nicodemites was influenced by a sense of guilt over his personal history during this time will probably remain unclear, but as Bruce Gordon observes, Calvin was 'always at his most vicious when cornered.' Gordon, *Calvin*, 195.

²⁸ *Inst. 1536, Preface*, 1 This was not the first such publication from among the Reformers by any means. Philip Melancthon had published his *Loci communes* in 1521, Zwingli his *Commentarius de vera et falsa religione* in 1525. Guillaume Farel had published his (much smaller) *Sommaire* in 1534, but this still left room for a fuller statement of the faith of the French Evangelicals.

²⁹ For an overview of the Anabaptists see, for example, William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: Introduction to Sixteenth Century Anabaptism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996); Hans-Jurgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, trans. Trevor Johnson, Christianity and Society in the Modern World. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1996).

³⁰ The events taking place in Münster between of 1533 and 1535 (while Calvin was preparing the *Institutes*) weighed heavily on the minds of those in power. An Anabaptist group gained control of the

Some of his surviving correspondence from the next two years shows that Calvin's separation from the Roman Catholic Church was now complete. Writing to Nicholas Duchemin,³¹ who had secured a position in the diocese of Le Mans and was unsure regarding participation in Roman Catholic practices that were required of him, Calvin speaks out against the Mass as 'to be detested above all.'³² It is clear that he disapproves those who conceal their evangelical views and continue to participate in Roman Catholic worship. This is the group to whom Calvin would later refer as 'Nicodemites', and against whom he would direct harsh criticism.

A continuing engagement with the Roman Catholics was inevitable given the broader political context. Calvin was also brought into contact with a wider circle of reformers through the theological disputations at Hagenau and Worms in 1540 and Regensburg in 1541. The colloquys had been organised by the Emperor Charles V in the hope of putting an end to the schism between Protestant and Catholic.³³ By the end of the colloquy at Regensburg agreement had been reached on original sin, free will and justification but not on issues of the Church and especially over the Eucharist.³⁴ The

city council in 1533 and in 1534 the city was declared 'The New Jerusalem,' the declaration of the establishment of a community of goods removed the rights of private ownership, the party destroyed city records and requisitioned the best houses. The radical ideas even extended to the reinstatement of polygamous marriage. Franz von Waldeck, prince-bishop of Münster, besieged the city just before Easter 1534 but it did not fall until 25 June 1535. These events would be used to argue against religious toleration and to suggest that Anabaptists, no matter how law abiding they seemed, were better suppressed. For an account of the fate of the Anabaptists after Münster, see Meic Pearce, *The Great Restoration. The Religious Radicals of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 96-116.

³¹ Duchemin was a friend of Calvin's since his student days in Orléans. Calvin incorporated the letter (CO 5:239-78) in his *Petit traicté* of 1543 (CO 6:537-88).

³² De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 135.

³³ As John Meyer notes in passing, Charles faced a need for political unity in the face of the threat from the Turks and sought to further this through working for religious unity. John R. Meyer, 'Mysterium Fidei and the Later Calvin,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 25.4 (1972), 395.

³⁴ Calvin notes the outcome of the disputations in letters to Farel – on 11 & 12 May and July 1541. *Letters* 1.260-264 & 1.271-274.

exposure to debate with Roman Catholics may have had a significant influence on how Calvin later revised his theological position on certain matters.³⁵

The struggles of the Reformed churches were a significant concern for Calvin, not least for those ‘whose condition is so wretched and awful’³⁶ as was the case for the Evangelicals in France. Calvin was able to use Geneva as a focus for the training of pastors who would plant, nurture and lead the Reformed Church in France and from 1555 an increasing number of missionaries ‘began slipping from Switzerland across the French border to spread the ideas they had learned at the feet of John Calvin.’³⁷ Partly in support of this work, Calvin and the Company of Pastors directed considerable effort into the establishment of the Geneva Academy in 1559 under its first Rector, Theodore Beza. The Academy would be Calvin’s ‘crowning work,’³⁸ drawing students from across Europe. The drive to nurture the Reformation in France is a remarkable thing in itself. Careful estimates suggest that around 1240 churches were ‘planted’ there between 1555 and 1570, the majority between 1559 and 1562.³⁹

2.3 Anxiety, superstition and struggle: the challenges of sixteenth-century life.

A suggestion that Calvin’s social and cultural setting had a significant influence on the development of his theology is not, in itself, new. Some attempt has been made

³⁵ Randall Zachman, for example, suggests a number of areas where the influence of the disputations can be seen in the 1543 revision of the *Institutes* and including an increased emphasis on the ecclesial and corporate significance of Baptism, on the Supper as a means by which to elevate the faithful from earth to heaven and as an accommodation to our weakness, in his allowance (or encouragement) of the use of laying on of hands in confirmation, in public reconciliation and even in ordination (provided it is not seen as a sacrament) and even in his understanding of the order of church. ‘Revising the Reform. What Calvin Learned from Dialogue with the Roman Catholics,’ *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism*, ed. Randall C. Zachman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 165-91.

³⁶ Letter to Bullinger, 7 May, 1549. *Letters* 2:228.

³⁷ Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563* (Geneva: Droz, 1956), 5. Jon Balsarak points to the manner in which Calvin’s efforts on behalf of the French Reformed Church are ‘appropriately compared with a war’, and the ministers ‘depicted as foot-soldiers.’ Jon Balsarak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France. Calvin’s Lectures on the Minor Prophets, 1556-1559*, Brill’s Series in Church History, ed. Wim Janse (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 214.

³⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 105.

³⁹ Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*, 134.

previously to show that Calvin's theology is linked to his historical context, notably in the work of William Bouwsma⁴⁰ presenting a picture of Calvin as deeply troubled and set in an 'age of anxiety'⁴¹ which received positive attention, but drew significant criticism from Richard Muller for its failure to appreciate Calvin's use of rhetoric and his dialectical and apologetic intentions.⁴² However, Muller does, at least by implication, accept that Calvin's personal anxieties will have had some impact on his work.⁴³ Even if it is necessary to treat Bouwsma's thesis with a degree of caution,⁴⁴ it is hard to disagree with his statement that:

theology is a *human activity* that is often remarkably sensitive to its historical context and can therefore tell us a good deal about the past; and conversely that theological discourse can often only be understood only with some knowledge of the circumstances surrounding its expression.⁴⁵

Given the shifting fortunes of the reformation, the difficulties created by changing political alliances and the challenges of everyday life in sixteenth-century Europe Bouwsma's suggestion of an 'age of anxiety' does have a certain plausibility. However, that does not of itself establish any influence on Calvin's theology.

⁴⁰ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*.

⁴¹ The publication of the *Sixteenth Century Portrait* built on Bouwsma's earlier work on formation of early modern culture. William J. Bouwsma, 'Anxiety and the Formation of Early Modern Culture,' *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J.H. Hexter*, ed. Barbara C. Malament (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980).

⁴² Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 79-98.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁴ Bouwsma's analysis effectively makes the somewhat untenable claim to know Calvin better than he knew himself. This is the essence of the criticism of T.H.L. Parker – 'Professor Bouwsma's programme is based on Kant's claim (by implication) to know Plato better than Plato knew himself. On this basis an author can mean anything we want him to mean. Calvin said A; he thought he meant A; our more sophisticated eyes can spot the tell-tale signs which show that, influenced unawares by X and Y, he really meant B. This seems to me the end of meaningful commerce with the past (or with the present either); supply 'Professor Bouwsma' for 'Calvin' in the previous sentence, and then where are we?' T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 11 n. 7.

⁴⁵ Bouwsma, 'Calvinism as Renaissance Artifact', 28.

Charles Cooke offers a useful evaluation of Calvin's health from a clinical perspective.⁴⁶ The evidence of Calvin's letter to the Montpellier physicians indicates that shortly before his death in 1564 he was suffering from chronic tophaceous gout, kidney stones, chronic pulmonary tuberculosis (with pleurisy, fever and coughing up blood) and, if this was not enough, he also suffered from intestinal parasites, haemorrhoids, irritable colon and migraines. He lived, certainly in his later years, with chronic and acute pain. He died, most probably, from toxic shock. Bouwsma sees a morbid element in Calvin's 'anxiety':

He thought much, not only about weakness and fatigue, but also about aging, illness, and death. He sought to impress on his congregation, because he felt that no one could sufficiently realize its truth, that life consists in growing older.⁴⁷

Bouwsma is by no means alone in seeing Calvin as portraying a negative image for the body.⁴⁸ It is tempting to see Calvin's poor health as resulting in the stern, driven, ascetic character that is depicted all too often. But the danger here is twofold, firstly in the assumption that Calvin's negative comments regarding the body (and, by implication, the earthly life) portray a negative attitude,⁴⁹ and secondly that, given his context Calvin's attitudes to the body are overtly negative or anxious. Calvin writes clearly of his illnesses,⁵⁰ but such directness is more likely due to be to a different attitude to such matters. Calvin not only lived in pain for a considerable period of his life, his saw death

⁴⁶ Charles L. Cooke, 'Calvin's Illnesses and Their Relation to Christian Vocation,' *John Calvin & the Church. A Prism of Reformation.*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

⁴⁷ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 30.

⁴⁸ For example, the idea that Calvin was dour and disliked bodily pleasures was established firmly in American consciousness by stereotypical depictions in history textbooks from the nineteenth century, as demonstrated by Thomas Davis. Thomas J. Davis, 'Images of Intolerance: John Calvin in Nineteenth-Century History Textbooks,' *Church History* 65.2 (1996).

⁴⁹ Thomas Davis notes how Calvin's attitudes are often set in contrast to those of Renaissance art which focussed on the unblemished, youthful and idealised human form. Davis, *This Is My Body*, 81.

⁵⁰ As Cooke observes, 'He did not hesitate to describe his haemorrhoids to a duchess.' Cooke, 'Calvin's Illnesses'.

and disease all around him. Outbreaks of the plague were not uncommon,⁵¹ people he knew (including his wife) suffered and died through illness or persecution. The accusations of dualism and spiritualizing tendencies in Calvin's thinking,⁵² and the idea that he was 'bound to his time by his anxiety,'⁵³ need to be set against the understanding that in Calvin's direct experience the human body was prone to disease and decay, which might do more to explain his 'rather curious ambivalence'⁵⁴ towards the body than a reliance on platonic or neo-platonic influences⁵⁵ or an 'unusual' sensitivity to anxiety.⁵⁶ Doubtless Calvin was very aware of how tenuous and frail life was,⁵⁷ but, in this light, it is worth noting that Calvin speaks at times in a very positive manner regarding the body in terms 'almost as rhetorically elevated as some of his negative statements.'⁵⁸

While the role of anxiety in driving Calvin's work may have been overplayed, Bouwsma's work does underline the significance of the personal history of an individual in understanding how their theological outlook develops. Therefore it is worth considering what other factors may have been driving forces for Calvin's work

⁵¹ There are numerous examples of Calvin's contact with the plague. Records in the Noyon chapter registry indicate that his father had requested permission to send him away from the town in 1523 to escape the plague that was present there. Parker, *John Calvin*, 157. Calvin had assisted in organizing public prayers against the plague in 1533 and he helped care for Farel's nephew in Strassburg who died from it. Wendel, *Calvin*, 39; Parker, *John Calvin*, 69.

⁵² For a good summary of the opinions of Calvin thinking of the body as spiritualist and dualist, see Chapter 5 of Engel, *John Calvin's Perceptival Anthropology*.

⁵³ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 32.

⁵⁴ Margaret R. Miles, 'Theology, Anthropology, and the Human Body in Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion",' *The Harvard Theological Review* 74.3 (1981), 311.

⁵⁵ Charles Partee notes a soul-body dualism in Calvin's view of man 'like almost every other Christian thinker,' but observes that 'to think that Calvin's anthropology is basically philosophical ignores or dismisses his criticism of the philosophers and the totality of the position he occupies. ... The difference between Calvin and the philosophers are as striking as the similarities.' Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 51.

⁵⁶ In claiming that Calvin was 'unusually sensitive to anxiety' Bouwsma gives many examples of Calvin's 'anxieties' but fails to contrast this to his contemporaries, this seems particularly telling for what Bouwsma refers to as a 'peculiarly anxious generation.' Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 32-48.

⁵⁷ Cooke points to a section of *Inst.* 1.17.10 where Calvin declares 'Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it.' Cooke, 'Calvin's Illnesses', 67. This passage is part of an exhortation to trust in God's providence, contrasting these threats with the joy that follows when 'the godly man' is 'set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care.' *Inst.* 1.17.11.

⁵⁸ Davis, *This Is My Body*, 83.

and ministry. Two in particular seem worthy of brief consideration here, and they are to some extent related. The first is Calvin's concern to purify the worship of God's people and the second is his concern regarding those who he would term 'Nicodemites' and who failed to separate themselves from the corrupted forms of worship.

Even if Calvin's 'conversion' is difficult to pinpoint, it is clear that his attitude to the manner of worship underwent a radical change. He had grown up taking part in Catholic rituals and intending to enter the priesthood. He describes himself as having been 'obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery'⁵⁹ at a time when the practices of piety within Catholicism were inclined towards the ornate. Philip Benedict observes:

The faithful believed that material objects were laden with supernatural power, prostrated themselves before such objects, and adorned them. Paraliturgical rituals proliferated to organize their worship and petitioning. No holy object came to be surrounded by more ornate rituals than the wafers used to celebrate the holy Eucharist that were transformed during the mass into the body of the living Christ and then were displayed in ornate golden monstrances or carried through tapestry-bedecked streets in grand processions.⁶⁰

The mass was a focal point for the Roman Catholic Church, and it was key point of differentiation between Catholic and Protestant worship. The belief that Christ was physically present in the Eucharist meant that Catholics saw such acts as failing to doff hats and kneel at the passing of the eucharistic procession as unbearable offences against his honour, while evangelical Protestants felt equally strongly the need to show their objection to this practice – this seems to have been a specially sore point in France.⁶¹ This understanding of Christ's presence, as physical, leading to the treatment of the consecrated elements with veneration, worship and outright superstition was

⁵⁹ CTS *Psalms*. 1.xl.

⁶⁰ Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, 9.

⁶¹ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith. Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA & London: Belknap, 2007), 80.

clearly unacceptable to Calvin. He now saw himself as a prophet, calling initially for ‘revitalizing’ of the structures of the Church but later calling the ‘remnant’ out of the corrupt structures.⁶² The mass is not simply a point of differentiation between traditions – it is an act of disobedience. This understanding colours his discussions of worship and the Sacraments.⁶³

While the corruption of the worship of the Church in the idolatry of the mass led Calvin to call for the reformation of worship from within the Church at first, through his conversion it would appear that he came to an understanding of a need to call out the ‘remnant’, those who were true to the Word of God, from within the Roman Church.⁶⁴ Those who wished to remain within the ‘corrupt’ structures of that Church, and who were prepared to take part in its worship practices, presented Calvin with a distinct problem. Those who returned to the Roman Church, such as du Tillet, would challenge even more. The Nicodemites, as Calvin refers to those who remain or return to the Catholic fold despite expressing evangelical views, would receive particular criticism. There has been some speculation on the reasons for Calvin’s vehemence against the Nicodemites,⁶⁵ and it is clear that not all ministers and theologians shared his concern.⁶⁶

⁶² Ganoczy provides a useful discussion on Calvin’s sense of divine calling. Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, 287-307. He concludes that ‘Calvin’s religious transformation was essentially a response which at first was hesitating and then became more and more resolute. He responded to a call to work toward the “reformation” of the Christian Church. ... He never stopped claiming his unshakeable attachment to the unity of the Catholic Church which he did not want to replace, but to restore.’ *ibid.*, 307.

⁶³ For example, in a distrust of forms of worship that even slightly carries a materialist tone. ‘Because Calvin sees human nature as inherently prone to idolatry, he constantly warns that it is dangerous to accept even the most insignificant form of material worship in the church, for “men’s folly” cannot restrain itself from falling headlong into superstitious rites. The acceptance of materiality in worship presents a threat to the purity of religion, and Calvin cautions so much against idolatry because he considers it a contagious and fertile evil ... once the process of idolatry has begun, there can be no turning back.’ Carlos M. N. Eire, “‘True Piety Begets True Confession:’ Calvin’s Attack on Idolatry,” *John Calvin & the Church*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 261.

⁶⁴ Calvin’s self-understanding of his calling as prophet, and his speaking to a ‘remnant church’ in France are discussed at length in Balserak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France*.

⁶⁵ David Wright provides a useful discussion in ‘Why Was Calvin So Severe a Critic of Nicodemism?’ *Calvinus Evangelii Propugnator. Calvin, Champion of the Gospel. Papers presented at the International Congress on Calvin Research. Seoul, 1998.*, eds. David F. Wright, Anthony N.S. Lane and Jon Balserak (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Calvin Studies Society, 2006).

⁶⁶ For example both Nicolas Duchemin and Gérard Roussel, whom Calvin regarded as friends at one time, were able to hold evangelical views and remain within the Roman Catholic Church – even gaining

In his writings against the Nicodemites,⁶⁷ Calvin appears more hostile than other leading reformers (with the possible exception of Bullinger) in this area.⁶⁸ His basic concern is for the purity of worship,⁶⁹ but it is tied to a preoccupation with the reform of the Church in France,⁷⁰ and with his sense of calling as a prophet, which resulted in an uncompromising attitude.

2.4 Conclusion: Calvin the Catholic prophet?

It appears that relatively little connection is made in the literature between Calvin's upbringing and his mature theology. However, this chapter has considered the impact of Calvin's upbringing and education in this respect. Calvin admits to having been steeped in 'superstitious' practice as a youth, his parents appear to have both been devout Roman Catholics. His initial training and indeed the chaplaincies to which he was appointed and which funded much of his education indicated his intention of becoming a priest. While his relationship with the Roman Catholic Church was formally broken, it seems likely that it had a lasting influence. It clearly had a strong influence on his relationship with those he termed 'Nicodemites,' who held evangelical views but declined to step out of the structure of the Roman Church as Calvin had done. The recent work of Jon Balsarak in describing Calvin's sense of calling as a prophet has been noted,⁷¹ this led to a continued concern to call out a 'remnant' from within that Church. Even Calvin's opponents were (sometimes) willing to accede that his aim was not to establish a new Church: Jean-Papire Masson, a Catholic biographer, was willing

advancement. Other 'evangelical Catholics' in France and Italy did not see 'why a growing spiritual experience focused on the work of God in Christ, and on justification by faith alone, should require joining a new church.' Tavad, 'Calvin and the Nicodemites', 78.

⁶⁷ For a brief survey of Calvin's anti-Nicodemite writing see De Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin*, 120-26.

⁶⁸ Wright, 'Why Was Calvin So Severe a Critic of Nicodemism?' 69.

⁶⁹ 'Here reform begins with the worship of God. ... A passion for true worship provides a consistent core to Calvin's anti-Nicodemism.' *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁰ 'He had left France in order to evangelize it from without, to organize his new communities from afar. All his life he had striven to attain this goal glimpsed in his youth.' Wendel, *Calvin*, 107.

⁷¹ Balsarak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France.*, 181-210.

to admit that Calvin ‘did not defect from the Roman Catholic Church because he wanted to constitute himself as the head of his own church, but because he disagreed with the Roman religion over the number and nature of the Sacraments, worshipping (or honouring) images, rituals and biblical interpretation.’⁷²

However, a ‘remnant’ Church is not a *de novo* creation. It equates to that part of the corrupt Church that has remained faithful, a body of people within the structure. The identification of a prophetic role suggests a continuing relationship, albeit troubled and negative, with the ‘reprobate’ as much as the ‘remnant.’ Calvin felt it necessary to break out of the structure of the Catholic Church, presumably because he considered that it was not susceptible to effective reform from within. He may have been ‘seeking to establish, or re-establish, *the* true Church, just as the prophets had done when calling out the faithful remnant,’⁷³ but to do this he looks back to the Church of an earlier age. The term ‘catholic’ was not necessarily reserved for the Roman Church in the sixteenth century, being contested by many Protestants who continued to claim the term for themselves,⁷⁴ and here it seems useful to give a sense of that connection to a pure, true Church which Calvin seeks to re-establish. Indeed in 1598 William Perkins wrote against Rome under the title *A Reformed Catholike*, stating that ‘By a Reformed Catholic I understand anyone that holds the same necessary heads of religion with the Roman Church, yet so as he pares off and rejects all errors in doctrine whereby the said religion is corrupted.’⁷⁵ This term would seem catch the essence of Calvin’s intent. In answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, ‘who is John Calvin and

⁷² Backus, ‘Roman Catholic Lives of Calvin’, 45.

⁷³ Balsarak, *Establishing the Remnant Church in France.*, 212.

⁷⁴ Lane, ‘Calvinus Clarissimus Theologus’, 206. Lane notes that Calvin refers to the Catholicity of the Church throughout his career, but observes a change in use that reflects the increasing success of the Roman Church in its claims to the term.

⁷⁵ William Perkins, ‘A Reformed Catholike: Or, a Declaration Shewing How Neere We May Come to the Prefent Church of Rome in Fundrie Points of Religion: And Wherein We Muft for Euer Depart from Them: With an Aduertifment to All Fauourers of the Romane Religion Shewing How the Said Religion Is Againtf the Catholike Principles and Groundes of the Catechisme,’ *A Golden Chaine* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1600).

where did he come from?’ we might then answer that he was a ‘reformed Catholic,’ holding to what he considered the true doctrine of the Church but looking to purify it of ‘errors’ both on doctrine and in its worship and that he came out of the Catholic Church and sought to call to a remnant Church to do likewise.

PART 2: CALVIN'S THEOLOGICAL PREOCCUPATIONS

Chapter 3. Rhetoric, reason and knowledge: engaging with the texts.

3.1 Introduction: *The question of knowledge*

Throughout the various editions of the *Institutes*, Calvin begins with the question of knowledge. Specifically he considers the issue of the knowledge of God. This is in keeping with the analysis that has led some to declare that ‘Calvin’s theology exalts the category of knowledge.’¹ This chapter will consider Calvin’s epistemology. In seeking to show that Calvin understood our knowledge of God as accommodated and affective, it will lay a foundation for the idea that the Sacraments seal the promises of the gospel and so exhibit Christ by the effective communication of the promise of union with Him. The question here is: what did Calvin consider it to be to know God?

While some may feel that the ‘days are past’ for Calvin to be seen as purely ‘a theologian of “the Word”,’² knowledge of God clearly underpins his understanding. Unfortunately, as is often the case with ideas that are so immediate to a thinker as knowledge is to Calvin, we are not offered a clear definition of knowledge from his written work but need to determine it from its impact on his thought as a whole.

William Bouwsma describes Calvin as living in the midst of a ‘long period of gathering uncertainty,’ which he refers to as the ‘Renaissance crisis of knowing,’³ in which the traditional conception of knowledge (which asserted that the human mind was capable of knowing what exists as it really is) is being challenged by a growing understanding of human knowledge as limited and contingent. One aspect of this challenge came from the revival of ancient rhetoric in Renaissance humanism, to which Calvin was exposed. There was here a shift in the definition of humanness from the capacity for *knowing* to

¹ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3.

² Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.

³ William J. Bouwsma, ‘Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing,’ *Calvin Theological Journal* 17.2 (1982), 190.

the capacity for *acting*.⁴ This is the context in which Calvin writes that ‘Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.’⁵ The reference to knowledge ‘of ourselves’ here carries a weight of meaning that draws in all human knowledge of creation.⁶ It is also evident that Calvin sees that knowledge of creation as directing a desire for greater knowledge of God who ‘not only sowed in men’s minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe.’⁷ This correlation between our knowledge of ourselves (that is, of creation) and our knowledge of God suggests that ‘by the mere fact of knowing’ we are driven to look beyond ourselves and the object of our perception.⁸ Failing to look beyond the object to a knowledge of God is the failing of idolatry.⁹

It is the knowledge of God, and of God’s action towards us in the work of Christ, that seems to drive much of Calvin’s writing. This is the purpose of God’s revelation to us in Scripture: ‘We have taught that the knowledge of God, otherwise quite clearly set forth in the system of the universe and in all creatures, is nonetheless more intimately and also more vividly revealed in his Word.’¹⁰ Knowledge of God lies at the heart of the Sacraments.¹¹

⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁵ *Inst.* 1.1.1.

⁶ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 21.

⁷ *Inst.* 1.5.1.

⁸ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 22.

⁹ Calvin declares that one of the ‘four classes’ of human righteousness is those who are ‘endowed with no knowledge of God and immersed in idolatry.’ *Inst.* 3.14.1.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 1.10.1.

¹¹ ‘Therefore, Word and Sacraments confirm our faith when they set before our eyes the good will of our Heavenly Father toward us, *by the knowledge of whom* the whole firmness of our faith stands fast and increases in strength’ (emphasis mine) *Inst.* 4.14.10.

3.2 Calvin and the twofold knowledge of God

The knowledge of God, as Calvin understands it, is twofold. Firstly there is the knowledge of God as Creator, secondly the knowledge of God as Redeemer.¹² The reality of God is laid out before humanity subjectively as the *sensus divinitatis* through the structure of the world and the course of history, but because the sinful nature of humanity leads to ‘both crude and refined idolatries, in which men cower in fright or rise in self-justified revolt against the true God,’ God adds to this the revelation of Scripture.¹³ This knowledge would have been enough for humanity to glorify God had it not been for the Fall, but as a result of humanity’s sinful state something more is needed. Human reason is not sufficient to know what God is like.¹⁴ What is needed is the knowledge of God as Redeemer. This is the goal of faith,¹⁵ in which we are helped by the ‘illumination’ of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

The understanding of the twofold knowledge of God means that Calvin sees knowledge of God as accommodated. Here the term ‘accommodated’ can be understood using Edward Dowey’s definition:

The term accommodation refers to the process by which God reduces or adjusts to human capacities what he wills to reveal of the infinite mysteries of his being, which by their very nature are beyond the powers of the mind of man to grasp.¹⁷

¹² ‘First, as much in the fashioning of the universe as in the general teaching of Scripture the Lord shows himself to be simply the Creator. Then in the face of Christ he shows himself the Redeemer. Of the resulting twofold knowledge of God we shall now discuss the first aspect; the second will be dealt with in its proper place.’ *Inst.* 1.2.1.

¹³ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 146.

¹⁴ David Steinmetz summarizes this in the following way: ‘While fallen human reason perceives that God exists, it misperceives what God is like. Only when reason is illuminated by faith can it once again see the world for what it is, a mirror of divine glory.’ Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context*, 32.

¹⁵ Calvin argues against the idea of ‘implicit’ faith by stating that faith is based on knowledge of the divine will, and that we gain salvation when ‘we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ, and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life.’ *Inst.* 3.2.2.

¹⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

¹⁷ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 3.

Because of our limited abilities, God must act to overcome our shortcomings to reveal his nature and his will towards us.¹⁸ Dowey proposed two aspects of God's accommodation, firstly the accommodation of God's revelation to our finite comprehension and secondly the accommodation of God's revelation to human sinfulness in his work of redemption.¹⁹ The aspect of accommodating to our finite capacity deals with the difference between finite creatures and the infinite Creator. For Calvin the essence of God is beyond the grasp of finite creatures who can only perceive his works,²⁰ indeed it is only in God's revelation directed to us that we can comprehend the divine.²¹ This does place limits on what is reasonable to speculate about, and on the value of philosophy where Calvin argues against 'toying with idle speculation' about 'what' God is rather than 'who' he is (i.e. what is consistent with his nature).²²

The second aspect of God's accommodation is in his works of redemption, and involves God's revelation being accommodated to human sinfulness. This is seen in the

¹⁸ Despite Calvin's frequent use of the idea of God accommodating, adapting or adjusting to human shortcomings, it seems to have received little attention until relatively recently. In the twenty-five years or so after Dowey published *The Knowledge of God* (originally in 1952) 'accommodation' changed from being an unregarded issue to one of widely recognised importance. Two works in this period are of particular note, that of David Willis and Ford Lewis Battles. E. David Willis, 'Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin's Theology,' *The Context of Contemporary Theology*, ed. Alexander J. McKelway & E. David Willis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1974); Ford Lewis Battles, 'God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity,' *Interpretation* 31.1 (1977). Willis linked accommodation to Calvin's 'rhetorical theology', and Ford Lewis Battles widened accommodation to cover God's works as well as the Scriptures (as Dowey had done previously). More recent work of note in regard to the theme of accommodation in Calvin's theology includes: David F. Wright, 'Calvin's Accommodating God,' *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser and Brian G. Armstrong, vol. 36 (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997); Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*; Arnold Huijgen, 'Divine Accommodation and Divine Transcendence in John Calvin's Theology,' *Calvinus Sacrarum Literum Interpres. Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research.*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Arnold Huijgen, *Divine Accommodation in John Calvin's Theology: Analysis and Assessment*, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

¹⁹ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God*, 4-17.

²⁰ In this Calvin is of a similar mind to Thomas Aquinas, Robert Ayers notes that 'In spite of his searing attacks on the scholastics, Calvin's view of our knowledge of God and of the world is in certain respects much like that of St Thomas. Similar to Aquinas, he holds that we cannot know God in his essence, as he is in himself, but that we contemplate him only in his works.' Robert H. Ayers, 'Language, Logic and Reason in Calvin's Institutes,' *Religious Studies* 16.3 (1980), 284.

²¹ 'Consequently, we know the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.' *Inst.* 1.5.9.

²² *Inst.* 1.2.2.

Mediatorial office of Christ, apart from whom there is no redemptive knowledge of God. This is the aspect that seems to occupy Calvin most, and underpins much of his exegetical work. Not only is there an understanding that all our knowledge of God is revealed knowledge, it is also accommodated knowledge. Even in the offer of salvation God ‘must descend far beneath his loftiness’ and can be compared to a nurse burbling to an infant.²³

Divine accommodation is also a factor in how we read scripture, allowing Calvin to argue for the abrogation of some divine injunctions that he considers to have been allowances or compromises for the limits of human capacity.²⁴ Thus there are times when Calvin finds that the constraints within which God works to accommodate to the hardness of the human heart are uncomfortable, even censurable.²⁵ But not only does accommodation shape his reading of Scripture, his exegetical work also seems to have developed his understanding of divine accommodation in regard to the Sacraments.²⁶ The Sacraments are a source of knowledge²⁷ and certainty.²⁸

²³ *Inst.* 1.13.1. In what is generally seen as the *locus classicus* for accommodation Calvin speaks of God’s communication to humans in terms of ‘*balbutio*’ – literally ‘to stammer’ or ‘to lisp’ – Wright translates this as ‘to prattle’ in this context, but ‘to burble’ has a better onomatopoeic feel while conveying the same sense. Wright, ‘Calvin’s Accommodating God’, 4.

²⁴ For an extensive treatment of Calvin’s use of accommodation in exegesis see Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised*.

²⁵ For example, considering God’s command to kill all the males of captured cities (Deut. 21:12-15) he says that ‘The permission here given seems to confer too great a license’ and ‘is far distant from perfection’ but argues that the compromise God makes is the restriction to kill *only* men, and not women or children. (*Pentateuchal Harmony* 3.53) Calvin comments on how God accommodates to human barbarity in terms of allowing Israelites to become slaves (albeit for a limited period), only allowing the freeing of a married slave if he left wife and children in slavery and even permitting parent to ease their poverty by selling children into slavery. Wright, ‘Calvin’s Accommodating God’, 11.

²⁶ For a survey of the development of the themes of knowledge and accommodation in Calvin’s eucharistic thought between 1541 and 1557 see Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 145-200.

²⁷ ‘The Sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches.’ *Inst.* 4.14.16.

²⁸ ‘A sacrament ought, by God’s sure promise, to encourage and comfort believers’ consciences, which could never receive this certainty from man.’ *Inst.* 4.19.2.

3.3 Calvin's epistemology and participation

Knowledge and faith are for Calvin closely linked, in his rejection of the concept of implicit faith he asserts that faith is founded on knowledge.²⁹ Davis notes that 'there is no faith where there is no knowledge for Calvin and no legitimate worship of God where there is no sure knowledge.'³⁰ Specifically faith rests on the knowledge of God's redeeming works.³¹ Here we move towards another aspect of knowledge that is key in Calvin's understanding. As he sees true knowledge leading to faith, he understands knowledge as something more than simply noetic. Knowledge of God evokes a response in us, as we learn of his disposition to save us we are drawn to him. This aspect of knowledge Dowey terms the 'existential' character of knowledge in Calvin's understanding. Dowey cites H.R. Mackintosh's view that this is 'a mode of thought which concerns not the intellect merely, but the whole personality of the man who awakens to it and adopts it.'³² There is no value in neutral or disinterested knowledge of God that either suggests that God is not involved with the world or fails to evoke a response in us. There is a world of difference between possession of information and *knowing* in Calvin's understanding. Faith is not then merely 'a common assent to the gospel history,'³³ but 'is more of the heart than of the brain, and more of the disposition than of the understanding.'³⁴ Knowledge is not neutral but engaging. As Bouwsma puts

²⁹ 'This, then, is the true knowledge of Christ, if we receive him as he is offered by the Father: namely, clothed with his gospel. For just as he has been appointed as the goal of our faith, so we cannot take the right road to him unless the gospel goes before us.' *Inst.* 3.2.6.

³⁰ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 163.

³¹ 'It is plain, then, that we do not yet have a full definition of faith, inasmuch as merely to know something of God's will is not to be accounted faith. But what if we were to substitute his benevolence or his mercy in place of his will, the tidings of which are often sad and the proclamation frightening? Thus, surely, we shall more closely approach the nature of faith; for it is after we have learned that our salvation rests with God that we are attracted to seek him. This fact is confirmed for us when he declares that our salvation is his care and concern.' *Inst.* 1.2.7.

³² Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: Nisbet, 1947), 219.

³³ *Inst.* 3.2.1.

³⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.8.

it, ‘only *affective* knowledge is *effective* knowledge.’³⁵ The act of knowing and the response it engenders cannot be separated.

When it comes to the Sacraments, the existential aspect of knowledge is clear. It can be said that in Calvin’s understanding ‘the entire eucharistic celebration served as a source of knowledge about the Christian’s union with Christ.’³⁶ That knowledge is *affective*, through the effective presentation of the promise of the redeeming work of Christ we are *affected* and participate in the union that is offered to us.³⁷ At the heart of the Sacraments there is ‘a personal appropriation of Christ’s words of promise.’³⁸ It is not enough just to possess information about Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf, Calvin insists that we must know and feel it for ourselves. This knowledge, given through the Holy Spirit, draws the believer to participate in the union, the relationship, promised both in the Word and the Sacrament.

3.4 Calvin as rhetorical theologian?

The existential aspect of Calvin’s epistemology has been suggested to have its roots in the renewal of classical rhetoric in humanism.³⁹ Calvin’s use of rhetoric has been well established,⁴⁰ and its impact on his theological approach widely discussed.⁴¹

³⁵ Bouwsma, ‘Calvin and the Renaissance Crisis of Knowing,’ 209.

³⁶ Davis, *This Is My Body*, 68.

³⁷ Barbara Pitkin suggests that, for Calvin, the firsthand experience believers have of the divine benevolence in the Sacraments through the power of the Holy Spirit could mean that they are *more* certain of the things they know by faith than they could be of anything known ordinarily. Barbara Pitkin, *What Pure Eyes Could See. Calvin’s Doctrine of Faith in Its Exegetical Context*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 31.

³⁸ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 164.

³⁹ For example in William J. Bouwsma, ‘Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica,’ *Calvinism as Theologia Rhetorica: Protocol of the Fifty-Fourth Colloquy, 28 September 1986*, ed. W. Wuellner, vol. 54 (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1986). In discussing Calvin’s use of rhetoric and concern for the effectiveness of exegesis, Bouwsma comments that ‘*eruditio* was indeed, for Calvin, always the handmaiden of *persuasio*.’ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ There are now sufficient articles and books concerning Calvin’s use of rhetoric that David Wright could suggest that it had become ‘flavour of the month’ in Calvin studies at one point. David F. Wright, ‘Was John Calvin a “Rhetorical Theologian”?’ *Calvin Studies IX: Papers Presented at the Ninth Colloquium on Calvin Studies*, eds. John H. Leith and Robert A. Johnson (Decatur, GA: Columbia Theological Seminary, 2000) 46.

In *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (1995), Serene Jones considers the nature of classical rhetoric as described by Cicero, who argued that the form of rhetoric should be consistent throughout a discourse, and preferred the form which he termed ‘demonstrative’ which was most often used in public rituals.⁴² By the sixteenth century, she suggests, rhetoricians were applying the ‘forensic’ and ‘deliberative’ forms, intended for a courtroom setting or to address the public on matter of civic responsibility respectively, to the written word.⁴³ Part of the rhetorical repertoire is *imitatio*, or imitation, an ability to take on the role of previous authors and reapply their arguments in a new context – a process that Quintillian compared with digestion, the orator absorbing the complexities of the argument and its author so that it becomes part of them. This appropriation of the arguments allowed them to be used in a new context by the orator.⁴⁴ The language thus deployed, according to Cicero, is not simply representing ideas as Platonic, but was an active instrument. Properly manipulated, it has the potential to transform states and overthrow governments, to gather public support or to destroy reputation and lives.

The orator needs to take into consideration the needs, expectations, biases and ability of the intended audience. The intent remains to persuade, therefore these considerations affect the form but not the function of the message: it is not simply a matter of telling the audience what it wants to hear.

⁴¹ The first use of the term ‘rhetorical theology’ in connection to Calvin appears to have been in 1974 in Willis, ‘Rhetoric and Responsibility in Calvin’s Theology’.

⁴² Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

⁴³ Cicero encouraged students to draw fully on a five part framework to construct their argument: *inventio*, *collocatio*, *memoria*, *elocutio* and *actio* (invention, arrangement, memory, persuasion and delivery).

⁴⁴ Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*, 19.

The principle of keeping in sight the goal of one's oration, or of a written text, was not lost on renaissance rhetoricians. However they modified the definition of 'good' towards which the orator was aiming. The Italian humanists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries combined Cicero's 'good of the State' with a Christian notion of 'service and obedience to the divine will of God.'⁴⁵ But underlying this goal was a principle that 'it is better to will the good than know the truth.'⁴⁶ This idea that, in the final analysis, virtuous action was more important than intellectual assent to either the truths of divine wisdom or the principles of right reason meant that the use of rhetorical technique was firmly focused on producing a practical reaction in its audience.

Instead of speculative metaphysics, to impress the listener with reason, renaissance rhetoricians sought to encourage their audience to 'will the good' and to take on a virtuous disposition. According to rhetoricians such as Petrarch,⁴⁶ this process was slowly brought about as the reader began following the habits of thinking of a text, and eventually willingly embodied the movement of the text. This would include the emotive state and the practical reason appropriate to virtuous action and faithful living. Thus the rhetorician needed to 'sow in the heart', by evocative rhetoric, the good they desired, rather than 'hammer it into the reader's head' by simple repetition. Effective communication therefore required *decorum*, deliberate adaptation to one's audience for the sake of persuasion. This was central to Calvin's pedagogy, and he considered necessary for 'a wise teacher to accommodate himself to the capacity of those whom he has undertaken to instruct.' He could add that the teacher should 'not go higher than they are able to follow, and so that, in short, he drops in his instructions by little and little, lest it should run over, if poured in more abundantly.'⁴⁷ Thus each audience required a specific and different approach: in the same way that a physician would adapt

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁶ Petrarch, quoted in *ibid.*

⁴⁷ CTS *Corinthians* 1.122 (on 1 Cor. 3:2).

treatment to a particular individual so the rhetorician must adapt his argument to persuade a particular reader, considering the situation of the listener and then how to deal with it.⁴⁸

If such was the basis of rhetoric as Calvin would have studied it, the question arises as to how much effect it had upon his writing. Whilst works such as the *Institutes* were clearly not written as classical rhetorical pieces, it would seem likely that the rhetorical skills that Calvin had studied and sharpened in his earlier career would be brought to bear as he sought to convince his reader. Furthermore he was not constrained to work within the classical framework of Cicero and therefore was free to refine and stretch the rhetorical rules learnt through his legal studies.⁴⁹ Thus Calvin developed his own rhetorical style, which was lucid and concise both in Latin and French.

Bouwsma observes that Calvin thought figurative language particularly effective as a means of communication.⁵⁰ Even though it was less precise in nature it had a greater power of expression. Calvin declares that ‘figures are called eyes of speech, not because they explain the matter more easily than simple, ordinary language, but because they win attention by their propriety, arouse the mind by their lustre, and by their lively similitude so represent what is said that it enters more effectively into the heart.’⁵¹

⁴⁸ Sermon on Job 21, ‘Ainsi en est-il, que nous devons contempler ceux que Dieu visite par afflictions: il faut en premier lieu regarder quelles sont les personnes, et puis comme nous les voyons disposees.’ *CO* 34:206

⁴⁹ Quirinus Breen emphasises this freedom: ‘Another word should be said to intercept a possible suspicion that Calvin wrote with the rhetorical textbooks of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian on his desk for constant reference. He knew these masters, and doubtless other ancients, as well as a number of his own era. But he plays the scores by ear, and some parts he disdains altogether. Indeed, he persistently violates a basic rule of rhetoric in that he seldom if ever tries to persuade by pleasing the reader either in what he says or how he says it. Were one to name the most constant excellence of Calvin, it could well be that of vividness; he tries his utmost to keep the reader awake.’ Quirinus Breen, ‘John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition,’ *Church History* 26.1 (1957), 8.

⁵⁰ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 116.

⁵¹ *Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine*, 319.

Randall Zachman considers how Calvin uses analogy and anagoge, suggesting that he ‘can arguably be described as basing his theology on drawing the right analogy and following the proper anagoge from the visible sign to the invisible reality it signifies.’⁵²

The pervasiveness of rhetoric in Calvin’s writing is such that David Wright states that ‘no doubt can be entertained about [Calvin’s] devotion throughout his reforming career to the effective, persuasive communication of Christian truth, whether as preacher, lecturer, counsellor, deliverer of admonitions, disputant, polemicist, and so on.’⁵³

However, the use of rhetoric in itself does not constitute a ‘rhetorical theology,’ and Wright sounds a note of caution about the use of the term in respect of Calvin. The idea of truth that ‘possesses the heart and transforms the life,’ he suggests might be a biblical rather than rhetorical discipline.⁵⁴ He refers to Francis Higman’s analysis of the language of Calvin’s polemical treatises, where Higman concludes that Calvin’s use of rhetoric is ‘a means whereby the full impact of the thought is achieved,’⁵⁵ and discerns a ‘rhetorical logic’ similar to that discerned by Quirinus Breen in the *Institutes*.⁵⁶

While the debate regarding Calvin’s designation as a ‘rhetorical theologian’ may continue, his use of rhetorical techniques is clear: he employs all the resources he has available to convince, persuade, to move his listener.⁵⁷ In this he is using these techniques as servant of the truth, just as he suggests that eloquence should serve the gospel ‘as a handmaid to her mistress.’⁵⁸

⁵² Randall C. Zachman, ‘Calvin as Analogical Theologian,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51.2 (1998), 162.

⁵³ Wright, ‘Was John Calvin a “Rhetorical Theologian”?’ 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁵ Francis M. Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in His French Polemical Treatises*, Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs (Oxford University Press, 1967), 121.

⁵⁶ ‘There is a logic in the *Institutes*. In fact, it is full of logic. But the logic is not syllogistic. It is rhetorical logic.’ Breen, ‘John Calvin and the Rhetorical Tradition,’ 13.

⁵⁷ In doing so, Calvin may indeed be working more consciously with a biblical model, Gary Hansen notes that ‘Calvin assumes that the figures of speech and other elements of the ancient art of rhetoric are inherent to human communication,’ and uses rhetorical categories in his exegesis. Gary Hansen, ‘John Calvin’s Nonliteral Exegesis,’ *Calvinus Sacrarum Literum Interpres. Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research.*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis, Reformed Historical Theology (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 32.

⁵⁸ CTS *Corinthians* 1.77 (on 1 Cor. 1:17).

3.5 Conclusion: The knowledge of God as a context for Calvin's theology

If faith is at the heart of the Calvin's understanding of Christian life, and 'faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge,'⁵⁹ then knowledge, specifically knowledge of God, is also there. What this chapter has attempted to show is that Calvin's epistemology, although not explicitly stated, underpins his theology. The knowledge we have of God, both as Creator and as Redeemer, relies on God's self-revelation in creation, Scripture and Jesus Christ as Mediator. In this Calvin sees our knowledge of God as accommodated knowledge, as God adapts both to our limitations as finite beings and our shortcomings as sinful. Whether Calvin's idea of accommodation is a deliberate borrowing of rhetorical *decorum* will remain open to debate,⁶⁰ but the principle that we rely on God to descend 'far beneath his loftiness'⁶¹ to make himself known runs through Calvin's thought.

We can see Calvin's clear understanding that knowledge, if it is of any value, has an impact. Knowledge of self leads us to contemplate God's glory⁶² while knowledge of God evokes the response of worship in us.⁶³ Thus knowledge is not merely noetic, it is evocative and persuasive: that is, it is *affective*. The means of communicating knowledge is then to engage the listener with the subject, to *affect* them. The aim of preaching is not to convey the simple notion of salvation but to convince or persuade the listener that God's salvation is offered to them. For Calvin, to know God is something transforming, we are changed by our knowledge.

⁵⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.2.

⁶⁰ David Wright, for example, is particularly sceptical of this claim. Wright, 'Was John Calvin a "Rhetorical Theologian"?' 62.

⁶¹ *Inst.* 1.13.1.

⁶² *Inst.* 1.1.1.

⁶³ 'Our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence;' *Inst.* 1.2.2.

Calvin's epistemology specifically underpins his eucharistic doctrine. If the Sacraments exhibit Christ by acting to 'seal' the promises onto the heart of believers and persuade them of their own salvation it is because they add authority to those promises. They give *substance* to the promises making them affective, and therefore effective: conveying the reality they represent. This understanding will allow Calvin to argue for a sacramental presence, rather than requiring any form of local presence, in terms of knowledge 'lifting' the believer to Christ's presence. It also allows him to use the term 'substance' in connection to the meaning of the Sacraments, something that will be discussed in Chapter 6.⁶⁴ Calvin declares in various places to the effect that: 'For to what end does Christ hold forth a pledge of his flesh and blood under earthly elements unless it be to raise us upwards? If they are helps to our weakness, no man will ever attain to the reality, but he who thus assisted shall climb, as it were, step by step from earth to heaven.'⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See pp. 158-165.

⁶⁵ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.250.

Chapter 4. Prayer, Piety and Parenthood: the human relationship to the Godhead.

4.1 Introduction: discerning the place of prayer and piety in the human relationship with God

In *Grace and Gratitude* Brian Gerrish claimed that, for Calvin, man is ‘eucharistic man,’ and that ‘authentic humanity is constituted by the act of thanksgiving to the Maker of heaven and earth.’¹ The question here is: ‘what is our relationship to God and what should it be?’ This chapter will consider something of this idea beginning with Calvin’s link between knowledge of God and piety, then moving to prayer as a key aspect of the life of piety and as a means to approach God, Christ’s role as Mediator to enable prayer and to show how Calvin sees the benefits of the union of the believer with Christ as being linked to prayer and to private and public worship.

4.2 The Knowledge of God and Piety

Calvin sees the knowledge of God as implying, even impelling, a purpose. Worship, or at least honour, is the natural response to knowledge of God, but this is not in itself a sufficient response; rather we must be persuaded ‘that he is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek nothing elsewhere than in him.’² The proper response that Calvin envisaged was termed by him as ‘piety’ (*pietas*), being ‘that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces.’³ In keeping with this the important question for human beings to ask concerns the nature of God in terms of God’s relationship with creation and with humanity rather than in strictly philosophical

¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 50.

² *Inst.* 1.2.1.

³ *Inst.* 1.2.1. The term that Calvin uses in French is ‘piété’. E.g. in *Petit Traicte CO* 5:455.

terms. Calvin is keen to avoid the ‘idle speculations’ of *what* God is and concentrate on the more important question of *who* God is to us:

For how can the thought of God penetrate your mind without your realizing immediately that, since you are his handiwork, you have been made over and bound to his command by right of creation, that you owe your life to him? — that whatever you undertake, whatever you do, ought to be ascribed to him?⁴

It is then through perceiving God as creator that the human mind sees its life as ‘wickedly corrupt unless it be disposed in his service.’⁵ Thus it emerges that Calvin’s concept of God was not simply ‘a fountain of all good,’ but a creator who is intimately connected to and involved in his creation. The response to this knowledge is both love and awe. This is not then, an image of God dreamt up by pious imagination but by a search for ‘the one and only true God’ who is ‘the Author of every good.’ It follows that the pious mind, acknowledging God as ‘Lord and Father’ not only accepts his authority but also seeks to obey his will and ‘advance his glory.’ Such authority carries a judicial tone, but not one without warmth, for ‘this mind restrains itself from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but because it loves and reveres God as Father, it worships and adores him as Lord.’⁶

For Calvin, it seems, real piety involved an awareness of the glory of God, and of human limitation in contrast to such glory. This was the root of his idea of the ‘fear’ of God. This ‘fear of God’ needed to be combined with a willing reverence and ‘legitimate’ worship, that is worship carried out within the prescription of the law. This idea of a limitation on worship will be developed later, but it seems that Calvin distrusted excessive show on the grounds of a lack of sincerity. True worship was both from the heart and within the limits of scripture for ‘very few really reverence him; and

⁴ *Inst.* 1.2.2.

⁵ *Inst.* 1.2.2.

⁶ *Inst.* 1.2.2.

wherever there is great ostentation in ceremonies, sincerity of heart is rare indeed.’⁷ The purpose of worship was not admiration of the ceremony, but to develop a relationship and knowledge of God that was a direct invitation both to fear and to trust God.

In the third chapter of Book 1 of the *Institutes*, Calvin expands on this idea that ‘all men have a general veneration for God.’ He proposes that ‘God has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.’⁸ He points to the widespread existence of religion as indicating this deep-seated recognition. Aware that some saw in religion a means by which a minority could exercise control over the majority, Calvin argued that rather than suggesting that religion is a social construct this abuse of religious authority would have no power if it were not for the intrinsic knowledge of God within people, ‘from which the inclination towards religion springs as from a seed.’⁹ Calvin also saw ample evidence that intrinsic knowledge of God could be ignored or corrupted. Whether through superstition or an active turning away from God Calvin saw many people denying what he considered the real nature of God, unable to seek the truth. Similarly, he shows a concern that many seek to hold faith in religion (by which he presumably was implying religious ceremony and practice) itself, rather than in divine reality to which religion points, and argues that there is a need to conform religion to God’s will.¹⁰ It is in contrast to this that Calvin conceives the role of scripture in shaping our knowledge as ‘another and better help’ which ‘clearly shows us the true God.’¹¹

For Calvin, then, the knowledge of God evokes a response from the individual. It is expressed as ‘piety’: recognising God as creator and source of all things, and in seeking to conform to the will of God as revealed through Scripture. Part of this includes the

⁷ *Inst.* 1.2.2.

⁸ *Inst.* 1.3.1.

⁹ *Inst.* 1.3.2.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 1.4.3.

¹¹ *Inst.* 1.6.1.

recognition that human gifts are a reflection of the creator, and that the manner in which human beings reflect the image of God depends upon their acceptance of the divine gifts. Gerrish observes that, for Calvin, ‘without the recognition that their talents and distinctive constitution are divine gifts, humans are not – in the full sense – images of God,’ as their ‘blessedness’ lay in their participation in God.¹² These gifts are not simply the internal or ‘spiritual’ gifts. The second book of the *Institutes* describes the way in which the divine gifts include not only the fruits of the natural world, but also social structures and even the achievement of human civilisation. The inherent social nature of the human being is itself a divine gift.¹³ This gift of ‘political order’ in Calvin’s thinking is not necessarily accepted by all. (The criminal or even anarchist tendencies of some humans were evidence of this, but these were due to the ‘frailty of the human mind’ rather than a withholding of the gift itself.) Alongside political order, art and science are also to be considered gifts from God, as are all things that benefit humanity. For example, the truths that are to be found in secular writers can ‘teach us that the mind of man though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.’¹⁴ Indeed, the benefits that God imparts through science and mathematics are not to be ignored, ‘for if we neglect God’s gift freely offered in these arts, we ought to suffer just punishment for our sloths.’¹⁵

Political order, art and science may be the work of human reason, but they are nevertheless divine gifts that should lead us to gratitude. The nature of these phenomena as gifts is shown by their unequal distribution, and Calvin asked ‘For why is one person more excellent than another? Is it not to display in common nature God’s special grace,

¹² Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 44.

¹³ ‘No man is to be found who does not understand that every sort of human organization must be regulated by laws, and who does not comprehend the principles of those laws. Hence arises that unvarying consent of all nations and of individual mortals with regard to laws. For their seeds have, without teacher or lawgiver, been implanted in all men.’ *Inst.* 2.2.13.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 2.2.15.

¹⁵ *Inst.* 2.2.16.

which, in passing many by, declares itself bound to none?’¹⁶ But it was not only grace on a grand scale that was to be considered as directing us towards gratitude to God. The deeds of individuals can also provide an opportunity for gratitude. There is a sense in which many of God’s benefits reach us through a network of social relationships (which is part of the image in which we are formed, and are a gift from God in themselves), and therefore there is a sense in which some of God’s blessings reach us from the hands of other human beings. This is expressed in the *Geneva Catechism* in the section on prayer. We are to exhort God to answer our every need, but this does not, apparently exclude our requesting help of others. This is because it is God who gives them the gifts needed to meet our needs, indeed ‘whoever does not show himself grateful to men betrays also his ingratitude to God.’¹⁷

Thus, in Calvin’s scheme, all knowledge of God is drawn from experience, from the structures of society and the nature of the created order, and even the actions of other human beings seems to point towards the goodness of God. His vision of God’s goodness and benevolence, even if it is expressed in his own distinctive style, was not greatly original. Naturally he drew from a common store of religious ideas.¹⁸ Zwingli was considerably more eager than either Luther or Calvin to acknowledge his debt to philosophy and, although he recognised the goodness of God as a biblical theme, he also remarks that it is a favourite theme of the philosophers, and in particular he quotes Seneca’s reference to the goodness of the Platonic Artificer-God. It appears that Zwingli considered much of the work of the philosophers to have derived from the same source as theological thought, that of ‘the nature and character of the supreme deity.’¹⁹ Calvin was considerably more cautious: he was clearly aware of what he saw as the mistakes of

¹⁶ *Inst.* 2.2.17.

¹⁷ *Catechism*, 120.

¹⁸ For example, Gerrish observes that the image of God as ‘fountain of good’ can be found in both Luther and Zwingli. Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

the philosophers and the dangers therein. Calvin goes as far as to describe the Epicureans as ‘crass despisers of piety.’²⁰ It appears that Calvin had a more positive attitude to Plato’s writings. Gerrish sees echoes of Plato in several aspects of Calvin’s ‘fount of all goodness’, although he does not go as far as to suggest that such ideas are derived from Plato.²¹

Calvin shows some indebtedness to Aristotle and the notion of the *summum bonum*. The third question of the Geneva Catechism asks, ‘What then is man’s supreme good?’²² The answer refers back to the first and second questions. The chief goal of human existence is virtually synonymous with the greatest good of human life: and that is to know and glorify God. Human happiness, it seems, consists in fulfilling the function for which we were created. The worst that can happen is not to fulfil this function, to ‘not live to God.’²³ Then comes the question ‘What then is true and right knowledge of God?’ to which the answer is given, ‘When he is so known that that his own proper honour is done him.’²⁴

The idea that the good of anything lies in the performance of its function or end was part of Aristotle’s thought. Aristotle saw the highest human good in the exercise of the noblest human capacity, that of intellectual contemplation. Aquinas drew from this a definition of the highest good as vision of the divine essence, an activity that perfects the human intellect. As the knowledge of God as source of all good develops, and the human being is able to fulfil that part of his or her intended function, then comes the need for a response. That is the honouring of God, which is Calvin’s ‘piety’. The correct method of honouring him is then to put our trust in him, to study to serve him by

²⁰ *Inst.* 1.5.11.

²¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 34.

²² *Catechism*, 91.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

obeying his will, to call upon him when we are in and to acknowledge him ‘with both with heart and mouth to be the only author of all good things.’²⁵

4.3 Prayer: The chief exercise of faith

Paying honour to God for Calvin seems to be rooted in prayer, which he describes as the ‘chief exercise of faith.’ If, in comparison to the ‘fountain of all goodness’, human beings are lacking in any redeeming quality and are therefore incapable of obtaining salvation through their own ability, they must seek such resources as are necessary from outside themselves. This resource God has revealed in Christ offering us happiness and wealth in place of misery and neediness, opening treasures to us ‘that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son.’²⁶ Again, Calvin resorts to the image of ‘an overflowing spring’ from which flows God’s goodness, but he notes that there is a requirement for the individual to respond, to take an active part in the flow of grace. We are to seek and ask ‘what we have learned to be in him.’ To know that God is the source of all good, and not to seek good in him ‘would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.’²⁷ Calvin clearly suggests an active participation on behalf of the individual seeking to know God, to ‘dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out to us by the Lord’s gospel’²⁸, which is in keeping with another image he uses for prayer – that of ‘conversing’ with God.²⁹

Calvin suggests six reasons for the necessity of prayer. The first argument is to increase our ‘zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become

²⁵ Catechism, 91-2.

²⁶ *Inst.* 3.20.1.

²⁷ *Inst.* 3.20.1.

²⁸ *Inst.* 3.20.2.

²⁹ *Inst.* 3.20.4.

accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor.’³⁰ This rests on the development of the believer’s relationship with God – to ‘fire the heart’ with a desire to know God and respond to that knowledge, and to establish in the heart and mind of the believer the value of trusting God for help. In his commentary on Romans 10:14 Calvin draws out the need for faith to establish genuine prayer. Trust in the power of God to save, and in his will to save, is necessary as a prerequisite for prayer to develop³¹ and part of a relationship which establishes God as ‘father’.³² Calling upon God in prayer, we come to know God better as ‘father’, the source of all good, so deepening our faith and aiding further prayer.³³

The second argument is related to the knowledge that God has of us; that we should ‘learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts.’³⁴

The third and fourth reasons for prayer are to remind us of the goodness of God’s gifts, offering true thanks, and being drawn deeper into reflection on God’s kindness. Again, the theme of deepening relationship with God through prayer is apparent, as with the fifth and sixth reasons which are to embrace with ‘greater delight’ the things obtained by prayer and to confirm God’s providence.

In keeping with the holiness of God, Calvin argued that ‘devout detachment’ is required as the first rule in prayer.³⁵ This is not to say that in prayer we should be without emotion, for it is often through great emotion, ‘great anxiety,’³⁶ that the individual is drawn to prayer. But Calvin argues for the mind to be ‘raised above itself’ to a purity

³⁰ *Inst.* 3.20.3.

³¹ Calvin argues that the believer can only commit to God in prayer if they have not ‘previously entertained in his mind such a persuasion of God’s paternal kindness towards him, that he dares to expect everything from him.’ *CTS Romans*, 397 (on Rom. 10.14).

³² Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 66. Gerrish observes: ‘It is particularly striking how often Calvin simply identifies believing in God with recognizing God’s Fatherhood.’

³³ *Inst.* 3.2.2.

³⁴ *Inst.* 3.20.3.

³⁵ *Inst.* 3.20.4.

³⁶ *Inst.* 3.20.4.

worthy of God. This means setting aside distractions, and even using physical posture to focus the mind on the holiness of God.³⁷ But, human nature means that often individuals, rather than lifting their minds to God, seek to advance their own desires, ‘for many rashly, shamelessly, and irreverently dare importune God with their improprieties and impudently present before his throne whatever in dreams has struck their fancy.’³⁸ The remedy for this comes through the provision of the Holy Spirit who is our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and temper our emotions.

Calvin’s second rule of prayer is that it must come from a sincere sense of want. Those who ‘intone prayers after a set form as if discharging a duty to God’³⁹ are failing in their attempt at best, or, at worst, are mocking God. Calvin describes their hearts as cold, as opposed to the ‘burning desire’ that is necessary. The need for prayer is not a ‘present reality’ in them.⁴⁰ Yet, prayer is not simply dependent upon a passing mood of penitence for the Scriptures admonish us to pray constantly. In his commentary on Ephesians 6:18, Calvin notes the command to pray with ‘all perseverance’ and directs the believer to overcome any tendency to weariness by ‘cheerful performance’ of prayer.⁴¹ This reflects a suggestion elsewhere that in prayer we should always ‘mingle thanksgiving with our desires’⁴² so that we might be able to rejoice even in the midst of sorrow. Similarly if we find ourselves in good times, there is no excuse to forgo prayer merely because we do not have a sense of physical want. He observes that since we ‘cannot enjoy a single morsel of bread apart from God’s continuing favour’ even the possession of well-stocked granaries and wine cellars should not hinder our prayers for

³⁷ Calvin states: ‘And the rite of raising the hands means that men remember they are far removed from God unless they raise their thoughts on high,’ (*Inst.* 3.20.5) and ‘As for the bodily gestures customarily observed in praying, such as kneeling and uncovering the head, they are exercises whereby we try to rise to a greater reverence for God.’ *Inst.* 3.20.33.

³⁸ *Inst.* 3.20.5.

³⁹ *Inst.* 3.20.6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 340 (on Eph. 6:18).

⁴² CTS *Phil., Col. & Thess.* 297 (on 1 Thess 5:17).

daily bread. The sense of want is spiritual rather than merely physical, and draws us closer to the Father. Affliction stimulates us to prayer and prosperity gives an opportunity to praise,⁴³ but a ‘zeal for the Kingdom of God’⁴⁴ should be the driving force in our search for God’s help.

The third rule of prayer requires that we yield all confidence in ourselves and plead for pardon.⁴⁵ As part of the raising of the mind to God there must be a total submission to the glory of God. This leads Calvin to propose that the plea for the forgiveness of sin is the most important part of prayer.⁴⁶ Having approached God through prayer by means of a sense of repentance, we pray with confident hope. Thus prayer is based on both penitence and hope.⁴⁷ The aspect of hope and confidence in prayer in the *Institutes* should not be underestimated. Thus true prayer is a deep-rooted lifting up of the mind to God, recognising the holiness of the divine, and fills the person with a sense of penitence and also with confidence in the promise that prayer will be answered. Calvin describes this as ‘an intimate conversation,’ there is a participation in relationship that draws the believer towards the fountain of all goodness that Calvin previously described. The rules Calvin set out are descriptions of the ideal for this participation, and God will not reject ‘those prayers in which he finds neither perfect faith nor repentance, together with a warmth of zeal and petitions rightly conceived.’⁴⁸

True prayer flows from faith, for it is only by faith that we can trust in God. In his commentary on Romans 10:14, Calvin suggests that in seeking the ‘secure refuge’ of

⁴³ CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 354 (on James 5.13).

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 3.20.7.

⁴⁵ *Inst.* 3.20.8.

⁴⁶ *Inst.* 3.20.9.

⁴⁷ Calvin states that ‘It is fitting therefore that the godly man’s prayer arise from these two emotions, that it also contain and represent both. That is that he groan under present ills and anxiously fear those to come, yet at the same time take refuge in God, not at all doubting he is ready to extend his helping hand.’ *Inst.* 3.20.11.

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 3.20.16.

prayer to God the believer ‘acts like the son, who commits himself into the bosom of the best and the most loving of fathers.’⁴⁹ An understanding of God’s loving disposition is a prerequisite to enter into this intimate conversation calling God ‘Father.’⁵⁰ Gerrish notes the importance to Calvin of recognising God’s fatherhood.⁵¹ It is the manner in which believers can be identified. Against the Roman Catholic idea of implicit faith Calvin argues that ‘Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge’⁵² and specifically knowledge not only of God, but of the divine will: we obtain salvation ‘when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of the reconciliation effected through Christ.’⁵³ The recognition of God’s fatherhood is equated at points in Calvin’s writing with faith and with salvation. Gerrish observes how here the language of faith echoes the language of piety and that ‘for Calvin, the fatherhood of God was bound up with the deed of reconciliation; and if salvation is given with the recognition of God’s fatherhood, that is because God’s fatherly goodness is the guarantee of everything we need.’⁵⁴ But, given that Calvin saw prayer as the ‘chief exercise of faith’, Gerrish could have gone on to observe that the language of faith also echoes the language of prayer. The recognition of the fatherhood of God, the fount of all goodness, is central.⁵⁵

Even ‘perverted prayer’ from a heart not at peace or composed, or, worse still, those prayers which appear as ‘ill-controlled’ outbreaks, are listened to by the Father. A sign

⁴⁹ CTS *Romans*, 296 (on Rom 10:14).

⁵⁰ ‘M: Why is the name of Father, rather than any other, here given to God?’

C: Because a sure and trustful conscience is in the first place necessary for praying rightly, God assumes this name, which suggests nothing but pure kindness. So that banishing all anxiety from our minds, he may invite us to pray to him intimately.’ *Catechism* 123-4.

⁵¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 66.

⁵² *Inst.* 3.2.2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 67-8.

⁵⁵ For example in *Inst.* 3.20.14 there is an exhortation to prayer which draws on the image of the ‘kind father’: ‘We must therefore make up our minds that, even though we do not excel in a holiness like that which is praised in the holy patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, yet because we and they have a common command to pray and a common faith, if we rely upon God’s Word, in this we are rightly their fellows. For God ... declaring that he will be gentle and kind to all, gives to the utterly miserable, hope that they will get what they have sought. ... Our most gracious Father will not cast out those whom he not only urges, but stirs up with every possible means, to come to him.’

of the care that the fount of all goodness has for his children is his listening to ‘the groans of those who, unjustly afflicted, implore his aid.’⁵⁶ In fact, Calvin does not suggest that ‘the four rules of right praying’ he puts forward must be completely fulfilled before the prayers are answered.⁵⁷ This is not, however, an excuse for the pious to ignore the form or content of their prayer, ‘lest God’s majesty become worthless for us.’⁵⁸ This, of course was an ideal, and never carried with the ‘uprightness’ it was due. Not even David is seen to conform to this, for his prayers in many cases had the ‘savour of intemperance.’ The image that Calvin uses, however, is of a Father who ‘tolerates even our stammerings and pardons our ignorance whenever something inadvertently escapes us.’ This seems to establish that, for Calvin, prayer, as the chief exercise of faith, is part of a drawing near to God, or a ‘lifting up’ of the heart to a welcoming, father-like deity.

4.4 From Father to Son – Prayer is Mediated through the person of Christ

Our ability to draw near to God in prayer is linked with the saving action of the Father in sending the Son to act as the Mediator who ‘comes forward as intermediary, to change the throne of dreadful glory into a throne of grace.’⁵⁹ In Calvin’s thinking it is solely through the mediatorship of Christ that prayers are heard. The role of mediator, originally given to the Priest who entered the sanctuary whilst the people remained ‘afar off in the court,’ was then taken up by Christ. Calvin observes that this ‘taught us that we are all barred from God’s presence, and consequently need a Mediator, who should appear in our name and bear us upon his shoulders and hold us bound upon his breast so that we are heard in his person.’⁶⁰

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 3.20.15.

⁵⁷ *Inst.* 3.20.16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Inst.* 3.20.17.

⁶⁰ *Inst.* 3.20.18.

Even the unworthy prayers that we offer are ‘cleansed’ by the ‘sprinkled blood’ of the Mediator, allowing Calvin to infer that ‘God was from the beginning appeased by Christ’s intercession.’ Thus the action of God in Christ enables prayer to be effective in drawing us to participate in the relationship with the divine presence. But it is solely through Christ that this mediation occurs, even in the case of mutual intercession of believers, for it is by participating in relationship to Christ, as ‘one body’, that such prayers are drawn out and ‘gush forth from the emotion of love.’⁶¹ For Calvin, the Mediator can only be Christ; he strongly rejects the notion of petitioning the Father through any other than the Son. Specifically he rejects the practice of prayer to the saints ‘who, having died in the flesh, live in Christ,’⁶² for we should not even dream that they themselves have any way to petition the Father other than through Christ. Calvin perceives this practice as unscriptural and dishonouring to Christ, as it removes from him the title of sole Mediator.⁶³ Furthermore Calvin sees how the error of treating the saints as mediators has progressed to the point of superstition, with saints being adopted as a ‘tutelary deity’ by many individuals.⁶⁴ Here he alludes to his commentary on Jeremiah, in which he sees God’s judgement against Israel for adopting ‘patrons’ (idols) for each city as paralleling the Roman practice of praying to ‘dead saints’.⁶⁵ He describes such a patron as ‘an inferior god, who procured the favour of the supreme God.’ In short, they are Baalim.⁶⁶ This veneration of the saints is, then, based on ‘confused’ interpretation of scripture.⁶⁷ Even invoking the example of the patriarchs does not provide a basis for such practice since, for example, the invocation of the names of Abraham and Isaac by Jacob in Genesis 48:16 is not calling on their help, but

⁶¹ *Inst.* 3.20.19.

⁶² *Inst.* 3.20.21.

⁶³ Calvin quotes Ambrose to emphasise this point: ‘He ... is our mouth, through which we speak to the Father; he is our eye, through which we see the Father; he is our right hand through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless he intercedes, there is no intercourse with God either for us or for all saints. *Inst.* 3.20.21. The reference is to *Isaac or the Soul* viii.75.

⁶⁴ *Inst.* 3.20.22.

⁶⁵ CTS *Jer. & Lam.* 1.129 (on Jer. 2:28).

⁶⁶ CTS *Jer. & Lam.* 2.93 (on Jer. 11:13).

⁶⁷ *Inst.* 3.20.23.

calling to mind the covenant in which Jacob participates as an inheritor.⁶⁸ In his commentary on that passage, Calvin notes that Jacob is making a statement of adoption to include Ephraim and Manassah within the covenant rather than suggesting that ‘the dead are to be invoked in prayer.’⁶⁹ Calvin goes as far as to suggest that directing prayer to those other than Christ, our true Mediator, ‘involves manifest sacrilege.’⁷⁰

The centrality of Christ as Mediator is clearly bound with the believer’s relationship with him. The response to God’s Word is faith, and from faith prayer rightly springs. Calvin observes that Paul ‘assumes this as an acknowledged axiom, that we cannot rightly pray unless we are surely persuaded of success.’⁷¹ Thus our knowledge of the saving action of Christ means that we can pray with confidence and conviction. This confidence is ‘the key that opens to us the gate of heaven’ in enabling our approach to God.⁷²

It is part of our relationship with Christ that we direct our prayers through him. In keeping with this Calvin suggests that we should consider ourselves continually in relationship, and therefore that we should not consider that we can ‘shut up God’s presence’ within the walls of church buildings but should pray ‘within ourselves’ calling upon God ‘without distinction of place.’⁷³ But, although we should ‘ever aspire to God and pray without ceasing,’ Calvin recognises that ‘our weakness is such that it has to be supported by many aids, and our sluggishness such that it needs to be goaded,’ and he commends a regular pattern of prayer as such a goad.⁷⁴ This pattern then undergirds the relationship between the believer and God with a closeness that allows

⁶⁸ *Inst.* 3.20.25.

⁶⁹ CTS *Genesis* 2.430 (on Gen. 48:16).

⁷⁰ *Inst.* 3.20.27.

⁷¹ CTS *Romans*, 397-8 (on Rom. 10:14).

⁷² CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 258 (on Eph. 3:12).

⁷³ *Inst.* 3.20.30.

⁷⁴ *Inst.* 3.20.50.

the individual to enter prayer as a ‘conversation with God,’⁷⁵ in a manner not dependent on personal mood.⁷⁶

Calvin sees the benefits of the action of God in Christ as being linked to prayer and to private and public worship. The person of Christ is central, acting as Mediator. The relationship between the believer and Christ is expressed in prayer, the ‘chief exercise of faith,’ but rests in faith and its effects. Gerrish suggests that we might go as far as to suggest that ‘faith consists in the pious inclination.’⁷⁷ So we return to a basis of the relationship with God as fountain of all goodness, for faith and the prayer that flows from it. But Calvin’s reflections on faith show that he perceives an intimate union between Christ and believers. Whilst the formal definition of faith is in terms of knowledge that rests on the promise in Christ, Calvin can also describe it in terms of receiving Christ clothed with his gospel.⁷⁸ Such descriptions are significant for his understanding of the Sacraments, as they indicate the close relationship between knowledge, faith and the union with Christ that the Sacraments embody. This intimate union with Christ is crucial to Calvin’s understanding of grace and salvation. Picking up on a number of biblical images Calvin declares that Christ is ‘our head’ (Eph. 4:15), and the ‘first-born among many brethren’ (Rom. 8:29) and we are ‘engrafted into him’ (Rom. 11:17) and called to ‘put on Christ’ (Gal. 3:27), and that ‘all he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.’⁷⁹ It is only in Christ that we may spiritually ‘grow in vigour or in stature.’⁸⁰ Yet Calvin recognised that ‘not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel.’ Gerrish, for example notes that Calvin distinguishes between ‘believing in

⁷⁵ *Inst.* 3.20.4.

⁷⁶ *Inst.* 3.20.7.

⁷⁷ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 68.

⁷⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.6.

⁷⁹ *Inst.* 3.1.1.

⁸⁰ CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 286 (on Eph. 4:15).

Christ' and 'communion with Christ.'⁸¹ This distinction may have been partly based in exegesis. In Ephesians 3:17 Calvin seems to have understood the instrumental language of the prayer, 'that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,'⁸² as implying a distinction between what faith is, and its effects.⁸³ For Calvin, it seems, union is the immediate consequence of faith, and faith in turn remains dependent on what Calvin elsewhere calls the 'mystical union' of believers with Christ.⁸⁴

The means of the union is through the Spirit, which effects the union by faith. For Calvin declares that 'Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears.'⁸⁵ Through this union, a communion with Christ effected by the Spirit, we grow together in one body. This is the *koinonia* at the heart of the Sacraments. It is not just because Christ is a human like ourselves, but also because he engrafts us into his own body by the power of the Spirit so that we may draw life from him. Calvin, noting how Paul describes this as a great mystery that no words can explain fully, suggests we should more seek to feel Christ living in us than to find a way to explain the communication happens.⁸⁶

4.5 The role of Christ as Mediator in Salvation

Whatever Calvin's specific intent in using the term 'mystical' with respect to the union between believer and Christ, it is without doubt that the person of Christ acting as Mediator is fundamental to his understanding of prayer and worship, and of the

⁸¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 71.

⁸² Eph. 3:17 (NIV).

⁸³ Here Calvin states that 'Most people consider fellowship with Christ, and believing in Christ, to be the same thing; but the fellowship which we have with Christ is the consequence of faith. In a word, faith is not a distant view, but a warm embrace, of Christ, by which he dwells in us, and we are filled with the Divine Spirit.' CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 262 (on Eph. 3:17).

⁸⁴ *Inst.* 2.12.7, 3.11.10.

⁸⁵ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

⁸⁶ CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 325 (on Eph. 5:32).

Eucharist. Nevin claimed that Calvin's theology in this respect is essentially Christocentric, and that what he considered as a falling away from Calvin's eucharistic understanding, which had taken place in the Reformed Church, 'must affect necessarily the whole view that is entertained of Christ's person, the idea of the Church, and the doctrine of salvation throughout.'⁸⁷

Indeed, Calvin's writing in the *Institutes* confirms this central role of Christ as Mediator. He argues that, after the fall of the Adam, no knowledge of God apart from the Mediator has had power regarding salvation.⁸⁸ In stating 'This is eternal life, to know the Father to be the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent,'⁸⁹ Jesus is making, in Calvin's eyes, a claim not only for his own time but eternally. Indeed, he suggests that God's relationship with 'the ancient people' was founded on Christ as Mediator.⁹⁰

The centrality of the mediatorial role in Calvin's understanding shapes not only his broad understanding but also specifically that of the nature of Christ as both human and divine. It is crucial then that 'he who was to be our Mediator be both true God and true man.'⁹¹ The necessity of the Mediator being both human and divine is not 'simple ... or absolute,' but stems from 'a heavenly decree, on which men's salvation depended.' Again the stress is very much on the divine initiative of salvation and human inability to 'ascend to him' unaided. Christ's title 'Immanuel' denotes not only the power and action of God but also the union of person, by which he became 'God-man'.⁹² The

⁸⁷ Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 29.

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 2.6.1.

⁸⁹ John 17:3.

⁹⁰ 'For even if God included all of Abraham's seed in his covenant, Paul nevertheless wisely argues that Christ was properly that seed in whom all the nations were to be blessed, since we know that not all who sprang from Abraham according to the flesh were reckoned among his offspring.' *Inst.* 2.6.2

⁹¹ *Inst.* 2.12.1.

⁹² CTS *Isaiah* 1.249 (on Isa. 7:14).

union is a means by which the ‘actual presence of God’ is exhibited.⁹³ The task of the Mediator is ‘no common thing,’⁹⁴ but to restore fallen humanity to God’s grace by a joining of natures.⁹⁵ Indeed, Calvin argues that Christ would not be ‘properly qualified’ as Mediator if he did not unite the two natures in his person.⁹⁶

A second requirement of the Mediator was reconciliation through obedience, as a counter to the disobedience of humanity. Here the two natures are absolutely necessary, for ‘neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us.’⁹⁷ The sole purpose of the incarnation is, then, the redemption of fallen humanity by the action of the loving Father in sending the Son.⁹⁸ Calvin uses a number of Biblical quotations at this point to underline his conviction that Christ became ‘a sacrifice and expiation to abolish our sins,’ whilst in the following section dismissing speculation about the possibility of incarnation in the absence of the need for reconciliation by saying that ‘it is not lawful to inquire further how Christ became our Redeemer and the partaker of our nature’ other than to accept it as part of the divine plan for salvation.⁹⁹

The union of natures in Christ does not occur ‘in the sense that the Word was turned into flesh or confusedly mingled with the flesh.’¹⁰⁰ Rather, it is through a unity of

⁹³ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 1.105 (on Matt. 1:23).

⁹⁴ *Inst.* 2.12.2.

⁹⁵ ‘Who could have done this had not the self-same Son of God become the Son of man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?’ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 1.105 (on Matt. 1:23).

⁹⁷ *Inst.* 2.12.3.

⁹⁸ Calvin states that ‘the only reason given in Scripture that the Son of God willed to take our flesh, and accepted this commandment from the Father, is that he would be a sacrifice to appease the Father on our behalf.’ *Inst.* 2.12.4.

⁹⁹ *Inst.* 2.12.5.

¹⁰⁰ *Inst.* 2.14.1.

person rather than by ‘confusion of substance.’ In this duality and the duality of body and soul, Calvin takes an orthodox Chalcedonian line. Thus he sees scripture pointing to aspects of Christ that must be ascribed to his humanity, along with aspects that must be ascribed to his divinity, as well as some attributes that embrace ‘both natures but fits neither alone.’¹⁰¹ The union is such that in some cases the properties of the natures are interchanged. Calvin’s apparent support of a *communicatio idiomatum* is extended in a following section where he contrasts the fact that God ‘cannot be touched with hands’ to Christ’s being crucified and shedding his blood for us, and declares that ‘the things that carried out in his human nature are transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity,’ because Christ ‘was both God and man.’¹⁰²

Here we have come upon a much-debated area of Calvin’s theology. Despite what might be seen as ‘formally correct’ assertions of Chalcedonian orthodoxy,¹⁰³ there is much uncertainty regarding how Calvin understood the person and work of Christ. In fact Calvin is seen at times as moving close to the Nestorian viewpoint and failing to do justice to the union of human and divine natures in Christ’s person. McDonnell observes ‘There is a Nestorian tendency in Calvin as well as Zwingli, although more pronounced in the latter,’¹⁰⁴ and, quoting various examples adds in a footnote that ‘There is a general tendency among Calvin scholars to make note of his Nestorian tendency.’ Admittedly, McDonnell points out that this must be seen in the light of it being part of Calvin’s reaction to Luther, but it opens serious questions about Calvin’s christology even in the face of Calvin’s conscious rejection of both Nestorius and Eutyches.¹⁰⁵ This is of particular importance with regard to the debates between Lutherans and Calvinists over the Eucharist. The Lutheran concept of the Real Presence

¹⁰¹ *Inst.* 2.14.1.

¹⁰² *Inst.* 2.14.2.

¹⁰³ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 54.

¹⁰⁴ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 213.

¹⁰⁵ *Inst.* 2.14.4.

requires the ubiquity of Christ's body, which Calvin strongly rejected,¹⁰⁶ Lutherans defended on the grounds of an understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* whereby the unlimited presence of Christ's divinity is communicated to his humanity. Calvin is seen by some to have taken a line that the communication of properties was 'simply a manner of speaking'¹⁰⁷ with no possibility that the body of Christ might actually become ubiquitous by reason of its union with his divinity. This separation may well reflect the attempt that Calvin made to reconcile the Lutheran understanding to the Zwinglian stance. The relegation of the *communicatio* to a mere manner of speaking may be more accurately the stance of Zwingli,¹⁰⁸ although as Calvin describes the *communicatio* as an interchange of properties and also refers to it as a *tropus* or manner of speaking it is not easy to determine. It is clear that Calvin had a different understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* to Luther, and the subsequent debate between Lutheran and Calvinist understandings of the Eucharist led the former to accuse Calvinists of a Nestorian separation of Christ's natures, while the latter accused Lutherans of a Eutychian confusion.

In some respects the disputes over Calvin's understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* are difficult to base on strong evidence. Calvin refers to *communicatio idiomatum* in only two sections of the *Institutes*: his christology, where he treats the two natures of Christ as united in one person, and in his teaching on the Eucharist, where he opposes the Lutheran claim to the ubiquity of the body of Christ. But these passages do give a significant indication of Calvin's christology. In the final (1559) edition of the *Institutes*, as in the earliest (1536) edition, the key christological passages have four

¹⁰⁶ *Inst.* 4.17.30.

¹⁰⁷ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 54.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph N. Tylenda, 'Calvin's Understanding of the Communication of Properties,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 38.1 (1975), 54.

main points, and it is only the fourth point which deals directly with the *communicatio idiomatum*. The focus of this may be seen in *Inst.* 2.14.1-3.

The first point that can be seen is that Scripture at times attributes to Christ properties which refer solely to his humanity. For example Christ ‘increased in age and wisdom’ (Lk. 2:52), he ‘did not know the last day’ (Mk. 13:32), he was ‘seen and handled’ (Lk. 24:39) after his resurrection. Elsewhere, Calvin maintains that there is ‘no impropriety,’ in considering that Christ was ignorant of something (such as the timing of the last day) ‘in respect of his perception as a man.’¹⁰⁹

Secondly, sometimes the scriptures attribute to Christ properties that belong uniquely to his divinity. Christ asserted that ‘before Abraham was, I am’ (Jn. 8:58), that he was ‘glorious in his Father’s presence before the world was made’ (Jn. 17:5) and that he works together with the Father (Jn. 5:17). Thus it can be seen that Christ claimed for himself divine powers that are alien to human nature but correctly attributed to him because he is truly God. The third point observes that scripture sometimes refers to characteristics that are appropriate to both natures together, and not to either one alone. These characteristics do not proceed from either his human or divine natures, but they proceed from both natures together. Examples include Christ’s power of remitting sins (Jn. 1:29), of raising to life whom he wills, of bestowing righteousness and holiness. Tylenda notes that, although it is true that Christ held these powers along with the Father before the creation of the world, it had not been ‘in the same manner or respect’ and they could not have been given to a man who was ‘nothing but a man.’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.154 (on Matt. 24:36).

¹¹⁰ Tylenda, ‘Calvin’s Understanding of the Communication of Properties,’ 54.

The fourth point concerns the *communicatio idiomatum*. In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* Calvin writes that through ‘communication of properties they [the Scriptures] assign to his divinity the things that belonged to his humanity, and to his humanity the things that belonged to his divinity,’¹¹¹ by the 1559 edition this has become a suggestion that the Scriptures: ‘express this union of the two natures that is in Christ as sometimes to interchange them.’¹¹² Calvin goes on to say ‘But the communication of properties consists in what Paul says ... the things that he [Christ] carried out in his human nature were transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity.’¹¹³ Thus in the examples of the first three points Jesus Christ is always the subject, or person, to whom the attributes are assigned, but in the communication of idioms, there is an interchange, as Calvin says ‘improper, but not without reason.’

It is interesting to note here the observation of John Zizioulas with regard to the understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum*, that the patristic concept of hypostatic union ‘makes the person (*hypostasis*), and not the natures, the ultimate ground of Christ’s being.’ Zizioulas then adds that ‘there is a subtle but significant distinction to be made between this view and that suggested by the idea of *communicatio idiomatum*, which seems to assign, or at least to assume, an ontological status in each nature taken in itself.’¹¹⁴ Calvin’s discussion of ‘the communicating of characteristics or properties’¹¹⁵ may carry such a subtly, but significantly different understanding – a ‘union of both natures’ in the *person* of Christ. Indeed this is Tylenda’s conclusion.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ *Inst.* 1536 2.13.

¹¹² *Inst.* 2.14.1.

¹¹³ *Inst.* 2.14.2.

¹¹⁴ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Contemporary Greek Theologians, eds. C. Yannaras, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia and C. Carras, 1997 ed., vol. 4 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 109 n. 07.

¹¹⁵ *Inst.* 2.14.2.

¹¹⁶ ‘When Calvin speaks of the transfer or interchange of attributes, he says... that it is because of the two natures united in Christ in one person. Since we are talking about an interchange of properties, and the properties proceed from each of the two natures, it follows that there can only be such an interchange or communication because of the fact of the hypostatic union.’ Tylenda, ‘Calvin’s Understanding of the Communication of Properties,’ 58 n. 13.

However, Tylenda is unable to agree with McDonnell's suggestion that communication of properties is exclusively in the office of Christ the Mediator,¹¹⁷ and he maintains that 'Calvin is emphasizing the fact that the attributes are predicated of a person, a subject having that nature, and not solely of the nature itself.'¹¹⁸ Noting five examples of the communication of properties used by Calvin, Tylenda observes that 'in none of the examples is the property of one nature applied to the other nature as such; it is always applied to a subject possessing that nature.'¹¹⁹ Tylenda claims that Calvin does not mean that a human concrete attribute such as 'blood' or 'dying' can be applied to divinity as such, or to the divine nature in the abstract. To say, for example, 'divinity is mortal' would not be conceivable. But both 'blood' and 'dying' can be predicated of divinity in the concrete, of a divine being, if the subject, besides being divine, is also human, and therefore has blood and is mortal. It follows that, since Christ is a single subject having two real natures (i.e. he is true God and true man) we can truthfully say by the communication of idioms that 'God purchased the Church with his blood.'¹²⁰ It would seem then that this difference in approach is not as subtle as it first seemed.

Drawing on John's Gospel, Calvin underlines the unity of the person of the Mediator in being both human and divine, receiving divine 'prerogatives when he was manifested in the flesh,'¹²¹ for although, along with the Father, he held these 'before the creation of the world, it had not been in the same manner or respect, and they could not have been given to a man who was nothing but a man.' The Mediator's role of reconciliation, 'joining us to the Father as the measure of our weakness permits,' is in effect temporary (or perhaps, more accurately, temporal) as when we attain heavenly glory and see God as he is, it will follow that 'Christ, having then discharged the office of Mediator, will

¹¹⁷ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 217.

¹¹⁸ Tylenda, 'Calvin's Understanding of the Communication of Properties,' 58 n. 13.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹²¹ *Inst.* 2.14.3.

cease to be the ambassador of his Father, and will be satisfied with that glory which he enjoyed before the creation of the world.’¹²²

In the unified duality of the person of the Mediator, ‘the two natures may not be thought of as either fused or separated.’¹²³ Calvin claims this observation, if applied ‘intelligently’, to be a key to understanding many difficulties concerning the person of Christ: specifically against the heresy of Nestorius, ‘who in wanting to pull apart rather than distinguish the nature of Christ devised a double Christ’; and the heresy of Eutyches ‘lest, while meaning to show the unity of the person, we destroy either nature.’¹²⁴ At the root of the disputes with Lutheran theology lay Calvin’s understanding of the person of Christ and his concern neither to fuse nor to separate the two natures. Calvin held in tension the finite limits of humanity and the infinite capacity of divinity. However, when the Calvinists insisted upon this claim that Christ entered the world as both Creator and creature, it was interpreted by Lutherans to imply that they held that in the incarnation only part of the Word was contained within the incarnate Jesus, and that something was left ‘outside’ (extra) giving rise to the so-called ‘extra Calvinisticum’ or ‘Calvinist extra’. The debate regarding the extra Calvinisticum is illuminating with respect to the christological understandings of Calvin and the other Reformers, and it is worth considering in more detail.

The doctrine of the ‘extra Calvinisticum’ seems to have received its name when Lutherans heard that Calvinists insisted that the Son’s existence also beyond the flesh of Jesus Christ (*etiam extra carnem*) was being threatened by the Lutheran version of the *communicatio idiomatum*, and it was subsequently labelled ‘that Calvinistic beyond’

¹²² *Inst.* 2.14.3.

¹²³ *Inst.* 2.14.4.

¹²⁴ The union of the two natures in Christ was part of the dispute between Calvin and Michael Servetus, whom Calvin considered Nestorian.

(*illud extra Calvinisticum*).¹²⁵ The Calvinists maintained that the Son's existence also beyond the flesh did not jeopardize the unity of the divine and human natures in the incarnation, but the Lutherans claimed that it did. Although not a term coined by him, much modern writing uses the term 'extra Calvinisticum' to denote Calvin's doctrine about the life and reality of the Eternal Son even beyond the flesh.¹²⁶ To some eyes the 'extra Calvinisticum' provides a problematic aspect to Calvin's christology in that it causes him to distinguish too sharply between the two natures of Christ, and therefore is at the root of his Nestorian tendencies. In the extreme it can even be seen to give rise to 'two Christs:' a *logos ensarkos* and a *logos asarkos*. This would suggest that Calvin unconsciously fell into the same trap of which he accused Nestorius, but Wilhelm Niesel argues that the 'extra Calvinisticum' is, in fact, not central in Calvin's christology, and that any weight it might give to a separation of the two natures is balanced by Calvin's view that the Word indwells the 'temple' of Christ's humanity.¹²⁷ The limitations seen by this perceived distinction are well expressed by Willis, 'if the "extra Calvinisticum" involves an implicit distinction between the *logos ensarkos* and the *logos asarkos*, is not God's full revelation of himself exclusively in Jesus Christ menaced, and is not a way opened to a natural theology alongside and complementary to revealed theology?'¹²⁸ Willis notes a more plausible suggestion that the extra Calvinisticum 'is the product of an effort to explain the Incarnation in terms not violating the principle of *finitum non capax infiniti*, which is seen by critics as determining much of Reformed theology.'¹²⁹

In contrast to the Calvinists, there were three main Lutheran christologies: they have been typically associated with Johann Brenz (1499–1570), Martin Chemnitz (1522–

¹²⁵ Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight, Lutterworth Library ; Vol. 48 (London: Lutterworth, 1956), 119.

¹²⁸ Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

1586) and Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560). Brenz, and Württemberg christology generally, affirmed that in the hypostatic union Christ's humanity was so united to the Logos in his entirety that subsequent to the Incarnation the Logos had no longer an existence beyond the humanity. The *communicatio idiomatum* enabled this in that the humanity, which in itself would have been finite, was endowed by the omnipotence of the Logos with infinite susceptibility. It was this infinite susceptibility, communicated to the humanity by the Logos in the hypostatic union, which permitted the humanity to be filled with the divine fullness to constitute the Incarnation without breaching the principle of *finitum non capax infiniti*.¹³⁰ This understanding further argued that the body of Christ united to the Word, although visibly local, filled heaven and earth even before the resurrection and the observable ascension.

Chemnitz claimed there was a *perichoresis* (a coinherence) where the human nature manifested the attributes of the divine 'as a glowing iron manifests the attributes of fire.'¹³¹ Therefore the God-man was able to be present with his assumed nature wherever, whenever, and however he willed. Christ was ubiquitous wherever he taught and promised that he willed to be present in his assumed nature. Chemnitz held it was wrong to teach that the person of the Word existed after the incarnation beyond and separate from his assumed nature, and rejected a concept of a physical or natural communication or a transfusion of properties; he likewise rejected a mere *communicatio dialectica*. He distinguished among three kinds or stages of the *communicatio idiomatum*, an arrangement generally taken up in orthodox Lutheran approaches subsequently: a genus *idiomaticum* where the attributes of each nature are ascribed to the entire Person; a genus *apotelesmaticum* where the redemptive acts and functions

¹³⁰ Isaac August Dorner, *History of the Development of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, trans. David Worthington Simon, Clark's Foreign Theological Library, 3rd Series, vol. 2.2, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1861), 178-90.

¹³¹ Quoted in Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 10.

proper to the entire Person are attributed to only one or the other of the two natures; a genus *majesticum* where the human nature is clothed with and magnified by the attributes of the divine nature. The orthodox Reformed theologians accepted the genus *idiomaticum* and the genus *apotelesmaticum* but rejected the genus *majesticum* in favour of a *communicatio gratiarum* where the human nature is imparted with grace by the Word in the incarnation.¹³²

In the third approach, Melancthon understood the *communicatio idiomatum* in the sense of a dialectical communication, rejecting any physical and real communication. These differing christologies were not easily reconciled, even within the Lutheran tradition. There seems to have been a shift in Lutheran terminology over time with ‘Calvinist’ becoming a special term of opprobrium, especially with the appearance of Joachim Westphal’s *Farrago confusaneorum et inter se dissidentium Opinionum de coena Domini ex Sacramentorum libris congesta* (Magdeburg, 1552). Westphal accused the Melancthonians of departing from Luther’s doctrine of the Real Presence and agreeing with the sacramentarians including, among others, Zwingli and especially Calvin. Westphal’s tract *Recta fides de Coena Domini* (1553) referred to the Zwinglian position as the ‘Calvinist heresy’. The *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549 had produced a form that enabled a basic solidarity to be affirmed between Geneva and Zürich on the doctrine of the Eucharist, with the emphasis placed on the Real Presence of Christ, but it was not enough to mediate with the Lutherans. Attention centred by the 1560’s on the implications of the question, ‘Given the character of Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist, how can the reality of the two natures and their hypostatic union into one Person be most faithfully and accurately confessed?’¹³³ It was as a result of the

¹³² Martin Chemnitz. *The Two Natures in Christ: A Monograph Concerning the Two Natures in Christ, Their Hypostatic Union, the Communication of Their Attributes, and Related Questions, Recently Prepared and Revised on the Basis of Scripture and the Witnesses of the Ancient Church*, 1578, trans. J.A.O. Preus (St.Louis: Concordia, 1971).

¹³³ Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology*, 16.

Reformed attempt to answer this that the ‘extra Calvinisticum’ affirmation came into prominence.

Both Lutheran and Reformed theologians, it appears, were intent, in different ways, on maintaining the unity of the Person and the reality of the natures in the hypostatic union. Both were intent on confessing that in his One Person, God himself was dealing with the world and on affirming that the incarnation did not require that the Eternal Word cease to govern the universe. The Lutherans generally insisted that Christ’s humanity, by virtue of the majesty conferred to it by the *communicatio idiomatum*, was exalted to governing the universe in union with the divine nature. The Reformed theologians never agreed with the Lutherans that Christ’s humanity shared the majesty of the divine nature. They resorted to a more traditional, even Patristic, provision for the Word’s governance of the universe after the Incarnation: the doctrine that the Incarnate Lord never ceased to have his existence *etiam extra carnem*.¹³⁴

Challenged by the polemic of Westphal, Calvin used a distinction between *totus* and *totum* to explain the ‘extra Calvinisticum’ and, although his sources in the *Institutes* are named as simply as ‘scholastics,’ the suggestion from his other writings is that Calvin’s source may have been Peter Lombard.¹³⁵ In his Last Admonition Calvin defends his christology with an understanding that while Christ can be ubiquitous as a Person (the whole person – *totus*) his body is local (the whole thing – *totum*), declaring that ‘Christ, the Mediator, God and man, is whole everywhere, but not wholly.’¹³⁶ Calvin clearly seeks to hold a line between Nestorian separation and Eutychian confusion of the natures of Christ. The only tenable alternative is the Patristic emphasis on the Person as an ontological basis. Such an approach shifts the understanding into a different area.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.30.

¹³⁶ Last Admonition, 382 ‘*Christus mediator deus et homo totus ubique sit, sed non totum.*’ CO 9:195.

The concentration of Calvin on the Person of Christ and the hypostatic union avoids the dilemma of choosing between a Nestorian separation or Eutychian confusion, between a finite Jesus (who has shed or set aside some part of his divinity) and an infinite Christ (who can hardly be considered human). The Person of Christ may then act as Mediator specifically because the hypostatic union brings together the human and the divine. The *communicatio idiomatum*, whilst being more than a ‘figure of speech’, is not an abrogation of the identifying qualities of the human and divine natures (the one does not take on the properties of the other), rather it is a description of the mediatorial role of the second person of the Trinity, who scripture witnesses as having both human and divine attributes and attributes unique to himself as the locus of the hypostatic union. The communication of human and divine natures is then the basis by which Christ acts as Mediator between humanity and the Godhead.

The saving activity of the Mediator is seen by Calvin as having three aspects: the prophetic office, kingship and priesthood.¹³⁷ Perhaps most specifically for our understanding of the role of Christ in mediating salvation Calvin sees the priestly office of the Mediator as the effector of reconciliation. While ‘God’s righteous curse bars our access to him’ it follows that ‘an expiation must intervene in order that Christ as priest may obtain God’s favour for us and appease his wrath’ and so ‘the priestly office belongs to Christ alone because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction of our sins.’¹³⁸ Similarly, in a linked passage in his *Commentary on 1 John 1:7*, Calvin emphasises the continuing power of Christ’s blood to be ‘the power and efficiency’ of the ‘cleansing and satisfaction’ of the sacrifice of Christ.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ *Inst.* 2.15.2.

¹³⁸ *Inst.* 2.15.6.

¹³⁹ CTS *Catholic Epistles* 166 (on 1 John 1:7).

Indeed, we are to remember that by ‘the shedding of [Christ’s] blood’ that we have been redeemed it is by the ‘spiritual drinking of blood’ that the new covenant is ratified.¹⁴⁰

Although this expiatory language has a strong rhetorical edge, it is clear that Calvin is arguing for the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice in bringing about reconciliation between the believer and the Father. For example he claims that ‘if the effect of his shedding of blood is that our sins are not imputed to us, it follows that God’s judgement was satisfied by that price.’¹⁴¹ Thus it is through the action of Christ in making a sacrifice of himself that we are allowed to approach the Father’s presence. This action appears to have its origin in the tension between the images of the holiness of the Father, which must be opposed to fallen and disobedient humanity, and the image of the loving ‘fountain of all goodness’, who seeks to reconcile humanity to himself. It takes a specific action from God to break the tension, the sacrificial action of the Mediator.

4.6 Receiving the benefits of the Mediator — a communion of faith?

As Calvin himself writes:

We must now examine this question. How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son – not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?¹⁴²

It is not enough simply to say that the Christ acts as sole Mediator, the mechanism by which this mediation is effected must be sought. While the initiation of the process is rooted in the Father’s love, and manifested in the sacrificial action of the Son, it is clearly not a one way process. It may even be described as ‘interactive’, in respect of Calvin’s use of ‘*participare*’ to suggest a participatory interaction. We have to participate in Christ for ‘as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated

¹⁴⁰ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.214 (on Mark 14:24).

¹⁴¹ *Inst.* 2.17.4.

¹⁴² *Inst.* 3.1.1.

from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.¹⁴³ Picking up the imagery of being ‘engrafted into him’¹⁴⁴ and the need to ‘put on Christ’¹⁴⁵ further heighten the sense of interaction or participation. The process of engrafting is performed by the Spirit through faith, which Calvin describes as ‘the principal work of the Holy Spirit.’¹⁴⁶

In Chapter 3 we considered something of the link between knowledge and faith and the existential character of knowledge in Calvin’s understanding.¹⁴⁷ There is a response evoked by the ‘higher knowledge’, as Calvin calls faith, a response that involves assurance and certainty rather than a noetic understanding.¹⁴⁸ For Calvin the initial moment of faith might be ‘recognition’, that is recognising God for who he is. Thus the ‘certainty’ of the knowledge of heart and brain is the trust and acceptance of God’s love for us and in the promises made to us of salvation, and ‘there is no right faith except where we dare with tranquil hearts to stand in God’s sight.’¹⁴⁹ The ‘certainty’ is not necessarily absolute; in some senses, as Calvin wisely acknowledges, it can be questioned. Believers, then are ‘in perpetual conflict with their unbelief,’ and true faith endures through this struggle to ‘rise up, although not without difficulty and trouble.’¹⁵⁰

So faith is initiated and grounded in the recognition of the nature of God, and in the ‘freely given promise of God’¹⁵¹ and effects our engrafting into Christ.¹⁵² The promise on which faith is grounded is fulfilled in Christ: it is in Christ that we are loved by the

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Rom. 11:17.

¹⁴⁵ Gal. 3:27.

¹⁴⁶ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

¹⁴⁷ See pp. 75-76.

¹⁴⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.14.

¹⁴⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.16.

¹⁵⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.17.

¹⁵¹ *Inst.* 3.2.29.

¹⁵² Calvin says that faith ‘does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ.’ *Inst.* 3.2.30.

Father.¹⁵³ The promise is contained within the Word of God, but human imperfection means that it does not of itself engender faith and there needs to be another agent involved. This agent is the Holy Spirit who ‘is not only the initiator of faith, but increases it by degrees, until by it he leads us to the Kingdom of Heaven.’¹⁵⁴ The Spirit works with the Word to engender faith when the promise it contains is ‘both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts.’¹⁵⁵

The communion, or union, with Christ is crucial to Calvin’s understanding of grace. It is the product of faith through the action of the Holy Spirit. It is by the process of being engrafted into Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit in engendering faith, that we ‘become partakers of every good.’¹⁵⁶ In some respects this sharing of the benefits of the Mediator in the believer’s participation in Christ might parallel the *communicatio idiomatum* that happens in the unified duality of the hypostatic union. Gerrish suggests that in Calvin’s understanding Christ ‘dwells within us, makes us participate not only in the good things that are his but in his very self.’¹⁵⁷ This is the ‘mystical union’ that is the goal of the pious life, that which ‘the knowledge of his benefits induces.’¹⁵⁸

4.7 Conclusion: a pious hunger.

In the previous chapter it was noted that in Calvin’s epistemology knowledge is more than the possession of information. We must engage with the information for it to be considered effective. In this engagement, we might even say that we somehow ‘participate’ in the knowledge; it evokes a change in us, and a response from us. This would seem to be particularly the case in respect of our knowledge of God: to know

¹⁵³ *Inst.* 3.2.32.

¹⁵⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

¹⁵⁵ *Inst.* 3.2.7.

¹⁵⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.36.

¹⁵⁷ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 73.

¹⁵⁸ *Inst.* 1.2.1.

God evokes a response in us. For Calvin then, experiencing the knowledge of God as ‘fount of all good’ leads us in ‘fear and reverence’ into worship and, through the work of the Spirit, we grow in faith and our ability to share in the knowledge that is offered us through the gospel. This is the form of our participation in a relationship with God, the pious life.

The role of Christ as Mediator means that it is the promise of his salvific action, and our knowledge of it, that is the key to our participation in him. As we are enabled by the Spirit to perceive the truth of his promise to us, to own it for ourselves we can participate in it. It would seem then that Christ is not only the sole mediator, sent to initiate the process of salvation but also provides the means of salvation by our participation in him through the faith engendered in us by the Holy Spirit.

In this respect Gerrish’s claim that for Calvin man is ‘eucharistic man’ is reasonable, that faith in the promise of reconciliation made in God’s action in Christ brings ‘assurance and certainty’¹⁵⁹ the mark of which is the ‘reverence joined with love of God’ that is Calvin’s hallmark of the pious life.¹⁶⁰ The knowledge of God, and of God’s promises in Christ, should evoke a response. To label this response as ‘gratitude’ doesn’t do justice to the level or character of response that Calvin sees being evoked. To begin to know some ‘assurance and certainty’ not only is a cause for thanks, but a cause to know *more*. The knowledge of God teaches us to believe with all our heart, which ‘is not to believe Christ perfectly, but only to embrace him from the heart and with a sincere mind; not to be sated with him, but to hunger, thirst, and aspire to him with fervent affection.’¹⁶¹ The question raised at the beginning of the chapter was: ‘What is our relationship to God and what should it be?’ Our relationship to God as believers is

¹⁵⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.14.

¹⁶⁰ *Inst.* 1.2.1.

¹⁶¹ *Inst.* 4.14.8.

characterised by ‘reverence and love of God,’ Calvin’s idea of the life of piety that follows from knowing the benefits he offers. But it is not something static, we are continually drawn on. Calvin frequently uses the image of spiritual feeding, especially in regard to the Sacraments,¹⁶² and he cites Augustine to say that the Sacraments require ‘the hunger of the inner man’ to give spiritual nourishment.¹⁶³ Thus faith both offers spiritual feeding and promotes a spiritual hunger. It is this understanding of faith’s effect of bringing about our union with Christ, our *koinonia* with him, and at the same time increasing our desire for that union that Calvin brings to Spirit’s role in the Sacraments. Thus we can say that our relationship to God should be characterized by a ‘pious hunger’ as we seek to know God more.

¹⁶² For example, in *Inst.* 4.17.1 Calvin says that in the Eucharist Christ ‘attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality’ and that ‘the Lord’s body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice; and that his blood was once so shed for us in order to be our perpetual drink.

¹⁶³ *Inst.* 4.17.34.

Chapter 5. Faith and Understanding: the Work of the Spirit

5.1 Introduction: the convincing Spirit.

The previous chapter considered the response to the knowledge of God and of God's promises in terms of piety, union with Christ and pointed towards the image of the 'hunger of the inner man' as indicating the desire for deepening union that comes that knowledge. This chapter will consider the question, 'What does the Spirit do?' It will assess the work of the Spirit in authenticating knowledge, planting and nurturing faith and provoking a response. In this it will seek to establish the link between Calvin's understanding of the Word of God and doctrine, the manner in which the Spirit 'convinces' the believer of the authority of the Word and the role of the Spirit in conveying the promises of God in the preached Word. Calvin's appreciation of the knowledge of God as God's accommodation to our limited comprehension plays a particular part when it comes to the Sacraments, in which the Spirit acts to 'show forth' (*exhibit*) the promises of the Sacraments and make them a present reality to us. In particular the union with Christ which this activity of the Spirit enables, most clearly in the Sacraments, brings the benefits of that union, the *duplex gratia* of justification and sanctification.

Calvin makes an explicit connection between Word and Sacraments. Not only does he declare that 'a Sacrament is never without a preceding promise'¹ but, citing a statement from Augustine, 'Let the Word be added to the element and it will become a Sacrament,' he goes on to suggest that the Sacraments 'require preaching to beget faith.'² It is clear that, like Luther, Calvin sees the Word as essential to the Sacraments.³

¹ *Inst.* 4.14.3

² *Inst.* 4.14.4

³ Luther's view can be seen, for example, in the Large Catechism which states 'It is the Word, I say, that makes this a Sacrament and distinguishes it from ordinary bread and wine, so that it is called and truly is Christ's body and blood.' Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 468.

The role of the Spirit in convincing the believer of the truth, authority and effectiveness of the Sacraments and the promise they exhibit is crucial to Calvin's understanding of the Sacraments. Calvin's existential epistemology means that it is through the work of the Spirit that we both apprehend our justification through Christ and are drawn to respond. This work of the Spirit then underpins our reception of the twofold grace (*duplex gratia*) of justification and salvation.

5.2 'The Spirit says': Word as doctrine

If faith is a kind of 'knowing', or a 'higher knowledge',⁴ it must be based on some underlying truth. However this foundation is not 'of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception' but 'is so far above sense that man's mind has to go beyond and rise above itself in order to attain it.' This truth is to be found in God's Word and particularly in Scripture which 'gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.'⁵ However Calvin does not simply equate the Word with the Bible for, properly perceived, Scripture carries an authority significantly beyond the bare text.⁶ It would appear at times that Calvin held to an understanding of Scripture as dictated by the Holy Spirit, and 'a depository of heavenly doctrine,'⁷ and Calvin can say that 'the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard'⁸ and that the 'credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author.'⁹

⁴ *Inst.* 3.2.14.

⁵ *Inst.* 1.6.1.

⁶ Gerrish notes: "'Scripture says" and "the Holy Spirit says" are used synonymously throughout his *Institutes* and commentaries, and the human authors are regarded as only the instruments or secretaries of the Spirit.' Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 77.

⁷ Gerrish, 'The Words of God and the Words of Scripture', 63.

⁸ *Inst.* 1.7.1.

⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

In his commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16, Calvin makes a clear statement of an understanding that the source of Scripture is divine inspiration. He says that in order to ‘profit’ from the Scriptures we must accept ‘that the Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit.’¹⁰ However, elsewhere in his commentaries Calvin occasionally notes errors in the text he is interpreting. Whilst some argue that he attributed these errors to a copyist,¹¹ others have felt that this explanation to be unsatisfactory in at least some cases, since errors that did not affect the teaching conveyed by a biblical text seem not to have concerned him.¹² Ford Lewis Battles infers from *Institutes* 1.6.2, where Calvin refers to God putting what they should ‘hand down to their posterity’ into the minds of the patriarchs,¹³ that Calvin’s understanding of the divine authorship ‘is not of a mechanical verbal dictation, but of an impartation of divine truth that enters the hearts of the Scripture writers.’¹⁴ More recently, Gary Neal Hansen argues that Calvin’s theological rules or priorities of interpretation allow for and even require non-literal interpretation of biblical texts.¹⁵

Richard Burnett argues that it is not necessary to go this far in denying Calvin the literal sense. Developing his argument by a study of *The Harmony of the Gospels*, Burnett suggests that there may be some ‘elasticity’ in Calvin’s understanding of the ‘literal sense’ of the text. He suggests that there is much that Calvin seems willing to leave open or unresolved, for example with respect to the much debated topic of whether the

¹⁰ CTS *Tim., Titus & Philemon* 249.

¹¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,’ *Princeton Theological Review* 7.2 (1909), 250, 57.

¹² John T. McNeill, ‘The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin,’ *Church History* 28.2 (1959).

¹³ *Inst.* 1.6.2.

¹⁴ Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 71 n. 5.

¹⁵ Gary Hansen, ‘John Calvin and the Non-Literal Interpretation of Scripture,’ PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1998, 1. Hansen, ‘John Calvin’s Nonliteral Exegesis’.

Holy Spirit (in Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Baptism of Christ) descended upon Jesus like a dove, as a real dove, or in the form of a dove.¹⁶ Calvin considers this a 'question more curious than useful,' and in regards to whether the dove had a solid body or just the appearance of one, suggests that though he would conclude the words of Luke suggest it had only a bodily appearance he would leave the matter unsettled, 'lest I should afford to any man an occasion of wrangling.'¹⁷ From such examples Burnett concludes that 'whatever commitment he had to interpreting Scripture according to the literal sense, Calvin was not a *literalist*,' and that for Calvin 'there was – at least in principle, if not often in practice – a certain amount of breathing space between what is written and what is written about.'¹⁸ But it is not a simple matter of whether the text is presented as a verbatim representation of the divine Word, or as an inspired text based on doctrine 'engraved on the hearts' of the human authors. There is an element of reciprocity between Scripture and its divine source. An important consideration, that Calvin is at pains to emphasise, is that Scripture derives its authority from its divine source, but our knowledge of the divine rests in Scripture.

5.3 Authority and holiness as marks of the Word

If the written Word of Scripture reflects an eternal Word in any way, then, suggests Calvin, its authority lies in the eternal truth of that Word and not in any value ascribed to it by any human source. He attacks a 'most pernicious error [that] widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the Church.'¹⁹ It is then to be considered to 'mock the Holy Spirit' to suggest that the authority, integrity or accuracy of Scripture can only be conferred by the Church. Such a stance is untenable for Calvin simply because the Church derives its authority from

¹⁶ Richard Burnett, 'John Calvin and the *Sensus Literalis*,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57.1 (2004), 11.

¹⁷ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 1.205 (on Matt. 3:16).

¹⁸ Burnett, 'John Calvin and the *Sensus Literalis*,' 12.

¹⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.1.

Scripture rather than the reverse. Quoting Ephesians 2:20, he affirms that the Church is ‘built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets’ and therefore ‘if the teaching of the prophets and apostles is the foundation, this must have had authority before the Church began to exist.’²⁰

Calvin is aware of a possible counter-argument based on the writings of Augustine,²¹ who maintains, ‘For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church.’²² This is a significant issue, since Calvin frequently uses Augustine, amongst others, as an authority to confirm his views as in keeping with the historic Church and defend himself against the charge of ‘new’ doctrine.²³ In the *Prefatory Address* to the *Institutes*, Calvin complains that his opponents ‘do not cease to assail our doctrine’ as something ‘new,’ ‘of recent birth’ and ‘against the agreement of so many holy fathers.’²⁴ As Calvin, with other humanists and Reformers, appears to follow the tradition of viewing the early Church as a ‘golden classical period,’²⁵ it is clearly important to him that the authority of ‘the ancient writers of a better age of the Church’ is seen to be on his side.²⁶ It is the doctrine of this ‘primitive and purer Church’²⁷ that he sees as being ‘restored to us by God’s goodness.’²⁸ He is willing to make a strong claim to the support of Augustine, saying he is ‘wholly ours,’²⁹ and even claiming ‘If I wanted to weave a whole volume from Augustine, I could readily show

²⁰ *Inst.* 1.7.2.

²¹ *Inst.* 1.7.3.

²² Augustine. ‘The Epistle of Manichaeus,’ *Augustine: The Writings against the Manichaeans, and against the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 4, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Albany, OR: SAGE Software. CD-ROM. 228.

²³ *Prefatory Address* Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 14-15. For an extensive discussion of Calvin’s use of the Church Fathers, including Augustine, see Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*.

²⁴ Battles observes, that ‘these were staple arguments against Luther and the other Reformers from the beginning.’ Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 15 n8.

²⁵ Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 40.

²⁶ *Prefatory Address* Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 18.

²⁷ *Necessity of Reforming the Church* 215.

²⁸ Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 16.

²⁹ ‘Augustinus ... totus noster est.’ *CO* 8:266.

my readers that I need no other language than his.’³⁰ Lane suggests that Calvin saw himself ‘restoring the teaching of Augustine’ on a range of issues, even if, in some areas, he chose to dissent from Augustine’s teaching.³¹ Calvin was by no means alone in looking to Augustine for authority: Arnoud Visser notes how Augustine was claimed by Luther and his supporters as ‘completely on their side’ in regard to the dependence of salvation on faith alone and by Catholic opponents in ‘calling for obedience to the Sacraments and the ecclesiastical tradition.’³² Lane goes as far as to suggest that Augustine was ‘accepted in the sixteenth-century Western Church as the Father *par excellence*.’³³ It is clear that Calvin needed to affirm Augustine’s support not simply because Augustine was a voice of the ‘primitive and purer Church,’ but because Augustine was the authority that many of Calvin’s opponents used against him. In addition to this Calvin clearly engaged with the writings of Augustine throughout his career, citing him ‘in every one of his significant works’³⁴ and drawing from a wide range of the works of Augustine,³⁵ so it would be reasonable for him to want to show Augustine’s support in regard to the authority of Scripture.

Calvin argues that Augustine’s apparent claim asserting the authority of the Church over Scripture is in reality simply a claim that it is the authority of the Church that brings the unbeliever to recognize the authority of Scripture, rather than being

³⁰ *Inst.* 3.22.8.

³¹ Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 38.

³² Arnoud S. Q. Visser, *Reading Augustine in the Reformation. The Flexibility of Intellectual Authority in Europe, 1500-1620*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4. Visser provides a useful account of the wider context of the reception of Augustine in the various editions that were available in this period, although his specific treatment of Calvin is limited.

³³ Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 38.

³⁴ Anthony N.S. Lane, ‘Augustine and Calvin,’ *The T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, eds. C.C. Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 178.

³⁵ Lane’s careful study of Calvin’s use of Augustine in *Bondage and Liberation of the Will* suggest that here alone he uses fourteen or fifteen works from at least five of the ten volumes of the Erasmus edition. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 157. Lane offers textual evidence to suggest that, at least following Calvin’s return to Geneva, he used (and may have owned) a copy of one of the two Paris reprints (1528/29 or 1531/32) of the Erasmus edition of the collected works of Augustine. Prior to this it is not clear that Calvin had consistent access to a particular edition, indeed he complains of a lack of access to Augustine’s writings during his exile to Strassburg. *Ibid.*, 157-62.

Augustine's doctrinal understanding in itself. Calvin suggests that, for Augustine, 'there would be no certainty of the gospel for unbelievers to win them to Christ if the consensus of the Church did not impel them.'³⁶ Battles notes that Luther, in his tract *That the Doctrines of Men Are to Be Rejected* (1522), had largely anticipated this interpretation of Augustine.³⁷ The inherent authority of Scripture is important because Calvin stresses the discernment of divine activity within it as being of importance. He maintains that 'ever so learned men' who would oppose the authority of Scripture can be forced (unless they are 'hardened to the point of impudence') to admit that they can discern God speaking in Scripture, from which 'it is clear that the teaching of Scripture is from heaven.'³⁸ This process of discerning the truth of the eternal Word within the written Word is effected under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Thus the authority of Scripture as the Word of God must be seen as being divine in source, not only in its origin but also in its discernment.

At times there is a strong sense in Calvin's writings that it is the inherent doctrinal matter of Scripture, and in the exegesis of Scripture, that established the Church. However, to maintain itself as faithful the Church needs to confine itself to that doctrinal matter recognising Scripture's authority over the Church. 'It is utterly vain,' Calvin says, to place the certainty of Scripture on 'churchly assent' for 'while the Church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial.'³⁹ Indeed, Calvin condemns as 'fanatics' those who would reject a reliance on what they perceive as the 'dead and killing letter' of Scripture as the basis for doctrine.⁴⁰ The Spirit is not (according to his understanding) sent to promulgate new doctrine, but to elucidate and

³⁶ *Inst.* 1.7.3.

³⁷ Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 323 n. 266.

³⁸ *Inst.* 1.7.4.

³⁹ *Inst.* 1.7.2.

⁴⁰ *Inst.* 1.9.1.

establish that which is already inherent within the Word. The Spirit has the task ‘of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the gospel.’⁴¹

Clearly, Calvin will not allow the possibility that the Spirit and the eternal Word might be at variance. Not only is Scripture understood to contain all necessary doctrine when understood under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but that Spirit is to be recognised by its agreement with the doctrine contained within Scripture. As Calvin observes, ‘if any spirit, passing over the wisdom of God’s Word, foists another doctrine upon us, he justly deserves to be suspected of vanity and lying.’⁴²

If a Holy God must be self-consistent, then it follows that any ‘spirit’ that suggests an alternative ‘will’ must be seen as not being holy. Rufus Burton has stressed the priority of holiness as an attribute of God over and above love. Holiness, in this instance, is defined as ‘that attribute of God whereby, as a consequence of his own being, he wills and maintains his own perfection, and by which he makes his creatures holy.’⁴³ It does indeed seem crucial here to Calvin that God cannot contradict himself by presenting one doctrine in the form of Scripture and a different one through the action of the Holy Spirit. This is drawn out in Calvin’s dispute with the Anabaptists. In *Against the Libertines*, Calvin clearly feels compelled to attack the Libertine doctrine that there is only one Spirit and this same Spirit is responsible for all actions. Calvin considered that this doctrine made human action dependant totally on the divine Spirit⁴⁴ and, whilst he was ready to concede that ‘the eternal Spirit of God’ is the ‘source and origin of

⁴¹ *Inst.* 1.9.1.

⁴² *Inst.* 1.9.2. In his *Commentary on Galatians* 1:6-9, Calvin picks up on the words of Paul that if ‘an angel from heaven’ were to preach any other gospel ‘let him be accursed’, and while admitting that it would be impossible for such an angel to preach ‘another gospel’ sees such language as ‘a powerful confirmation to our faith while, in reliance on that word, we feel ourselves at liberty to treat even angels with defiance and scorn.’

⁴³ Rufus Burton, ‘*Ardens Sed Virens: A Reformed Account of the Holiness of God*,’ (Institute of Systematic Theology, Kings College London, 28th January 2003), unpublished paper.

⁴⁴ ‘Instead of our souls they say it is God, who lives in us, who gives strength to our bodies, who supports all those actions in us that pertain to life.’ *Against the Libertines*, 231

everything,' he rejected the mechanistic and determinist conclusions that the Libertines drew from such a position. Here, it seems that Calvin wants to underline some element of freedom for the individual. We are not merely instruments of the divine will, although our existence rests in that will. Calvin sees the danger of this Libertine doctrine as taking away the role of the soul in terms of moral agency. If whatever we do is the bidding of the one divine spirit then there can be nothing that we do that is against the will of that divine Spirit, that means that we can do nothing against the will of God. Thus 'sin' and even the devil are 'frivolous fantasies which we have conceived'⁴⁵ as nothing can act against or be contrary to the will which enacts it, and so the Libertines could claim that 'everything in the world be seen directly as his [God's] doing.'⁴⁶ But how could a holy God act in a way contrary to that which he has indicated as holy? A holy God must be self-consistent and in Scripture there is a clear declaration of God's will, given in order to teach that will and our obedience. This is then the heart of the matter, if the Holy One is the will behind all things and need not be self consistent, then there need be no rift between creator and created, and there would be no need for the Mediator to reconcile us to the Father. Such a doctrine is a 'root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.'⁴⁷

In the *Institutes* Calvin answers those who wish to see the Spirit as having precedent over Scripture in terms of a divine self-consistency,⁴⁸ and we see how the Word of Scripture and the Holy Spirit are linked because of the holiness of God, for God cannot speak against himself.⁴⁹ Thus Calvin maintains that the Word was not sent by the power

⁴⁵ Ibid, 234.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 238.

⁴⁷ Deut. 29:18, quoted in *Against the Libertines*, 252.

⁴⁸ 'To be sure, if the Spirit were judged by the rule of men, or of angels, or of anything else, then one would have to regard him as degraded, or if you like, reduced to bondage; but when he is compared with himself, when he is considered in himself, who will on this account say that injustice is done him?' *Inst.* 1.9.2.

⁴⁹ 'For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to

of the Spirit in order that it might later be dispensed with and replaced by the direct action of the Spirit. Rather the eternal Word was sent that it might be later confirmed by the action of the Spirit.

In the light of this, it seems reasonable to propose a solution to understanding the anomaly between Calvin's insistence on the divine source of Scripture and his ability to ignore some of the textual difficulties in that 'the words, for him, were indeed inspired – but only insofar as they are the form of doctrinal matter.'⁵⁰ This would allow for both the objective authority of the Bible, and for Calvin's strong christological emphasis. Calvin argues that faith rests not strictly in all the words of God but in those that present God's declaration that 'our salvation is his care and concern,'⁵¹ that is 'the freely given promise in Christ.' The totality of the Word of God must be seen in this light. The Catechism teaches that to know God is eternal life, and that this knowledge can be obtained 'in the Holy Scriptures in which it is contained.'⁵²

5.4 *The role of the Spirit in the exhibition of Christ in the Word*

The Scriptures, as a whole, are the Word of God in that they reveal Christ, in whom is the promise of salvation for 'if we wish to obtain the knowledge of Christ, we must seek it from the Scriptures; for they who imagine whatever they choose concerning Christ will ultimately have nothing instead of him but a shadowy phantom.'⁵³ However, it is not simply that Scripture as the Word reveals Christ, but also that he is the true author of Scripture. As Battles observes, in his introduction to the *Institutes*, Scripture is a necessary part of the revelation of Christ. Normally Calvin does not differentiate God's

contemplate God's face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely, in the Word.' *Inst.* 1.9.3

⁵⁰ Gerrish, 'The Words of God and the Words of Scripture', 63.

⁵¹ *Inst.* 3.2.7.

⁵² *Catechism*, 130.

⁵³ CTS *John* 1.217 (on John 5:39).

Word from the canonical Scriptures, but it is clearly more than the words spelled out on the sacred page. Battles suggests that Scripture assumes ‘unquestionable and infallible authority’ in Calvin’s understanding because he holds that ‘Christ, the Word, by whom all things were created, is the Author of the written Word, by which the eternal Word is known.’⁵⁴

Calvin’s reverence for Scripture certainly did not prevent him from seeking a Word *within* the words. The process of engagement with the written Word becomes a process of engagement with the eternal Word through the agency of the Holy Spirit. At one point Calvin compares the manner in which Scripture brings our knowledge of God into focus to the way in which spectacles bring the written word into sharp focus for the weakened vision of ‘old or bleary-eyed men.’⁵⁵ In particular, it makes clear the nature of God as both Creator and Redeemer. It is the latter knowledge of God that Calvin sees as being that which ‘alone quickens dead souls.’ In other words, it is specifically the knowledge of God as Redeemer, that is in the person of the Son, that it offers which he sees as being effective is engaging the reader of Scripture with God. On one level Scripture is to be seen as an ethical standard, to counter ‘the lust to fashion constantly new and artificial religions,’⁵⁶ but this is not an end in itself. The scriptural standard is the means by which believers can engage more fully with the eternal Word that lies behind the written Word. It is through the Word that we learn of the works of God and can discern his nature not by our own judgement.⁵⁷ However, the way to approach God is an ‘inexplicable labyrinth’ unless we are guided by ‘the thread of the Word.’ Furthermore the revelation in Scripture, based on the eternal Word which it directs us to, can offer us a greater knowledge of God than can the revelation which can be

⁵⁴ Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, liii-liv.

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 1.6.1.

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 1.6.3.

⁵⁷ Rather we discern God’s nature ‘by the rule of eternal truth.’ *Inst.* 1.6.3

discerned in the created world for ‘the human mind because of its feebleness can in no way attain to God unless it be aided and assisted by his Sacred Word.’⁵⁸

Christ is then not only the goal of faith; he is also the goal of Scripture.⁵⁹ Even the letter of the Law is a word of life if, through the Spirit, it ‘shows forth’ (*exhibet*) Christ.⁶⁰ Calvin’s doctrine of revelation forms the basis for this hermeneutical principle: Christ is not only the goal of Scripture, but as God’s eternal Word or Wisdom is the wellspring (*scaturigo*) of all the oracles of God.⁶¹ God’s Word is not a transitory, ephemeral utterance but ‘the everlasting Wisdom, residing with God, from which both all oracles and all prophecies go forth.’⁶² It is this wisdom, ‘the Spirit of Christ,’ by which the Old Testament prophets spoke just as much as the Apostles and subsequent teachers.⁶³ The Word existed before time, ‘as the order or mandate of the Son, who is himself the essential Word of the Father.’⁶⁴

Although Calvin sees faith as being engendered by the Spirit there would seem to be a further complication in that he saw a necessity for instruction. He says that ‘faith cannot be acquired by any miracle, or any perception of the Divine power; it requires instruction also.’⁶⁵ The idea that Christ is both source and goal of God’s Word in Scripture is not, then, a reason for neglecting sound doctrine. Doctrine is not intended to reduce faith or piety to mere intellectual grasp of a series of propositions, for this is not how Calvin understands true knowledge. There is something much deeper, more visceral in our *knowing* Christ. Our knowledge is not just of the fact of Christ, but a

⁵⁸ *Inst.* 1.6.4.

⁵⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.6.

⁶⁰ *Inst.* 1.9.3.

⁶¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 79.

⁶² *Inst.* 1.13.7.

⁶³ In his commentary on 1 Peter 1:11, Calvin suggests that the prophets ‘did not go beyond what the Spirit taught them.’ Given that the ‘spiritual kingdom’ is higher than can be successfully conceived by human minds, even though ‘there will be no limits to man’s curiosity’, this subjection to the guiding of the Spirit is an exemplar of ‘sobriety in learning’. CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 39.

⁶⁴ *Inst.* 1.13.7.

⁶⁵ CTS *Daniel* 1.237 (on Daniel 3:28).

recognition and response to the significance of what he promises. This is what it means for the Word to properly ‘show forth’ Christ, that we are convinced of his promise to us and respond accordingly. Even so, underlying Calvin’s writing is an idea that instruction aids us to recognise the character of God, and therefore without instruction we cannot give God the honour that is his due.⁶⁶ Indeed Calvin can declare that ‘Christ does not otherwise rule among us than by the doctrine of the gospel.’⁶⁷

Doctrine, or instruction, is, then, an aid to developing faith, presumably through the action of the Holy Spirit (since Calvin repeatedly states that Word and Spirit belong inseparably together). This instruction comes from being within the community of the Church, which Calvin could describe as a mother ‘into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.’⁶⁸ Specifically, within the Church ‘the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors,’ the members of the Church are to allow themselves ‘with a gentle and teachable spirit to be governed by teachers appointed to this function.’⁶⁹ It is not enough to study Scripture in private for there is an obligation to meet together to share in the doctrine which elucidates the order that ‘all should obey in common’ and which God has declared the only way of edification or maintenance in the faith.⁷⁰

Those who ‘spurn the spiritual food, divinely extended to them’ through the Church ‘deserve to perish in famine and hunger.’⁷¹ Within the Church, Calvin sees the office of

⁶⁶ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 82.

⁶⁷ CTS *Minor Prophets* 3.259 (on Micah 4:3).

⁶⁸ *Inst.* 4.1.1.

⁶⁹ *Inst.* 4.1.5.

⁷⁰ *Catechism* 130.

⁷¹ *Inst.* 4.1.5.

preaching as crucial⁷² and as a means by which the Word is presented.⁷³ The preaching of the Word is of equal importance with administration of the Sacraments in defining the existence of a church for ‘wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the Sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’⁷⁴ This localised definition did not, in Calvin’s mind, exclude the concept of a ‘church universal’. The local churches ‘disposed in towns and villages according to human need’ each carry the authority of the church universal, and the responsibility to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. It is worth noting that Calvin’s conception of how the Word is presented seems to stress the corporate aspect, which is that it is the task of the Church to present the Word, although the faith that stems from receiving the Word is a divine gift.

The preaching of the Word is vital as a foundation upon which faith can be established. By preaching the Word the listener’s heart is lifted to consider the love of the Father, and the promises shown in his Son. In effect the preaching of the Word acts as a channel for the Holy Spirit to engender faith by exhibiting Christ.⁷⁵

⁷² E.g. in *Inst.* 4.3.3 Calvin notes how Cornelius and Paul were given knowledge of God and drawn into the church by human agency. In the case of Cornelius an angel directs him to Peter and with Paul, Christ ‘sends him to a man from whom he is to receive both the doctrine of salvation and the sanctification of Baptism.’ Calvin then declares: ‘Who, then, would dare despise that ministry or dispense with it as something superfluous, whose use God willed to attest with such proofs?’

⁷³ *Catechism* 130. This declares that it is necessary to hear pastors ‘and to receive their exposition of the doctrine of Christ from their lips with fear and reverence. Underlining the importance of preaching as an active presentation of the Word, this section continues, ‘Therefore whoever holds them in contempt or dissuades from hearing them, holds Christ in contempt and disrupts from the society of the faithful.’

⁷⁴ *Inst.* 4.1.9 In this definition Calvin follows the Augsburg Confession, article 7, which states that the Church is ‘the assembly of believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the Holy Sacraments are administered according to the gospel.’ Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 42.

⁷⁵ Here again we see how Calvin’s epistemology underlies his soteriology. The *promise* offered in the preaching of the gospel becomes a *knowledge* of salvation – a reassurance and confidence – through the work of the Spirit in engendering faith.

5.5 Word, Faith and The Work of the Spirit

There is, as has previously been noted, some ambiguity in how Calvin uses the term 'Word'. It is potentially problematic in discussions of how the Spirit engenders faith, for some clarity of thought is needed to maintain the separation between written and eternal 'Word'. For, although Calvin sees the authority of the written Word resting on the eternal Word, they are clearly not identical. The one points to the other. The Spirit confirms the witness of the written Word, and opens the believer to accept the eternal Word to which it points. Human shortcomings require such divine action to generate faith. Calvin observes that, although the fulfilment of God's promises to which Scripture points should be enough to engender faith, human frailty means that 'our mind has such an inclination to vanity that it can never cleave fast to the truth of God' and so we require 'the illumination of the Holy Spirit' to make it effective.⁷⁶

Calvin's discussions of the Word are further complicated in that he does not restrict consideration simply to the eternal Word and the writings of Scripture, but also appears to consider preaching as a form by which the eternal Word is presented to the listener. It is akin to the manner in which prophetic utterance is to be seen as taking on the authority of God's Word under the influence of the Holy Spirit. He notes at one point that when God makes known his will to the people of Israel it is most often not a direct manifestation of God's voice speaking 'as thunder directly from heaven upon the ears of the assembled people,'⁷⁷ but more normally through the medium of a prophet whose speech becomes so closely identified with God's Word that the mouth of the prophet can be considered to be the mouth of God. In this case the prophet's words can really become God's Word as they are communicated to those intended, 'for God does not speak openly from heaven, but employs men as his instruments, that by their agency he

⁷⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

⁷⁷ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 82.

may make known his will.⁷⁸ Ronald Wallace indicates how this is drawn into our situation in the role of the preacher, who is ‘to expound the Scripture in the midst of the worshipping Church, preaching in the expectancy that God will do, through his frail human word, what he did through the Word of his prophets of old, that God by his grace will cause the word that goes out of the mouth of man to become also a Word that proceeds from God himself, with all the power and efficacy of the Word of the Creator and Redeemer.’⁷⁹

Calvin understands the preached Word as an instrument by which Christ reveals himself in much the same way as he uses the other signs of his presence in his historic acts of revelation.⁸⁰ Thus preaching becomes a ‘token’ of the presence of God, indicating his proximity. Thus God ‘approaches by the preaching of the Word, and he approaches also by various benefits which he bestows on us, and by the tokens which he employs for manifesting his fatherly kindness toward us.’⁸¹ However, the word of the preacher can only become the Word of God by the action of the Holy Spirit, and ‘the external Word is of no avail by itself, unless animated by the power of the Spirit.’⁸² Indeed, unless the Spirit is ‘animating’ the words of the preacher then any eloquence and skill will amount to nothing. It would seem that the acid test of preaching for Calvin is in the Spirit’s presence indicated by the ability of the Word to convince the listener of God’s presence and promises.⁸³ If the Spirit is absent, then no skill in performance or rational argument will suffice to transform the words of the preacher into God’s Word. Preaching can therefore fail to be the Word of God and remain on a merely human level throughout,

⁷⁸ CTS *Isaiah* 4.172 (on *Isaiah* 55:11).

⁷⁹ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 82-3.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸¹ CTS *Isaiah* 4.50 (on *Isa.* 50:2).

⁸² CTS *Ezekiel* 1.108 (on *Ezek.* 2:1-2).

⁸³ It is the apprehension of God’s promise for oneself that is the mark of participation in Christ for Calvin, and thus it is the presence of the Spirit, who enables this apprehension through faith that must be the mark of effective preaching.

with all the rhetorical skill and passion of the preacher accomplishing nothing.⁸⁴ However, this does not remove the duty of the preacher to co-operate in the process, as Calvin illustrates in this way:

Ezekiel, as we have just seen, proceeds to say, that a book was given him to eat, because God's servants ought to speak from the inmost affection of their heart. We know that many have a tongue sufficiently fluent, but use it only for ostentation: meanwhile, God treats their vanity as a laughing stock, because their labour is fruitless. ... But the efficacy of the Holy Spirit is not exerted unless when he who is called to teach applies his serious endeavours to attain to the discharge of his duty.⁸⁵

Thus the minister must set aside any confidence in his own abilities and apply himself 'diligently to the Lord's work' to depend solely on the work of the Spirit for preaching to have effect.⁸⁶

Calvin draws on Paul's distinction between 'letter' and 'spirit' in 2 Corinthians 3:6, to show this need for the Spirit's action. Rather than a distinction between literal and allegorical readings of the text, Calvin sees the distinction as being between a human, rational argument and the divine argument conveyed by the Spirit's presence. There is a strong sense of the need for rhetorical effectiveness in Calvin's contrast between 'literal preaching,' by which he means 'dead and ineffectual, perceived only by the ear,' and 'spiritual doctrine,' which 'is not merely uttered with the mouth, but effectually makes its way to the souls of men with a lively feeling.'⁸⁷ This suggests that the Word acts on other levels than simple rational comprehension. Faith is then not to be seen as 'understanding', but is something 'higher'. Calvin criticises those 'who in considering

⁸⁴ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 90.

⁸⁵ CTS *Ezekiel* 1.130 (on Ezek. 3:1-3).

⁸⁶ CTS *Corinthians* 1.176 (on 1 Corinthians 4:20): 'Without this [the power of the Spirit], preaching is dead, and has no strength, with whatever beauty it may be adorned.'

⁸⁷ CTS *Corinthians* 2.172 (on 2 Corinthians 3:6).

faith identify it with a bare and simple assent arising out of knowledge, and leave out confidence and assurance of heart.’⁸⁸

Faith then rests upon the Word, but it is only through the action of the Spirit that the Word is accepted in human hearts. The Spirit is ‘the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears.’⁸⁹ The link between the promise of salvation and faith is integral to Calvin’s discussion of faith, which is ‘a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.’⁹⁰

The promise is that of Christ, and Calvin describes the Spirit’s role as the task of bringing to mind what Jesus had taught by mouth.⁹¹ It is clear from *Institutes* 3.2.8 that Calvin sees faith as a ‘unique gift of the Spirit.’ The gift is that of acceptance of the promise, and this gift is also (at least in part) the fulfilment of the promise, ‘for the beginning of believing already contains within itself the reconciliation whereby man approaches God.’⁹² The sanctification of the Spirit draws the believer into knowledge of the *fulfilled* promise of God in Christ. The knowledge of the Spirit at work in us is part of the knowledge of God’s redeeming action in Christ, for ‘Christ cannot be known apart from the sanctification of his Spirit.’⁹³ Thus when Calvin talks of faith as knowledge of the promises of God, he is not simply referring to an awareness of, but to a *participation* in those promises. It is a personal faith, based in a relationship that forms with the acceptance of the promise of grace. It cannot be a handing over of the task of understanding, even to the Church. The believer must be engaged by the

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

⁸⁹ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

⁹⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.7.

⁹¹ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

⁹² *Inst.* 3.2.8.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

knowledge, and seeking after the knowledge, if it is to be efficacious.⁹⁴

The Spirit then opens the heart of the believer to understand the promises of God and so provokes a reaction of faith. This might be seen in how Calvin deals with that part of the Apostle's Creed in the *Catechism*. The language indicates divine action producing a human response. It is the intention of the Creed that we should know that God has redeemed us by his Son and that, by the Spirit, we are made 'heirs' of this redemption. Our 'consciences' must be sprinkled with 'the blood of Christ.'⁹⁵ The dynamic tone of the language indicates that Calvin perceives a distinct flow of action. The Holy Spirit is the agent not only for our ability to grasp an understanding of the benefits that Christ offers us, but also for those benefits to be 'sealed in our hearts.'

This process of sealing can be linked to the process of sanctification. If God is holy, an important understanding for Calvin as was noted in the previous section, then the engrafting of the human being into Christ must be a process of sanctification. So the generation of faith by the Holy Spirit is a sanctifying action, drawing human will into line with the divine. It is process rather than an event, and needs to be kept conceptually distinct from justification. Here is a crucial differentiation for Calvin: the one can be described as the process of repentance, the other the event of forgiveness. This is the twofold grace, the *duplex gratia*, and these two elements, linked but distinct form the 'sum of the gospel.' Both are attained by faith.⁹⁶ Calvin's understanding of the *duplex gratia* will be explored more fully in Chapter 7, particularly in regard to how Calvin

⁹⁴ 'Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge. And this is, indeed, knowledge not only of God but of the divine will. We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the church has prescribed, or because we turn over to it the task of inquiring and knowing. But we do so when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ, and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life. By this knowledge, I say, not by submission of our feeling, do we obtain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.' *Inst.* 3.2.2. Note here that the knowledge, the participation, to which Calvin points is of *both* justification and sanctification.

⁹⁵ *Catechism* 102.

⁹⁶ *Inst.* 3.3.1.

weaves the idea in his understanding of the Sacraments as the fruit of participation in Christ,⁹⁷ how it relates to discussion of deification⁹⁸ and the manner in which the two Sacraments reflect the twofold grace.⁹⁹

Repentance is part of the response to the promise of forgiveness; Calvin establishes this by drawing on the example of the preaching of Jesus and John the Baptist, ‘for while Christ the Lord and John preach in this manner: ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,’ do they not derive the reason for repenting from grace itself and the promise of salvation?’¹⁰⁰ The immediate effect of faith then is to move the believer to repentance as a response to the promise of grace. The hope that the promise of forgiveness brings may be seen as acting like a ‘goad’ to stir up an attitude of repentance.¹⁰¹ God acts first in justification then, when through faith we have received the promise of forgiveness, we respond in repentance. Even at this stage in his development of the theme Calvin feels it necessary to emphasise that human action is the result of divine action rather than causative of it. He underlines the error of seeing penitential practice as in any way capable of attaining the forgiveness offered and therefore using it as a qualifying test for admission to the ‘communion of the grace of the gospel.’

Although Calvin, seeking to emphasise ‘how little devoid of good works is the faith, through which alone we obtain free righteousness by the mercy of God’¹⁰² it might better serve our purpose here to reverse Calvin’s original order and consider something of the nature of justification that he sees being obtained for us in Christ before we look further at the process of sanctification.

⁹⁷ Section 7.3, page 194.

⁹⁸ Section 7.4, page 202.

⁹⁹ Section 7.5, page 214.

¹⁰⁰ *Inst.* 3.3.2.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Inst.* 3.11.1.

The image that Calvin uses to portray justification is judicial in nature. He argues that ‘as iniquity is abominable to God, so no sinner can find favour in his eyes in so far as he is a sinner and so long as he is reckoned as such.’¹⁰³ The phrase ‘is reckoned as such’ is of considerable importance here, for it allows Calvin to suggest that those whose nature is not ‘righteous’ may appear so if they appear before the heavenly judge clothed in the righteousness of Christ.¹⁰⁴ It is clear then that justification is not a statement of the righteousness of our nature but the *imputation* of righteousness.¹⁰⁵

The forgiveness of sins is then a ‘mere benefit of Christ,’ which is ‘received by faith’ and by which ‘the sinner is considered as a just man in God’s sight.’ This ‘gracious acceptance by God’ is a free gift and not the result of any righteousness inherent in us.¹⁰⁶ Justification is the work of the Mediator, which we receive through faith. Faith does not have the power of justification in itself, but it is the instrument through which we receive the justification given to us in Christ. Calvin compares faith ‘to a kind of vessel; for unless we come empty and with the mouth of our soul open to seek Christ’s grace, we are not capable of receiving Christ.’¹⁰⁷ It is faith then that readies us to receive Christ.

The effect of justification is not brought about by any immediate change in our nature, but through a union with Christ, and by the transfer of the benefits won by him in both his human and divine natures to us through that union. The union of believer with Christ has the effect of conferring the benefits of justification to the believer; it is on this that the certainty of salvation rests for Calvin. He charges Osiander of undermining that certainty with his doctrine of ‘essential righteousness’ by removing the reliance upon a

¹⁰³ *Inst.* 3.11.1.

¹⁰⁴ *Inst.* 3.11.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Inst.* 3.11.3.

¹⁰⁶ *Inst.* 3.11.4.

¹⁰⁷ *Inst.* 3.11.7.

free gift of pardon.¹⁰⁸ Answering the charge that it would be ‘insulting to God and contrary to his nature that he should justify those who actually remain wicked,’ Calvin counters that justification and regeneration (that is, sanctification) are not separated. The appreciation of justification leads to repentance, which is part of the process of sanctification.¹⁰⁹

Equally in exploring the differences between the doctrines of salvation by faith and salvation by works, Calvin seems to be arguing against any reliance upon righteousness of our own, even when this righteousness is seen simply in terms of the good works that we might be deemed to do as the result of our salvation.¹¹⁰ Calvin declares that ‘not even spiritual works come into account when the power of justifying is ascribed to faith.’¹¹¹ Furthermore it seems that our good works cannot even be reasonably used as an indication of our salvation. Despite the apparently common assumption that the basis for the later doctrine of the *Syllogismus practicus*¹¹² is to be found in Calvin, Niesel argues convincingly that this is not the case,¹¹³ and that, in fact, Calvin distrusts greatly the use of our works as a means to assure us of our election. Surely, he suggests, such assurance can never be sufficient in the face of divine judgement.¹¹⁴ At one point in the *Institutes*, Calvin flatly rejects the idea of the *Syllogismus practicus* as unhelpful to faith. It acts as a disheartening distraction to the believer, placing reliance on something

¹⁰⁸ *Inst.* 3.11.11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.11.13-14.

¹¹¹ *Inst.* 3.11.14.

¹¹² The ‘practical syllogism’ – a way to establish the assurance of election in and for an individual – used by the Reformed, seems to have relied heavily upon the outward fruits of faith, whilst recognising that they do not cause salvation.

¹¹³ Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 170-81.

¹¹⁴ ‘A far different concern troubles and torments believers who sincerely examine themselves. First, then, doubt would enter the minds of all men, and at length despair, while each one reckoned for himself how great a weight of debt still pressed upon him, and how far away he was from the condition laid down for him.’ *Inst.* 3.13.3.

other than the promises of God in Christ.¹¹⁵ The only place to look for the promise of our own election and salvation is in Christ himself.¹¹⁶

Rejecting strongly any suggestion that justification can be achieved through works, Calvin seeks to underline the gratuitous nature of the gift and the undeserving nature of those who receive it. The only thing in which we should place our trust is that those whom God chooses to reconcile to himself, he makes righteous by forgiveness of sin.¹¹⁷

Calvin at points uses language filled with hints of his eucharistic teaching: by ‘partaking’ of Christ we receive the grace of reconciliation¹¹⁸ and we possess righteousness ‘only because we are partakers in Christ.’ The justification we receive is full and permanent, but its legal nature gives rise to the tension in the language of justification and sanctification. We are accounted righteous even though our nature is not truly righteous. No work that we can do prior to or subsequent to our being ‘clothed in Christ’ changes our nature, or indicates a sufficient change in our nature, to merit our being accounted as righteous. The tension between our depravity and God’s holiness must be resolved in some manner if reconciliation is to be brought about. Thus, having justified us through the action of the Mediator, God acts to bring us into conformity with his will by the process of sanctification. In Chapter 3 of the third volume of the

¹¹⁵ ‘Satan has no more grievous or dangerous temptation to dishearten believers than when he unsettles them with doubt about their election, while at the same time he arouses them with a wicked desire to seek it outside the way. I call it “seeking outside the way” when mere man attempts to break into the inner recesses of divine wisdom, and tries to penetrate even to highest eternity, in order to find out what decision has been made concerning himself at God’s judgment seat.’ *Inst.* 3.24.4

¹¹⁶ ‘Those whom God has adopted as his sons are said to have been chosen not in themselves but in his Christ; for unless he could love them in him, he could not honour them with the inheritance of his Kingdom if they had not previously become partakers of him. But if we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.’ *Inst.* 3.24.5

¹¹⁷ ‘The apostle teaches that man is God’s enemy until he is restored to grace through Christ. Thus, him whom he receives into union with himself the Lord is said to justify, because he cannot receive him into grace nor join him to himself unless he turns him from a sinner into a righteous man. We add that this is done through forgiveness of sins; for if those whom the Lord has reconciled to himself be judged by works, they will indeed still be found sinners, though they ought, nevertheless, to be freed and cleansed from sin. It is obvious, therefore, that those whom God embraces are made righteous solely by the fact that they are purified when their spots are washed away by forgiveness of sins. Consequently, such righteousness can be called, in a word, “remission of sins.”’ *Inst.* 3.11.21.

¹¹⁸ *Inst.* 3.11.1.

Institutes Calvin appears to be using the term ‘repentance’ to describe sanctification. Repentance is what follows from the faith that attains justification.¹¹⁹ The offer of forgiveness received in the preaching of the gospel must bring the hearer to see their own fallen nature and commit themselves to ‘the practice of repentance.’ Calvin defines repentance as a ‘true turning of our life to God’ which ‘consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.’¹²⁰ Calvin suggests that the transformation is ‘not only in outward works, but in the soul itself.’¹²¹ Repentance is an ethical and moral transformation that comes from an appreciation of the divine judgement. The judicial imagery is vital here, for it appears to Calvin that it is only when we appreciate the nature of that divine judgement that we are able to ‘cast out’ wickedness from our ‘inmost heart.’ The certainty of judgement, acts as a powerful incentive to change as ‘before the mind of the sinner inclines to repentance, it must be aroused by thinking upon divine judgment.’¹²² This ‘fear of God’ must be accompanied by faith in the promise of salvation. It is not enough simply to fear God. Although the knowledge of judgement might instil fear in us, that would achieve nothing if there were not a way for us to avoid the judgement that is rightly set against us. With faith in the promise of salvation there comes a regeneration, which consists in a putting aside of our old nature and a taking of on a new nature. Calvin differentiates these component parts as ‘mortification’ and ‘vivification.’ Mortification is the setting aside of the old nature, the turning of the soul to God. The term is intended to convey the radical nature of the change that is required – the ‘whole flesh’ needs to be put to destruction – if our nature is to be conformed to the divine will.¹²³ Having denied our nature we are then open to the Spirit’s working in us to establish a new nature. This is Calvin’s

¹¹⁹ ‘Actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness. Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith.’ *Inst.* 3.3.1.

¹²⁰ *Inst.* 3.3.5.

¹²¹ *Inst.* 3.3.6.

¹²² *Inst.* 3.3.7.

¹²³ *Inst.* 3.3.8.

vivification, a spiritual rebirth. In this the heart must put on ‘an inclination to righteousness,’ and this occurs when ‘the Spirit of God so imbues our souls, steeped in his holiness, with both new thoughts and feelings, that they can be rightly considered new.’¹²⁴

These two components combine in the radical regeneration that is sanctification, the conforming of the human nature to the holy will of the divine. It is a restoration of the *imago dei*, restoring in us ‘the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.’¹²⁵ Having achieved reconciliation through a judicial mechanism, the forgiveness of sins, this process does not have to be instantaneous. It is a process that, in fact, never achieves fulfilment in this life. It is the process in which those who follow Christ are called to engage themselves throughout their lives, a ‘race of repentance’ which they run continually.¹²⁶

Salvation thus rests in an event and a process, the one apprehended by faith imparted by the Spirit and the other driven by the Spirit. Calvin is at pains to point out the believers are still sinners and that ‘all writers of sounder judgment agree that there remains in a regenerate man a smouldering cinder of evil, from which desires continually leap forth to allure and spur him to commit sin.’¹²⁷ Consequently Calvin recognises that ‘because even the best and most excellent plan of the present life is only a progression,’ we will only be able ‘appear spotless and blameless before God’s face’ when, ‘having put off this sinful flesh, we cleave wholly to the Lord.’

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ *Inst.* 3.3.9.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ *Inst.* 3.3.10.

5.6 Conclusion: the Spirit and the benefits of union with Christ.

The beginning of this chapter raised the question of ‘what does the Spirit do?’ While it would be reasonable to answer this in terms of engendering faith, as Calvin does when he says ‘faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit,’¹²⁸ but in terms of the current study we might equally say it *convinces*. Specifically it convinces the believer of the authority and truth of the promises that God makes in Christ and of the offer of union with Christ and the benefits he has won. It is the nature of faith in Calvin’s understanding to be a ‘higher knowledge,’¹²⁹ an existential knowledge that affects the believer. It is the Spirit’s role to engage the believer in the reality of the knowledge that moves beyond the possession of information. Faith comes ‘when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life.’¹³⁰ This is what the Spirit convinces us of.

As we come to the discussion of the Sacraments, and the Eucharist in particular, we need to be aware of the role Calvin sees for the Spirit in working through them to convince with the knowledge they contain. If our abilities to comprehend the redeeming work of God in Christ are limited (by our finite and sinful nature), it is only by the gift of faith that we can gain that knowledge and be convinced by it.

¹²⁸ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

¹²⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.14.

¹³⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.2.

PART 3: CALVIN'S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY

Chapter 6. Word, Sacrament and substance.

6.1 Introduction: discerning meaning in the Sacraments

It is evident in the literature regarding Calvin there is considerable room for debate on the understanding of his eucharistic theology. This reflects his own understanding of himself as a mediator between Lutheran and Zwinglian extremes. One aspect that does seem to be generally accepted is his complete rejection of a presence of Christ in any terms that might be interpreted in a materialist sense.¹ Equally there seems to be a general acknowledgement that he understands the Sacraments as being instrumental in some manner, with the sacramental signs bestowing what they represent (or at least the reality being presented with the sign).² The question arises that if Calvin did not see the Eucharist conveying a physical presence, nor being a simple memorial, what did he think they offered? What is it, in Calvin's understanding, that the Sacraments actually convey?

This chapter will attempt to answer this question by considering Calvin's understanding of signs, the place of the Sacraments in confirming the Word and as accommodated instruments, and the *koinonia* (communion) with Christ that Calvin sees the believer being called to participate in. In doing so it will attempt to show that Calvin sees the Sacraments as conveying *meaning*, something more than noetic knowledge. His use of the term 'substance' (*substantia*) in a rhetorical sense (as in the substance of an argument) allowing him to avoid the question of the presence or absence of Christ's body and focus on the union with Christ that is promised and effected.

¹ See, for example: Wendel, *Calvin*, 341; McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 232-3; Davis, *This Is My Body*, 72-3; Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 225.

² The understanding of the Eucharist in Calvin studies is discussed in Chapter 1, pp. 8-33. The development of Calvin's emphasis on the Eucharist as an accommodated instrument is well described by Davis who suggests that, while this emphasis is denied in the 1536 *Institutes*, it has 'begun to shape up' by the *Short Treatise* (1541). Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 129.

6.2 Signs and seals

If the sacramental signs are not ‘bare’, then what role do they hold? They must be linked to the promises of God because they are to ‘seal’ the promises that they signify to the faithful. They represent a single act of God where both the signifying and the sealing cannot be separated. Calvin compares them to the seals attached to official documents, which are ‘nothing in themselves’ yet which, when added to the document they seal, both confirm the authority of the document and become part of the text in its fullest sense.³ The Sacraments bring the ‘clearest promises’ in visual form to add to the promise given in the exposition of the Word of God. These promises, or ‘covenants,’⁴ are indicated by the Sacraments so that we might place our trust in them just as Noah was encouraged to obey God by the establishment of a divine covenant: ‘For then do we freely embrace the commands of God, when a promise is attached to them, which teaches us that we shall not spend our strength for naught.’⁵ When considering the covenant with Noah, Calvin also notes that the sons of Noah are included in the covenant because they were ‘joined with their father.’⁶ The promise to Noah is intended to be ‘common to all people.’ The bond between the family of Noah parallels a wider bond between humanity.

Calvin’s use of ‘sign’ language does present some problems, and much scholarly discussion has centred around this area. Calvin takes considerable trouble to show that the sign and the truth of the sign, the signified, should not be separated.⁷ Admittedly, in the 1536 *Institutes* it would appear that Calvin’s emphasis is on the sign’s role in

³ *Inst.* 4.14.5.

⁴ *Inst.* 4.14.6.

⁵ CTS *Genesis* 1.258 (on Gen. 6:18).

⁶ CTS *Genesis* 1.297 (on Gen. 9:9).

⁷ See, for example, *Inst.* 4.14.16. ‘I say that Christ is the matter (*materiam*) or (if you prefer) the substance (*substantiam*) of all the Sacraments; ... and they do not promise anything apart from him.’ *CO* 2:952. In the same section Calvin notes Augustine’s argument: that ‘we also must have a distinction lest we cling too tightly to the outward sign’, but we are to avoid the twin traps of either receiving the signs ‘as though they had been given in vain’ or failing to lift our minds ‘beyond the visible sign’ to the truth it signifies.

reinforcing the promises rather than, in some manner, in conveying them. At one point he specifically rejects the substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist: ‘By this we obviously mean that the very substance (*substantiam*) of his body or the true and natural body of Christ is not given there; but all those benefits which Christ has supplied us with his body.’⁸ This might be seen as closer to what Brian Gerrish has termed ‘symbolic memorialism’⁹ (and as much of the 1536 *Institutes* are carried through to later editions, it may serve to confound attempts to analyse his sacramental theology) but, as Calvin continues to develop the *Institutes*, there is a movement towards an understanding of sign that conveys more than simply information. The ‘mystery’ is not simply a doctrinal package to be given cognitive assent, it is something that ‘exhibits’ (*exhibere*) Christ. The term ‘*exhibere*’ is used by Calvin to indicate that the signs do more than simply point towards that which they signify. To some extent, Calvin may be seen as following the Augsburg Confession which states that ‘to remember Christ is to remember his benefits and realize that they are truly offered to us,’¹⁰ and that the Sacrament is to be a source of consolation rather than simply a means to ‘remember the history.’¹¹ These are effective signs rather than simple conveyors of information, the idea of ‘seal’ carries the suggestion that they add greater authority to the promises.¹²

The promises that the Sacraments ‘seal’ are the divine covenant. In this respect Calvin appears content to describe a number of Old Testament practices as ‘sacraments’, in that they seal (that is, they confirm and exhibit) God’s covenant with Israel. The most

⁸ *Inst.* 1536 4.30, *CO* 1:123.

⁹ Gerrish, ‘Sign and Reality’, 128.

¹⁰ Calvin’s use of *exhibere* reflects the language of the 1540 *Confessio Augustana Variata* on the Lord’s Supper: ‘*De coena Domini docent quod cum pane et vino vere exhibeantur corpus et sanguis Christi vescentibus in Coena Domini.*’ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3.13 n. 3.

¹¹ Kolb and Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 71. Kolb notes that remembering Christ as remembering his benefits and realizing that they are truly offered to us is ‘an oft-used concept of Melancthon.’ *Ibid.*, 71 n. 153.

¹² In describing the Sacraments as a seal, Calvin also follows Melancthon. For example, in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Melancthon says that the Eucharist ‘was instituted as a seal and testimony of the gracious forgiveness of sins and therefore as an encouragement to sensitive consciences in order that they may be completely convinced and believe that their sins are freely forgiven.’ *Ibid.*, 267.

obvious of these is the practice of circumcision. This, Calvin declares, is ‘the symbol by which [the Jews] were admonished that ... the whole nature of mankind, is corrupt and needs pruning.’ It is also a ‘token and reminder to confirm them in the promise given to Abraham.’¹³ The act of circumcision is a ‘seal’ by which the Jews are ‘more certainly assured that their faith ... is accounted to them as righteousness’ (their faith being in the ‘saving seed’, that is in Christ). Calvin links this to Paul’s testimony in Romans 4:11, that righteousness might be imputed to the faithful. Circumcision ‘ratifies’ faith even though in and of itself it cannot justify, and indicates the way in which sacraments are seals ‘by which the promises of God are in a manner imprinted on our hearts, and the certainty of grace confirmed.’¹⁴ The signs have no intrinsic power, but they are instruments (*instrumenta*) of God’s grace, working through the Spirit’s action for the elect.¹⁵ The emphasis on the Sacraments as instruments of grace, and the Spirit’s role in enabling our participation in the Sacraments, seems to have developed in Calvin’s theology through his exegetical work on Romans. Thomas Davies observes that the 1539 *Institutes* have a new emphasis on the instrumental nature of the Eucharist (compared to the 1536 edition), and that this is ‘a concept closely tied to Calvin’s developing thoughts on instrumentality as he worked through his Romans commentary.’¹⁶ Here Calvin’s exegesis seems to strongly inform his theology. Circumcision offers a ‘twofold grace’, the promise of a ‘blessed seed’ — the descendents of Abraham — and an indication of how this is to be brought about, by ‘cutting off in man whatever is born of the flesh.’¹⁷ Here Calvin sees a parallel between circumcision and Baptism, ‘for it was a symbol of a new life, and also of the remission of sins.’¹⁸

¹³ *Inst.* 4.14.21.

¹⁴ CTS *Romans* 164 (on Rom. 4:11).

¹⁵ ‘*Ac tametsi per se nihil iuvant, Deus tamen, qui gratiae suae instrumenta esse voluit, arcane spiritus sui gratia efficit ne profectu careant in electis.*’ CO 49:74.

¹⁶ Davis, *Clearer Promises*, 107.

¹⁷ *Inst.* 4:14.21.

¹⁸ CTS *Romans* 165 (on Rom. 4:11).

Other Old Testament practices are also used as examples of this offering and sealing the promise of redemption. Baptisms and purifications are to be seen as signifying the need for the cleansing of our nature, and promise ‘another cleansing’ in Christ.¹⁹ Sacrifices are to make the people aware of their unrighteousness, and that ‘some satisfaction’ was required by God. They also set the principle that a mediator between God and humanity is required for ‘the shedding of blood’ in sacrifice that would be sufficient satisfaction for the divine justice. The Old Testament ‘sacraments’ point in the same direction: Christ, who has now been exhibited by the Father in fulfilment of earlier promises. Baptism becomes a means to confirm to us that we have been ‘cleansed and washed’ and the Eucharist a means of confirming that we have been ‘redeemed’. But the power of the Sacraments is not in the signs; it is in the Spirit that ‘makes us certain’ of the testimony they provide.²⁰ It is the Spirit who is the ‘primary witness who gives us a full assurance of this testimony,’²¹ but the work of the Spirit is with the faithful. Calvin draws attention to the fact that Abraham is counted as righteous *before* circumcision and attributes this to God’s intention to give an initial example ‘that no one might ascribe salvation to external signs.’²²

Calvin’s use of the terms such as ‘sign’ and ‘substance’ develops over time. It should be remembered that the 1536 *Institutes* were written early in his career and before much of his exegetical work. By 1539 he has incorporated the idea of substantial partaking of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist into the *Institutes*.²³ The rest of this discussion will consider Calvin’s mature theology, what it is that the Sacraments are ‘sealing’ and how this is apprehended by the believer.

¹⁹ *Inst.* 4.14.21.

²⁰ *Inst.* 4.14.22.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² CTS *Romans* 165 (on Rom. 4:11).

²³ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 168.

When considering the ‘sacraments of the law’ (the Old Testament practices) Calvin rejects any suggestion that they merely foreshadowed God’s grace in Jesus.²⁴ They seal the same promises, the same covenant, as the ‘Christian Sacraments’. In his Commentary on 1 Corinthians 10:3 Calvin sees the gift of manna as corresponding to the Eucharist. The manna, like the water that flowed from the rock, was more than bodily nourishment, it was also ‘for the spiritual nourishment of souls.’²⁵ The physical elements of the sacrament can thus fulfil more than one purpose, as Calvin says: ‘While, therefore, the Lord relieved the necessities of the body, he, at the same time, provided for the everlasting welfare of souls.’ The signs remain signs, but at the same time convey that which they signify. Paul, in Calvin’s eyes, declares the virtue and efficacy of the Sacraments and equates the virtue of the ‘sacraments of the law’ with that which ‘ours have to this day.’ For, he argues, if manna was ‘spiritual food’ (that is, nourishment for the soul) then it not the ‘bare emblem’ that is shown in the Sacraments, but ‘the thing represented is at the same time truly imparted.’

Calvin’s use of the term ‘substance’ (*substantia*) is potentially as problematic – if not more so – as his use of the language of sign. Helmut Gollwitzer described three different senses in which Calvin used the term ‘substance.’²⁶ The first of these is in terms of a scholastic or philosophical meaning, referring to the ‘substance or nature of a thing’, and which has a material connotation that Calvin strongly rejects. The second is Christ as the substance of the Sacrament in terms of our union with him. The third is in terms of the benefit that we receive which ‘flows into our souls’ from his body.²⁷ While Gollwitzer’s division are useful in recognizing the shifting use Calvin makes of the

²⁴ *Inst.* 4.14.23.

²⁵ CTS *Corinthians* 1.315 (on 1 Cor. 10:3).

²⁶ Helmut Gollwitzer, *Coena Domini: Die Altlutherische Abendmahlslehre in ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit dem Calvinismus Dargestellt an der lutherischen Frühorthodoxie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1937), 120-1.

²⁷ Wendel, *Calvin*, 342.

term, they are not without their problems. He seems to equate Calvin's rejection of an oral reception of Christ's body in the Eucharist with a rejection of 'the real and natural body' of Christ, whilst in fact Calvin can say that it is 'the true and natural body which was offered on the cross' which is offered in the Eucharist.²⁸ Tony Lane suggests that in focusing on 'spiritual substance' rather than Calvin's use of the idea of 'feeding spiritually' Gollwitzer 'makes the distinctions in the adjectives where they might be more usefully placed in the adverbs.'²⁹ Thomas Davis suggests that Gollwitzer misses the development of Calvin's usage of the term, and so his categories can be misleading when applied to certain passages.³⁰ Despite these objections the observation by Gollwitzer that Calvin's use of the term 'substance' varies is sound. Calvin can move from a natural philosophical sense (the substance of an object),³¹ to a rhetorical sense (the substance of an argument) of the Word, where he clearly intends to convey the sense of 'meaning' or 'reality'.

When writing against Westphal in the *Second Defence* Calvin indicates that eating the flesh of Christ is unlike the process of physical eating; there is no devouring or 'transfusion' (*tranfusio*) of substance (digestion).³² This suggests a materialist 'substance' (as seems to be the case when Calvin denies a substantial presence). Similarly he speaks of Christ breathing life into our souls 'from the substance of his flesh (*carnis suae substantia*).'³³ However, in the same document he does not want to exclude the 'substance' of Christ's body from the Sacrament: 'For although we bring not down the substance (*substantiam*) of Christ's body from heaven to give us life, yet we are far from excluding it from the Supper, as we testify that from it life flows into

²⁸ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.279.

²⁹ Lane, 'Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?' 32-3.

³⁰ Davis, *Clearer Promises*, 89-90.

³¹ For example, Muller suggests that Calvin is aware of Aristotelian categories, and indicates the positive impact of Medieval Aristotelianism on Calvin's work. *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 176.

³² *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.277 and 2.283. CO 9:70.

³³ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.248.

us.³⁴ Calvin also says that ‘Christ is uniformly called by me the substance (*substaniam*) of Baptism and of the Supper.’³⁵ This suggests a more spiritualizing approach, and by his 1558 sermons on 1 Corinthians 10 & 11, Wim Janse notes that his use of the term ‘substance’ seems, apart from when he is criticizing the Lutheran position, to have become more and more a synonym for ‘content, ‘essence’ or ‘main point’.³⁶ Similarly in the 1559 *Institutes* he can refer to Christ as the ‘substance’ (*substantiam*) or ‘matter’ (*materiam*) of the Eucharist and to our being made partakers of his ‘substance’ (*substantiae*).³⁷ François Wendel observes that Calvin, in respect to the Eucharist does not use the term ‘substance’, that is, in the same way as the scholastics, in opposition to the ‘accidents’, and he adds that ‘there is no question of making Calvin say that in the Eucharist we receive a kind of invisible material substrate ... in which the body of Christ comes and melts into ours.’³⁸ It should be evident, even on such a cursory reading, that Calvin uses divergent meanings of the term ‘substance’.

If Calvin is content to use divergent meanings of ‘substance’ it might be that his concern is not to be drawn into a detailed philosophical debate on this topic but to press on to the heart of the matter. This is, for him, the accommodation of God to our shortcomings where we are drawn to that which gives life to our souls, the ‘substance’ of the flesh of Christ.³⁹ Julie Canlis suggests that Calvin ‘displaces the eucharistic debates from a wrangle over substance to one defining the true nature of participation,’⁴⁰ and it is to Calvin’s development of the idea of participation that we

³⁴ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.275, CO 9:76.

³⁵ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.292, CO 9:81.

³⁶ Wim Janse, ‘Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology: Three Dogma-Historical Observations,’ *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research.*, ed. H. J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 62.

³⁷ *Inst.* 4.17.11, CO 2:1010.

³⁸ Wendel, *Calvin*, 341.

³⁹ ‘The Sacraments were instituted to lead us to the communion of Christ, and be helps by which we may be ingrafted into the body of Christ, or, being ingrafted, be united more and more.’ *Second Defense*, 311. Davis translates this as ‘drawn closer and closer’ giving a stronger sense of the dynamics. *Clearest Promises*, 47.

⁴⁰ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 159.

will look in due course to understand more fully the nature of the Sacraments. Before that, however, we will consider the close link between Word and Sacrament in Calvin's thought.

6.3 *Word and Sacrament*

As has been noted by Brian Gerrish,⁴¹ it is not difficult to see how the strong emphasis on the cognitive aspects of faith could lead to a dry intellectualism that turns the community gathered for worship into 'a class of glum schoolchildren.' Reformed worship has always tended towards the didactic, often with unfortunate zeal, while Calvin's concern that the fatherly face of God become visible has all too often been overlooked. Within Calvin's eucharistic theology there is a theme regarding a mystery that defies understanding: a communion with Christ. The Word of God is not only a doctrine but also a powerful instrument of the Spirit. These aspects are in no way contradictory or mutually exclusive. What Gerrish distinguishes as 'pedagogical' and 'sacramental' functions of the word are bridged in preaching. In his commentary on Romans 10:17 Calvin observes that Paul 'testifies, that by [preaching] faith is produced,' and 'that of itself it is of no avail; but that when it pleases the Lord to work, it becomes the instrument of his power.'⁴²

It is not the human agency that is, of itself, important but the action of God through such human agency. In the *Institutes*, Calvin asserts that the 'power of the keys' (cf Matt. 18:18) 'is simply the preaching of the gospel' and that with regard to human beings it is 'not so much power as ministry.'⁴³ That is regardless of who preaches the gospel, it is the gospel itself, 'the true promise of God,' which has the power. The

⁴¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 82.

⁴² CTS *Romans*, 401 (on Rom. 10:17).

⁴³ *Inst.* 4.11.1.

power of the gospel is to give *koinonia* (κοινωνία) with Christ. Calvin was not satisfied with the previous translation of *koinonia* as *societas* or *consortium* (the choice, for example of Erasmus). As he argued, we do not ‘socialize with Christ’ or ‘consort with him;’ we, in some mysterious way, ‘participate in him’ and are made one body with him. Thus he preferred to refer to a ‘communion’ with Christ, ‘because that better expresses the force of the Greek *κοινωνία*.’⁴⁴

The gospel is intended as an instrument for our participation in Christ, ‘for this is the design of the gospel, that Christ may become ours, and that we may be ingrafted into his body.’⁴⁵ To this end the Word is linked with the Sacraments. There is a clear indication that this is not a simple statement to accompany, nor particularly the recitation of a formula of consecration. The Word must be preached in a manner to support the Sacrament that seals it. The Word ‘should, when preached, make us understand what the visible sign means.’⁴⁶ The failure of the Mass in this respect is that the people are not enabled to comprehend the meaning of the sign, and Calvin charges that by design ‘nothing of doctrine should penetrate to the people’ through the use of Latin ‘among unlearned men.’⁴⁷

This link between Word and Sacrament rests in the need for faith to *participate* in the Sacrament. The two parts combine; the Word presenting the promise to us and the Sacraments exhibiting them. The faith, which the preached Word engenders in us, allows us to apprehend the reality of the promise, the person of Christ, and the Sacrament confirms our faith in the Word. This is not a matter of observing the symbols from a distance, being reminded of something in a passive manner. Word and

⁴⁴ CTS *Corinthians* 1.60 (on 1 Cor. 1:9). ‘Ego autem communionem ponere malui, quia vim graecae vocis κοινωνίας melius exprimebat.’ CO 49:313.

⁴⁵ CTS *Corinthians* 1.60 (on 1 Cor. 1:9).

⁴⁶ *Inst.* 4.14.4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Sacrament are intended to be immediate and powerful ways in which to experience the presence of God. Together, Word and Sacrament combine to present the promises of God, made flesh in Christ, in such a way that we apprehend them afresh and deepen our relationship with the God who calls us as his elect. The elements themselves have no inherent power in this, but the Spirit who ‘illuminates our minds’ uses them to ‘affect us within.’⁴⁸

This brings us to the heart of the matter, at least in regard of God’s work in the Sacraments. The Sacraments exhibit the Word to which they are joined. They do this because God has chosen them for a purpose, which is to confirm and strengthen faith. They are *instruments* of God’s will for humanity. What is more, they are instruments accommodated to our weaknesses.

6.4 The accommodation of God in Word and Sacrament

There are points within Calvin’s writing that he stresses the separation between God and humanity. The holiness of the divine in its full form is too much for us to bear and becomes a source of ‘dread and wonder’ even for the saints.⁴⁹ Those who are normally ‘firm and constant’ are ‘overwhelmed and almost annihilated.’ The barrier that is formed because of the ‘irreconcilable disagreement between righteousness and unrighteousness’⁵⁰ would be insurmountable without the action of God to wipe out all evil within us. The divine nature is ‘infinitely exalted above the comprehension of our understanding’⁵¹ and the glory of God, ‘when we contemplate it alone, can produce no other effect than to fill us with despair.’⁵² Such language does move toward an extreme separation between humanity and God, and it is small wonder that some have taken this

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 4.14.8.

⁴⁹ *Inst.* 1.1.3.

⁵⁰ *Inst.* 2.16.3.

⁵¹ CTS *Psalms* 3.385 (on Ps. 86:8).

⁵² CTS *Hebrews* 110 (on Heb. 4:16).

as part of the impression that Calvin was a ‘singularly anxious man’⁵³ and a certain degree of darkness in Calvin’s God.⁵⁴ However, to see this separation as an abyss within which humanity is trapped would be to miss Calvin’s point. God wills to draw the elect out of their fallen state, and so must come down and draw them up.⁵⁵

The Sacraments are to be understood as representing God’s accommodation, for ‘God uses means and instruments which he himself sees to be expedient, that all things may serve his glory since he is Lord and Judge of all.’⁵⁶ Thus the bread that feeds our bodies and the sunlight that illuminates and heats the world are instruments of the divine goodwill towards us. The Sacraments are instruments by which faith is nourished spiritually, ‘whose one function is to set his promises before our eyes to be looked upon, indeed, to be guarantees of them to us.’⁵⁷ The linkage to the preaching of the Word is in the need for the Sacraments to effectively exhibit Christ. The preaching is then another instrument through which the Spirit works to show us the promise of the Father in Christ just as God used Paul as an instrument in his preaching which was not ‘persuasive’ in terms of ‘striving by artifice’ but was effective because of the Spirit working through the ‘instrumentality of the Apostle.’⁵⁸

In his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:5-9*, Calvin suggests that part of this accommodation requires something from humanity in response to God. He observes that it would be easy for God to ‘bless the earth’ without ‘diligence’ on humanity’s part, but that we are to labour ‘that the earth, on its part, yield a return.’ Similarly it would be possible for God to produce faith ‘in persons while asleep’ but he has chosen to do it

⁵³ Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 32.

⁵⁴ Bouwsma picks up on Calvin’s ‘terror’ in anticipation of divine judgement. *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ In regard to the return of Christ, Calvin can say, ‘He will come to us as redeemer, and rescuing us from this boundless abyss of all evils and miseries, he will lead us into that blessed inheritance of his life and glory.’ *Inst.* 3.9.3.

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 4.14.12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ CTS *Corinthians* 1.100 (on 1 Cor. 2:4).

otherwise, through ‘hearing’ the Word.⁵⁹ And it is not enough for the ‘seed to be sown,’ it has to be nurtured and so Paul can talk of Apollos ‘watering’ the seed that he had planted.⁶⁰ This participation does not take away any of God’s authority or power in the process for it is through God that such work is effective.⁶¹

Preaching is not simply a human activity, it is a means by which God chooses to make known the promises he has established in Christ. While Calvin draws a parallel between preaching and the Sacraments in the image of human toil, such as ploughing, sowing and watering the Word, but the work of the Spirit to bring growth is clearly essential to him.⁶² Although it might be argued that there is an element of divine imposition in this description, Calvin’s intent seems to be more directed at showing how we are drawn, through the preached Word and through the Sacraments, to understand, and respond to, the promise of God in Christ. This is the nature of the accommodation that God undertakes, and in those to whom he gives faith to perceive the promise it increases their faith. The Sacraments, when effectively linked to the Word, have the confirmation and increase of faith as their ‘particular ministry’ as an instrument by which God accommodates to human weakness to renew the elect.⁶³ In this Calvin emphasises the role of the Spirit, without which the Sacraments would accomplish ‘nothing more in our minds that the splendour of the sun shining on blind eyes.’⁶⁴ Calvin uses an illustration in the *Institutes* that brings this home quite effectively. In terms of human persuasion, if one sets out to convince someone in words then, whilst you may use all the argument that would best draw them to your opinion, you will not be effective unless they have sufficient judgement to weigh your arguments, they are of a ‘teachable disposition’ (that

⁵⁹ CTS *Corinthians* 1.127 (on 1 Cor. 3:6).

⁶⁰ ‘Hence, although our heavenly Father does not reject our labour in cultivating his field, and does not allow it to be unproductive, yet he will have its success depend exclusively upon his blessing, that he may have the entire praise.’ CTS *Corinthians* 1.128 (on 1 Cor. 3:6).

⁶¹ CTS *Corinthians* 1.129-30 (on 1 Cor. 3:7).

⁶² *Inst.* 4.14.11.

⁶³ *Inst.* 4.14.9.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

is, they are willing to listen and accept your arguments) and they have a sufficiently good opinion of your viewpoint that they would have some respect for it. These predispositions make your arguments effective, and Calvin suggests that the Spirit similarly predisposes the faithful to the signs of the Sacraments by showing us that, in them, God is speaking to us, ‘softening the stubbornness of our heart, and composing it to that obedience which it owes to the Word of the Lord.’⁶⁵ This requirement that the believer be able to apprehend the promises by being of a ‘teachable disposition’ stresses the knowledge of God, the meaning, that lies within the Sacraments. It is this *meaning* that the Sacraments present that is discerned under the guidance of the Spirit and which then ‘affect us within.’⁶⁶

The image of the Sun shining is used by both Luther and Zwingli in connection to the question of eucharistic presence, although used in different ways. Luther argues for a non-physical but substantial presence by comparison to the ‘bright rays’ of the Sun.⁶⁷ He declares that ‘the right hand of God is everywhere, but at the same time nowhere and uncircumscribed’ but says that ‘there is a difference between his being present and your touching.’ The rays of sunlight are ‘so near you that they pierce into your eyes or your skin so that you feel it, yet you are unable to grasp them and put them into a box, even if you should try forever.’ In the same way, Luther suggests, Christ ‘does not permit himself to be so caught and grasped.’ There is a significant difference between Christ being ‘present’ and his being ‘present for you.’ It is only when Christ binds himself to the Word and says ‘here you are to find me’ that he is ‘present for you.’ The idea that the presence of Christ must be apprehended by the believer, to be understood as ‘present for you,’ seems to have a significant resonance with Calvin’s understanding, but the apparent insistence on ubiquity by Lutherans such as Westphal was unacceptable to

⁶⁵ *Inst.* 4.14.10.

⁶⁶ *Inst.* 4.2.4.8.

⁶⁷ *LW* 37, 67-9.

Calvin who saw no need to override the human physical limitations on location when ‘no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.’⁶⁸ On the other hand, Zwingli used the image of the Sun to argue for the physical absence of Christ’s body.⁶⁹ Zwingli claims that ‘in the holy Eucharist, i.e. the supper of thanksgiving, the true body of Christ is present by the contemplation of faith’ and says that those who ‘thank the Lord for the benefits bestowed on us in his Son acknowledge that He assumed true flesh, ... and thus everything done by Christ becomes as it were present to them by the contemplation of faith.’ However he argues that the humanity can only be in one place, although this does not restrict the influence of his body. Zwingli says that ‘we see even in creation that bodies are confined to one place, but their power and influence extend very far.’ So the example of the Sun, ‘whose body is in one place, while his power pervades all things,’ shows how we can know a presence despite physical separation. As Zwingli says, ‘The human mind also surmounts the stars and penetrates the underworld, but the body is nevertheless in one place.’ Again there are resonances with Calvin’s understanding, here with the importance of restricting the flesh of the body of Christ to the finite limits of humanity and to the ability of human mind apprehend a connection by faith. Arguably Calvin is seeking to find a harmony between these views, the effective (but non-physical) presence and the distant source of power. While Calvin seems to have accepted the argument for the restrictions on the location of Christ’s body due to his humanity, he also argues for the effectiveness and instrumentality of the Eucharist.

6.5 Substance and spiritual nourishment

It is clear from *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* (1543) that Calvin is aware of the Aristotelian categories of substance and accident. Here he argues that human

⁶⁸ CTS *Second Defense* 2.249.

⁶⁹ *De Ratio Fidei*, 49-52.

corruption is *accidental* rather than *substantial*, and that the human will is freed from this ‘accidental’ corruption by the Spirit to be able to receive God’s grace by being restored to the original Adamic condition.⁷⁰ Human nature as established by God, he argues, is perfect,⁷¹ and citing Basil he affirms that ‘at the beginning therefore he says that sin was not inherent in man’s substance, but befell him through his own fault, something which we not only acknowledge but carefully safeguard.’⁷² Similarly he cites Irenaeus and Tertullian as arguing that ‘sin is not attached to [man’s] substance.’⁷³ This use of the Aristotelian categories is essential to Calvin’s argument in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, and shows that while he may not have been a particular enthusiast for Aristotle, he at least understood and was able use some of the concepts of Aristotelian philosophy when the need arose.

This use of Aristotelian language did not become incorporated into the later editions of the *Institutes* but, as Todd Billings argues, does provide a clarification on (at least) some of the potentially misleading language used elsewhere in his writings.⁷⁴ When Calvin speaks in terms of the mortification of the flesh and the ‘old man’,⁷⁵ he refers to the accidental, corrupt self and is working in terms of Pauline language. We are then crucified to the ‘old man’, which is enslaved to sin, so that ‘the corruption of the original nature may no longer thrive.’⁷⁶ Billings argues that Pighius misunderstood Calvin, seeing this participation in Christ’s death as a ‘death’ to the good creation in Adam while in fact Calvin saw it as a mortification of the ‘sinful desires’ which corrupt

⁷⁰ ‘Before we are restored in Christ, we derive our origin from Adam.’ CTS *Corinthians* 2.53-4 (on 1 Cor. 15:46).

⁷¹ *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, 40.

⁷² *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, 75.

⁷³ *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, 84 Lane claims that ‘there is no question but that Calvin studied Irenaeus for himself,’ and notes that he cited him extensively and Tertullian over 50 times. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 76; *ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁴ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 47.

⁷⁵ For example in *Inst.* 3.3.5.

⁷⁶ *Inst.* 3.3.9.

the good creation in Adam.⁷⁷ Such a participation in Christ's death is accompanied by a participation in Christ's resurrection so that the image of God is restored.⁷⁸

There are a number of places where Calvin's usage would imply 'significance' or 'meaning' rather than something physical. Here Calvin can also use the term 'matter' (*materiam*) of the Sacraments.⁷⁹ Similarly in regard to Baptism, Calvin declares that 'He who grasps these things has attained the solid truth of Baptism, and, so to speak, its entire substance.'⁸⁰ In regard to the Eucharist, he says that 'I call Christ with his death and resurrection the matter, or substance.'⁸¹

The difficulty of tying down the usage of the term can be seen from Calvin's discussion of the 'false sacraments', where he says that in the 'divinely given' (i.e. true) sacraments there are two aspects of note: 'the substance of the physical thing which is set forth to us, and the form which is impressed upon it by God's Word, in which its whole force lies.' The 'substance' might here be easily read as the physical, material aspect or indeed some other aspect of the bread and wine (for example their capacity to nourish the body) but this is subservient to the 'form' the aim towards which the instrument is intended.

Those who receive Baptism 'in right faith' feel the effective working of Christ's death 'just as a twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it is grafted.'⁸²

The Sacraments work to nourish our souls because their substance is the flesh of Christ, but there is no physical mixing or transfusion and 'Christ's flesh itself does not enter

⁷⁷ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 47.

⁷⁸ *Inst.* 3.3.9.

⁷⁹ For example, CO 2:952. Tony Lane notes that 'matter', along with 'form', are also Aristotelian categories, and suggests that Calvin's use of Aristotle and Aristotelian distinctions are 'extensive'. *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, xxvi.

⁸⁰ *Inst.* 4.16.2.

⁸¹ *Inst.* 4.17.11.

⁸² *Inst.* 4.15.5.

into us.’⁸³ The image of nourishment is highly significant. The life-giving substance of the Sacraments is the ‘flesh of Christ’ in which the promises of God are made manifest. The Sacraments remind us of the fact that Jesus was made to be ‘the bread of life’, but more than that, they ‘give us a relish and savour of that bread’ causing us to ‘feel the power of that bread.’⁸⁴ This concept of spiritual nourishment becomes increasingly significant for Calvin as his theology of the Sacraments develops. References to the Sacrament as ‘spiritual food’ are present in the 1536 *Institutes* although the main content of the concept does not really arise until later.⁸⁵ The concept of the life-giving flesh of Christ is not emphasised in the earliest version of the *Institutes*, but it does gain significant weight in the later editions and is drawn out in the *Short Treatise* (1540). Here Calvin declares that ‘to maintain us in this [spiritual] life, then what is required is not to feed our bodies with corruptible and transitory provisions, but to nourish our souls on better and more profitable diet.’⁸⁶ The ‘spiritual bread’ is ‘the same Word by which our Lord regenerated us’ in which ‘Jesus Christ, who alone is our life, is given and administered to us.’ And what applies to the Word also ‘fitly belongs to the Sacrament of the Supper’ where we are led to communion with Christ.⁸⁷ The imagery of nourishment finds its way into Calvin’s liturgy for both Strassburg and Geneva, where the prayer asks at one point that ‘we who walk in the love and fear of thy name may be nourished by thy goodness,’⁸⁸ and the post-communion prayer refers to Jesus as the ‘meat and drink of life eternal.’⁸⁹ But the image of spiritual nourishment is not limited

⁸³ *Inst.* 4.17.32.

⁸⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.5.

⁸⁵ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 80. Examples of the Eucharist as spiritual nourishment in the 1536 *Institutes* include 4.35 ‘We see this sacred bread of the Lord’s Supper is spiritual food, sweet and delicate to those to whom Christ has shown it to be their life, whom it moves to thanksgiving, for whom it is an exhortation to mutual love among themselves.’ and 4.25 ‘we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ’s body is the food and protection of our spiritual life.’

⁸⁶ *Short Treatise* 143. ‘Pour nous sustenter donc en ceste vie, il n’est pas question de repaistre noz ventres de viands corruptibles et caducques, mais de nourrir noz ames de pasture meilleure et plus precieuse,’ *CO* 5:435.

⁸⁷ *Short Treatise* 144.

⁸⁸ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 201.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 203.

to the Eucharist: if Jesus Christ is the ‘only provision by which our souls are nourished’ that provision is distributed by the Word which is ‘also called bread and water.’⁹⁰ Both Eucharist and Baptism are instruments by which the Word brings us spiritual nourishment.

This movement towards the concept of spiritual nourishment is crucial for Calvin’s mature sacramental theology. He can avoid a materialist interpretation, while maintaining an understanding that we are presented with more than mere signs. It shifts the ground significantly; this is neither a simply physical transaction (receiving bread and wine, for example, as reminders of a past event), nor a ‘magical’ event to bring justification through our participation.⁹¹ It involves our relationship with the whole Christ – body and blood as well as Spirit. François Wendel observes that Calvin was ‘in opposition to all who would allow nothing more than a purely spiritual communion with the spirit of Christ,’ the believer having to enter into a relationship with the spirit of Christ and also with his body and blood.⁹² This relationship is of sufficient importance that Calvin describes Christ as the substance of the Sacraments in the *Short Treatise* (1541), where Calvin says it is necessary that Christ is given to us in the Sacrament so we gain his blessing and adds that ‘for this reason I am accustomed to say that the matter (*matiere*) and substance (*substance*) of the Sacraments is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of them are the gifts and blessings which we have by means of him.’⁹³

In the Eucharist then, two things are exhibited: Jesus himself ‘as source and substance of all good’ and the ‘fruit and efficacy of his passion.’⁹⁴ The Sacrament is not simply an instrument whereby Jesus is presented to us, it is also a means by which we are offered

⁹⁰ *Short Treatise* 143-4.

⁹¹ *Inst.* 4.14.14. ‘Assurance of salvation does not depend upon participation in the sacrament ... justification is lodged in Christ alone.’

⁹² Wendel, *Calvin*, 334.

⁹³ *Short Treatise*, 145-6, *CO* 5:437.

⁹⁴ *Short Treatise*, 146.

the benefits of his death and resurrection. Similarly, in Baptism the believer is not only ‘engrafted into the death and life of Christ,’ but also become ‘sharers in all his blessings.’⁹⁵ For Calvin the meaning of the Sacraments is inherent in the flesh and blood of Christ, for it is in that flesh and blood that the benefits of his death and resurrection have been won and they ‘do not promise anything apart from him.’⁹⁶

If the benefits of what Christ has achieved are to be obtained through his flesh, then our relationship with the flesh of Christ must be at the heart of how Calvin understands the Sacraments. In this Billings sees an appropriation of the Cyril’s application of christology to eucharistic theology.⁹⁷ Calvin appears to appropriate Cyril’s notion that the flesh of Christ is life-giving. Indeed Calvin refers directly to Cyril in saying that Christ has ‘fullness of life to be transmitted to us’⁹⁸ in his the flesh. What is important in this is that Calvin ascribes this to his humanity rather than his divinity. He suggests that when Jesus refers to God granting ‘the Son to have life in himself’ (John 5:26), that he is not referring to ‘those gifts which he had in the Father’s presence from the beginning’ but rather ‘those with which he was adorned in that very flesh wherein he appeared.’ To participate in his flesh is, then, to participate in the life it offers. The language of nourishment flows into the language of vivification in Calvin’s liturgy.⁹⁹

In his commentary on John 6:27, where Jesus speaks of working for food which does not perish, is sealed by God and given by the Son, Calvin says that Jesus was ‘appointed

⁹⁵ *Inst* 4.15.5.

⁹⁶ *Inst.* 4.14.16.

⁹⁷ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 50.

⁹⁸ *Inst.* 4.17.9.

⁹⁹ For example, ‘...let us lift our souls and hearts on high where Jesus Christ is in the glory of his Father, whence we expect him at our redemption. Let us not be fascinated by these earthly and corruptible elements ... Then only shall our souls be disposed to be nourished and vivified by his substance when they are lifted up above all earthly things, attaining even to heaven, and entering the Kingdom of God where he dwells.’ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 207.

to us for that purpose by the Father.’¹⁰⁰ In his exegesis of John 6:51, where Jesus refers to himself as ‘living bread.’ Calvin describes the hierarchy of salvation being accommodated to human capacity, but importantly he emphasises the role of the *flesh* of Jesus.¹⁰¹ It is God’s ‘wonderful purpose’ of exhibiting life in human flesh ‘where formerly there was nothing but the cause of death.’ In this God does not ‘call us above the clouds’ but displays life on earth. The flesh of Christ has become a channel to the life that ‘dwells in his Divinity.’ Calvin goes on to say that ‘in this sense it is called life-giving, because it conveys to us that life which it borrows for us from another quarter.’ That ‘other quarter’ is the righteousness of the divine nature that is manifest in the flesh of Christ, for in it was accomplished the redemption of man, in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sins, and an obedience yielded to God, to reconcile him to us; it was also filled with the sanctification of the Spirit, and at length, having vanquished death, it was received into the heavenly glory.¹⁰²

All the work of God in accommodating himself to human capacity is focussed in the flesh of Christ, and it follows that the flesh of Christ is the substance of the Sacrament to nourish our souls. Indeed, as Davis observes, for Calvin, it is Christ himself, in his flesh and blood, that the Christian enjoys in the Eucharist rather than simply a communion through sharing in the benefits that Christ has obtained. It is only through communion with the vivifying flesh of Christ that the Christian can obtain those benefits.¹⁰³

The notion of ‘spiritual nourishment’ allows the Sacrament to work on two levels for Calvin, where simultaneously both of which are ‘true’ (which is important to Calvin

¹⁰⁰ ‘As this secret power to bestow life, of which he has spoken, might be referred to his Divine essence, he now comes down to the second step, and shows that this life is placed in his flesh, that it may be drawn out of it.’ CTS *John* 1.242 (on John 6:27).

¹⁰¹ CTS *John* 1.262 (on John 6:51).

¹⁰² CTS *John* 1.263 (on John 6:51).

¹⁰³ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 48.

in terms of the Sacraments, for God's Word 'cannot lie or deceive us').¹⁰⁴ The bread and wine remain physical nourishment for the body and yet, through the Spirit, they are instruments by which we are nourished in our souls by faith. The water washes the physical body and yet, through the Spirit, the Sacrament is an instrument which, through faith, goes beyond the 'outward act' to become 'the washing of the soul by the blood of Christ and the mortifying of the flesh.'¹⁰⁵

The 'mortification of the flesh' is the complementary aspect to spiritual nourishment. The death of the old self is an accompaniment to the growth and life of the new self which is engrafted in Christ. This engrafting is the means by which we share in the nature of Christ (in his flesh and therefore also in the result of his divinity). By receiving his spiritual nourishment, being engrafted into his flesh, we can be said to 'participate in' or 'partake of' Christ, and so to 'participate in' or 'partake of' his relationship with the Father. This participation in the divine relationship brings us to consider the nature of that relationship, the *koinonia* of the Trinity.

6.6 *koinonia* and participation

The Greek word 'κοινωνία', which Calvin sees as articulating the believer's participation and communion in Christ, carries a great deal of meaning and offers a useful way in to Calvin's understanding of participation.

George Hunsinger observes, that 'what makes the word *koinonia* untranslatable, and therefore a good candidate for direct appropriation into English (or any language where it may be needed) is the profound and singular connotation of 'mutual indwelling.' Hunsinger describes *koinonia* as meaning that we are not related to God, or to one

¹⁰⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.3.

¹⁰⁵ CTS *Catholic Epistles* 118 (on 1 Pet. 3:21).

another, through a system of external relations but through ‘something like relational fields that interpenetrate, form and participate in each other in countless real though often elusive ways.’¹⁰⁶ Julie Canlis sees Calvin’s use of the term as being qualitatively different from Platonic schemes of ‘participation’, with the relationships it describes characterised by intimacy and differentiation rather than consubstantiation. She suggests that, for Calvin, ‘we do not consort with – or enter into the society of – Jesus. Rather we ‘participate’ – having a relationship of *koinonia* with him.’¹⁰⁷ This *koinonia*, a participation or communion, is a rich concept, carrying, as it does for Calvin, the notion of engrafting and sharing. The understanding of spiritual nourishment flows naturally into this intimate, life giving *koinonia*. Canlis draws on Calvin’s letter to Peter Martyr of 8 August 1555 to illustrate this, in which Calvin suggests that Paul in 1 Cor 1:9 refers to the faithful being called into the communion (κοινωνία) of Christ in preference to ‘fellowship’ (*consortium*) or ‘society’ (*societas*) because it better ‘designates that sacred unity by which the Son of God engrafts us into his body, so that he communicates to us all that is his,’ and in which ‘we so draw life from his flesh and his blood, but they are not improperly called our food.’¹⁰⁸

Communion with Christ is the aim of the Sacraments, and not only of the ‘new’ sacraments (those instituted by Christ), but also of the ‘old law’. Calvin notes how Paul declares that ‘the fathers ate the same spiritual food as we, and explains that food as Christ [1 Corinthians 10:3]’ and that in such case ‘Who dared treat as an empty sign that which revealed the true communion (*communione*) of Christ to the Jews.’¹⁰⁹ The *koinonia* of the Sacraments has been the aim, the *telos*, of creation and continues to be

¹⁰⁶ George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace. Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 257. Cited in Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 7-8.

¹⁰⁷ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ CO 15:723. ‘*Sic illum Pauli locum interpretor, ubi fideles in eius κοινωνίαν vocatos esse dicit (I Cor. 1, 9). Neque vero nomen consortii vel societatis mentem eius satis exprimere videtur, sed mihi sacram illam unitatem designat, qua filius Dei nos in corpus suum inserit, ut nobiscum sua omnia communicet. Ita a carne eius et sanguine vitam haurimus, ut non immerito vocentur nostra alimenta.*’

¹⁰⁹ *Inst.* 4.14.23, CO 2:958.

where God wills us. The intimacy of the relationship is essential, and it is here that the Spirit is at work ‘secretly’ to bring us into *koinonia* with Christ. In introducing the work of the Spirit, Calvin declares that ‘as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us,’ and so, if we are to receive his benefits, he must ‘become ours’ and ‘dwell within us.’¹¹⁰ The dwelling of Christ in us is a *koinonia* with his flesh and it carries with it the benefits that have been obtained by his incarnation.

The *koinonia* with Christ is a reflection on the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, three persons in perfect *koinonia*. The three persons of the Trinity are closely linked in communion, ‘the Son is one God with the Father because he shares with the Father one and the same Spirit; and that the Spirit is not something other than the Father and different from the Son, because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son.’¹¹¹ Commenting on John 14:10, Calvin observes, ‘The Father, therefore, is said to be in Christ, because full divinity dwells in him, and displays its power; and Christ, on the other hand, is said to be in the Father, because by his divine power he shows that he is one with the Father.’¹¹²

The role of Christ as Mediator can then be seen as drawing creation into communion with himself so that it can be in communion with the Father. Thus all creation is related to God in Christ, who mediates creation and its *telos*. Our *telos* is that ‘we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow.’¹¹³ There is a mutual indwelling between the persons of the Trinity to which the Mediator gives us access in himself.

¹¹⁰ *Inst.* 3.1.1.

¹¹¹ *Inst.* 3.13.19.

¹¹² CTS *John* 2.87 (on John 14:10).

¹¹³ CTS Catholic Epistles, 371 (on 2 Pet. 1:4).

If *koinonia* is the fundamental objective for the world that God has made, and specifically communion in the Mediator, then Calvin's doctrine of creation does, as Canlis suggests, 'open before us with breathtaking possibility.'¹¹⁴ The world is opened to the faithful to see 'sparks of [God's] glory, as it were, glittering in every created thing' and it can be considered a 'theatre of the divine glory'.¹¹⁵ The *koinonia* of the Mediator in the Trinity means that through him creation becomes a place of communion where the fatherhood of God, the mediation of the Word and the 'tending' of the spirit are revealed.¹¹⁶

The significance of this concept of a divine *koinonia* is that it offers a way in which Christ as Mediator can draw creation into relationship with the divine. Participation in Christ is participation in the Trinitarian *koinonia* because he holds the divine and human natures together. Here the development of Calvin's understanding of participation after the 1536 *Institutes* is significant. He was clearly influenced heavily by his exegesis of Romans, and the theme of participation is extended both in the later editions of the *Institutes* and his other writing. It is through the period between 1539 and 1543 that Calvin 'develops a theology of participating in the substance of Christ, becoming one with God through the Spirit.'¹¹⁷ The 'called of Jesus Christ' are 'partakers' (*participes*) in him,¹¹⁸ and that participation means that not only are they 'just, but [their] works also are counted just before God, and for this reason, because whatever imperfections there may be in them, are obliterated by the blood of Christ.'¹¹⁹ Our participation is 'a secret union, by which we are joined to [Christ]; so that he, reviving us by his Spirit, transfers

¹¹⁴ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 58.

¹¹⁵ CTS *Hebrews*, 266 (on Heb. 11:3).

¹¹⁶ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 58.

¹¹⁷ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 76.

¹¹⁸ CTS *Romans* 49 (on Rom. 1:7).

¹¹⁹ CTS *Romans* 139 (on Rom. 3:22).

his own virtue to us.’¹²⁰ In this ingrafting not only do we ‘derive the vigour and nourishment of life from Christ, but we also pass from our own to his nature.’¹²¹

Participation in Christ is necessary for the reception of the benefits he has attained in his flesh. In his commentary on Romans 6:4 Calvin says that the object of our being baptised into the death of Christ is that ‘we, being dead to ourselves, may become new creatures,’¹²² adding that Paul ‘rightly makes a transition from a fellowship in death to a fellowship in life.’ This participation is in the ‘flesh’ of Christ, for that is where Calvin sees the benefits of Christ as being held. Canlis observes that Christ’s flesh functions as a synecdoche for his humanity and is thus the locus of human salvation.¹²³ The life within the flesh of Christ flows out as water from ‘a rich and inexhaustible fountain’ from the Godhead to creation and, Calvin declares: ‘Now who does not see that communion of Christ’s flesh and blood is necessary for all who aspire to heavenly life?’¹²⁴

It should be noted that Calvin is not always consistent in his use of the term ‘flesh’ in regard to Christ. He at times uses it to refer in a clearly physical manner to Jesus’ actual body, while at others to Jesus’ full humanity (a humanity that is sustained by the Spirit).¹²⁵ It is in the latter manner that he sees the ‘flesh’ as acting to offer means whereby we can have communion. This full humanity is endowed with a human agency, with a true free will, by the Spirit. This free will was able to be in communion with the Father. Calvin suggests that in Christ there is a harmonization of the will of God and the will of man, ‘as musical sounds, though various and differing from each other, are so far

¹²⁰ CTS *Romans* 222 (on Rom. 6:5).

¹²¹ CTS *Romans* 223 (on Rom. 6:5).

¹²² CTS *Romans* 221 (on Rom. 6:4).

¹²³ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 101.

¹²⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.9.

¹²⁵ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 101.

from being discordant, that they produce sweet melody and fine harmony.’¹²⁶ The humanity of Christ is such that he is neither an extension of the divine will nor autonomous from it.¹²⁷ The Spirit acts to hold the human will of Jesus in communion by making it free to conform to the divine will.

Here the Spirit is working to set the human will free, allowing it to choose a manner of obedience. In considering the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (‘But yet not as I will...’ Matt. 26:39) Calvin notes how Jesus ‘brings his feelings into obedience to God in such a manner as if he had exceeded what was proper.’¹²⁸ This capacity to be able to choose to obey is the mark of the ‘new man’ that will result from our regeneration by the work of the Spirit. Calvin cites Augustine as saying that ‘without the Spirit man’s will is not free, since it has been laid under by shackling and conquering desires’¹²⁹ to underline that, in fallen humanity, ‘the free will has been so enslaved that it can have no power for righteousness.’ In Christ full humanity is so held by the Spirit that it can respond to God freely, with human agency falling under a category of participation.¹³⁰ Drawing on John 6:44 (‘No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him’) Calvin concludes that ‘the pious are so effectively governed by God that they follow him with unwavering intention.’¹³¹ Philip Butin argues that Calvin’s intention is to convey that God’s gracious action in humanity can also, simultaneously, via the Trinity be an authentically human response.¹³²

The authentically human response is obedience. This is not seen as super-human acts of self-discipline or sheer willpower, but much more as communion: with Christ’s ‘Spirit-

¹²⁶ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.233 (on Matt. 26:39).

¹²⁷ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 104.

¹²⁸ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.232 (on Matt. 26:39).

¹²⁹ *Inst.* 2.2.8.

¹³⁰ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 104.

¹³¹ *Inst.* 2.3.10.

¹³² Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 76.

led love for the Father' being 'enacted in every aspect of his life.'¹³³ This obedience is at the core of Christ's salvific ministry, he reconciles us to the Father 'by the whole course of his obedience.'¹³⁴ Thus Paul's testimony, 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous,'¹³⁵ becomes a key text because it refers to 'one man's' obedience and moves the focus away from the possibility that Christ's righteousness is simply his *divine* righteousness. In response to Osiander's suggestion that righteousness is conferred on humanity by the 'deity of Christ,' Calvin argues that 'salvation and life are to be sought from the flesh of Christ in which he sanctified himself, and in which he consecrates Baptism and the Supper.'¹³⁶ Obedience follows out of the relationship between the Son and the Father, the relationship can readily be described as being motivated by love. Christ's obedience is the 'positive righteousness of his obedient and loving life lived in perfect filial relation to the Father from the cradle to the grave.'¹³⁷ This is expanded upon in Calvin's discussion of Baptism where he counters what he sees as the opinion of some of his contemporaries that Jesus submits to Baptism because it was a necessary part of his submission to the law (that is, that it was a *legal* necessity) by offering 'a more simple explanation' that while everyone's calling is different, each calling still requires that we render *relational* 'obedience to God the Father.'¹³⁸ Christ's Baptism is faithful filial obedience, the outworking of the relationship, the *koinonia*, which shapes his life. Christ's willing obedience is an essential part of the atonement, because 'a sacrifice not offered voluntarily would not have furthered righteousness.'¹³⁹ The obedience is willingly given because of the filial relationship, and this opens the relationship to those who are in Christ for they are given access to the Father.

¹³³ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 104.

¹³⁴ *Inst.* 2.16.5.

¹³⁵ Rom. 5:19 (RSV).

¹³⁶ *Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine*, 308.

¹³⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, 'Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 13 (1960), 232.

¹³⁸ CTS Gospel Harmony 1.202 (on Matt. 3:13), Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 105.

¹³⁹ *Inst.* 2.16.5.

The Catechism states that through Christ ‘there is opened up for us a way to the Father, so that with boldness we may come into his presence, and ourselves also offer in sacrifice to him ourselves and all we have.’¹⁴⁰ Brian Gerrish notes how the Father-Son relationship is crucial in Calvin’s understanding. The use of the term ‘father’ is not merely conventional, as though ‘father’ and ‘God’ are interchangeable. The language is expressly familial, expressing the eternal relationship between these two persons of the Trinity. Indeed to refer to God as ‘Father’ would be meaningless without this relationship. Gerrish suggests that for Calvin ‘Father’ is ‘not just a name but a description, and he perceives the coming of Christ as the incarnation of a fatherly love that had always been active in the world.’¹⁴¹ Participating in Christ we are drawn into this filial relationship and reconciliation to God can then be described by Calvin as to ‘have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father.’¹⁴² The relationship is so intimate that Calvin can suggest that our human nature is conformed to the perfect humanity of Jesus. In his commentary of Romans 6:5, in his discussion of ‘ingrafting’, Calvin wants to take the imagery further than that by which ‘the graft draws its aliment from the root’ while retaining its own nature. He sees our ingrafting to Christ as not only providing spiritual nourishment but that in this state ‘we also pass from our own to his nature.’¹⁴³ Thus this is more than a simple union, there is an ‘actual transformation’ in the ‘participatory, uniting act of engrafting.’¹⁴⁴

Calvin sees in Christ’s ‘flesh’ the perfect humanity, to which the Spirit connects us by faith. Participating in his flesh we participate in the *koinonia* of the Trinity as adopted sons and daughters. This understanding underlies his doctrine of the Sacraments: the

¹⁴⁰ *Catechism*, 96.

¹⁴¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 59.

¹⁴² *Inst.* 3.11.1.

¹⁴³ CTS *Romans*, 223 (on Rom. 6:5).

¹⁴⁴ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 94.

‘substance’ of what we are offered in the Sacraments is our ingrafting into Christ, so that we participate in his humanity and thus receive the benefits he has gained for us.

6.7 The question of the unfaithful

If the Sacraments offer the meaning of the promises to the faithful, what do they offer to those who are not among the faithful, but who still take part in the rite? In what manner do they participate, if at all? Here is the crux of the matter. For those understandings which are subject to the possibility of more materialist reading the danger arises that the body and blood of Christ could be seen to be consumed by the unfaithful, but Calvin’s understanding offers a means whereby Christ can be truly offered and yet not debased by unworthy reception.

It is clear that, for Calvin, participation in the rite of the Sacrament is not necessarily participation in the substance of the Sacrament. Using the image of the seal Calvin suggests that there is something more than the physical seal that is required for the seal to have authority. A sealed document can be met with ‘ridicule and scorn’ even when the people know that ‘it was put forth by a prince to attest his will,’ some may ‘treat it with indifference as not applying to them; others even curse it.’¹⁴⁵ Thus, there needs to be a relationship that accepts the authority of the ‘prince’ sealing the document as well as the authenticity of the seal itself. Commenting on Galatians 3:27, Calvin notes how Paul describes the Sacraments in two different manners. When dealing with non-believers he ‘proclaims loudly the emptiness and worthlessness of the outward symbol.’ However, when dealing with believers, ‘who make proper use of the Sacraments,’ his

¹⁴⁵ *Inst.* 4.14.7.

arguments are not directed at the outward symbol but he ‘calls our attention to the actual fact represented by the outward ceremony.’¹⁴⁶

To accept the authority of Christ who is the ‘substance’ of the Sacraments, faith is required.¹⁴⁷ The believer, with ‘sure faith,’ understands what is exhibited in the Sacrament. This aspect of ‘understanding’ is what distinguishes the effective reception of the Sacrament. Even though the unbeliever receives nothing from the Sacrament, its power is undiminished because it still presents the ‘grace of God’ to both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ alike. Here Calvin’s language becomes somewhat difficult, the sense of ‘understanding’ seems not to be simply a cognitive understanding but also has an emotional aspect – one carrying connotations of trust and reliance. It implies a relationship wherein we perceive the body of Christ as ‘our life.’ It has been noted, by Paul Venema, that Calvin’s ‘knowledge of faith’ is *sui generis*,¹⁴⁸ going beyond rational proof and ‘comprehension of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception,’ so that Calvin can say that ‘the knowledge of faith consists in assurance rather than in comprehension.’¹⁴⁹ This assurance rests on God’s goodness, and allows us to stand ‘with tranquil hearts’ in God’s sight.¹⁵⁰ The ‘knowledge’ of God’s action in Christ is such testimony in faith that ‘we cannot otherwise well comprehend the goodness of God unless we gather from it the fruit of great assurance.’¹⁵¹ This is an important aspect of Calvin’s liturgical (as well as theological) understanding, for it maintains the focus on the sacramental liturgies on the ‘substance’, Christ himself and his ‘flesh’ in particular, rather than on the form which is

¹⁴⁶ CTS *Galatians & Ephesians* 111 (on Gal. 3:27).

¹⁴⁷ ‘It is therefore certain that the Lord offers us mercy and the pledge of his grace both in his Sacred Word and in his Sacraments. But it is understood only by those who take Word and Sacraments with sure faith, just as Christ is offered and held forth by the Father to all unto salvation, yet not all acknowledge and receive him.’ *Inst.* 4.14.7.

¹⁴⁸ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 90.

¹⁴⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.14.

¹⁵⁰ *Inst.* 3.2.15.

¹⁵¹ *Inst.* 3.2.16.

in effect ‘accidental’, being simply the instrument by which God has chosen to confirm our salvation in Christ.

The question of reception by the unbeliever is particularly pertinent to the Eucharist. There is both a doctrinal and a practical dimension to the question. In doctrinal terms the issue is what do the unfaithful receive in the bread and wine, in practical terms the question becomes of the form of access to the Supper – should there be any restriction on who may receive? In respect of the doctrinal question, there are two strands that run through Calvin’s discussion. Firstly it is clear that the unfaithful receive only the bare signs,¹⁵² thus only the faithful participate in the body of Christ.

But there is a second strand to this doctrinal question, for Calvin sees the external signs as so tied to the testimony that they seal that if are received in an improper way the unbeliever brings ‘condemnation’ upon himself. This is the mirror image of the reception by the faithful, and ‘it is turned into a deadly poison for all those whose faith it does not nourish and strengthen, and whom it does not arouse to thanksgiving and to love.’¹⁵³ In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 Calvin expounds this idea at some length. He sees Paul’s phrase ‘eat unworthily’ as a general principle referring to the abuse of the Sacrament. It follows that there are ‘various degrees’ of unworthiness.¹⁵⁴ An unrepentant reprobate (for example, a ‘perjurer’, a ‘drunkard’ or a ‘cheat’) receiving the bread and wine would be a ‘token of wanton insult against Christ’ and would receive ‘destruction’. One who while ‘not addicted to any open or flagrant vice’ who was not ‘prepared in heart as became him’ would still reap the penalty for such sign of ‘irreverence’. The body of Christ is received joined with the Spirit, so ‘in what way could the man who is altogether destitute of a living faith and repentance,

¹⁵² McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 44.

¹⁵³ *Inst.* 4.17.40.

¹⁵⁴ CTS *Corinthians* 1.385 (on 1 Cor. 11:27).

having nothing of the Spirit of Christ, receive Christ himself?’ The body of Christ is presented and offered, but it cannot be received without faith – the unworthiness of the unrepentant ‘deprives them of a participation in it.’¹⁵⁵ This extreme language underlines the exhortation to self-examination so that none should take part in the Supper ‘who is not properly and duly prepared.’¹⁵⁶ Here Calvin takes issue with the practice of auricular confession, which he describes as a form of self-torture and one without the merit of effecting the duty of the believer. What is needed is something far more positive than merely reflecting on one’s ‘vileness’ (and even than the sharing of this with the priest), faith and repentance.¹⁵⁷

Repentance and faith are then positive aspects that the believer must bring, which allow them to ‘maintain that unity,’ the *koinonia*, with Christ that is the means by which the benefits of Christ are received. Calvin is clear that the faith and repentance required is not some perfect ideal but an ‘earnest desire of mind’ and a trust in Christ’s grace. He adds that ‘faith, when it is but begun, makes those worthy who were unworthy’ thus indicating a role for the Sacrament in the growth of faith. It suffices for the moment to note the dynamic nature of faith in the Sacrament that the doctrinal dimension of the question of the reception of the Eucharist by unbelievers reveals. The unbeliever is unable to participate in the body of Christ, but even the smallest amount of faith opens the possibility of participation, which in turn strengthens and nurtures faith.

There is an aspect of the question of the unfaithful that comes into Calvin’s discussions of Baptism, and it also sheds some useful light on Calvin’s understanding of the

¹⁵⁵ CTS *Corinthians* 1.389 (on 1 Cor. 11:29).

¹⁵⁶ CTS *Corinthians* 1.387 (on 1 Cor. 11:28).

¹⁵⁷ ‘You see here a method that is most easily apprehended. If you would wish to use aright the benefit afforded by Christ, bring faith and repentance. ... Under repentance I include love; for the man who has learned to renounce himself, that he may give himself up wholly to Christ and his service, will also, without doubt, carefully maintain that unity which Christ has enjoined.’ CTS *Corinthians* 1.388 (on 1 Cor. 11:28).

Sacraments. The issue here is the question of whether the Sacrament is effective if the person administering it is lacking in faith. Calvin is clear in this respect that the validity of the Sacrament is not dependent on the faith or the righteousness of the minister. Indeed, ‘nothing is added to it or taken from it by the worth of him by whose hand it is administered.’¹⁵⁸ As early as the 1536 Institutes he is engaged with refuting the teaching of the Anabaptists, whom he here identifies with the Donatists.¹⁵⁹ It appears that the Anabaptists held Baptism by anyone under ‘papal government’ to be invalid on account of the unworthiness of such ‘impious and idolatrous men.’ Calvin is clearly at odds with this view, which holds his own Baptism to be invalid, but it does not seem that Calvin is simply defending his own Baptism. He shifts the focus from the human realm to divine accommodation. The Sacrament is not to be received as a human action, ‘from the hand’ of the minister or priest, ‘but as if it were from the very hand of God, from whom it doubtless has come.’¹⁶⁰ The minister is simply an instrument through which God works in the same way that a messenger who carries a letter does not lend anything to the authority of the letter that will be recognised by the ‘handwriting and seal.’ The Sacraments carry their authority from the ‘hand and seal of our Lord’ which they bear. Baptism is an accommodated instrument to convey ‘the promise of forgiveness of sins, mortification of the flesh, spiritual vivification and participation in Christ.’ Commenting on Matthew 28:19, Calvin says that ‘there is no other way’ for the Sacrament to be effective than by an understanding of God’s accommodation: in the Father’s reconciling us through the Son, the Son’s sacrifice on the cross and the regenerating action of the Spirit.¹⁶¹ The underlying promise, rather than the external mechanism is the essential aspect. To ‘learn the value of Baptism,’ Calvin says, we should not fix our thought

¹⁵⁸ *Inst.* 4.15.16.

¹⁵⁹ *Inst.* 1536 4.22.

¹⁶⁰ *Inst.* 4.15.16. Battle’s footnote (n573) observes that both Zwingli and Luther similarly opposed the rejection of Baptism by ‘wicked’ ministers.

¹⁶¹ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.387 (on Matt. 28:19).

‘upon the element and the physical appearance, but rather raise it to God’s promises which are there offered to us, and to the inner mysteries which are represented in it.’¹⁶²

Calvin argues that the promise held in the Sacrament does not need to be immediately accepted for the Sacrament to have the value that God intends for it, and its effectiveness is seen when the promise is accepted rather than in the rite itself. Even when the promise has not been grasped it remains ‘fixed and firm and trustworthy’¹⁶³ and can be embraced by faith in later life. This is the basis for Calvin’s response to the objections to paedobaptism that children cannot understand preaching and therefore cannot properly understand the Sacrament, nor are they capable of repentance or faith. He argues that infants are baptized into ‘future repentance and faith,’ and even if these have not been formed in them ‘the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit.’¹⁶⁴ If anything, Calvin sees the administration of the sign of God’s promise to an infant to be a more powerful testimony, for if the child grows to an age where they can be brought to understand the sign ‘they shall be fired with greater zeal for renewal, from learning that they were given the token of it in their first infancy in order that they might meditate upon it throughout life.’ So in infant baptism, the covenant made by God with the believer is confirmed and sealed, the full significance ‘will afterward follow at such time as God himself foresees.’¹⁶⁵

6.8 Conclusion: the substance of the Sacraments as meaning.

This chapter began with the question of what Calvin understood the Sacraments to convey. It would be reasonable to say that in and of themselves they convey nothing for without faith the Sacraments are simply the bare signs. It is apparent that Calvin

¹⁶² *Inst.* 4.16.2.

¹⁶³ *Inst.* 4.15.17.

¹⁶⁴ *Inst.* 4.16.20.

¹⁶⁵ *Inst.* 4.16.21.

understands faith (which is the work of the Spirit) to act as a 'seal' to connect the sign with the reality it signifies. They convince the believer of the reality of the promise that they are attached to.

At the centre of Calvin's understanding of the Eucharist is knowledge: the knowledge of the promise of salvation in Christ, knowledge of the offer of *koinonia* and knowledge of the spiritual nourishment offered by the flesh of Christ. Thus we can say that, if the Spirit's role in the Sacraments is to convince the believer, then what the Sacraments offer is meaning. They offer the reality that the promise of the Word contains, not physically but in terms of our understanding and its effect on the believer. The Sacraments seal the promise, and make it 'real' to the believer. This aspect of Calvin's eucharistic theology has not been sufficiently appreciated in much of the discussion in recent years, particularly in the debate between those who would argue for a 'Catholicizing' or, alternatively, a 'crypto-Zwinglian' position for Calvin.

It is through an understanding of the Eucharist as conveying meaning that Calvin resolves the struggle between questions of 'presence' and 'absence' that plagued the discussions between Lutheran and Zwinglian standpoints, and which even colours contemporary discussion, by a shift from the mechanism of presence to its effect.¹⁶⁶ It is not simply that the Sacraments convey meaning, but also that it is Holy Spirit's work to convince the believer of that meaning. The exhibition of Christ is not physical, but epistemological. The question of physical presence or absence is, for Calvin, irrelevant at best and harmful at worst, and thus attempts to place him somewhere on a spectrum between Luther and Zwingli in terms of an understanding of 'real presence' miss the essential point. It is when we are convinced of the truth of God's promise of our

¹⁶⁶ While T.H.L. Parker notes this shift, as discussed in Chapter 1 (see page 47), he fails to make the link to Calvin's existential epistemology and it would be reasonable to read Parker's interpretation as suggesting that Calvin is simply circumventing the point of conflict as an attempt to establish unity.

salvation that we receive the effect of that promise. This approach of seeing the Sacraments in terms of their meaning underpins Calvin's linking them to the Word, which presents the promise. It also underpins his emphasis on the Sacraments as accommodated instruments through the need for us to truly 'understand' those promises, in terms of knowledge being affective. It also allows Calvin a means by which the unfaithful fail to receive the Body of Christ, in that they fail to truly know the promise exhibited and receive only the bare sign.

The substance, the meaning, of the Sacraments is the truth of the promise that they signify and their effect, as will be discussed in the following chapter, is seen in the twofold grace of justification and sanctification.

Chapter 7. The duplex gratia and the Sacraments

7.1 Introduction: the effect of the Sacraments

Calvin suggests a threefold division of the Eucharist in *Institutes* 4.17.11. The signification (*significatio*) of the Sacrament is contained in the promises, and these are ‘implicit in the sign.’ The matter (*materia*) or substance (*substantia*) of the Sacrament is ‘Christ with his death and resurrection,’ and the effect (*effectus*) of the Sacrament is ‘redemption, righteousness, sanctification and eternal life.’ In considering the work of the Spirit in engendering faith and convincing the believer of the truth of the promises in Chapter 5 we have considered something of the signification and, in looking at Calvin use of substance and its relation to the content of the promise of *koinonia* with Christ in Chapter 6, we have so far considered something of the *significatio* and *substantia* of the Sacraments. Now we turn to the *effectus*, and consider the benefits that the Sacraments bring to the believer. Here we will consider the twofold grace of God, justification and sanctification to answer the question, ‘What does Calvin understand the effects of the Sacraments to be?’

7.2 The *duplex gratia*: the twofold grace of God

Throughout the discussion of Calvin’s understanding of the Sacraments two themes recur, ‘repentance’ (consisting of ‘mortification of the flesh’ and ‘vivification’, which can otherwise be termed ‘sanctification’) and ‘justification’. It seems reasonable then, that some consideration of these themes might help get deeper into Calvin’s sacramental doctrine. The two themes together might well be candidates for Niesel’s ‘golden thread’,¹ a governing intention in the construction of Calvin’s theology. Prior to his

¹ ‘Calvin research suffers from the defect that the golden thread which runs through it has not yet been discovered. Certainly we are well informed about this or that individual feature or doctrine; but what is really in question when he writes his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, what his governing intention is in constructing his theology, remains as yet unknown to us. So long as we have not clearly grasped the

discussion of the ‘twofold grace of God’ (that is sanctification and justification) in the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin opens Book 3 with a discussion of our union with Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit. This underlies much of Calvin’s understanding of the Sacraments where the Spirit, through faith brings us to participate in the substance of Christ. The intention that Calvin sees in drawing us to participate in Christ is that in doing so we may receive the benefits that he has obtained ‘in his flesh’ so that ‘as far as we are concerned, he has not unprofitably come with the name of Saviour.’ Calvin compares this participation to ‘sacred wedlock through which we are made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, and thus one with him.’² This is echoed in Calvin’s Commentary on Ephesians 5:30 where he indicates that by saying that we are made members of Christ’s flesh and bones, Paul is expressing ‘something higher (καὶ ἐηφατικώτερον) and more emphatic’³ than Christ partaking of our human nature. The Spirit’s role, to bring us to participate in Christ so that we can share the gifts given to him from the Father suggest a rounded, Trinitarian, concept of redemption. Cornelius Venema observes that for Calvin ‘redemption is a unified work of the Triune God.’ All the gifts of the Father are in Christ, ‘so those who are his members through the operation of the Spirit lack nothing necessary to their salvation.’⁴

While this understanding of the work of the Spirit to engraft us to Christ through faith is important, Calvin himself suggests that any discussion of faith that did not consider the twofold grace of God ‘would be barren and mutilated and well-nigh useless.’⁵ Throughout his writing Calvin consistently refers to the ‘double grace’ or twofold benefit of our reception of the grace of God in Christ as comprising ‘the sum of the

kernel of the whole nor understood the essential inspiration, no attempt at an exposition of the whole can succeed.’ Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 9.

² *Inst.* 3.1.3 (emphasis mine).

³ CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 323 (on Eph. 5.30).

⁴ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 87.

⁵ *Inst.* 3.3.1.

gospel.⁶ It then follows that we should consider the concepts of justification and sanctification and how they fit within Calvin's understanding of the Sacraments.

The two benefits of justification and sanctification are the two parts of our redemption, both of which are bestowed on us in Christ when he 'communicates to us the righteous of God, partly when he makes us to be counted righteous by a gratuitous reconciliation, and partly when he renews us by his Spirit, that we may lead a godly and holy life.'⁷ These two benefits are closely linked, but distinct. In justification, Calvin sees the believer 'both reckoned righteous in God's judgment and ... accepted on account of his righteousness,'⁸ it is the 'first' or 'principle' of the benefits that we receive in Christ.⁹ Calvin describes knowledge of salvation as 'the principal subject of the gospel' emphasising that the children of God have no other means to obtain the knowledge of salvation than by the forgiveness of sins.¹⁰ Similarly in preaching the Word, 'the principal design of preaching the gospel is, that men may be reconciled to God, and this is accomplished by the unconditional pardon of sins.' He adds, 'Nothing is of more importance to us, than to be able to believe firmly, that our sins do not come into remembrance before God. Zacharias, in his song, calls it the *knowledge of salvation*.'¹¹ Indeed, Calvin suggests that we cannot truly worship God 'sincerely and from the heart' unless the conviction that 'that God is merciful, not in general, but toward us' is 'fixed and deeply rooted in our hearts.'¹²

⁶ 'With good reason, the sum of the gospel is held to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins.' (*Inst.* 3.3.1) is just one example, others include CTS Gospel Harmony 1.179 (on Matt. 3:2), 'it is proper to observe, that the whole gospel consists of two *parts*, – forgiveness of sins, and repentance.'

⁷ CTS *Hebrews* 156 (on Heb. 7:1).

⁸ *Inst.* 3.11.2

⁹ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 96-7. Venema cites a number of passages in which this priority is stated, both in Calvin's sermons and in the 1560 French edition of the *Institutes*.

¹⁰ CTS Gospel Harmony 1.76 (on Luke 1:77).

¹¹ CTS *John* 2.271 (on John 20:23).

¹² CTS *Minor Prophets* 3.406 (on Micah 7:19).

When Calvin looks to define justification he stresses its forensic (or juridical) nature. This is the gracious act of God as judge who accepts the believer into his favour.¹³ This judgement is gracious because, as sin is ‘abominable to God,’ otherwise no sinner could find favour in God’s eyes. This justification cannot be achieved by ‘works’ but when the sinner ‘grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.’ A significant part of this transaction then, is the ‘imputation’ of Christ’s righteousness as well as the forgiveness of sins. Calvin says that ‘to justify’ here ‘means nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed,’ and, ‘since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.’¹⁴ Justification is to be understood within a legal framework, and this can be seen in much of Calvin’s reading of Paul’s Letter to the Romans.¹⁵ In his commentary on Romans 3:9 he underlines this juridical aspect, pointing out that Paul adopts a forensic term, αἰτιάσθαι, which Calvin prefers to translate as ‘we have brought a charge.’¹⁶ Justification is a ‘gratuitous pardon’¹⁷ that frees us, an act of ‘gratuitous mercy,’¹⁸ which achieves what the law could not do. To be justified is ‘to be absolved by the sentence of God, and to be counted just.’¹⁹ This justification is an assurance of our salvation for ‘he who is justified has already obtained salvation.’²⁰

¹³ *Inst.* 3.11.2.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 3.11.3.

¹⁵ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 98.

¹⁶ *CTS Romans*, 124 (on Rom. 3:9).

¹⁷ *CTS Romans*, 277 (on Rom. 8:2).

¹⁸ *CTS Romans*, 278 (on Rom. 8:3).

¹⁹ *CTS Romans*, 324 (on Rom. 8:33).

²⁰ *CTS Romans*, 394 (on Rom. 10:10).

The emphasis on justification as a forensic act encourages us to see it as a juridical transaction where we are ‘acquitted before the tribunal of God,’²¹ and there is a clear intent to separate this from any suggestion that we become ‘just’: the force of justification is that it is an undeserved gift of a gracious God. Calvin repeatedly takes issue with the common medieval and Scholastic tendency to identify the act of ‘justification’ with the process of being made ‘just’.²² Our justification is not reliant on a quality within us nor does it instil a quality, for ‘the gift of righteousness is not a quality with which God endows us, as some absurdly explain it, but a gratuitous imputation of righteousness.’²³ In fact, ‘righteousness’, as a quality, is only to be found in Christ²⁴ and it is expressed as obedience to the Father’s will. It follows that the believer’s justification rests in Christ’s work alone. It is his righteousness that ‘clothes’ the believer in the sight of God, for ‘when the reason is asked, why God loves us and owns us as just, it is necessary that Christ should come forth as one who clothes us with his own righteousness.’²⁵

There are, in Calvin’s discussion of justification, two interrelated elements: the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness. Hence, it is not simply a setting aside of the penalty we should fall under, it is a positive gift of a righteousness which is ‘beyond ourselves.’²⁶

The nature of justification as a free gift in Calvin’s theology has, as Todd Billings has noted, been the subject of considerable debate.²⁷ Much of this debate has made use of

²¹ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 2.82 (on Matt. 12:37).

²² Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 99.

²³ CTS *Romans*, 210 (on Rom. 5:17).

²⁴ ‘It then follows, that righteousness is in Christ, and that it is to be received by us as what peculiarly belongs to him.’ CTS *Romans*, 213 (on Rom 5:19).

²⁵ CTS *Romans*, 157 (on Rom. 4:3).

²⁶ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 101.

²⁷ Billings treats this subject quite extensively, offering an overview of the criticisms of Calvin by ‘Gift theologians’. *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 3-14.

anthropological models, and has been highly critical of Calvin's concept of justification as 'imputation' of Christ's righteousness as a free gift. The idea of salvation as a 'gift' is problematic, it is suggested by Gift theologians such as John Milbank, because imputation leaves the human recipient 'passive' rather than in a reciprocal relationship of gift exchange.²⁸ Billings in turn suggests that Calvin's understanding of gift is different from that of the Gift theologians and from the anthropological model of Marcel Mauss,²⁹ and needs to be assessed on its own merits. It is in the *duplex gratia* that this can be seen in particular focus. Justification, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, is indeed a forensic act, but it is linked to union to Christ where believers come to 'possess' Christ and his righteousness and so is linked to Calvin's doctrine of participation.

The gift of justification is a gift of mercy from the divine judge and, given this, it is not surprising that Calvin repeatedly emphasizes the antithesis between justification by works and justification by faith. If, in our justification, God *freely* chooses both to overlook our sins (forgiveness) and to receive us 'clothed with the righteousness of Christ' then justification cannot be earned by works 'but must be received and acknowledged through faith alone.'³⁰ This is why Calvin must oppose the idea that justification depends on the infusion of a new character, for that would undermine the idea of our justification being a *free* pardon. While Calvin might be able to consider the hypothetical possibility of justification by works under the law, it is not something that we can achieve in reality. Romans 2:13 is, for Calvin, clear proof 'that no one is justified by works; for if they alone are justified by the law who fulfil the law, it follows that no one is justified; for no one can be found who can boast of having fulfilled the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990), 5-7. Cited in Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 3.

³⁰ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 102.

law.³¹ The only way to be accounted as righteous, other than this unachievable possibility, is to have righteousness imputed to us from the one who does fulfil the law.

The free gift of God's grace is received through faith. Faith is here oriented exclusively to God's benevolence and mercy in Christ. Faith finds no 'ground of confidence' in anything other than that Christ be 'wholly embraced,' and any suggestion of 'meritorious work' is an attempt to 'blend the grace of Christ with the merit of works, which is impossible.'³² Calvin describes faith as the 'the instrumental cause whereby the righteousness of Christ is applied to us.'³³ In his commentary on Acts 15:9 he states that it is the 'function of faith to transfer to us what belongs to Christ,' that there is a 'mutual relation between faith and the grace of Christ' and that 'faith does not cleanse us as a virtue or quality poured into our souls, but because it receives the cleanness offered by Christ.'³⁴ Faith therefore is the instrument through which the believer receives the grace of Christ, it is 'passive' in respect of our justification.³⁵ It is the exclusive property of faith to acknowledge that the righteousness we have is freely given to us from Christ, for 'this is the foundation of a freely bestowed righteousness, when we are stripped of a righteousness of our own.'³⁶ In keeping with this, a particular feature of faith in Calvin's scheme is its humility. 'The beginning of faith, indeed, is humility, by which we yield our senses as captives to God.'³⁷ It is the obedience of Christ that is the root of the 'righteousness' which he has, and which is imputed to us. Here the forensic justification blends with the filial relationship of the Son with the Father. It is not a legal duty that Jesus expresses, but a loving relationship, a participation in a *koinonia*.

³¹ CTS *Romans* 96 (on Rom. 2:13).

³² CTS *Galatians & Ephesians* 148 (on Gal. 5:2).

³³ *Inst.* 3.14.17.

³⁴ *Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles*, cited in Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 105.

³⁵ *Inst.* 3.13.5.

³⁶ CTS *Galatians & Ephesians*, 70 (on Gal 2:16).

³⁷ CTS *Isaiah* 3.331 (on Isa. 43:10).

Although Calvin opposes any suggestion that justification in any way makes us ‘just’ in itself, it is clear that it marks a change in our relationship with the Father. Our participation in Christ means that we now relate to the Father through his Son. Indeed by adoption we relate to God as sons and daughters. This is the *koinonia* that the Spirit brings us to participate in as we are engrafted in Christ, witnessing to our adoption and even supplying ‘the very words so that we may fearlessly cry, “Abba, Father!”’³⁸ Philip Butin encapsulates what Calvin sees as the new relationship we enter into as we come into Christ in that ‘the bond of Christ’s relationship with God the Father is identical to the bond of the believer’s relationship with God the Son, because in both cases that bond is God the Spirit.’³⁹ By adoption, we share in the same relationship that the true Son has with Father. This is the manner in which his righteousness is imputed to us. François Wendel seems to miss something of Calvin’s intent when he observes the Christ’s sacrifice ‘modifies, at least considered from the human point of view, the attitude of God himself toward men.’⁴⁰ It is not so much God’s attitude to men that changes in our salvation, but our relationship: we are forgiven because of the work of Christ in his death, for he is the only one who is able, in his human nature, to achieve the life of obedience which the law requires. Through his person as Mediator in whom we participate, his ‘work’, that is his obedience, is transferred to us and we receive the ‘fruits’ of his office as Mediator – justification and sanctification.

Calvin focuses on the work of Christ and, as Venema observes, in regard to ‘the saving significance of Christ’s death, Calvin invariably utilizes terminology appropriate to a juridical and sacrificial setting.’⁴¹ Calvin’s soteriology is built on an understanding of Christ’s willingness, though wholly righteous and innocent himself, to take on himself

³⁸ *Inst.* 3.1.3.

³⁹ Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 83.

⁴⁰ Wendel, *Calvin*, 231.

⁴¹ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 73.

our guilt and the condemnation associated with it. His self-sacrifice is an act on our behalf to impute his righteousness. As Paul van Buren puts it, ‘Christ put himself in the position of being able to represent us.’ This is the purpose of Christ’s becoming human, ‘that he might be the righteous man in our place, putting us to one side, as it were, and taking over the responsibility of performing our work and paying our debt.’⁴² Van Buren also notes that the efficacy of this substitution relies on a unity of will between the Father and the Son,⁴³ indeed Calvin can say that it is the Father who ‘destroyed the force of sin when the curse of sin was transferred to Christ’s flesh.’⁴⁴ Thus justification is not simply the result of the work of Christ, it is the will of both Father and Son.

The atonement, the ground for the imputation of righteousness to the believer, is the first part of Christ’s office as Priest.⁴⁵ He fulfils in his person everything associated with priesthood – he is *priest*, *victim* and *altar*.⁴⁶ This latter aspect is interesting in respect of atonement as the will of God. Commenting on Isaiah 60:7, Calvin notes not only that ‘at that time’ the altar was ‘the approach to gain God’s favour,’ but also that Isaiah’s reference to the altar here ‘ought to lead us to the truth; for Christ is the altar of God, and on him we must offer, if we wish that God should accept our sacrifices.’⁴⁷ Christ’s sacrifice needs no altar for he is himself the altar; his action is not the expression of a principle of atonement, for he is the atonement, the accommodating act of the Father.⁴⁸

Justification is a divine action, a free gift requiring only our trusting acceptance. That does not, however make the believer a mere passive recipient, as such a gratuitous act

⁴² Paul van Buren, *Christ in Our Place* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁴ *Inst.* 2.16.6.

⁴⁵ In *Inst.* 2.16.6 Calvin describes the role of Priest as having two parts, a sacrifice for the expiation of sins and continuing intercession on our behalf.

⁴⁶ John Frederick Jansen, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: Clarke, 1956), 93-4.

⁴⁷ CTS *Isaiah* 4.282-3 (on Isa. 60:7).

⁴⁸ Jansen, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, 94.

calls forth a response in us, when properly apprehended, of heartfelt gratitude.⁴⁹ T.F. Torrance suggested that such a response of gratitude was part of humanity's purpose, and that 'man is intended, then, to image the glory of God in his grateful acknowledgement of God's kindness and mercy, and in recognition of his utter dependence upon the Father.'⁵⁰ This gratitude is what drives the life of piety, a desire to conform to the will of God, to obedience. This is seen in our sanctification, a continuing process wherein, through our participation in Christ our 'flesh' is 'mortified' with his death and we are 'vivified' through his life. Sanctification is an effect of faith, 'repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith'⁵¹ which links sanctification to justification.

The terms 'sanctification', 'repentance' and 'regeneration' are used interchangeably in much of Calvin's writing, and refer to the second benefit of God's grace in Christ that we receive through faith. Repentance is our response to God, mediated by the Spirit: 'it is the true turning of our life to God, a turning that arises from a pure and earnest fear of him; and it consists in the mortification of our flesh and of the old man, and in the vivification of the Spirit.'⁵² In defining repentance as a 'true turning of our life to God,' Calvin identifies it as a conversion rather than resting in the performance of outward acts. There does seem to be at least an element of polemic here, in terms of his opposition to the Roman Catholic practice of penance where they are 'so doggedly set in outward exercises' that all that can be gleaned is that 'repentance is a discipline and austerity that serves partly to tame the flesh, partly to chastise and punish faults' rather

⁴⁹ Gerrish, noting how every gift is an invitation to give thanks, observes, 'What becomes clearer in the final edition of Calvin's *Institutes* is that the father's liberality and his children's answering gratitude, or lack of it, is not only the theme of the Lord's Supper, but a fundamental theme, perhaps the most fundamental them, of [Calvin's] entire system of theology.' Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 19-20.

⁵⁰ Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 31.

⁵¹ *Inst.* 3.3.1.

⁵² *Inst.* 3.3.5.

than to encourage ‘the inward renewal of the mind.’⁵³ This reflects Calvin’s doctrine of knowledge of God, which is ‘not of the tongue but of life,’ and ‘is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.’⁵⁴ It follows from this that only works which spring from this ‘inward renewal of the mind’ can be said to please God as the ‘fruits of repentance’. Calvin observes that such works are ‘called fruits of *repentance*: for *repentance* is an inward matter, which has its seat in the heart and soul, but afterwards yields its fruits in a change of life.’⁵⁵ The inward change ‘manifests itself in the outward life, as a tree produces its fruit.’

Repentance is rooted in a ‘fear of God’ (*timor Dei*) because, Calvin observes, ‘before the mind of the sinner inclines to repentance, it must be aroused by thinking upon divine judgment.’⁵⁶ This rather stark suggestion is moderated by passages that the *timor Dei* is also the humility that one would expect from children recognizing their own disobedience and wishing to make amends and serve their father but who are also confident in his love and mercy.⁵⁷ The fear of the wrath of God is tempered by the understanding that ‘the fear of God, and the true worship of him, depend on a perception of his goodness and favour; for we cannot from the heart worship God ... except this persuasion be really and deeply seated in our hearts, — that he is ever ready to forgive, whenever we flee to him.’⁵⁸

The regeneration of the believer is not instantaneous. Calvin is at pains to reassure those who are (rightly) concerned that they have not yet ‘crucified the flesh’ and achieved a

⁵³ *Inst.* 3.4.1.

⁵⁴ *Inst.* 3.6.4.

⁵⁵ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 1.189-90 (on Matt. 3:8, Luke 3:8).

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 3.3.7.

⁵⁷ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 117.

⁵⁸ CTS *Minor Prophets* 3.401 (on Micah 7:18).

properly pious and righteous life in themselves. He says ‘for this work of God is not completed in the day in which it is begun in us; but it gradually goes on, and by daily advances is brought by degrees to its end.’⁵⁹ Justification frees us from our ‘bondage’ to sin, but there remains in us ‘a continuing occasion for struggle.’⁶⁰ Sanctification is the path of discipleship, and it does much to temper the harsher images that are otherwise all too easily (indeed have all too often) used to place God and humanity in opposition. This is why Calvin says that practices such as excommunication are to be used with ‘gentleness’,⁶¹ because even those who are engrafted in Christ must still struggle with the ‘smouldering cinder of evil’⁶² that remains within them, and they require encouragement to return to the mortification of the flesh.

Sanctification is both ‘mortification of the flesh’ and ‘vivification’. In the former part it is the sacrifice of the Mediator that gives rise to the death of the ‘old man’, our sinful nature. In the latter there is a regeneration of the image of God within us so that we are transformed inwardly: ‘we require a transformation, not only in outward works, but in the soul itself.’⁶³ That transformation requires that first the old self, with all its affections which conflict with the wholehearted love of God and his righteousness, is ‘crucified’ so that we can be remade.⁶⁴ This equates to the command ‘cease to do evil, and do good.’⁶⁵ Christ’s atonement, breaking the law of sin and death, frees us by destroying the ‘old man’ and allowing the Spirit to lead us into the obedient life for which we made. Our regeneration is ‘to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam’s transgression.’⁶⁶

⁵⁹ *CTS Romans*, 226 (on Rom. 6:7).

⁶⁰ *Inst.* 3.3.10.

⁶¹ *Inst.* 4.12.10.

⁶² *Inst.* 3.3.10.

⁶³ *Inst.* 3.3.6.

⁶⁴ *Inst.* 3.3.9.

⁶⁵ *Inst.* 3.3.8.

⁶⁶ *Inst.* 3.3.9.

To underline the reality of the change that sanctification brings (albeit slowly), Calvin follows his discussion of repentance (and some of the errors concerning it) with chapters on ‘The life of the Christian man.’⁶⁷ François Wendel seems to see this as an addition to the more doctrinal slant of the discussion on repentance.⁶⁸ Cornelius Venema, on the other hand, sees this section as indicative of Calvin’s understanding of the *duplex gratia* being worked out throughout our lives, and indicating Calvin’s belief ‘that the Christian life is, in all of its aspects, fundamentally a life in transition from a condition of rebellion and disobedience to a condition of faith and obedient love.’⁶⁹

Calvin’s discussion of the Christian life in the *Institutes* makes it clear that repentance, that is our regeneration, was something to be lived out. Faith will lead us to a knowledge of the love and mercy of God which ‘must enter our heart and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us.’⁷⁰ Indeed, through faith we will be able to hear Christ’s calling and live to our full potential where ‘no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.’⁷¹

Justification and sanctification are closely linked, although Calvin is at great pains to distinguish between them. Wilhelm Niesel points out that the key to understanding the linkage that Calvin establishes between them is in his focus on the Mediator. He notes that ‘when Jesus Christ bestows himself upon us, then we receive salvation as a whole and a unity’ so not only are we ‘made just before God without reservation, although we as men are and remain sinners’ but also ‘our old Adam must die daily and be

⁶⁷ Calvin’s discussion of ‘The life of a Christian man’ starts at *Inst.* 3.6.1.

⁶⁸ ‘No more than Melancthon or than Bucer could Calvin resist the temptation to graft a complete practical morality upon this notion of sanctification. This he expounds in the chapters of the *Institutes* which are devoted to “the life of the Christian man”.’ Wendel, *Calvin*, 245.

⁶⁹ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 122.

⁷⁰ *Inst.* 3.6.4.

⁷¹ *Inst.* 3.10.6.

resurrected as a new man who eternally lives before God in righteousness and true holiness.⁷² Equally they must be distinguished from each other for, if we try to establish a nexus between justification and sanctification to the extent that they become one, as Calvin charges Osiander as doing,⁷³ it would remove any certainty of salvation from us, because while our regeneration is progressing ‘gradually’ (that is, it is not completed in this life) we would know ourselves still ‘liable to the judgment of death before [God’s] tribunal.’⁷⁴ This is, perhaps, Calvin’s real insight. The gift of grace is the first part of the *duplex gratia*, it is the assurance and comfort of knowing that we are accepted, adopted and able to stand in God’s presence because of the outpouring of grace in Jesus. When received in faith, that is when apprehended as our own under the guidance of the Spirit, then a genuine righteousness is imparted to us as we participate in the holiness of Christ through that same Spirit.⁷⁵ Even when we fall short of the obedience we can trust in the assurance of the justification Christ has already achieved for us and continue ‘with continuous effort striving toward this end: that we may surpass ourselves in goodness until we attain to goodness itself.’⁷⁶ The *duplex gratia* holds both the eternal promise and the current transformation of faith together and distinct in such a way that we are called to participate in the life of the one in whom they are held.

7.3 *The duplex gratia in the Sacrament and the ‘fruit’ of participation*

The impact of this understanding of the *duplex gratia* on Calvin’s theology will be seen as we consider how he weaves the concepts of justification and sanctification into his doctrines regarding the Sacraments. The *duplex gratia* provides the context for Calvin’s

⁷² Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 137.

⁷³ *Inst.* 3.11.6.

⁷⁴ *Inst.* 3.11.11.

⁷⁵ Christ ‘communicates to us the righteous of God, partly when he makes us to be counted righteous by a gratuitous reconciliation, and partly when he renews us by his Spirit, that we may lead a godly and holy life.’ CTS *Hebrews* 156 (on Heb. 7:1).

⁷⁶ *Inst.* 3.6.5.

pastoral and metaphysical account of the Sacraments. To return to Calvin's definition of a sacrament, 'it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.'⁷⁷ That is, it is an instrument by which the Father, through the Spirit, brings us to understand by faith that we are *justified* in the Son and so enable our *sanctification*, which draws us to participate more fully in the person of the Son. The words Calvin uses ('conscience', 'good will' and 'piety') echo his discussion of prayer. In some respects this might be expected as both prayer and the Sacraments are elements of our worship of God, but it may also indicate an underlying understanding. We must turn to God for the things that we lack, and in the Sacraments we are faced with our deepest lack (our sinfulness) and with the promise of the fulfilment of our need (our justification and sanctification) that we may draw on 'as from an overflowing spring,' just as we would do for any need that we take to him in prayer.⁷⁸

The *duplex gratia* offers the framework to understand the Sacraments. In a Sacrament the conscience of believers is given the assurance of the first grace, justification. The reality of this assurance can only be grasped by faith, but in so doing the good will of God towards us is revealed. In this manner the Sacraments 'are exercises which make us more certain of the trust-worthiness of God's Word.'⁷⁹ Billings suggests that this emphasis on the promise of 'good will' indicates that for Calvin the Sacraments do not simply manifest divine presence but a particular *type* of presence: 'a gracious presence which assures the believers of God's good will and free pardon, building up the gift of faith.'⁸⁰ Just as Calvin sees justification as the first of the twofold graces, the first role

⁷⁷ *Inst.* 4.14.1.

⁷⁸ *Inst.* 3.20.1.

⁷⁹ *Inst.* 4.14.6.

⁸⁰ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 117.

of the Sacraments is to convey (as a seal to the Word) the offer of redemption in the work of Christ, our Mediator.

From this first role, as from the first aspect of grace, flows a second, which is to draw from us a response where we ‘attest our piety towards him.’ Calvin here uses the term ‘piety’ (*pietas*) in a quite specific manner: it is ‘that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces’ and manifests in a ‘willing service’ to him.⁸¹ Thus the Sacraments are not simply about the reception of Christ, they are about a reception in such a way that believers can render a voluntary response of gratitude and willing service. This willing service is a restoration of the *pietas* of Adam before the Fall, a restoration of the image of God. This is *eucharistic* humanity (responding gratefully to the love of the creator), which is only a possibility through the grace of reconcilliation.

This is, then, a Trinitarian experience: the Word, sealed by the Sacrament, is received by believers who participate in Christ by the promise of the Father. Here we must take issue with Kilian McDonnell when he suggests that Calvin’s theological determinant is ‘the pure will of God electing, predestining, and sanctifying,’ and that the ‘theological point of departure’ for the Church as the Body of Christ ‘is not Incarnation, but election and predestination.’⁸² The incarnation is the basis on which we can participate in the body of Christ, being the means by which the Mediator redeemed humanity,⁸³ and in the incarnation, or more specifically in the sacrifice that it enabled and the imputation of righteousness that this establishes by the Father’s will, we see the outpouring of parental love which we can receive through the faith that the Spirit uses to bring us to participate in the humanity of Christ.

⁸¹ *Inst.* 1.2.1.

⁸² McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 363-4.

⁸³ *Inst.* 2.12.4.

The understanding of the *duplex gratia* as influential in Calvin's interpretation then begins to unwrap some of the mystery of Calvin's sacramental metaphysics. As we have previously noted, for Calvin, Christ is the 'substance' of the Sacraments, which do not promise 'anything but him.'⁸⁴ The sacramental sign has a 'union' with the substance of the Sacrament (that is, Christ) but must be distinguished from it as an instrument rather than the thing itself. It would be inappropriate to place any confidence in the sign or instrument which has no value apart from that substance.⁸⁵ The Sacraments are not causes of our good, they point to the author of all good and to the justification that the author of all good offers in the incarnate Son. Our gratitude and our faith (the faith which makes the union between sign and signified real to us) is then both 'ours' and a 'gift' with a cause and source (the Spirit) which is outside ourselves (*extra nos*).⁸⁶ Similarly, we are not to trust in the Sacraments in and of themselves because their power is *extra nos*. While to receive the signs without recognising their union to the substance of the Sacrament is the 'first vice' to be avoided, the second is to place our trust in the visible sign, the physical rather than spiritual reality, and not 'lift our mind' beyond it ascribing glory where it is due.⁸⁷ This would be part of the rationale for Calvin's opposition to the Roman practice of the adoration of the elements, which he declares a 'dangerous kind of adoration, replete with a carnal and crass conception of God' wherein the people 'worship the gifts in place of the Giver himself.'⁸⁸ Ronald Wallace points to the force of Calvin's objections directed against the tendency of the 'perverse heart of man' that tends to fall into the trap 'that lead him to imagine that in

⁸⁴ *Inst.* 4.14.16.

⁸⁵ 'It is our duty to put no confidence in other creatures which have been destined for our use by God's generosity and beneficence, and through whose ministry he lavishes the gifts of his bounty upon us; nor to admire and proclaim them as the causes of our good. In the same way, neither ought our confidence to inhere in the Sacraments, nor the glory of God be transferred to them. Rather, laying aside all things, both our faith and our confession ought to rise up to him who is the author of the Sacraments and of all things.' *Inst.* 4.14.12.

⁸⁶ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 119.

⁸⁷ *Inst.* 4.14.16.

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 4.17.36.

the means of grace he has acquired some mastery over God whereby he can automatically bring God down into his sphere of need.⁸⁹

Billings notes the importance of the ‘logic of gratitude’ here. Calvin’s concept of *pietas* involves a trust that ‘every good thing’ comes from God, which means that the sacramental elements can only have value inasmuch as they are instruments of God’s purpose.⁹⁰ The ‘good’ here is a restoration of the knowledge of God in Adam before the Fall who was ‘united and bound to his Maker’⁹¹ and who ‘was blessed, not because of his own good actions, but by participation in God.’⁹²

While they may not have value in themselves, the elements of the Sacraments are used by God to exhibit Christ to us, for God ‘truly executes whatever he promises and represents in signs.’⁹³ Believers receive through faith the substance of the Sacrament, ‘for a covenant ratified by the sacrifice of his death would not benefit us unless there were joined to it that secret communication by which we grow into one with Christ.’⁹⁴ As both the justification and the faith are gifts from God a lack of faith in the minister presiding in the Sacrament cannot act as a bar to God’s will being accomplished, just as previously noted in regard to Baptism this is also true of the Eucharist where ‘if there were a devil in the supper which is ministered,’⁹⁵ it could not stop God from accomplishing his work. The ministers who administer the elements ‘are and can do nothing’ in and of themselves.⁹⁶

⁸⁹ Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine*, 171.

⁹⁰ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 120.

⁹¹ *Inst.* 2.1.5.

⁹² *Inst.* 2.2.1.

⁹³ *Inst.* 4.14.17.

⁹⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.20.

⁹⁵ *Serm. Gen. 27:11-19*: ‘mais s’il y avoit un diable en la Cene qui l’administrast, si est-ce qu’il ne peut point empescher que Dieu n’accomplisse son oeuvre.’ *CO* 58:178.

⁹⁶ *Serm. Gen. 27:3-9*: ‘...et ce seroit trop attribuer à ceux qui ne sont et ne peuvent rien,’ *CO* 58:161-2.

The exhibition of Christ in the Sacrament is an instrument whereby God conveys to us the justification that has been achieved through his sacrifice. Both the justification and the faith that we require to know it ('know' that is in Calvin's sense of life-shaping rather than simply cognitive) are gifts from God. 'Knowing' the gift of justification involves our acceptance of it. We 'know' that we are adopted as children of God. Calvin begins the section of the *Institutes* dealing with the Eucharist by affirming that 'God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons.'⁹⁷ The idea of adoption appears to be tied with our participation in Christ, for once we are convinced of our free adoption (a gift not dependant on our own righteousness or worthiness) we draw assurance from our justification and respond being regenerated by the Spirit through that assurance. This is the spiritual nourishment that the gracious Father provides his children: a knowledge of the 'wonderful exchange'⁹⁸ which transfers to us the righteousness of Christ and where we 'also pass from our own to his nature.'⁹⁹ Our assurance of justification leads to a greater trust in the promises of God and a greater acceptance and hence a greater response from the justified sinner – this is the process of sanctification. It is a dynamic process that God drives through his chosen instruments, the Sacraments, and in which we participate in Christ through the Spirit.

The Sacraments, then, can be seen as the gateway to participation in Christ. As we receive through faith the promises they convey, we are assured of the power and reality of those promises and drawn in to participate in Christ, the 'substance' of the Sacrament. The *duplex gratia* is the key to understanding this. The first grace of justification stands as a gracious gift, through which Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Our response, by the power of the Spirit, involves our 'sacrifice of

⁹⁷ *Inst.* 4.17.1.

⁹⁸ *Inst.* 4.17.2.

⁹⁹ CTS *Romans*, 223 (on Rom. 6:5).

praise'¹⁰⁰ and our being transformed into the image of God which is our calling: 'we must call on him and acknowledge his goodness by thanksgiving, and further, that we must do good to our brethren; these are the true sacrifices which Christians ought to offer.'¹⁰¹ This response is our sanctification, in which, through the Spirit we are spiritually fed. Accepting the justification offered in Christ sees the death of the 'old man' and allows for the Spirit to regenerate the image of God within us. There is a spiritual growth that flows out of our participation that draws us ever deeper into that participation. The Sacraments are seen by Calvin, as Lee Palmer Wandel suggests, 'like preaching, as *praxis* – an ongoing dynamic in a process of deepening faith and increasing capacity to discern God in the world.'¹⁰² The liturgical emphasis is not on performance *per se*, the actions of the clergy or the trappings of the table, but on the message the Sacrament conveys and on our response of self-offering in return for the outpouring of divine grace.

In this shift to understanding the Sacraments as *praxis*, we see the context for Calvin's designation of the Sacraments as 'seals' of the Word. If the elements, and indeed the Sacrament as a whole, are to act as signs pointing to the promise of justification in Christ, then it is essential that the link of signification is made explicit. The Word 'should, when preached, make us understand what the visible sign means.'¹⁰³ The Sacraments then become an offer of the gospel made concrete, accommodated to our limited capacity but exhibiting the limitless love and grace of the 'fountain of all good'. The Word, and in the liturgical setting this means preaching that expounds scripture, is a source of knowledge about the Sacraments, and the Sacraments become a source of knowledge in themselves, making plain the relationship of the believer to Christ and

¹⁰⁰ *Inst.* 4.18.17.

¹⁰¹ CTS *Hebrews*, 351 (on Heb. 13:16).

¹⁰² Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 171.

¹⁰³ *Inst.* 4.14.4.

enabling the believer to enjoy more fully the reality of union with Christ and enabling that union to grow.¹⁰⁴ It follows then that ‘nothing more preposterous could happen’ than a ‘silent’ Sacrament, one without the preaching of the Word, for ‘whatever benefit may come to us from the Supper requires the Word: whether we are to be confirmed in faith, or exercised in confession, or aroused to duty, there is need of preaching.’¹⁰⁵ The recipients need to hear the promises that the Sacraments signify so that the promises may ‘beget faith’¹⁰⁶ that allows us to participate in Christ.

There is a undercurrent regarding preaching that suggests that it is not complete, or at least that it is not as effective as it might be, without a sacramental context. The Sacraments are ‘seals’ to add divine authority to the Word, and are an instrument by which we receive the spiritual nourishment from Christ himself, thus it would follow that the heart of worship is when Word and Sacrament combine to both convince us of the promise of justification and enable the Spirit to work in us for our sanctification. This does not mean that the Word is unable to convince us of our justification by itself, which would imply that participation in the Sacrament was *required* for our justification rather than it being a free gift, for our justification ‘is communicated to us no less by the preaching of the gospel than by the seal of the Sacrament, and without the latter can stand unimpaired.’¹⁰⁷ However, it is evident that Calvin sees something more being added to our knowledge when Word and Sacrament combine to ‘confirm and fortify us, and to deliver us from all doubt and uncertainty.’¹⁰⁸ Indeed, it is the immediacy of the Sacrament and its use as an instrument for the Spirit to work in us that means we should recognize the ‘fruits’ that come from it, Calvin claims that while ‘this same grace is offered us by the gospel, yet as in the Supper we have a more ample certainty and fuller

¹⁰⁴ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 214-5.

¹⁰⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.39.

¹⁰⁶ *Inst.* 4.14.4.

¹⁰⁷ *Inst.* 4.14.14.

¹⁰⁸ *Short Treatise* 144.

enjoyment, it is with good reason that we recognize such a fruit as coming from it.¹⁰⁹ The Sacraments add to the Word to build faith, ‘for as a building stands and rests upon its own foundation but is more surely established by columns placed underneath, so faith rests upon the Word of God as a foundation; but when the Sacraments are added, it rests more firmly upon them as upon columns.’¹¹⁰

Together the Word and Sacraments work together under the power of the Spirit to draw us into participation in Christ. This participation, our union with Christ, is worked out as we respond, individually and collectively. This is the ‘fruit’ of our participation, where we join in *koinonia* with Christ and with each other, and with the *koinonia* of the Trinity: ‘Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the Sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’¹¹¹

7.4 *The duplex gratia and our being made ‘conformable to God’ – Calvin’s concept of deification?*

Alongside the doctrinal concern regarding the Sacraments, Calvin shows a strong pastoral concern. His use of the *duplex gratia* in the approach to the Sacraments reflects this. Calvin offers reassurance to believers that they can approach the table while still struggling with their sinful nature.¹¹² True repentance, the process of sanctification,

¹⁰⁹ *Short Treatise* 145. The fruit of the sacrament in thus ‘*plus ample certitude et pleine iouissance.*’ *CO* 5:437.

¹¹⁰ *Inst.* 4.14.6.

¹¹¹ *Inst.* 4.1.9. Calvin defines the marks of the Church in a manner similar to the Augsburg Confession (art. 7), which states that the Church is ‘the congregation of saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.’ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3.11. Wendel, in observing this parallel, suggests that it is ‘by the presence of the means of grace instituted by the Christ, that the Church is constituted,’ and that the proper response of the believing community is ‘to constitute the Church by basing ourselves upon our communion with Christ, manifesting the same outwardly in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.’ *Calvin*, 297-8.

¹¹² ‘Therefore, when we feel our faith to be imperfect, and our conscience not so pure as not to accuse us of many vices, this must not to hinder us from presenting ourselves at the Holy Table of our Lord;

‘makes us battle against the evil which is within us, not for a day or a week, but without end or intermission.’ The ‘end of the gospel,’ through this continuing struggle, is to ‘render us eventually conformable to God,’¹¹³ the regeneration of the image of God within us. But, Calvin adds a suggestion that this may be referred to as being ‘to deify us.’ The question arises of how our regeneration, or our participation in Christ, equates to ‘deification.’ Does he mean something more than our sharing in the benefits that Christ has obtained for us by our *koinonia* with him? Is there a suggestion of a sharing or transfusion of the divine nature?

Carl Mosser argues that Calvin had a clear doctrine of deification, seeing this as more than an eschatological concept, but as the *telos* of humanity’s salvation, and arguing that ‘according to Calvin humanity was created in the image and likeness (which are synonymous for Calvin) of God that our minds might zealously be virtuous and meditate upon eternal life.’¹¹⁴ Human reasoning and understanding are given so that we can live ‘holy and upright lives.’¹¹⁵ Mosser notes how Calvin ‘brings together many of the terms and images of deification,’¹¹⁶ pointing to *Institutes* 4.17.2 as a particular example in which Calvin refers to the ‘wonderful exchange’ where Christ ‘confers immortality on us.’ He also points to *Institutes* 4.17.4, where Calvin says that Christ is called the ‘bread of life’ not in reference to the Sacrament but because ‘being made a sharer in our human mortality, he made us partakers in his divine immortality.’

Mosser prefers the term ‘*theosis*’ to ‘deification’ (the latter he considers an inadequate translation of the former). *Theosis*, he argues is for ‘believers to become by grace what

provided that amid this infirmity we feel in our heart that, without hypocrisy and deceit, we hope for salvation in Christ, and desire to live according to the rule of the gospel.’ *Short Treatise*, 152.

¹¹³ CTS *Catholic Epistles* 371 (on 2 Pet. 1:4).

¹¹⁴ Carl Mosser, ‘The Greatest Possible Blessing: Calvin and Deification,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55.1 (2002), 41.

¹¹⁵ *Inst.* 2.1.1.

¹¹⁶ Mosser, ‘Greatest Possible Blessing,’ 44.

the Son of God is by nature and to receive the blessings that are his by right as undeserved gifts.’ It is ‘a transforming union of the believer with God and Christ.’¹¹⁷ He dismisses Calvin’s accusation of Servetus, that ‘it is one of his delusions to imagine deity in believers,’¹¹⁸ somewhat unconvincingly, as being simply directed against Servetus rather than patristic doctrine.¹¹⁹ He notes that Calvin does not use ‘the boldest language of the Church Fathers,’ suggesting that, as he appears to be aware of the ancient pagan practice of exalting heroic figures to the status of gods, this is ‘probably to prevent misunderstanding rather than because of question about its legitimacy.’¹²⁰ He suggests that Calvin’s discussion of union with Christ and the Father, the indwelling of the Spirit and our sanctification are all ‘pervaded by the language and imagery of *theosis*.’¹²¹

Mosser’s claim has drawn significant criticism. Jonathan Slater, while recognizing the ‘ecumenical promise’ of the suggestion considers it to have ‘little evidence to support it.’¹²² He questions Mosser’s interpretation of Calvin’s understanding of the believer’s union with Christ, for while he affirms that Calvin sees the union involving a sharing of what is Christ’s by nature he points to Calvin’s defence of the distinctness of the two natures in the hypostatic union.

Far from emphasizing a communication of properties from Christ’s divinity to his humanity, Calvin’s emphasis is to guard the full integrity of both natures: Christ is *homoousias* with the Father according to his divinity, and remains so even in the Incarnation. Christ is *homoousias* with us according to his humanity, and remains so even after the resurrection and ascension.¹²³

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹⁸ *Inst.* 4.16.31.

¹¹⁹ Mosser, ‘Greatest Possible Blessing,’ 52.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹²² Jonathan Slater, ‘Salvation as Participation in the Humanity of the Mediator in Calvin’s “Institutes of the Christian Religion:” a Reply to Carl Mosser,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58.1 (2005), 39.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 41.

Slater's argument here is that Calvin sees believers sharing in what is Christ's according to his human nature rather than his divine nature. Similarly, in respect of the restoration of the image of God, rather than being a sharing in the divine nature is a restoration of human nature as it was before the fall of Adam.¹²⁴

This issue may be somewhat clouded by semantic issues. Calvin does not use the categories of late Byzantine theology, which, as Billings notes,¹²⁵ has drawn criticism from a number of Orthodox theologians regarding his account of divine and human agency. Similarly his articulation of 'participation' has drawn criticism from modern writers such as John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward and Simon Oliver (from among the 'Radical Orthodox' theologians). These scholars suggest that although Calvin does rediscover the theme of participation in Christ as found in patristic and Thomistic theology to some extent, a tendency towards (or in some cases a clear stance of) nominalism has the effect of emptying his theology of participation of its former meaning. This, they suggest, creates an arbitrary separation God and humanity.¹²⁶ Both of these lines of criticism may be criticized for failing to listen to Calvin's distinctive voice. Calvin's understanding comes from its own context and, while he does engage with patristic and medieval sources, he will often radically recontextualise these theologies for his own use.¹²⁷ Calvin's understanding of participation is significant in terms of 'deification' because our participation is, through the *duplex gratia*, connected to our transformation by sanctification to a restored image of God. Calvin declares that 'Scripture shows that God the Father, as he has reconciled us to himself in his Christ, has in him stamped for us the likeness to which he would have us conform.'¹²⁸ This is

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹²⁵ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 14.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹²⁷ Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, 52-6. Indeed, Calvin's 'radical recontextualising' is not confined to deification – as will be shown later, his reworking of the medieval understanding of the Sacraments is a 'radical recontextualising' of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

¹²⁸ *Inst.* 3.6.3.

the goal of our self-denial as believers: ‘Therefore, the apostle teaches that God has destined all his children to the end that they be conformed to Christ.’¹²⁹ The union with Christ, which Calvin envisages, is transformative, restoring the image of God that was given to Adam, ‘corrupted’ in the Fall and restored in Christ. The ‘conformation’ that Calvin envisages may not be complete within our earthly life, but it does suggest being remade to participate not only in Christ, but also in the relationships, the *koinonia*, he enjoys within the Trinity. We are, through the Spirit, ‘fully and firmly joined with God only when Christ joins us with him.’¹³⁰ Through Christ we ‘come into communion with God’¹³¹ or, more literally we ‘become participants in God.’¹³² This is the work of the Spirit (in conforming us to Christ) and the work of Christ (in his redemptive work which imputes righteousness to us), thus ‘conforming’ to Christ concerns our participation not just in him but also in the Trinity.

But does this ‘conformation’ equate to a doctrine of deification? As noted earlier there is a significant semantic element to this question, much will depend on what we mean by ‘deification’. Billings notes that recent studies have tended to assume that the theology of late Byzantine figures such as Gregory Palamas can be used to provide a standard definition of deification, even when considering theologians who are unfamiliar with such theologies.¹³³ This has some fairly self-evident problems, not least in that there may be Western theological sources, such as Augustine and Aquinas, who may offer a doctrine of deification which differs from this late Byzantine ‘standard’.¹³⁴ Calvin’s ‘deification’ (if we wish to use the term more widely) concerns a soteriology in which there is a union between humanity and divinity such that redemption involves

¹²⁹ *Inst.* 3.8.1.

¹³⁰ *Inst.* 2.16.3.

¹³¹ *Inst.* 1.13.14.

¹³² ‘*In Dei participationem venimus.*’ *CO* 2:102.

¹³³ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 53.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

being ‘conformed’ to the image of Christ (that is to the image of God) and so incorporated into the Triune life of God, while remaining creatures.

This ‘deification’ does not involve the leakage of divine attributes into human attributes. This is a significant part of Calvin’s dispute with Osiander, especially with regard to Osiander’s claim that believers share the deity of Christ in justification. Osiander’s ‘essential righteousness’ would transfuse God’s essence into the believer,¹³⁵ thus blurring the distinction between justification and sanctification.¹³⁶ Worse yet, Osiander, in suggesting that it is Christ’s divinity that is the source of the righteousness that we receive blurs the role of Mediator and threatens the proper, Trinitarian, basis of salvation.¹³⁷ If Christ is our righteousness in his divinity, what role is there for his humanity? It would seem that Osiander wishes to short-circuit the accommodation that God undertakes, making us receive the divine image before we have undergone ‘mortification of the flesh,’ but worse yet to appropriate for the believer something that belongs to God. Calvin argues that our union with Christ is a ‘fellowship of righteousness’ through which we share in ‘the gifts with which he has been endowed.’¹³⁸ Slater makes the observation that Calvin’s point can be expressed in terms of origin rather than nature: this is God’s righteousness, but not the righteousness of the divinity; our fellowship is with the righteousness of Christ’s human nature.¹³⁹

As Calvin uses the idea, deification is an appropriate term provided it is understood as being hyperbolic. That is, being conformed to God is, ‘if we may so speak,’¹⁴⁰ deification. In this respect Calvin’s understanding of deification is similar to that of Irenaeus. In an Irenaean understanding of deification the doctrine is not about

¹³⁵ *Inst.* 3.11.5.

¹³⁶ *Inst.* 3.11.6.

¹³⁷ *Inst.* 3.11.8.

¹³⁸ *Inst.* 3.11.10.

¹³⁹ Slater, ‘Salvation as Participation,’ 55.

¹⁴⁰ CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 371 (on 2 Pet. 1:4).

possessing the divine nature *per se*, it is ‘about receiving all that God desires to give and about being ‘grown’ by God such that we can actually receive.’¹⁴¹ This would equate in many ways to Calvin’s concept of sanctification where through the Spirit holding us engrafted to Christ we draw spiritual nourishment (that which God desires to give) and are conformed to the image of God (‘grown’ so that we can receive the gift). In Irenaean terms, as long as God gives and humanity receives, the Creator-creature distinction is maintained and there is no ‘leakage’ of attributes that should be considered divine. It is clear that Calvin studied Irenaeus himself,¹⁴² which may well account for the similarities to some extent. Other patristic sources also used ‘deification’ in a hyperbolic manner; Billings notes that Gregory of Nyssa emphasized the hyperbolic nature of the idea to the extent of avoiding the term *theosis* in his writing.¹⁴³ Looking back to the origins of the concept of deification in Plato, Calvin says that ‘Plato meant nothing but this when he often taught that the highest good of the soul is likeness to God, where, when the soul has grasped the knowledge of God, it is wholly transformed into his likeness.’¹⁴⁴

At this point it is worth noting that some help is offered through the semantic maze by Yang-Ho Lee, who notes that Calvin, when considering deification, uses ‘nature’ in a specific manner.¹⁴⁵ ‘But the word *nature* is not here essence but quality.’¹⁴⁶ That is, it implies that ‘We will be like God, but we will not be God.’¹⁴⁷ Since it is not an infusion of the divine nature into the believer, Calvin’s use of the term cannot suggest a *literal* ‘deification’. In this regard Charles Partee is correct when he suggests that ‘deification

¹⁴¹ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 190.

¹⁴² Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 76.

¹⁴³ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 55.

¹⁴⁴ *Inst.* 1.3.3.

¹⁴⁵ Yang-Ho Lee, ‘Calvin on Deification: A Reply to Carl Mosser and Jonathan Slater,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63.3 (2010), 278.

¹⁴⁶ CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 371 (on 2 Pet. 1:4).

¹⁴⁷ Lee, ‘Calvin on Deification,’ 279.

applied to Calvin's theology is a misnomer.'¹⁴⁸ In many respects the arguments regarding deification in Calvin's work then become secondary to what his use of the language and imagery of deification tell us about his soteriology and his theology of the Sacraments.

While it might be of interest to discern a theme of deification in Calvin's writing, this would not in itself constitute what might properly be called a 'doctrine' of deification. Doctrines differentiate between themes and theological alternatives, and it can be argued that Calvin undertook this in part in his discussions on areas connected to deification such as the goodness of creation and the union of divinity and humanity in Christ. But it is in the debate regarding participation that he may be seen as most clearly differentiating his doctrine in this regard, and here we return to Calvin's dispute with Osiander.

Osiander seems, like Calvin, to have been fond of the language of participation, seeing justification as participation in Christ's righteousness. As noted above, he saw this in terms of the believer possessing the divine nature of Christ. For Osiander justification was not the forensic pardon of the sinner by grace, but an infusion of the divine into the believer. This drew condemnation from Lutheran colleagues who, seeing similarities in the emphasis on indwelling and participation, accused Calvin of being 'Osiandran', a charge that Calvin found necessary to refute at some length in the *Institutes*. Calvin held that justification and sanctification are inseparable but distinguishable:

Although we may distinguish them [righteousness and justification], Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess

¹⁴⁸ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 168.

him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided into pieces.¹⁴⁹

Justification is irreducibly forensic; it cannot be earned or achieved by our righteousness, but it always and necessarily leads to sanctification in the believer.¹⁵⁰

Osiander, as Calvin sees it, is rejecting the necessity of Christ's atoning work on the cross for the forgiveness of sin. If justification is the *infusion* of Christ's righteousness, rather than the *imputation* of righteousness, with no concern to 'appease his Father by his sacrifice'¹⁵¹ then Christ's role as Mediator, specifically in terms of his incarnation as a 'servant' and his death on the cross (the ultimate obedience which obtains our justification), is unnecessary. Calvin insists that 'in his flesh', that is, in his humanity, 'righteousness has been manifested to us' so that 'we stand, supported by the sacrifice of Christ's death, before God's judgment seat.'¹⁵²

Thus Calvin argues for a 'forensic moment' of justification distinct from the transformative process that believers undergo through the indwelling of the Spirit.¹⁵³ Forensic pardon is not, as Osiander suggests, opposed to indwelling and participation but intimately linked to them. Our being 'conformed' to God follows from our being freely, forensically, justified by the work of the Spirit in us. In this Calvin would seem to go strongly against the typical trend of doctrines of deification, which place a strong

¹⁴⁹ *Inst.* 3.16.1.

¹⁵⁰ A sense of the inevitability of sanctification following from justification can be gained as *Inst.* 3.16.1 continues: 'Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom he illumines by his wisdom, he redeems; those whom he redeems, he justifies; those whom he justifies, he sanctifies.' Similarly the necessity of redemption for sanctification can be seen in Calvin's argument against Osiander. In CTS *Corinthians* 2.241 (on 2 Cor. 5;21) he notes that 'according to Paul, there is no return to favour with God, except what is founded on the sacrifice of Christ alone.'

¹⁵¹ *Inst.* 3.11.9.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 58.

emphasis on ‘union with Christ’ and tend to deprecate the use of forensic images in soteriology.¹⁵⁴

But Calvin has other reasons to hold this relationship between justification and sanctification. Of particular relevance to the question of deification are the response to the gift of salvation and a concern for the Trinitarian dynamics in our salvation. Firstly Calvin sees salvation as gift from God, free and trustworthy. Sanctification can then be described as the life of gratitude which is our response to the gift. The forensic nature of justification is significant because it means that we are free to respond without concern that we are not righteous, because the gift does not require that of us; it imputes righteousness to us. In late-medieval thinking, which saw the believer as ‘pilgrim’, the assurance of salvation was difficult to emphasize because salvation is dependent on the continuing acts of salvation.¹⁵⁵ Calvin argues that the goal of the Law is that ‘we love our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength.’¹⁵⁶ For this to take place ‘our soul must first be emptied of all other feeling and thought, our heart cleansed of all desires, and our powers gathered and concentrated upon this one point.’¹⁵⁷ We cannot achieve the end to which God calls us to if we live in ‘perpetual dread’, filled with fear and anxiety because we cannot achieve the ‘perfect love’ that the Law requires of us. If justification relies on our receiving righteousness, then any hint of unrighteousness in us negates any assurance we might have if, as Osiander holds, it would be impossible for God ‘to regard as just those who are not just.’¹⁵⁸ With the forensic pardon that Calvin envisages, the believer is freed from the ‘severe requirement

¹⁵⁴ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 172.

¹⁵⁵ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 58. Billings’ suggestion that ‘assurance’ *cannot* be emphasised perhaps overstates the case. It could be argued that the need for assurance would place a much stronger emphasis on the external signs and hence may account to some degree for the reliance on ceremony and on the physical signs that Calvin argues against so strongly. This is, however, a subject that is outside the scope of the current study.

¹⁵⁶ Deut. 6:5.

¹⁵⁷ *Inst.* 3.19.4.

¹⁵⁸ *Inst.* 3.11.12.

of the law' for a perfect love of God and is able to respond in love and gratitude. Unlike servants who 'dare not appear before their masters' unless they have completed their tasks to the letter, believers, freed by our justification in Christ, are like 'sons, who are more generously and candidly treated by their fathers, do not hesitate to offer them incomplete and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted by their fathers, even though they have not quite achieved what their fathers intended.'¹⁵⁹ This freedom means that we can be assured that our attempts will be 'approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be.' We are freed to receive the gift of grace with the joy of children who 'hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God' and 'cheerfully and with great eagerness answer, and follow his leading.'¹⁶⁰ The image to which we are being conformed is that of sons and daughters of God, not fearful slaves to the Law. The joyful obedience that we are called to is a participation in God through Christ, by the indwelling of the Spirit. Osiander's suggestion that there is an infusion of the divine to make us righteous would remove both the assurance of our adoption and the joy it should bring. In so doing it would undermine the promise that the Sacraments seal, the promise of imputed righteousness, and the response of gratitude that is part of sanctification.

With regard to the Trinitarian dynamics in our salvation, in removing the necessity of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, Osiander also fails to account for the essential role of the Spirit. Calvin maintains that Osiander does not 'observe the bond of our unity' with Christ which is the 'secret power of the Spirit.'¹⁶¹ If we were to receive righteousness through infusion of the divinity of Christ then there would a danger that our humanity, our creatureliness would be swallowed by divinity in our salvation. For Calvin,

¹⁵⁹ *Inst.* 3.19.4.

¹⁶⁰ *Inst.* 3.19.5.

¹⁶¹ *Inst.* 3.11.5.

Osiander is ‘bordering on Manichaeism’ in his teaching that the essence of God is transfused in humanity.¹⁶² In his commentary on 2 Peter 1:4, Calvin also makes the point:

The Manicheans formerly dreamt that we are a part of God, and that, after having run the race of life we shall at length revert to our original. There are also at this day fanatics who imagine that we thus pass over into the nature of God, so that he swallows up our nature. Thus they explain what Paul says, that God will be all in all, and in the same sense they take this passage. But such a delirium as this never entered the minds of the holy Apostles; they only intended to say that when divested of all the vices of the flesh, we shall be partakers of divine and blessed immortality and glory, so as to be as it were one with God as far as our capacities will allow.¹⁶³

The *duplex gratia* entails that we are free to respond and that in our adoption as sons and daughters of God our humanity is restored rather than swamped by the divine nature.¹⁶⁴ Our participation in Christ means that without losing our humanity we are drawn into the *koinonia* of the Trinity. This participation is always *in Christ through* the Spirit, and through the Father and Spirit’s indwelling in Christ ‘we possess the whole of deity.’¹⁶⁵ It is important to understand that our union with Christ does not mean that our nature changes: as Partee observes, union with God does not make us God ‘for that would be pantheism.’¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² *Inst.* 3.11.5.

¹⁶³ CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 371 (on 2 Pet. 1:4).

¹⁶⁴ While Calvin is generally held as an ‘arch-enemy of freewill,’ Tony Lane points out that ‘his opposition to it was not as unequivocal as is often supposed.’ While Calvin held that the bound will could not make any move towards goodness, he saw our salvation as entailing a new creation and follows Augustine in saying that ‘grace does not destroy the will but repairs it.’ Even if Christian freedom is not attained in this life, our regeneration grants us the freedom to respond, although perhaps only admits to such freedom grudgingly. Anthony N.S. Lane, ‘Did Calvin Believe in Freewill?’ *Vox Evangelica* 12 (1981), 72-90.

¹⁶⁵ *Inst.* 3.11.5.

¹⁶⁶ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 168.

On balance it would seem difficult to argue strongly that Calvin has a ‘doctrine’ of deification, but the theme, the concept and the language do figure in his writing and cast light on his understanding of our union with Christ and its effects. His understanding of deification rests in the language of ‘becoming God’ as being hyperbolic, and would be comparable to at least some patristic writers. Deification is being ‘conformed to God,’ sanctification, that ‘that we may at length be partakers of eternal life and glory.’¹⁶⁷ This is the intention of God for humanity, expressed in the gospel promises and sealed in the Sacraments. ‘Deification’, provided that it is understood in Calvin’s terms of hyperbole, is a theme within Calvin’s doctrine of our union with Christ and it is in this role that it runs through his discussion of adoption, participation and redemption.

7.5 Baptism and Eucharist, two Sacraments for twofold grace

If salvation can be understood in terms of the *duplex gratia* of justification and sanctification then the twofold grace is at the heart of the two Sacraments. The Sacraments reflect the twofold grace: Baptism promises our justification and the Eucharist is a means to our sanctification. The Sacraments are complementary in nature, and to appreciate Calvin’s understanding of the Eucharist we need to consider something of his understanding of Baptism. Both Sacraments involve drawing us into participation in Christ, both are means by which God makes his promises known to us. Calvin’s use of the language of participation in regard to Baptism can be seen as early as the 1536 *Institutes* where he sees Paul’s words in Romans 6 as not simply encouraging us to follow Christ, to ‘die to our desires’ and to be ‘aroused to righteousness,’ he is pointing to the role of Baptism in making us ‘sharers (*participes*) in his death’ that we may be ‘engrafted’ in it.¹⁶⁸ Baptism is not just an exhortation to die

¹⁶⁷ CTS *Catholic Epistles*, 371 (on 2 Pet. 1:4).

¹⁶⁸ *Inst.* 1536 4.15, CO 1:111.

to the flesh and live by the Spirit; it is an instrument by which God enacts the promise to do so.¹⁶⁹

Calvin's themes of adoption and engrafting are drawn into this understanding. In Baptism 'we are received into the society of the Church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children.'¹⁷⁰ The first thing that Baptism brings is reassurance of our justification: 'it is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight, be recalled, or charged against us.'¹⁷¹ Calvin takes pains to stress that the justification that Baptism attests to is eternal, not restricted to 'past time' such that any subsequent sin needs additional expiation. 'Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our Baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins.'¹⁷² In contrast to the practice of the Roman Church, it is Baptism that is the true 'Sacrament of penance', 'since it has been given to those who are intent on repentance as a confirmation of grace and a seal of assurance.'¹⁷³ The Sacrament seals two distinct but related promises, firstly the 'free pardon of sin' and then 'the grace of the Holy Spirit to reform us to newness of life,'¹⁷⁴ that is the promises of justification and sanctification. Baptism may have a role as a public testimony, but this is secondary to its primary role as an attestation of God's grace to us.

The underlying understanding of the *duplex gratia* is Trinitarian for while 'all the gifts of God proffered in Baptism are found in Christ alone' the person baptizing must invoke the names of the Father and the Holy Spirit because it is the Father who has 'set

¹⁶⁹ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 122.

¹⁷⁰ *Inst.* 4.15.1.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Inst.* 4.15.3.

¹⁷³ *Inst.* 4.19.17.

¹⁷⁴ *Inst.* 4.15.5.

this Mediator among us to gain favour for us in his sight' and our regeneration requires that we are 'imbued with a new and spiritual nature' through the Spirit. Thus, 'For this reason we obtain and, so to speak, clearly discern in the Father the cause, in the Son the matter, and in the Spirit the effect, of our purgation and our regeneration.'¹⁷⁵

It can be seen from this, and from Calvin's emphasis on the mortification and regeneration of the flesh, that Baptism is a sign of the 'first entry into immortal life'¹⁷⁶ and the 'entry into the Church,'¹⁷⁷ but does not detract from the ascetic struggle in which believers are to engage. Baptism is, then, the beginning of the process of mortification. This is elucidated in his treatment of the description in Romans of Paul's 'inner struggle,' where Calvin sees that Paul, whilst being a 'regenerated man', still has a 'perpetual conflict with the vestiges of his flesh' but holds out the consolation that 'those whom the Lord has once received into grace, engrafts into the communion of his Christ, and adopts into the society of the Church through Baptism – so long as they persevere in faith in Christ (even though they are besieged by sin and still carry sin about in themselves) – are absolved of guilt and condemnation.'¹⁷⁸

It is of utmost importance to Calvin that in the Sacraments God carries out what is promised. With the water, the sign, comes the signified reality wherein God 'purifies and washes away sins, and wipes out the remembrance of them' and where we take on our role as adopted sons and daughters of 'he who comes into a unity with us so that, having put on Christ, we may be acknowledged God's children.'¹⁷⁹ In Baptism God performs the action of purification and regeneration; the purpose of this is our union with Christ which is the ground for our adoption: 'for it is beyond any question, that we

¹⁷⁵ *Inst.* 4.15.6.

¹⁷⁶ *Inst.* 4.16.3.

¹⁷⁷ *Inst.* 4.18.19.

¹⁷⁸ *Inst.* 4.15.12.

¹⁷⁹ *Inst.* 4.15.14.

put on Christ in Baptism, and that we are baptized for this end – that we may be one with him.’¹⁸⁰

The reality of this union with Christ, or participation in him, which is effected by God is crucial in how Calvin sees the Sacrament being worked out in liturgical and ecclesial practice. This is quite marked in his defence of infant baptism against the Anabaptists and in his setting of Baptism within the worshipping community. Indeed, Billings argues that for Calvin this is true almost to the extent that ‘a real, substantial participation may be seen to be more primary than faith.’¹⁸¹

The practice of infant baptism has been seen as presenting a problem for Calvin’s insistence on the role of faith in the Sacraments, a matter of significance in his debate with the Anabaptists, and for his need to find a scriptural warrant for the practice given that he had taken a position where he could not simply appeal to the tradition of the Church.¹⁸² Elsewhere Calvin can readily hold together participation in Christ and faith, but the question of the capacity of infants for faith here throws the two into tension. Initially, in the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin takes a stance aligned to that of Luther, that children are capable of faith ‘in common with adults.’¹⁸³ This actually appears to go further than the ‘latent faith’ that Wendel assigns to the Lutheran position,¹⁸⁴ although Calvin is clear that faith does not *always* begin ‘from the mother’s womb’ but that ‘all God’s elect enter into eternal life through faith, at whatever point in age they are released from this prisonhouse of corruption.’¹⁸⁵ However, in the 1539 *Institutes*, Calvin modifies his stance significantly. His understanding becomes that the Sacrament signifies the potential for faith that exists as a ‘seed’ within the infant: ‘infants are

¹⁸⁰ CTS *Romans*, 220 (on Rom. 6:3).

¹⁸¹ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 124.

¹⁸² Wendel, *Calvin*, 323.

¹⁸³ *Inst.* 1536, 4.23.

¹⁸⁴ Wendel, *Calvin*, 323.

¹⁸⁵ *Inst.* 1536 4.23.

baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit.¹⁸⁶ Drawing on the parallel between Baptism and circumcision, Calvin affirms that ‘since God communicated circumcision to infants as a sacrament of repentance and of faith, it does not seem absurd if they are now made participants in Baptism — unless men choose to rage openly at God’s institution.’¹⁸⁷ In his dispute with the Anabaptists he argues that the sign can, in fact, precede the truth it signifies.¹⁸⁸ If the sign precedes the faith it promises it does not in any way reduce God’s fulfilment of the promise. Those who grow to an age where they are capable of understanding the sign ‘shall be fired with greater zeal for renewal, from learning that they were given the token of it in their first infancy in order that they might meditate upon it throughout life.’¹⁸⁹ Indeed, to deny children the Sacrament would be to seek to deny them the assurance of justification in the forgiveness of sin which is needed ‘even from the time in our mother’s womb,’ and ‘since God does not cut off from childhood the hope of mercy, but rather makes it sure, why should we take away the sign, much inferior to the thing itself?’¹⁹⁰ But it is not simply the possibility of faith that means that children should be included in Baptism, they are, through their families already in relationship with Christ by an extension of covenant wherein ‘God is so good and generous to his own as to be pleased, for their sake, also to count among his people the children whom they have begotten.’¹⁹¹ Being already a part of the Church, ‘they have been born directly into the inheritance of the covenant, and are expected by God,’¹⁹² and should be received into Baptism. There is no requirement that the Sacrament should be immediately effective, it

¹⁸⁶ *Inst.* 4.16.20.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Brief Instruction*, 50.

¹⁸⁹ *Inst.* 4.16.21.

¹⁹⁰ *Inst.* 4.16.22.

¹⁹¹ *Inst.* 4.16.15.

¹⁹² *Inst.* 4.16.24.

is a promise held out to the infant as much as a public declaration by the believer.¹⁹³ As the infant grows, there is a development in capacity and the growth of an ability to respond in gratitude. This willingness to respond suggests, Billings argues, that infants can receive the *duplex gratia*,¹⁹⁴ and certainly Calvin appears to include them among those who are ‘engrafted into the body of Christ.’¹⁹⁵

Calvin’s reliance on the analogy between circumcision and Baptism seems to include a significant element of participation in the common element of a covenant of grace. The Old Testament ‘sacraments’, as mentioned earlier,¹⁹⁶ offer in themselves both promise and the means by which God will fulfil the promise. The language clearly echoes the *duplex gratia*: circumcision is a sign of adoption for the Jews ‘as the people and household of God’ and their profession that they were to ‘enlist in God’s service’ representing repentance.¹⁹⁷ It is a sign of mortification of the flesh – a circumcision of the heart¹⁹⁸ – and of regeneration. The promise in both circumcision and Baptism is of ‘God’s fatherly favour, of forgiveness of sins, and of eternal life’;¹⁹⁹ Jewish children participated in Abraham’s adoption by participating in the covenant with Abraham through which God ‘expressly declares that the circumcision of a tiny infant will be in lieu of a seal to certify the promise of the covenant.’²⁰⁰

As he expands the analogy between circumcision and Baptism, Calvin uses the language of lineage to develop the underlying sense of the children of believers being part of the household of the Church and fellow adopted children. Here Billings makes

¹⁹³ ‘Accordingly, in infant baptism nothing more of present effectiveness must be required than to confirm and ratify the covenant made with them by the Lord. The remaining significance of this sacrament will afterward follow at such time as God himself foresees.’ *Inst.* 4.16.21.

¹⁹⁴ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 125.

¹⁹⁵ *Inst.* 4.16.22.

¹⁹⁶ Chapter 6, pp. 146-148.

¹⁹⁷ *Inst.* 4.16.4.

¹⁹⁸ *Inst.* 4.16.3.

¹⁹⁹ *Inst.* 4.16.4.

²⁰⁰ *Inst.* 4.16.5.

an interesting observation, that just as he ‘takes seriously the notion that original sin means a participation in the fallen Adam, the promise to Abraham and his ‘seed’ also involves real participation in Christ.’²⁰¹ Thus his sense of the ‘oneness’ of humanity with Adam (in his fallen state) is a necessary corollary to his theology of ‘oneness’ with Christ. This participation is not a matter of imitation, but a real union. Opposing the Anabaptists, Calvin notes that they would exclude children from salvation in considering them ‘solely as children of Adam until they reach an appropriate age for the second birth’ because ‘in Adam we can but die.’²⁰² Only by participation in Christ can we be brought to life. This does seem to back the claim Billings makes, that Calvin places a greater force on participation than faith, but such a claim may not take fully into account Calvin’s willingness to simply allow God to have sufficient grace to do whatever ‘he alone foresees will be expedient’ in terms of renewal by the Spirit for those too young to evidence faith.

The temporal separation of sign and the spiritual reality it signifies which Calvin posits for Baptism has already been established in his discussion on believer’s baptism. Calvin makes it clear that in the case of adults coming to Baptism the forgiveness of sin that comes from participation in Christ by faith has already occurred. Equally he can argue that the validity of Baptism is maintained despite any ‘delay’ over the repentance of the person baptised.²⁰³ This makes Baptism distinct from the Eucharist where it is clear that Calvin sees God imparting the spiritual reality with the external signs. For Calvin our justification must be, in certain respects at least, temporally dislocated from the Sacrament since it rests in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The role of the Mediator is both temporal (in an incarnate, historic act) and eternal (reaching across time). Baptism

²⁰¹ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 125-6.

²⁰² *Inst.* 4.16.17.

²⁰³ ‘We therefore confess that for that time Baptism benefited us not at all, inasmuch as the promise offered us in it – without which Baptism is nothing – lay neglected. Now when, by God’s grace, we begin to repent, we accuse our blindness and hardness of heart – we who were for so long ungrateful toward his great goodness. But we believe that the promise itself did not vanish.’ *Inst.* 4.15.17.

is a ‘testimony to us that we are not only engrafted into the death and life of Christ, but so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings.’²⁰⁴ Participation in Christ, being engrafted into his death and life, is the benefit that is offered and conveyed through the Sacrament. It is this participation that conveys the benefits of forgiveness of sin (by imputation) and newness of life (in mortification of the flesh and regeneration), and the sign is conjoined with that participation through faith, the knowledge on both cognitive and spiritual level of the grace of God. The Sacrament is given for the ‘arousing, nourishing, and confirming of our faith,’²⁰⁵ thus in some (particularly those baptized as infants) it acts to ‘arouse’ faith when its meaning, our engrafting to Christ, becomes understood and accepted. In others (particularly those who come as adults) it acts to confirm faith, and it stands as a reminder of our adoption for the continual nurture of faith.²⁰⁶ The sign is linked to the reality of our redemption and we participate in that reality as the Spirit engrafts us into Christ. In those who are part of the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Church and ‘as it were by hereditary right, that they may be partakers of the same adoption’²⁰⁷ are offered a promise which may ‘arouse’ faith as their capacity for it grows, whilst in those outside the Church who come to faith can have their faith ‘confirmed’ by Baptism.

The importance of the *koinonia* of the Church is emphasised by Calvin’s insistence that those wishes to join the Church (as adults) should be required to demonstrate their ‘faith and repentance.’ Drawing on Ephesians 2:12, where Paul argues that Gentiles ‘immersed in idolatry’ are outside the covenant, Calvin declares:

²⁰⁴ *Inst.* 4.15.6.

²⁰⁵ *Inst.* 4.15.14.

²⁰⁶ Although ‘faith’ itself may be viewed as an absolute, requiring ‘full and fixed certainty, such as men are wont to have from things experienced and proved’ (*Inst.* 3.2.15), it is clearly held to varying degree as it is ‘violently buffeted hither and thither’ (*Inst.* 3.2.24) in our daily struggles. It is the work of the Spirit to give us the faith we need to participate in Christ and grow ‘more and more into one body’ with him.

²⁰⁷ CTS Psalms 4.139 (on Ps. 103.17).

Those who embrace faith in Christ as grown men, since they were previously strangers to the covenant, are not to be given the badge of Baptism unless they first have faith and repentance, which alone can give access to the society of the covenant.²⁰⁸

This stance would seem to be less about the Sacrament being a ‘mark by which we confess our religion before men,’ which Calvin sees as a deficient understanding of the Sacrament,²⁰⁹ but reflects the seriousness of joining the *koinonia* of the Church ‘into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith.’²¹⁰ The Church is another means, accommodated to our weakness, by which God communicates to us the gospel of Jesus Christ for ‘in order that the preaching of the gospel might flourish, he deposited this treasure in the Church.’²¹¹ Because of the role which the Church has, there is a need for its members to submit to a common discipline, for ‘if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more necessary in the Church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible.’²¹² Joining the Church (as opposed to confirming membership of it) will then require the candidate to show that they understand the community which they propose to join to avoid its corruption: ‘For if a Turk should offer himself for Baptism, we could not easily baptize him unless he gave a confession satisfactory to the Church.’²¹³

²⁰⁸ *Inst.* 4.16.24.

²⁰⁹ *Inst.* 4.15.1.

²¹⁰ *Inst.* 4.1.1.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Inst.* 4.12.1.

²¹³ *Inst.* 4.16.24.

Venema observes how Calvin underscores the purpose of the Church, being ‘the tangible medium wherein the Triune God meets us in the here and now.’²¹⁴ This is carried out in the two ‘marks of the Church’, preaching and the Sacraments.²¹⁵ Both of these are aids to the development of faith, for ‘these can never exist without bringing forth fruit and prospering by God’s blessing.’²¹⁶ While Calvin’s ecclesiology deserves a much fuller treatment than can be reasonably be given here, it is worth noting that this role of conveying the gospel in Word and Sacrament colours Calvin’s thinking about Baptism. Those baptized as infants can be expected to be brought up to understand the doctrines of the Church (and so share in the task of attaining ‘the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God’²¹⁷). This is assured by the requirement for parents to have children attend Catechism²¹⁸ and for godparents to be restricted to ‘men of faith and of our communion.’²¹⁹ Those wishing to join from outside the community must then show that they will not disrupt the community because such disruption will damage the *koinonia* of the Church and so have a detrimental effect on our participation in God: ‘So powerful is participation in the Church that it keeps us in the society of God.’²²⁰

The setting of Baptism within the worshipping community emphasises the relationships within the ‘body of Christ’, the *koinonia* amongst the faithful that reflects our participation in Christ. The correct usage was for the person to be presented to the ‘assembly of believers’ and for the Sacrament to be carried out with the ‘whole Church looking on as witness.’²²¹ According to the *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, Baptism

²¹⁴ Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ*, 211.

²¹⁵ *Inst.* 4.1.9.

²¹⁶ *Inst.* 4.1.10.

²¹⁷ *Inst.* 4.3.1.

²¹⁸ *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, 69.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²²⁰ *Inst.* 4.1.3.

²²¹ *Inst.* 4.15.19.

was to take place at the time of the sermon with the font placed near to the pulpit,²²² so that the ‘recitation of this mystery’ would be better heard – this would suggest the importance of the practice is in acting as a reminder for those who gathered around the Baptism of their own Baptism. All this is calculated to stress the importance of being part of the Church, the community of believers.

While Baptism, as a Sacrament, offers all the benefits of our union with Christ the emphasis on the forgiveness of sin is clear. The first Sacrament emphasises the first aspect of the twofold grace. It follows quite naturally that the Calvin’s understanding of the Eucharist places its emphasis upon regeneration, the second aspect. Again this is not to suggest that either Sacrament offers only part of the *duplex gratia*, but while Baptism is the sign of entry into the community of the Church, the Eucharist is the sign of our renewal and spiritual restoration, in which we ‘have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours.’²²³ The offer of the *duplex gratia* in both Sacraments follows from Calvin’s understanding of justification and sanctification as distinguishable but inseparable, they are two aspects of the same process: they are the means by which God has chosen to seal his promises to us and engraft us into Christ.

If Baptism is the sacrament of entry, the Eucharist is the sacrament of regeneration with an understanding of spiritual nourishment: ‘it is to seal and confirm that promise by which he testifies that his flesh is food indeed and his blood is drink which feed us unto eternal life.’²²⁴ The inseparability of the twofold grace is important because the ‘feeding’ begins ‘in living experience we grasp the efficacy of his death,’²²⁵ this

²²² *Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, 66.

²²³ *Inst.* 4.17.2.

²²⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.4.

²²⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.4.

understanding (which is more than cognitive) draws forth a response as ‘Christ truly grows into one with us.’²²⁶

The distinction between justification and sanctification is important for Calvin’s discussion of the understanding of the Eucharist as sacrifice. Throughout the various editions of the *Institutes*, one of the main arguments against the Mass is the manner in which the Roman Catholic Church has perpetrated a ‘pestilential error’ by teaching that it ‘is a sacrifice and offering to obtain forgiveness of sins.’²²⁷ The issue is clear, if any form of sacrifice is *required* to obtain our justification then it would imply that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was not sufficient in itself, negating his office as Mediator, and also would imply that the effectiveness of the sacrifice would rest in the work of the priest. Thus this understanding of the Mass ‘wipes out the true and unique death of Christ and drives it from the memory of men’²²⁸ and the need for daily sacrifices requires the appointment of priests as ‘successors and vicars’ of Christ and ‘by this substitution they not only deprive Christ of his honour, and snatch from him the prerogative of that eternal priesthood, but try to cast him down from the right hand of his Father, where he cannot sit immortal without at the same time remaining eternal priest.’²²⁹

As he expands on the subject, Calvin claims that sacrifices come in two different types. Calvin saw the sacrifices under the Law of Moses as showing that ‘either an offering was made for sin by some kind of satisfaction, by which guilt was redeemed before God; or it was a symbol of divine worship and an attestation of religion’²³⁰ and in the latter form might represent supplication, thanksgiving or a renewal of commitment. The

²²⁶ *Inst.* 4.17.10.

²²⁷ *Inst.* 4.18.1.

²²⁸ *Inst.* 4.18.5.

²²⁹ *Inst.* 4.18.2.

²³⁰ *Inst.* 4.18.13.

former is ‘a sacrifice of propitiation or of expiation’²³¹ and corresponds to the first grace where Christ’s sacrifice is an expiation for our sins and we receive his righteousness by imputation. The Old Testament sacrifices then ‘prefigured a true sacrifice such as was finally accomplished in reality by Christ alone; and by him alone, because no other could have done it.’²³² The sacrifice of Christ is ‘eternal’ in effectiveness and force, doing all that was necessary ‘to recover the Father’s favour, to obtain forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and salvation,’ and so leaves no room afterwards ‘for any other sacrificial victim.’

In our adoption, participating in Christ, the first step is realizing (‘grasping’) the way in which Christ has accomplished what sinners could never do for themselves. This may well be the ‘entire substance’ of Baptism but it is also the ground for the Eucharist.²³³ Christ is the eternal priest who has, and is, the perfect sacrifice and therefore Christian clergy are not ‘priests’ and the Eucharist cannot be a sacrifice (at least, it cannot be a sacrifice of expiation). Even the Old Testament sacrifices were insufficient to obtain forgiveness of sins in themselves, their effectiveness was ‘because they prefigured a true sacrifice such as was finally accomplished in reality by Christ alone.’²³⁴

Where Calvin does use the language of sacrifice for the Eucharist it is in terms of the second form that he notes, the ‘sacrifice of thanksgiving’. This second type of sacrifice is the grateful reaction of believers to the gifts of God. It includes ‘all the duties of love’ and ‘whatever we do in the worship of God,’ and it depends ‘upon the greater sacrifice, by which we are consecrated in soul and body to be a holy temple to the Lord.’²³⁵ This is an exact parallel to the relationship of the *duplex gratia*, just as the second grace,

²³¹ *Inst.* 4.18.13.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Inst.* 4.16.2.

²³⁴ *Inst.* 4.18.13.

²³⁵ *Inst.* 4.18.16.

sanctification, depends upon the first, justification, the sacrifice of thanksgiving depends upon the expiatory sacrifice of Christ.²³⁶ Given that the only sacrifice that can merit forgiveness of sin is that of Christ himself, it follows that this kind of ‘sacrifice’ ‘has nothing to do with appeasing God’s wrath, with obtaining forgiveness of sins, or with meriting righteousness; but is concerned solely with magnifying and exalting God.’²³⁷ In fact such a ‘sacrifice’ can only be acceptable to God ‘from the hands of those whom he has reconciled to himself by other means.’²³⁸ This is a response of gratitude, and in this light the Eucharist provides a focus for humanity’s response. As Brian Gerrish puts it: ‘In the Sacrament God does still more clearly what he always does, providing his children with the bread of life; and they in turn enact the meaning of authentic human existence as a continuous sacrifice of praise.’²³⁹ In this second sense of ‘sacrifice’, all believers are ‘priests’²⁴⁰ and the Eucharist *is* a sacrifice, indeed ‘the Lord’s Supper cannot be without a sacrifice of this kind, in which, while we proclaim his death and give thanks, we do nothing but offer a sacrifice of praise.’²⁴¹

Although Calvin does not make an explicit connection, the two types of ‘sacrifice’ would correspond strongly with the two types of ‘grace’. These two work together: this involves Christ doing for sinners what they cannot do for themselves, restoring them to the abundant favour of the Father, and it involves a transformation by the Spirit in which the believers offer themselves to God and to each other. This Trinitarian setting for the *duplex gratia* underlies the participation of believers in Christ – receiving the forgiveness which Christ alone has achieved for us, we respond in the Spirit who

²³⁶ Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift*, 132. Billings also picks up an example of Calvin using the idea of sacrifice being applied to the life of discipleship involving a ‘willingness to suffer’ from a letter of 19 April 1556 where he suggests that ‘we should dedicate our lives as a sacrifice to him.’ *Ibid.*, n. 100.

²³⁷ *Inst.* 4.18.16.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 158.

²⁴⁰ *Inst.* 4.18.17. ‘All Christians are called a royal priesthood;’ ‘[Christ] ... has made us a kingdom and priests unto the Father.’

²⁴¹ *Inst.* 4.18.17.

regenerates us into joyfully obedient adopted sons and daughters. In the Sacrament the response of gratitude is part of the proper relationship between God and humanity being restored. Again Gerrish points to the place of gratitude in the divine design where ‘the existence of humanity in God’s design is defined by thankfulness, the correlate of God’s goodness, and the existence of humanity in sin is defined by thanklessness, the antithesis of God’s goodness.’²⁴²

Given the distinct emphases of the two Sacraments, it is not unreasonable that the frequency of celebration should reflect the emphases. Baptism, the sacrament of entry into the *koinonia* of the Church and participation in the *koinonia* of the Trinity is a once and only event in the same way that the expiatory sacrifice of Christ is a once and only event. On the other hand, the Eucharist, as a ‘sacrifice of thanksgiving’ reflects the ongoing response and growth in our participation in Christ.

God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life.²⁴³

In this light the Eucharist is intended as a frequent celebration, helping believers ‘by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim his goodness.’²⁴⁴ The response of the believer is not only deepening their relationship with God, but also their participation in the community of the Church: ‘we reciprocally bind ourselves to all the duties of love in order that none of us may permit anything that can harm our brother, or overlook anything that can help him, where necessity demands and ability suffices.’²⁴⁵ Lee Palmer Wandel notes that while the majority of evangelicals condemned the medieval

²⁴² Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 41.

²⁴³ *Inst.* 4.17.1.

²⁴⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.44.

²⁴⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.44.

requirement of annual communion as non-scriptural, Calvin explicitly situates the Eucharist within a ‘dialogic process’ where the believer does not simply deepen their faith, but increases their capacity to ‘read the signs’ of the Supper itself.²⁴⁶ The Supper is not ‘external’, a ceremony to be performed, or even simply ‘worship’, a mode of honouring God, in the sense that Zwingli or Luther might use the term. The Eucharist is mutual, Christ is made one with us and we with him. This mutual participation is not completed in a single event. We are made one with Christ over a period of time, therefore frequent communion is an essential aspect of our growth as Christians: it transforms ‘one’s being and epistemology.’²⁴⁷

7.6 Conclusion: The effect of the Sacraments as the reception of the duplex gratia

In the Sacraments Calvin sees a concrete form of the *duplex gratia*. They are instruments accommodated to human weakness in which God chooses to confirm the gifts revealed in the gospel. They are a gateway into our participation in Christ. In the Eucharist Christ is truly exhibited, under the influence of faith (the gift of the Spirit) not only are we made aware of what he has done for us, but we are also enabled to place trust in his redemptive act: we are convinced of the truth of the promise, and of the substance. This is at the heart of Calvin’s concept of our adoption where the Spirit connects us to the ‘flesh’, that is the humanity, of Christ and all the he did through his incarnation. That allows us to be considered ‘sons of God’ and so enter into the *koinonia* that exists within the Godhead. The Spirit also regenerates our humanity to restore the freedom to obey that originally was found in Adam before the fall and is now seen in Christ, this allows us to respond freely in thanksgiving and gratitude.

²⁴⁶ Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation*, 171.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

In this Trinitarian context, the Sacraments not only witness to our adoption but provide the means by which that adoption is made meaningful to us and by which it becomes effective. The trust we are freed to place in our adoption is our participation in Christ. Through our participation we are spiritually ‘fed’ and grow and thus our engrafting in Christ becomes a *process* by which we are drawn ever deeper in to the *koinonia* that we are called to share in.

The use of the *duplex gratia* by Calvin as the framework by which understand our participation in Christ and to provide a Trinitarian context for our adoption provides a way to engage with his eucharistic metaphysics. The substance of the Sacraments is in their meaning: it is in the promise, indeed the reality, of our justification by Christ’s obedience and the Father’s free pardon of sin that this offers. The meaning, once ‘grasped’ by faith brings us ‘oneness with Christ’ and complete gratitude through the Spirit where the whole of our lives are consecrated to God.

What we have shown here is that manner in which Calvin’s depiction of the Sacraments as a concrete form of the *duplex gratia* needs to be seen in terms of Calvin’s understanding of knowledge. It is the existential aspect of knowledge that, for Calvin, links our justification with our sanctification: when we truly grasp that Christ’s body is given to us it evokes a response of gratitude and repentance. The knowledge the Sacraments convey, through the promises they signify and the faith the Spirit gives in convincing the believer of the truth of those promises, effects the move to regeneration which is our participation in Christ.

Chapter 8. ‘What I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest’ How Catholic was Calvin’s understanding of Communion?

8.1 Introduction

So far we have considered something of Calvin’s historical situation, his understanding of knowledge as being affective or existential, his understanding of the human response to God, the importance of the Holy Spirit to convince the believer in the truth of that being signified and the substance and effect of the Sacraments. We now come to the question of what Calvin was attempting in developing his doctrine. The question here is to what extent he was able to return to the understanding of the ‘primitive and purer Church’ that he, along with the majority of his Reformed colleagues sought to reclaim.¹

Here I intend to show that reaching back to a ‘primitive and purer’ understanding, in the context of Calvin’s existential understanding of knowledge, brings him to an understanding of the Eucharist that parallels certain modern Catholic interpretations of transubstantiation and that his use of a rhetorical sense of ‘substance’ leads him to a doctrine that can be considered a ‘reinvention’ of the doctrine he most fervently opposed. In this Calvin achieves the aims of a ‘Reformed Catholic,’² in that he seeks to recover the original intent of the doctrine to convey the Sacrament as an instrument of grace while rejecting the error and corruption of materialist readings and the potential for idolatry.

In trying to determine Calvin’s understanding of the Eucharist, it needs to be kept in mind that he was not consciously seeking a novel approach, or some new understanding. Calvin was writing to correct error (as he saw it) and corruption that had

¹ *Necessity of Reforming the Church* 215. Lane notes that the majority of humanists and Reformers viewed the early Church as a ‘golden classical period.’ Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers*, 40.

² For a brief discussion of this term used by William Perkin in 1598, see page 67.

crept in to the teaching of the Church. His claim was not to novelty, but fidelity.³ His fervour for the 'ancient' truth leads him into direct antagonism with some contemporary teachings, such as transubstantiation, that he saw not merely as innovation but as spiritually dangerous.

8.2 Calvin's 'middle way'.

In his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* (1541) Calvin portrays his teaching on the Eucharist as a middle way between Luther and Zwingli.⁴ On the one hand he welcomes the attempt of Zwingli to overturn the 'carnal presence' as it had been taught for 'more than six hundred years,'⁵ but on the other he regrets the failure to show 'what presence of Jesus Christ ought to be believed in the Supper.'⁶ He suggests that Luther's opposition was rooted in an understanding of Zwingli's doctrine as leaving nothing but the bare signs, without their 'spiritual substance'. However, he makes it clear that Luther has failed to deny 'such a local presence as the Papists imagine'⁷ and so does not sufficiently oppose the worship of the consecrated elements (which seems to have been one of Calvin's primary concerns). In the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Calvin, although not naming Luther and Zwingli directly, sets out again to hold a middle way between their errors. On the one hand we are to avoid having such low regard for the signs that we divorce them from their mysteries, but on the other we should not extol them so highly that we obscure the mysteries themselves.

Luther held to a real presence 'in, with and under' the bread (whilst specifically rejecting transubstantiation) and was concerned to avoid reducing the Sacrament to a

³ In the *Prefatory Address* Calvin strenuously denies that his teaching is new. 'That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man's impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God's goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery.'

⁴ *Short Treatise*, 163-166.

⁵ *Ibid*, 164.

⁶ *Ibid*, 165.

⁷ *Ibid*, 165.

subjective experience (precisely the trap into which it seems Calvin suspected that Zwingli had fallen into). For Luther there was a sacramental union between the bread and Christ's body, so that in eating the bread we also eat his body. Zwingli's teaching was much simpler: that the bread and wine are unchanged in the Sacrament, serving as signs of Christ's body and blood who is not present in any physical or material manner but only by faith in the mind of the believer and in the community of believers. For Zwingli the bread and wine are something like visual aids to remind us of what we know already.

While much has been made in recent years of the possibility that Calvin was holding a more 'Catholic' line in terms of stressing a real presence, and an objective efficacy, in the Eucharist (for example in the work of Brian Gerrish),⁸ others have sounded notes of caution suggesting that Calvin's rejection of Zwingli was not as complete in this area as some would perhaps wish.⁹ While there may be a case to suggest that Calvin saw an objective efficacy in the Eucharist when he says 'by true partaking of him, his life passes into us and is made ours – just as bread when taken as food imparts vigour to the body,'¹⁰ it is not in terms of any physical or material presence. This is the basis not only of his objection to Luther but, more significantly in the case in hand, of his staunch objection to transubstantiation.

For Calvin, the doctrine of transubstantiation is a target of particular criticism. This 'fictitious' doctrine, which 'fabricates' a local presence, he declares to be a 'monster'.¹¹ He denies that it has any basis in antiquity or in scripture. There are two underlying concerns that drive Calvin to such a vigorous rebuttal. Firstly, he is at pains to preserve

⁸ See for example Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*.

⁹ For example Lane, 'Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian?' 21-41.

¹⁰ *Inst.* 4.17.5.

¹¹ *Inst.* 4.17.14.

the recognition of the humanity of Jesus. In these terms the human body of Jesus is subject to the same limits as all human bodies, although it has been received in heaven, where it is to remain until Christ returns in judgement.¹² This is essential to his understanding of Jesus as Mediator in our salvation through the hypostatic union. Calvin maintains that we cannot seek to draw back Christ's bodily presence under the 'corruptible elements' or to 'imagine it to be present everywhere' as ubiquity would be just as contrary to humanity as multiple local presences.¹³ The second concern is simply the result of a doctrine that suggests a local presence in, with or under the elements in that it encourages the adoration of the consecrated elements. This, Calvin suggests goes beyond unhelpful doctrine to downright idolatry.¹⁴

Calvin agrees with Zwingli that Christ's body is seated at the right hand of the Father, and that therefore there cannot be a local, bodily or physical presence here on earth. He agrees that this naturally leads to a rejection of the idea of feeding on Christ with our mouth, and that therefore the unbeliever cannot receive Christ's body (which is to be received only by faith).¹⁵ His stance on the 'real presence' (*praesentia realis*) is more complex. It has been noted above that Calvin does not affirm the term 'real presence',¹⁶ but he does suggest a presence in the Sacrament. This presence is to be seen in terms of relationship,¹⁷ Calvin declares that 'we must establish such a presence of Christ in the Supper as may neither fasten him to the element of the bread, nor enclose him in the bread, nor circumscribe him in any way (all which things, it is clear, detract from his heavenly glory).'¹⁸ Christ's presence in the Eucharist is not a local presence, yet it is both real and true presence. So it is not with the fact of presence that Calvin has

¹² Acts 3:21.

¹³ *Inst.* 4.17.12.

¹⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.36.

¹⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.34.

¹⁶ See Chapter 1, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Inst.* 4.17.13.

¹⁸ *Inst.* 4.17.19.

problems but its mechanism. 'Westphal insists on the presence of the flesh of Christ in the Supper: we do not deny it, provided he will rise upwards with us by faith.'¹⁹

Calvin's avoidance of the term 'real presence' may have been a response to its association with the doctrine of transubstantiation, and subsequently with a perception of a local presence. Calvin is actively seeking to avoid two errors, the reduction of the elements to mere signs on the one hand and a materialist local presence on the other. To do this he places the emphasis on the physical presence of Christ at the right hand of the Father and argues that the presence of Christ can not be in any physical form. The presence is mediated by the Holy Spirit 'lifting' us to Christ.²⁰ Keith Mathison suggests the term 'suprastantiation' to describe Calvin's doctrine.²¹ The prefix 'supra' indicating 'above,' 'beyond' or 'transcending' as the mode of presence is not specifically connected to the physical form of the elements. The bread and wine are a necessary part of the Sacrament, but they are not the primary focus of it. Although Calvin's language, often talking of 'spiritual' nourishment, has inclined some readers to refer to a doctrine of 'spiritual presence,' Mathison suggests that this can be misunderstood to suggest that only the spirit of Christ, the divine nature, is present in the Sacrament.²² Thus 'suprastantiation' would avoid this potential pitfall, by indicating that there is a real participation in the substance of Christ's body and blood, but that this occurs on a plane that transcends and parallels the plane on which the physical signs exist.

While it may indeed be the case that term 'suprastantiation' avoids the pitfall of participation in only the divine, spiritual nature, it may fall into a more significant trap. The assumption is generally made that the doctrine that Calvin is opposing when he

¹⁹ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.281.

²⁰ See, for example, *Inst.* 4.17.31.

²¹ Mathison, *Given for You*, 279.

²² *Ibid.*, 280.

refers to transubstantiation is that of Aquinas. The footnotes to the English translations of the *Institutes* make cross references to Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, and yet the text itself refers in less specific terms to groups such as 'The Schoolmen'.²³ Killian McDonnell suggests that Calvin was aware of the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, even to the extent of his rejection of a local presence,²⁴ although this would indicate that Calvin failed to understand Aquinas' teaching on substantial presence. What may be equally possible is that Calvin was not engaging with Aquinas, but directly with contemporary popular eucharistic piety. To do this he need not have read Aquinas, but simply to be aware of the teaching of the Catholic Church and of its liturgical practice. McDonnell recognises a certain validity in Calvin's criticism when directed against later scholasticism and popular eucharistic piety.²⁵ As noted in Chapter 6,²⁶ Calvin's use of the term substance is not always consistent, sometimes having a metaphysical slant,²⁷ and at others a more empirical intent,²⁸ which may suggest that he was not so much engaged in systematic reflection but in polemic against liturgical practices that he considered dangerous to the spiritual life of the believer.

8.3 Transubstantiation

The doctrine of transubstantiation has its roots in eucharistic controversy. The reaction to a 'sensualistic' interpretation of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist by Berengar of Tours in the eleventh century, who denied that the real presence of Christ need to be explained by physical changes in the elements, was met with a perhaps overly harsh discipline within the Church. Bonaventure admitted that the confession of faith required of Berengar (which spoke of the body of Christ being 'ground by the teeth of the

²³ See, for example, the text and accompanying footnote of *Inst.* 4.17.13, 4.17.18.

²⁴ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 238.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See pp. 149-151.

²⁷ Such as in the *Short Treatise*, 146 '...the matter and substance of the Sacraments is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of them are the gifts and blessings which we have by means of him.'

²⁸ For example, *Short Treatise*, 158

faithful')²⁹ was 'excessively formulated'³⁰ and even Thomas Aquinas placed limits on the interpretation of this statement of faith.³¹

The primary purpose of the doctrine of transubstantiation can be seen as maintaining the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In the manner in which it was formulated by Aquinas, it is an attempt to set the teaching of the Church on the real presence in a framework of philosophical understanding. The change of substance of the bread was thought necessary as a basis for the distinctive eucharistic presence. In the Council of Trent, the doctrine of transubstantiation was upheld, but the Council did not necessarily uphold the Aristotelian framework in which it had been set.³² Rather, the aim seems to have been to resist the errors seen in Zwingli on the one hand and Luther on the other.³³ This is exactly what Calvin was attempting in his writing on the eucharistic presence, albeit from a different standpoint.

If it is accepted that the primary intention of the doctrine of transubstantiation is to maintain the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and that the use of Aristotelian language is not required for this, then it is possible to analyse the doctrine of transubstantiation on three levels, as Edward Schillebeeckx has done.³⁴ The levels are that of faith, ontological change and natural philosophy.

Firstly there is the level of faith. This is seen in a declaration that there is a particularly eucharistic form of presence. Somehow Christ is manifest in this Sacrament in ways that are not experienced in other sacraments or in other parts of Christian experience.

²⁹ James F. McCue, 'The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar through Trent: The Point at Issue,' *Harvard Theological Review* 61.3 (1968), 387 n1.

³⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 14.

³¹ *Summa Theologica* III q77 a7, ad3.

³² There is not sufficient space here to deal with the discussions of the terms 'species' and 'substance' in this context.

³³ McCue, 'The Doctrine of Transubstantiation from Berengar through Trent: The Point at Issue,' 427.

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*.

When the believer is offered bread and wine, they receive Christ not symbolically but really and effectively. Aquinas says, 'this Sacrament which contains Christ himself, ... is perfective of all the other Sacraments, in which Christ's virtue is participated.'³⁵

Secondly there is the level of ontological change. Aquinas speaks of a 'change of all being.'³⁶ By this it seems that he meant that the reality of the bread is changed: it becomes something quite different after the consecration, the body of Christ. This concept of an ontological change does not presuppose an Aristotelian philosophical framework. It is quite possible to answer the question 'What is that?' with reference to the consecrated bread and wine in terms that do not make use of the concepts of 'substance' and 'accidents'. Indeed the discussion of a 'change of the substance' of the bread and wine predates the penetration of Aristotelian thought into the Western Church, moreover it can be seen that there is a stream of thought that leads to the conviction that the real presence cannot be maintained without a real change in the bread and wine.³⁷ The fathers of the Council of Trent were therefore able to say, 'Although the word (transubstantiation) is of more recent date, the real faith is nevertheless very old.'³⁸

While the stream of thought that leads to the doctrine at this point reaches back to the Greek Fathers, the mindset that conceived it was undoubtedly different. The Greek Fathers could see things in a more dynamic manner, emphasising the role of the Spirit in controlling the material realm. A change of being was the result of a thing's being taken over by the Spirit; thus, a Christian was a person whose flesh had been taken over by the Spirit.³⁹ To such an understanding, matter, to quote Origen, 'being without

³⁵ *Summa Theologica*, III q75 a1.

³⁶ *Summa Theologica*, III q75 a4.

³⁷ Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*, 65.

³⁸ *Concilii Tridentini Acta* quoted in *ibid.*, 66.

³⁹ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* V, 9, 3.

qualities, receives such as the Creator desires to invest it with, and which frequently divests itself of those which it formerly possessed, and assumes others of a different and higher kind.'⁴⁰ To be changed, in the context of the Eucharist, meant that Christ, the Logos, took possession of the bread and the wine and made it his body and blood. The elements were appropriated in a manner that was an extension of the 'hypostatic union' that was at the heart of the incarnation.⁴¹ The bread and wine became sacramental forms in which the body of the Logos appeared. The basic thrust of thought is the same as that of transubstantiation, but expressed in a different framework.

There is then, at this second level, a change in the reality of the elements. What is offered in reality is not simply bread and wine, but the very person of Christ. What was merely bread and wine is changed so that something else is offered and received. For Aquinas, and for the Council of Trent, these changes needed to be expressed in language that could be grasped, and they naturally turned to the Aristotelian language with which they were familiar. This is the third level that Schillebeeckx identifies within the doctrine of transubstantiation, that of natural philosophy. The intellectual tools with which Aquinas and his subsequent followers had to work included the Aristotelian framework. Thus, to be able to explain the ontological change in the elements, required by the understanding of a real presence in the Eucharist, they resorted to the language of 'substance' and 'accidents'. This enabled them to hold to a real presence in the Eucharist by reference to the substance of the elements being changed, without requiring a change in the accidents, the appearance. For Schillebeeckx the important issue here is that this was the only way to do this, not because it is the only way this is possible, but because it was the current philosophical framework.

⁴⁰ Origen *Against Celsus* 3, 41

⁴¹ Schillebeeckx notes that the terms *metaballein* and *metapoiein* used by the Greek Fathers meant precisely 'to change by appropriating oneself to, by taking possession of.' Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*, 68.

8.4 Transignification

Calvin's existential understanding of knowledge and his rhetorical use of 'substance' have a particular resonance with the work of the modern Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who has proposed an interpretation of the doctrine of transubstantiation which is termed 'transignification.' In transignification it is the meaning of the signs that is transformed rather than any physical or material aspect. Schillebeeckx challenged the emphasis on natural philosophy that often attends the discussion of transubstantiation. Some writers have previously identified a strong similarity between transignification and Calvin's eucharistic doctrine,⁴² although what seems to be lacking in the literature is an understanding of the way in which Schillebeeckx's shift in emphasis from 'what *is it that* signifies?' to 'what *is* signified?' parallels Calvin's concern to move away from the question 'how is Christ present in the Sacrament?' to 'what does Christ's presence in the Sacrament bring us and how does it do so?'⁴³

Schillebeeckx argues strongly that Aristotelian philosophy does not suffice to uphold either the level of faith (the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist) nor the ontological change (the change in reality of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ) within the doctrine of transubstantiation. He maintains that observations in modern physics (and especially quantum physics) cast serious doubt on our ability to apply the concept 'substance' to material reality, and has meant that the term has been increasingly reserved for personal beings.⁴⁴ He opts to use an anthropological rather than a philosophical approach. The Eucharist is then considered in the light of its role as

⁴² Kenneth Baker, *Fundamentals of Catholicism* (Ignatius, 1983), 240; Meyer, 'Mysterium Fidei and the Later Calvin,' 399.

⁴³ As noted previously (page 21), Philip Butin observes, for Calvin the key consideration 'was not how Christ was present in the elements; rather it was how God worked in the Eucharist to unite believers to Christ by the Spirit, and the benefits that this union brought.' Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response*, 114.

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *The Eucharist*, 94.

sign. Schillebeeckx suggests that in the work of post-Tridentine theologians the value of the Sacraments as signs had been pushed into the background to as relatively non-controversial, being as it was an area on which Protestant and Catholic could find agreement relatively easily. This oversight he sees as significant, as it resulted in an overemphasis on the physical rather than sacramental reality of the Eucharist. Schillebeeckx affirms that if what is referred to in a sign is really present, it can never be so by virtue of the sign itself.⁴⁵ The sign does not necessarily point to something which is absent, but can point to that which is present but not necessarily visible. The reality of the elements is not, then, to be found in their physical reality, but the sacramental reality of what they signify. They truly signify the body and blood of Christ; thus, the meaning of what is given is changed through the action of the Living Lord in the Church.⁴⁶ The Sacraments are not merely signs, but become interpersonal encounters between the believer and Christ.

Although it may be of interest in itself, it is outside the scope of this study to assess how effective Schillebeeckx is in accommodating transubstantiation to an anthropological framework. He does insist that transignification is compatible with a fully understood doctrine of transubstantiation. That is, it is compatible with an understanding that is not overly wedded to a particular natural philosophy (one which he argues is not required by the statements of Aquinas or the Council of Trent). The importance in terms of Calvin's eucharistic theology is that Schillebeeckx is making a genuine attempt to reformulate, or even reinvent, the doctrine of transubstantiation by casting it in a new framework. There is much here that bears resemblance to Calvin's attempt to find a middle way between Zwingli and Luther, at least on initial inspection, despite Calvin's apparent staunch opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation. Indeed Kenneth Baker

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

can dismiss transignification on the grounds that it can be understood to say 'that there is no real change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ – only the meaning or finality of the bread and wine change. The latter sense is not really new – only the name is new, since Calvin taught the same thing in the sixteenth century and his teaching was also rejected by Trent,' and that some who hold this view deny Christ's 'perduring presence in reserved Hosts kept in the tabernacle after the conclusion of the Mass.'⁴⁷ In this Baker appears to miss the point that it is precisely the change in meaning that is for Calvin the 'real' change, the change in reality (which Schillebeeckx refers to as a change in 'sacramental reality') or 'substance' (in a rhetorical sense). Transignification is seen more positively by John Meyer, who observes 'It is interesting to note that Calvin's interpretation of the ancient Christian writers' understanding of eucharistic conversion suggests a position quite similar to contemporary transignification theories.'⁴⁸

8.5 Does Calvin reinvent the doctrine of transubstantiation?

How then, does Calvin's eucharistic teaching stand under Schillebeeckx's three levels of analysis: faith, ontological change and natural philosophy? If he is reworking or reinventing the doctrine then we would expect there to be a significant level of correlation.

The first level for analysis is that of faith. Here, it is clear that Calvin holds a understanding that Christ is present in the Eucharist. While he avoids using the term 'real presence' (*praesentia realita*), he does argue that the presence is real and effective.

⁴⁷ Baker, *Fundamentals of Catholicism*, 240.

⁴⁸ Meyer also notes that the use of *signa exhibitiva* to express the presence of Christ in terms of 'visibilization and actualisation' was probably employed as early as 1132 by Alger of Liège. Meyer, 'Mysterium Fidei and the Later Calvin,' 399.

We teach that Christ is to be sought by faith, that he may manifest his presence; and the mode of eating which we hold is, that by the gift of his Spirit he transfuses into us the vivifying influence of his flesh.⁴⁹

While this presence is not physical it is more than merely symbolic.

I therefore say ... that the sacred mystery of the Supper consists in two things: physical signs, which, thrust before our eyes, represent to us, according to our feeble capacity, things invisible; and spiritual truth, which is at the same time represented and displayed through the symbols themselves.⁵⁰

Thus the bread and wine have a significance far beyond their physical reality. This does not change their physical reality, but is held at the same time. What is more this significance exists only when the symbol is perceived by faith; the unfaithful receive only bread and wine the significance passing over them in the same manner that rain runs off rocks rather than moistening them.⁵¹

This draws us to the second level of analysis suggested by Schillebeeckx, that of ontology. Is there an ontological change taking place in the Eucharist as Calvin understands it? Does the nature of the elements, or of the participants, change? In Schillebeeckx's terms, the answer has to be yes. Through the action of the Holy Spirit what is offered to the believer is not bread and wine, but the body and blood of Christ. While retaining their physical reality as bread and wine, the elements have become to us through faith the body and blood of Christ that offer us salvation. Although Calvin speaks of a spiritual presence, what is offered here is not limited to the spiritual. Calvin says:

I am not satisfied with those persons who, recognizing that we have some communion with Christ, when they would show what it is, make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood. As though all these things

⁴⁹ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.282.

⁵⁰ *Inst.* 4.17.11.

⁵¹ *Inst.* 4.17.34.

were said in vain: that his flesh is truly food, that his blood is truly drink; that none have life except those who eat his flesh and drink his blood.⁵²

Calvin's use of the term 'substance' is open to interpretation. On the one hand it is used to indicate the scholastic concept of substance (which he rejects); on the other, it means something much more akin to significance. Killian McDonnell suggests that Calvin has a soteriological concept of substance. There is not to be a separation between the person of Christ and his work, so Calvin avoids speaking of the heavenly or glorified body being given in the Eucharist, preferring to speak of the communion with the Mediator and Redeemer.⁵³ However, even in this light it can be argued that there is a substantial change in the Eucharist, the bread and wine becoming the means through which our communion with Christ is achieved. Calvin's concept of substance is self-consciously biblical, signifying the profound reality of a being or of a thing.⁵⁴ The reality here is the person and work of Christ.

I call Christ with his death and resurrection the matter, or substance. But by effect I understand redemption, righteousness, sanctification, and eternal life, and all the other benefits Christ gives to us.⁵⁵

Thus it follows that there is a substantial, that is, ontological, change, that follows from the consecration of the bread and wine. This change, this consecration, is enacted by the Holy Spirit, which Calvin can describe as linking us to the full reality, including the physical reality, of the person of the Mediator and Redeemer.

There is nothing more incredible than that things severed and removed from one another by the whole space between heaven and earth should not only be

⁵² *Inst.* 4.17.7.

⁵³ See also Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 219.

⁵⁴ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 247.

⁵⁵ *Inst.* 4.17.11.

connected across such a great distance but also be united, so that souls may receive nourishment from Christ's flesh.⁵⁶

So there is a level of faith in terms of an understanding of the true presence of Christ, and a level of ontological change in the manner in which the elements offer something beyond their physical reality, a sacramental reality made concrete by the Spirit which can bridge the spatial separation between heaven and earth. To this extent Calvin is covering the same ground as transubstantiation. Where he diverges, most radically is in terms of the Aristotelian natural philosophy that had traditionally been used to describe the events. The philosophical framework that Calvin was using was more influenced by Platonism than Aristotelianism,⁵⁷ so that it seems inevitable that Calvin would challenge the Aristotelian language used in the doctrine of transubstantiation. For him it represents an attempt to contain divinity within the physical, and is open to serious misinterpretation. Not only is there the dangerous notion of bringing Christ down to earth, but the notion of the physical, local presence is a clear invitation to idolatry in the adoration of the Sacrament. Although Calvin was willing to acknowledge that Aquinas did not hold to a local presence,⁵⁸ he does so somewhat tangentially, suggesting that his intent was not so much to engage in the philosophical debate, but to correct what he saw as the error of popular piety, the overly physical language and understanding.

Here it should be noted that we are dealing with at least two senses of the term 'transubstantiation.' There is its expression in theological and scholastic discussion, and also its popular understanding. Gary Macy suggests that by the end of the thirteenth century the theological aspect of the doctrine 'must have been something like quantum

⁵⁶ *Inst.* 4.17.24.

⁵⁷ This would also be in keeping with T. F. Torrance's observations of Calvin's use of Patristic rather than Aristotelian concepts of space. Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 30.

⁵⁸ *Inst.* 4.17.13, possibly referring to *Summa Theologica* III q77, a5.

physics for non-scientists today' seen as 'an amazing thing we trust a scientist can explain.'⁵⁹ For the general populace the 'real presence' was not a metaphysical concept to be argued over, 'demanding the most concentrated application of one's abilities in the service of articulating the most fundamental mystery of creation,'⁶⁰ but 'something powerful and even dangerous.'⁶¹ The popular understanding associated with the doctrine was dissociated from the philosophical understanding. However, in the matter of substantial presence, Aquinas holds that the presence is only discernable to the intellect and not to the senses:

Christ's body is substantially present in this Sacrament. But substance, as such, is not visible to the bodily eye, nor does it come under any one of the senses, nor under the imagination, but solely under the intellect, whose object is 'what a thing is' (De Anima iii). And therefore, properly speaking, Christ's body, according to the mode of being which it has in this Sacrament, is perceptible neither by the sense nor by the imagination, but only by the intellect, which is called the spiritual eye.⁶²

This would suggest that, as the substance cannot be touched or held, the claim for 'oral manducation,' such as was forced on Berengar, is problematic.

8.6 *Reinvention or rediscovery?*

So was Calvin re-inventing transubstantiation? Doubtless he would have denied it, as he directed a great deal of opprobrium in the direction of the doctrine. However he did see himself as recovering the understanding of the 'primitive and purer Church,' believing the true teaching of the Church to have 'lain long and unknown and buried,'⁶³ and now

⁵⁹ Gary Macy, 'Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages,' *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, eds. Ian Levy, Gary Macy and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 378.

⁶⁰ Stephen E. Lahey, 'Late Medieval Eucharistic Theology,' *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages*, eds. Ian Levy, Gary Macy and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 499.

⁶¹ Macy, 'Theology of the Eucharist in the High Middle Ages', 378.

⁶² *Summa Theologica* III q76 a7.

⁶³ Prefatory Address, Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 16.

being restored. Certainly Calvin can be seen to be recasting this 'restored' doctrine in an alternative philosophical frame, but the intent was the same as Aquinas at least on some levels. Calvin's primary purpose was to affirm a presence of Christ that was not only real, in terms of being 'true,' but also effective for salvation. It was a particular eucharistic presence, and it involved a change in the substance, the sacramental reality, of the elements that can be regarded as an ontological change.⁶⁴ That Calvin rejected the specifically Aristotelian use of the terms 'substance' and 'accidents' need not have meant that he had to reject the idea of transubstantiation in itself. Rather, his rejection of transubstantiation speaks more about how entrenched that Aristotelian language was in the discussions and how linked it had become to liturgical practice than it does about Calvin's essential understanding of the Eucharist.

This understanding of the change in significance or meaning of the elements through the action of the Holy Spirit is an integral part of Calvin's eucharistic theology, and it would be reasonable to expect it to find some expression in liturgical form. For this we can turn to the liturgies of Strassburg and Geneva, along with the *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper*, to explore whether such expressions can be found.

8.7 The background to Calvin's liturgical form

Sibley has argued that the main thrust of the work of John Calvin was liturgical rather than theological reform,⁶⁵ and that his search for a simple, biblical and meaningful liturgy was the driving force for the systematizing and exegesis that followed. While this may be an interesting approach, it seems more reasonable to suggest that worship

⁶⁴ See above, pp. 243-244.

⁶⁵ Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., 'The Church as Eucharistic Community: Observations on John Calvin's Early Eucharistic Theology (1536-1545),' *Worship* 81.3 (2007), 253. 'A case could be made that, for Calvin, the Reformation was primarily a liturgical reformation, with the exegesis and systematizing being a result of his interest in worship.'

and liturgy were concerns for Calvin that drove forward his theological work, but that his theological work in turn underpinned his reform of the liturgy.

Calvin's initial reconstruction of the Eucharist can be seen in the 1536 *Institutes*. Here Calvin indicates his wish for an observance at least once a week which would begin with 'common prayers' prior to the preaching of a sermon. Following the placing of the bread on the table, the minister would recite the Institution of the Supper and then further expound the promises of Christ, before excommunicating those prohibited. Prayers of thanksgiving and of preparation would follow this. Psalms were to be sung (or a passage of the Psalms read) and 'in becoming order the believers should partake of this most holy banquet, the ministers breaking the bread and giving the cup.'⁶⁶ This would be followed by further exhortations to a faithful life, prayers of thanks and the singing of praise to God.

This shape may well reflect something of the usage in Basel, where Calvin completed and published the *Institutes*,⁶⁷ but it also reflects Calvin's strong opposition to the ceremonial of the Mass, which he refers to as 'theatrical trifles.'⁶⁸ There is freedom in the 'becoming order' for believers to take the bread in their hands or divide it among themselves, to hand the cup back to the deacon or pass it to the next person, to use leavened or unleavened bread, red or white wine and so on.⁶⁹ These details are 'indifferent' and to be left to the local church's discretion, although Calvin clearly has a preference that the Church should match the practice of the early Church. The complete

⁶⁶ *Inst.* 1536 4.53.

⁶⁷ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 186.

⁶⁸ *Inst.* 1536 4.53.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

liturgy for Geneva (1542), seems to have been drawn heavily from Bucer's Strassburg liturgy, as well as from the liturgy of Farel.⁷⁰

In Calvin's liturgies a number of the themes of Calvin's writings stand out quite clearly. He wrote a considerable amount denouncing the errors of the Mass, but in particular his concern seem to be that the focus on the physical elements rather than Christ becomes a form of idolatry. The emphasis on human action, as a sacrifice, leads to both the infrequency of communion and communion in one kind only. Calvin in 1537, along with other ministers, submitted to the Council in Geneva that the Supper should be held monthly (although he would clearly have preferred more frequent celebration),⁷¹ and as early as the 1536 *Institutes* he writes strongly against the withholding of the cup in the Mass as withholding participation in the Supper from the Church.⁷²

The liturgical reforms also represented a serious attempt to restore a Biblical integrity to the liturgy, although this was tempered with recognition that some rituals had served their purpose and were no longer of value. Indeed Calvin ascribes the misunderstanding of this to be the prime cause of the development of excessive ceremonial in the Roman Church.⁷³ The danger, in Calvin's view, was that the excessive use of rituals then obscures that which needs to be seen most readily, Christ himself.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ The influence can also be seen in Calvin's Strassburg liturgy, although, as Thompson notes, the first edition (1540) of Calvin's Strassburg liturgy is lost. A second edition was published by Pierre Brully (Calvin's successor) in 1542, but the Strassburg text used here is the third edition, edited by Calvin, published in 1545. Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 189; William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship Its Development and Forms* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 113.

⁷¹ *Articles*, 50 Here Calvin indicates that the ideal would be at least weekly, but that this compromise would take account of the 'frailty of the people.'

⁷² *Inst.* 1536 4.48. 'For the petty sacrificer, about to devour his victim by himself, separates himself from all believing folk. I call it a private mass (that no man may be mistaken) whether he resound bellowing and shouting, or only squeak with mumbling and whispering, since both kinds remove participation in the supper from the church.'

⁷³ CTS *John* 1.157 (on John 4:20). 'To this ignorance ought to be ascribed that huge mass of ceremonies by which the Church has been buried under Popery. Immediately after the commencement of the Christian Church, it began to err in this respect, because a foolish affectation of copying Jewish ceremonies had an undue influence. The Jews had their sacrifices; and that Christians might not be inferior to them in splendour, the ceremony of sacrificing Christ was invented: as if the condition of the

8.8 Consideration of the liturgy of Geneva and Strassburg

This brings us to the question of the liturgies that Calvin developed. Is there any indication here that Calvin was striving to express a doctrine that has any parallel to the doctrines of transubstantiation or consubstantiation, something more memorialist or a true *via media* such as supstantiation might be? Unfortunately the simplicity of form that Calvin sought makes it more difficult to discern as much information as might be hoped for, and this makes it important to read both the 1542 Geneva and 1545 Strassburg liturgies alongside the *Short Treatise*.

Calvin seems to have distrusted variety in liturgical form. In *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* he refers to the external ceremonies as 'subterfuges' that act as a means to avoid the presence of God.⁷⁵ In the *Short Treatise* he argues that returning to the ceremonies that have been abolished would be to repair the 'veil of the temple which Jesus Christ rent by his death.'⁷⁶ Perhaps for this reason, whilst on working days the minister is left free to use whatever form seems suitable, on Sunday morning a common form is generally to be used. The structure of this form emphasises the place of the sermon, which is in keeping with the important link between the sermon and the Sacrament that Calvin holds. In the *Short Treatise* Calvin states:

the chief thing which our Lord recommends to us, is to celebrate this mystery
with true intelligence. It follows then that the substance of it all consists in the

Christian Church would be worse when there would be an end of all those shadows by which the brightness of Christ might be obscured.'

⁷⁴ *CTS Hebrews*, 243 (on Hebrews 10:19) 'He states the conclusion or the sum of his previous doctrine, to which he then fitly subjoins a serious exhortation, and denounces a severe threatening on those who had renounced the grace of Christ. Now, the sum of what he had said is, that all the ceremonies by which an access under the Law was open to the sanctuary, have their real fulfillment in Christ, so that to him who has Christ, the use of them is superfluous and useless.'

⁷⁵ *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, 193.

⁷⁶ *Short Treatise*, 162.

doctrine. This being taken away, it is no more than a cold ceremony without efficacy.⁷⁷

The presentation of the gospel, the promise of God, through the sermon is then an integral part of the liturgy. The Minister is instructed to at least touch upon the Lord's Supper in the sermon when it is to be celebrated; it is clearly of importance that the believer should be reminded of the promise that the elements carry with them. The enactment of the Supper then stands as a response to the preached Word, in which by faith we are able to partake of the reality already disclosed to us in the Word. The Sacrament then seals the promises.

For this reason, the Lord instituted for us his Supper, in order to sign and seal in our consciences the promises contained in his gospel concerning our being made partakers of his body and blood; and to give us certainty and assurance that in this consists our true spiritual nourishment; so that, having such an earnest, we may entertain a right assurance about salvation.⁷⁸

In a prayer of preparation in the Strassburg liturgy, the Minister then prays that 'In steadfast faith may we receive his body and blood, yea Christ himself entire, who, being true God and true man, is verily the holy bread of heaven which gives us life.'⁷⁹ The prayer continues to ask that we 'may truly become partakers of the new and eternal covenant of grace.' The substance of what is about to take place is 'Christ himself entire' and it is by receiving him that we become partakers in the 'new and eternal covenant of grace.' In the *Short Treatise* Calvin underlines this by saying that 'all benefit which we ought to seek from the Supper is annulled, unless Jesus Christ be there given to us as the substance and foundation of all.'⁸⁰ The subsequent recitation of the institution serves to underline the scriptural warrant and the promises already held out in

⁷⁷ *Short Treatise*, 161.

⁷⁸ *Short Treatise*, 144.

⁷⁹ *Form of Prayer*, 204.

⁸⁰ *Short Treatise*, 146.

the Word, as well as to distance the celebration from the Mass, but it leads on to an aspect of the liturgy that grates to the modern ear. The Minister proceeds to fence the table, excommunicating those unfit to receive Christ. The text of the Strassburg and Geneva liturgies give no hint as to the degree of this fencing, but Calvin introduced communion tokens in Geneva in 1560,⁸¹ which suggests that there was some degree of active selection. This process of exclusion would seem to be at odds with Calvin's general acceptance of the Church as a *corpus permixtum*,⁸² and with his conviction that the Sacrament was not reserved for mature believers but was intended for the 'weak and feeble'.⁸³ While Osterhaven suggests that this reflects Calvin's desire to establish 'a carefully worked out discipline' within the Church,⁸⁴ and Locher suggests that Calvin 'is convinced that without order and discipline, the universal Church would disintegrate',⁸⁵ there is a more positive threat to the Eucharist as the participation of the unholy, reprobate individuals threatens to pollute the Sacrament. 'For whoever approaches this holy Sacrament with contempt or indifference, not caring much about following when the Lord calls him, perversely misuses it and thus contaminates it.'⁸⁶ The misuse of the Sacrament is seen in the lack of repentance, an indication that the Sacrament is ineffective for such individuals.⁸⁷ Hence, not only is there a need to fence the table, but also the believers must take seriously the exhortation of Paul to examine their own consciences.

⁸¹ M. Eugene Osterhaven, 'Eating and Drinking Christ: The Lord's Supper as an Act of Worship in the Theology and Practice of Calvin,' *Reformed Review* 37.2 (1984), 90.

⁸² 'Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and the early Melancthon agree upon the understanding of the realized church as a conglomerate of both true believers and hypocrites. All who gather around Word and Sacrament belong to the *corpus permixtum*, a view acknowledged by the majority of early Reformed confessions of faith.' Gottfried W. Locher, *Sign of the Advent: A Study in Protestant Ecclesiology*, Ökumenische Beihefte zur Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2004), 121.

⁸³ *Inst.* 4.17.42.

⁸⁴ Osterhaven, 'Eating and Drinking Christ,' 90.

⁸⁵ Locher, *Sign of the Advent*, 77.

⁸⁶ *Short Treatise*, 149.

⁸⁷ Osterhaven suggests that 'partaking of the Lord's Supper worthily meant to Calvin faith, repentance, and the pursuit of a godly life.' Osterhaven, 'Eating and Drinking Christ,' 89. The reprobate, in these terms, are not simply sinners, but willful sinners who are neither repentant nor attempting to lead a godly life. These are the outward signs of a lack of faith.

The fencing and exhortation to self-examination is balanced by Calvin's encouragement to those who are conscious of 'frailty and misery' in themselves to receive the Supper. This is as much about our consecration as about the justification that we are promised.

Let us be assured that the sins and imperfections that remain in us will not prevent him from receiving us and making us worthy partakers of this spiritual Table.⁸⁸

The Sacrament is 'a medicine for the poor sick souls' and not reserved for those of mature faith only. It is a means to our sanctification, because Christ 'who is the unfailing truth, has spoken with his own lips: he is truly willing to make us partakers of his body and blood, in order that we may possess him wholly and in such wise that he may live in us and we in him.'⁸⁹

This is the crux of the matter, for God cannot be false in his dealings with humanity. If we are offered the sign of the body and blood of Christ, we must also be offered the reality:

If God cannot deceive or lie, it follows that it accomplishes all which it signifies. We must then truly receive in the Supper the body and blood of Jesus Christ, since the Lord there represents to us the communion of both.⁹⁰

In the *Short Treatise*, Calvin refers to Christ as the substance of the Sacrament, while the efficacy of them is 'the gifts and blessings which we have by means of him.'⁹¹ Here he is not using 'substance' in a physical or material sense, but in a more metaphysical manner. Christ is the meaning behind the visible signs, and is presented to us in those signs:

⁸⁸ *Form of Prayer*, 206.

⁸⁹ *Form of Prayer*, 207.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Short Treatise*, 146.

It is like this with the communion which we have with the body and blood of the Lord. It is a spiritual mystery, which cannot be seen by the eye, nor comprehended by the human understanding. It is therefore symbolized by visible signs, as our infirmity requires, but in such a way that it is not a bare figure, but joined to its reality and substance. It is therefore with good reason that the bread is called the body, since not only does it represent it to us, but also presents it to us.⁹²

Sign and substance are thus distinguished but not divisible. The Sacraments 'should not and cannot be at all separated from their reality and substance.' Calvin's reference to the 'internal substance' of the Sacrament in the *Short Treatise* is striking.⁹³ While some have suggested that he has a soteriological understanding of substance,⁹⁴ this suggests at the very least a strong parallel to the understanding of substance as meaning or reality more in keeping with the pre-scientific usage of the early Church. It is the same reality that Aquinas is trying to indicate when he proposes a changed substance using an Aristotelian framework.

Calvin freely admits that his answer to the question 'What is given in the Sacraments?' is the same as might be given by Lutherans and the Roman Church. He points out that 'Westphal insists on the presence of the flesh of Christ in the Supper: we do not deny it,'⁹⁵ asserting that 'the controversy with us is not as to reception, but only the mode of reception.'⁹⁶ Elsewhere he states: 'That we really feed in the Holy Supper on the flesh and blood of Christ, no otherwise than as bread and wine are the aliments of our bodies, I freely confess.'⁹⁷ Calvin asserts the reality and wholeness of the gift of Christ in the Lord's Supper. It is not only the divine nature that is offered but also Christ's human

⁹² *Short Treatise*, 147.

⁹³ *Short Treatise*, 148.

⁹⁴ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 246.

⁹⁵ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.281.

⁹⁶ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.282.

⁹⁷ CTS *Jer. & Lam.* 1.xvii (*Dedication to Lectures on Jeremiah*).

nature, which is centred in his earthly body. The sign and substance cannot be separated, and the substance is the whole of Christ. It is this underlying reality that Calvin is seeking to express when he engages with those who, in his eyes, would deny the reception of the humanity of Christ either by suggestion a ubiquitous presence or multiple local presences. There is an intention here to express the fact that the 'substance' of the flesh is not 'material'. The flesh, the physical, corporeal body remains at a distance and although we feed on it actually 'though it is at a great distance from us, and is not mixed with us.'⁹⁸

There are some subtleties to be considered. For example, the driving force is always to be seen in divine action. Even though we are to 'present ourselves to him with ardent zeal,' nonetheless it is Christ who makes us capable of receiving the gift. Echoing the *Sursum Corda*, the liturgy exhorts the believers to 'lift our spirits and hearts on high where Jesus Christ is in the glory of his Father,' and direct the believer away from the 'earthly and corruptible elements' and not to seek Christ there 'as though he were enclosed in the bread and wine.'⁹⁹ This is clearly directed against the 'phantasy' of transubstantiation – an 'opinion' that Calvin maintained was 'received by great and small in the Popish Church, and that it is cruelly maintained in the present day by fire and sword.'¹⁰⁰ Thus there is to be no adoration of the Sacrament, 'for to prostrate oneself before the bread of the Supper, and worship Jesus Christ in it as though he were there contained, is to make an idol displace the Sacrament.'¹⁰¹ Not only is Calvin opposing the adoration of the Sacrament that would take place during the Mass, he also

⁹⁸ CTS *Corinthians* 1.379 (on 1 Cor. 11:24).

⁹⁹ *Form of Prayer*, 207.

¹⁰⁰ *Short Treatise*, 158.

¹⁰¹ *Short Treatise*, 159.

identifies the use of processions and the reservation of the consecrated bread as false practises arising from this misunderstanding.¹⁰²

The focus of the Sacrament is not in the physical elements, but in the action of receiving. The sign and substance are both received at the same time, and therefore any understanding that focuses on the static elements is doomed to fail. The command of Jesus is to take, eat and drink, not to stand and adore.¹⁰³ This observation gives rise to a question that does not seem to have been widely considered. How does Calvin treat the remaining elements after the Supper is finished? There is no mention in the text of Strassburg or Geneva liturgies, nor the *Short Treatise* or *Institutes*, and yet it would seem to be a significant question. Practice should follow from understanding. In Cranmer's 1552 Prayer Book the rubric allows the Curate to take the bread and wine home for 'his own use,'¹⁰⁴ which might be seen as confirmation by those who see a more memorialist (that is, Zwinglian) understanding in his liturgy. But such a rubric is not included in Calvin's liturgies: what did Calvin do? The option of reservation is blocked because of the danger of suggesting a material or bodily presence. The option of disposal might be acceptable, but could be considered unseemly treatment of the sacramental signs.¹⁰⁵ There may be an indication in Calvin's commentary on Exodus 12:1-20 where, with reference to the institution of the Passover, he suggests:

The cause of his desiring the neighbours to be added if the number of people in one house were not, sufficient to eat the Passover, was that nothing might be left of it; and this amongst others appears to have been the chief reason why the

¹⁰² *Short Treatise*, 159. 'From the same source proceeded other superstitious practices, such as carrying the Sacrament in procession through the streets once a year, making another day a tabernacle for it, and all the year round keeping in a cupboard to amuse the people, as if it were a god.'

¹⁰³ *Short Treatise*, 156, 'This is the significance of the order which Jesus Christ left us, not that we offer or immolate, but that we take and eat what has been offered and immolated.'

¹⁰⁴ *The First and Second Prayer Books of King Edward VI* in Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 283.

¹⁰⁵ Much would depend on the manner of disposal. While reverent disposal would placate concerns about 'unseemly treatment' in some circumstance, it could equally be open to the charge of treating the elements as 'holy'.

whole lamb was to be consumed, viz., lest they should mix this sacred feast with their daily food, and also lest its dignity should be diminished by appearing in the form of tainted meat. Perhaps, too, God provided this, lest any superstition should creep in from the preservation of the remnants; and therefore commanded the very bones to be burnt.¹⁰⁶

This would suggest that consumption of any remaining bread or wine would similarly guard against superstition creeping in with regard to the elements. On the other hand, Calvin's attitude towards the practice of communion for the sick may suggest otherwise.

Communion for the sick was a significant, indeed controversial, question within the Reformed churches and a point of contention between the Reformed and Lutheran churches. Calvin would have been exposed to the practice of communion for the sick in Strassburg during his stay there between 1538 and 1540, and possibly also during his stay in Basel in 1535-6. Of course, he would also have been exposed to the practice as a child and young man through his Catholic upbringing. In Strassburg communion for the sick was linked to the monthly celebration of the Eucharist, from which Deacons would be despatched with some members of the congregation on the same day as the main congregation celebrated the Sacrament.¹⁰⁷ This was not the practice of the Church in Geneva, where the Consistory followed the line taken by the Zürich and Bern churches that communion should only take place in the church. Despite this it would seem that Calvin was open to the possibility, even approving, of communion at home for the sick in certain circumstances. He writes to the ministers of Montbéliard in 1543, when the Duke of Wurttemberg sought to introduce Lutheran practices, that he feels that celebrating the Supper with the sick in their homes is good, providing it is necessary

¹⁰⁶ *Pentateuchal Harmony* 1.460.

¹⁰⁷ Wim Janse, 'Controversy and Concordance between Calvin and Westphal on the Communion of the Sick,' *Calvinus Clarissimus Theologus. Papers of the Tenth International Congress on Calvin Research*, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 166.

and appropriate: 'Concerning the administration of the Supper I think like this: the custom is gladly to be permitted, that communion is celebrated at the home of the sick, when the matter and the opportunity supports it, nor should it be greatly opposed that it is given to evildoers who are about to be punished, if indeed they request it, and appear sufficiently prepared to receive it: by this law however, that it be true communion, that is, that the bread is broken in an assembly of the faithful.'¹⁰⁸ The celebration should take place in a fellowship of believers rather than being a distribution of previously consecrated bread and wine. The celebration needs to be announced in advance so that all know about it and can prepare themselves for it. Indeed Calvin considers it 'absurd' that the Eucharist should be held on an *ad hoc* basis at the request of one individual in the Church after the regular service.¹⁰⁹ Similarly when writing to Viret in 1543 Calvin says 'I recommended that they should not administer the Supper privately on the request of one. In church of course: concerning the sick, who cannot meet together in the assembly, the matter is different.'¹¹⁰

Towards the end of his 1555 refutation of Calvin's eucharistic theology Joachim Westphal accuses him of liturgical separatism, and, of particular relevance to our consideration here, that 'They do not administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper to the sick in their homes, at the time when these people need the most consolation' thus

¹⁰⁸ Calvin to the ministers of Montbéliard, 7 October 1543, CO 11:624-625: '*De coenae administratione ita sentio, libenter admittendum esse hunc morem, ut apud aegrotos celebretur communio, quum ita res et opportunitas feret, nec magnopere etiam repugnandum esse, quin maleficis detur qui plectendi sunt, siquidem postulent, et ad receptionem satis comparatos esse appareat: hac tamen lege, ut sit vera communio, hoc est, ut panis in coetu aliquo fidelium frangatur.*'

¹⁰⁹ CO 11:625 '*Coenam vero in ordinaria concione institui extra ordinem unius rogatu nimis absurdum est: neque enim decet proponi coram omnibus sacrum illud epulum, quod omnium commune est, sine solenni denunciatione, ut ad participationem se ecclesia comparet. Eo autem modo fieri quo princeps iubet, quid aliud foret quam subiicere uniuscuiusque libidini publicum ecclesiae ordinem? Et si necessitatem obiiciunt, non est cur recusetis frequentiore usum, ne quis amplius necessitatem obtendat, qui in coetum modo convenire poterit.*'

¹¹⁰ Calvin to Pierre Viret, [1543], CO 11:647: '*Coenam privato uno petente ne administrarent, suadebam. In ecclesia scilicet: nam de aegrotis, qui convenire in coetum nequeunt, diversa est ratio.*'

putting at stake the salvation of people who are already vulnerable.¹¹¹ Calvin replies to this by caricaturing the Lutheran practice as a relapse into Catholicism, suggesting that the rule of Christ is not kept if 'the bread should be carried about in procession like cakes in a fair' and decrying the idea that 'one individual should receive in private and eat apart.'¹¹² This, to Calvin, is against the 'law of communicating.'¹¹³ It seems that what Calvin seeks here is to maintain the ecclesial, corporate and local character of the rite, which McDonnell suggests was an attitude inherited from Bucer.¹¹⁴ However, it is very much a part of Calvin's understanding of the Sacrament, as becomes clear in situations such as this, in which Calvin fears that the corporate nature of the Sacrament is being undermined. Although from a pastoral perspective Calvin sees the communion with the sick as being desirable, it is not necessary.¹¹⁵ The practices he accuses Westphal of supporting indicate the danger he sees inherent in the use of the Sacrament outside the church. If it had been essential, then he would have no doubt worked harder to overcome the opposition of the Consistory. At the same time, it is evident that he was unhappy with the lack of a proper opportunity for the sick to share in communion and so to gain some solace from it. In writing to Venceslas Zeuleger in 1558 Calvin states: 'I am also sorry that among us the Lord's Supper is not administered to the sick. Nor is it my fault, that those who are about to depart from this life should be deprived of this consolation.'¹¹⁶ He explains this lack due to the length of establishment of the 'contrary practice' which would mean that change could not be made without 'much contention.' This suggests that Calvin's advice to the Ministers of Montbéliard regarding communion for the sick reflected the practice Calvin had seen in Strassburg

¹¹¹ Janse, 'Controversy and Concordance', 159. Janse gives the original text of Westphal's *Iusta defensio* (1555): '*Sacramentum Coenae Domini non dant domi aegrotis eo tempore, quo maxime indigent consolatione, subdolo nimirum consilio Satanae, ut circumventi facilius periclitentur de salute.*' Ibid., 173.

¹¹² *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.320 – CO 9, 102 '*Sed quum nihil minus coelestis magistri doctrinae consentaneum sit, quam panem in pompa non secus ac fercula in theatro circumferri: deinde hominem unum privatim et seorsum pasci, ...*'

¹¹³ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.320. CO 9, 102 '*communicationis lege posthabita*'.

¹¹⁴ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 187.

¹¹⁵ CO 20, 201. '*Non ita necessario.*'

¹¹⁶ CO 6, 454.

rather than the practice of Geneva, although Janse notes that in *Les Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* (1541, 1561) the statement that the Supper is only to be celebrated in church is followed by the phrase 'jusques a meilleure opportunité,' 'until a better opportunity presents itself,' which has been seen by some to reflect the hand of Calvin.¹¹⁷ However, the *Order for Visitation of the Sick* (1546) makes no mention of the possibility of a sickbed celebration.¹¹⁸

From Calvin's letter to Caspar Olevianus in December 1563,¹¹⁹ it seems that what Calvin objects to in both the Roman and, by implication, the Lutheran practice is the private character of communion with the sick. The corporate and ecclesial nature of communion cannot be set aside, even for the pastoral benefit of the sick. This is part of the 'law of communicating,' we cannot enclose the divine presence in the elements to be dispensed at whim. The union with Christ, the mystery of the Sacrament, can only take place within the community that is his body.¹²⁰ It therefore follows that any rite for the communion of the sick should maintain an ecclesial character. Calvin declares that the Supper is only legitimate if it is held communally ('*nulla sit legitima coena, nisi communis*'),¹²¹ communion with the sick would therefore not be considered false if it were not a private act. Calvin indicates that he would wish the communion for the sick to be a public ceremony, to include teaching and be in the company of the godly.¹²² This reflects the Strassburg practice of sending a Deacon with some of the congregation to the home of the sick communicant, and would in effect transfer the whole sacramental act to the home of the sick person. The sacramental action therefore includes instruction, the exposition of the Word of God, as well as the sharing of bread and wine. If Word and Sacrament are joined in the local celebration, then the rite does not need to

¹¹⁷ Janse, 'Controversy and Concordance', 168. *CO* 10.26.

¹¹⁸ *Visitation of the Sick*, *CTS Tracts* 2.127-8.

¹¹⁹ *CO* 20, 200-201.

¹²⁰ *CO* 20, 201.

¹²¹ *CO* 20, 200.

¹²² *CO* 20, 201.

be confined to the church building. Looking for a scriptural warrant, Calvin states that Paul, in admonishing the Corinthians that they should eat and drink in their own homes, was not excluding the Supper from private homes but is seeking to make a distinction between 'spiritual' and 'ordinary' meals. Celebrating in a private home is not necessarily a private celebration. It is the latter that is forbidden, and to avoid this Calvin directs that 'a congregation assemble, made up of relatives, friends and neighbours, so that distribution may be made according to the command of Christ.'¹²³

The possibility of communion for the sick was not open to Calvin in Geneva. The Consistory preferred the practice of Zürich and Bern, but Calvin did not want posterity to hold this lack accountable to him.¹²⁴ For our purposes here it would seem that the practice that Calvin seems to prefer is neither reservation nor 'disposal' but use for the marginalised (at least those prevented from being part of the gathered congregation by reason of health). The evidence does not indicate how Calvin proceeded in the light of the Consistory's proscription. The fact that his proposal for the communion with the sick was to take the whole rite to them (at least, presumably, an appropriately shortened version of it) by means of a congregation of friends, family and neighbours suggests that either he had no problem with the possible re-consecration of the elements, if the bread and wine used had been previously blessed as part of the regular communion service, or that what was intended was that 'spare' bread and wine (i.e. which had not been consecrated as part of the rite conducted in the church) would be used. His concern here is clearly to avoid the elements themselves being seen as having any inherent efficacy. It is the promise of Christ, made present through the Holy Spirit that is the effective power.

¹²³ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 189.

¹²⁴ Calvin to Zeuleger, *Letters* 3:463 'Only it has been my wish that an attestation of what I wished on that subject should go down to posterity.'

The result is that he is able to accede to the requirement of the Consistory on the grounds that he can direct the memory of the sick person to the communion they have previously received. It is this vein that he counters Westphal: 'For we carefully recall to the remembrance of the sick the pledge of life which was once deposited with us, that they may thence confirm their faith, and borrow weapons for the spiritual combat.'¹²⁵ Perhaps this is less than whole-hearted, for five years later he is arguing for communion with the sick, concluding that 'those who are suffering from a long illness or are in mortal danger' should not be 'robbed' of the benefits of communion for 'receiving the Eucharist provides us with the weapons for the spiritual battle we have to wage.' He continues 'Now, if a pious man sees he will have to depart this world, he will certainly be beleaguered and tormented by many temptations, and he will rightly wish to arm himself in order to keep his ground. Should he be denied this unique aid?'¹²⁶ It seems sadly ironic that despite having himself carried to church on the penultimate Sunday of his life to participate in the Eucharist, Calvin was forced at the last to rely on the memory of the Eucharist rather than the Sacrament itself.¹²⁷

Janse observes that Calvin may have been forced into a stronger rejection of communion with the sick by the need to oppose the rise of gnesio-Lutheranism as championed by Westphal. But Calvin's distrust of anything that smacked of magic or superstition and of the danger of idolatry is also significant here. Just as with his opposition to the practices surrounding the Mass, Calvin's desire that we should not seek to enclose the grace of God within the elements of the Eucharist on the one hand against his desire that we should receive with gratitude the grace of God through participating in the Sacrament with faith (placing ourselves at God's disposal) place him in something of a cleft stick. He cannot accept practices which imply a special status to

¹²⁵ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.320-1.

¹²⁶ Calvin to Olevianus, 1 December 1563, *CO* 20,200-201.

¹²⁷ As noted by Janse 'Controversy and Concordance', 170.

the physical elements, or which deprive the Sacrament of its corporate nature. Therefore he has to oppose the underlying doctrine even when he has some pastoral sympathy. Calvin can allow no exception to the corporate nature of the Eucharist; there is no occasion on which it is proper to neglect the unity of the worshipping community (of which the Eucharist is the symbol)¹²⁸ and so he must accede to the demands of the Consistory to keep it within an ecclesiological setting.

8.9 *The divine driving force: the role of the Spirit in the Eucharist.*

One of Calvin's key objections to the doctrine of transubstantiation seems to be the danger of making the Sacrament an object, and the corollary that this object is under human rather than divine control. Liturgical ritual, processions and reservation of the Sacrament do nothing to mitigate this concern. It is necessary to understand the full pomp and ceremony that the Medieval Mass entailed to grasp the intent of Calvin's polemic in his regard. Layer upon layer of ritual and ceremony had, to Calvin's eyes, been placed between the believer and the true object of the Sacrament – the divine promise of salvation in Christ.¹²⁹ To wrest control of the Sacrament from God and place it in the hands of the priest is nothing short of blasphemy.

The opinion of everyone has been approved by all their doctors and prelates, that in hearing Mass or having it said, *one merits by this devotion*, grace and righteousness before God. We say that to obtain any profit from the Supper, we need bring nothing of our own, to merit what we seek.¹³⁰

There is a clear objection to the understanding that places the priest as the mediator in salvation, transferring to human capacity the ability to effectively sacrifice and

¹²⁸ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 190.

¹²⁹ Crockett refers to the need for an 'act of historical imagination' being required for modern Christians to reconstruct the Medieval Mass. William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (Pueblo, 1992), 150. Whilst this will be true for the understanding of any historical liturgy it is especially relevant here, as it is the practice as much as the doctrine that Calvin writes against.

¹³⁰ *Short Treatise*, 157 (emphasis mine).

intercede on the believer's behalf to obtain pardon for sin.¹³¹ The believer has only to receive in faith the grace that is presented in the Sacrament; that grace being found through its direction to the cross of Christ. Thus Calvin's considerable polemic against the idea of the Eucharist as a sacrifice is directed to underline our dependence on divine grace as opposed to human action. Attempts to defend the sacrificial nature of the Sacrament are insufficient in that they focus on the material and immediate. They do not go beyond the rite to its true substance, the body and blood of Christ. To speak of the Mass as an application of the sacrifice of Christ makes it appear to be an attempt to recreate the sacrifice rather than directing the participants to the original event.¹³² Calvin therefore rejects the idea that this is 'not a repetition but an application' countering that Christ did not offer himself up in a way that requires a daily ratification but so that the 'benefit of it should be communicated to us by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the Sacred Supper.'¹³³ To consider the Sacrament as a sacrifice then detracts from the essential effectiveness of the Eucharist.

Thus, then, it is apparent that there is nothing more contrary to true understanding of the Supper, than to make such a sacrifice of it as diverts us from recognising the death of Christ as a sacrifice unique and with a virtue that lasts for ever.¹³⁴

The Sacrament is to be distributed, not withheld – in keeping with the command of Christ at we should 'take and eat' – and so the description of the Sacrament as a sacrifice is also problematic as it encourages the believer to take a passive role, merely being present whilst the 'sacrifice' is offered on his or her behalf.¹³⁵

¹³¹ *Short Treatise*, 156.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Inst.* 4.18.4.

¹³⁴ *Short Treatise*, 157.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*: 'But after this evil opinion was forged, out of it, as an abyss, has come the unhappy custom, that the people, contenting themselves with being present to participate in the merit of what is being done, abstain from communicating, because the priest pretends to offer his host for all, and especially for those present.'

If the Eucharist is not effective through the sacrificial action of the priest then it is clear that the driving force must rest elsewhere. Here Calvin's understanding of the role of the Spirit comes to the fore. The Sacrament has a deeply personal quality, and this is brought about by the work of the Spirit. The substance, the reality of the Sacrament is the person of Christ in his body and blood, and this can only be received through the power of the Holy Spirit. Only a divine power can lift us into the divine presence and feed us with the body and blood of Christ.¹³⁶

The Holy Spirit is the means by which the body of Christ is brought together and enlivened. The truth we encounter in scripture and indeed the confirmation of God's promises in the Sacraments would not be effective without the work of the Spirit to allow them enter into the believer and effect some manner of transformation.

For first, the Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word. Secondly, he confirms it by the Sacraments. Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and Sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within.¹³⁷

This indicates the role the Spirit in engendering faith, this is the 'the proper and entire work of the Holy Spirit.' The Spirit works through the Sacraments as an 'inward teacher ... by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the Sacraments to enter in.'¹³⁸ The signs are ineffective in themselves unless they are connected to that which they signify. The freedom of God is not constrained by the Sacraments; it is the choice of the Spirit to act but the Sacrament is 'charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power.'¹³⁹ This action does not compromise the authority of God, 'So far, then, is God from resigning the grace of

¹³⁶ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 258.

¹³⁷ *Inst.* 4.14.8.

¹³⁸ *Inst.* 4.14.9.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

his Spirit to the Sacraments, that all their efficacy and utility is lodged in the Spirit alone.¹⁴⁰

The union with Christ offered in the Eucharist cannot give way to any cheapening of the transcendence of God. There remains a dimension of distance in opposition to the union. We are caught up by the Holy Spirit to participate in the divine presence, but cannot draw that presence down ourselves. As McDonnell puts it:

There is in Calvin a real sacramental mysticism, but he will not tolerate what he considers a fuzzy sacramental mysticism which forgets the distance between God and man, which recognizes no boundaries, no barriers. Here the work of the Holy Spirit is the work of a jealous God; he will not give God's transcendence to a creature.¹⁴¹

The *opposita* of Calvin's theology here are 'union' and 'distance'. The believer is united with Christ who is still (physically) distant. The danger of transubstantiation as he believes it to be understood by his contemporaries is that it undermines the dimension of distance/transcendence and thereby is detrimental to the dimension of union. The materialist understanding, even if it does not reflect the original intention of the doctrine, makes the union subject to human rather than divine action. In the same way private communion is detrimental to the dimension of union because it fixes that dimension between the believer and the divine, and fails to recognise the union *between* believers that makes the body of Christ a reality.

It is clear that the Spirit has a role in the effectiveness of the Sacrament, which centres around the Ascension, for the substance of the Sacrament, the body and blood of Christ which is offered to us, has been transferred from earth to heaven. Calvin points towards the relationship between Ascension and Pentecost: 'Surely, the coming of the Spirit and

¹⁴⁰ CTS *Pentateuchal Harmony* 3.285 (on Deut. 30:6)

¹⁴¹ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 191.

the ascent of Christ are antithetical; consequently, Christ cannot dwell with us according to the flesh in the same way that he sends his Spirit.¹⁴² The Ascension becomes the determining factor for the manner of Christ's presence, 'For if we wish to abase him under the corruptible elements of this world, besides subverting what Scripture declares concerning his human nature, we annihilate the glory of his ascension.'¹⁴³ In his earthly life, Jesus was clearly present locally by virtue of his human nature, a human and corporal presence, but after the Ascension and Pentecost that is not possible as his local presence is at the right hand of the Father:

For as we do not doubt that Christ's body is limited by the general characteristics common to all human bodies, and is contained in heaven (where it was once for all received) until Christ return in judgment, so we deem it utterly unlawful to draw it back under these corruptible elements or to imagine it to be present everywhere.¹⁴⁴

The Spirit then becomes the agent by which the presence of Christ is effected. The Ascended Christ has a spiritual presence in the Eucharist.¹⁴⁵ To suggest that the body is not received would remove the benefit of the Sacrament as 'the analogy of the sign applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ.'¹⁴⁶ To suggest an immaterial presence denies the continuing humanity of Christ and opens the door to the error of ubiquity.¹⁴⁷ The presence of Christ is real but effected by the Holy Spirit who 'unites things separated in space.'¹⁴⁸ This is something that Calvin recognises as a challenging concept, but he suggests that what our minds are unable to comprehend we should 'let faith conceive.'¹⁴⁹

¹⁴² *Inst.* 4.17.26.

¹⁴³ *Short Treatise*, 159.

¹⁴⁴ *Inst.* 4.17.12.

¹⁴⁵ This idea of a 'spiritual presence' is noted above, it does not suggest a 'spiritualistic' or 'immaterial' presence but a presence effected by the Holy Spirit. See pp. 235 & 244, see also McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 261-2.

¹⁴⁶ *Inst.* 4.17.10.

¹⁴⁷ *Inst.* 4.17.30.

¹⁴⁸ *Inst.* 4.17.10.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

This draws us back to the imagery of the *sursum corda*, where the Spirit lifts us up into the presence of Christ – a real, spiritual and effective presence. There is no need for the body of Christ to be 'drawn down' to a local presence, no need for a material real presence, for:

the Lord bestows this benefit upon us through his Spirit so that we may be made one in body, spirit, and soul with him. The bond of this connection is therefore the Spirit of Christ, with whom we are joined in unity, and is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us.¹⁵⁰

This 'channel' through which we are lifted into the divine presence conveys the life of Christ: 'Because I say, that Christ dwelling in us raises us to himself, and transfuses the life-giving vigour of his flesh into us, just as we are invigorated by the vital warmth of the rays of the sun.'¹⁵¹ Through the work of the Spirit 'it is not necessary that he should descend from heaven in order to assist us, since he can assist us by the grace of his Spirit, as if he stretched out his hand from heaven.'¹⁵² Calvin underlines this effective participation of the believer in the body and blood of Christ in numerous places through his writings¹⁵³ even though it is clear that the nature of this participation is beyond human comprehension. It is a 'heavenly action'¹⁵⁴ that results in the body and blood being eaten in a spiritual manner. In a manner parallel to the way that the hypostatic union brings Christ's divine and human natures together without mingling or confusion, this spiritual participation is a union that does not bring any transfusion of substance.

In the *Short Treatise* Calvin underlines his understanding of a 'spiritual presence' in the final summation. On receiving the Sacrament 'in faith ... we are truly made partakers of

¹⁵⁰ *Inst.* 4.17.12.

¹⁵¹ *Second Defence*, CTS Tracts 2.279.

¹⁵² CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.390-1 (on Matt. 28:20).

¹⁵³ A small sample are gathered in Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 206-7.

¹⁵⁴ A 'coelestis actio'. CO 21:488.

the proper substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.' This is brought about by 'by the secret and miraculous power of God, and that the Spirit of God is the bond of participation, this being the reason why it is called spiritual.'¹⁵⁵

The Spirit effects a participation in the full presence of Christ both by connecting things held separate in space, but also by taking a role in the nurturing of faith itself.¹⁵⁶ Here we encounter the dependence of humanity on God, even faith comes to us from the Holy Spirit. Calvin rejects the Zwinglian position that the Eucharist is the act of a believing man; rather, he holds that it is the act of someone who lives by faith, faith that has been moved in us through the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁷ The Holy Spirit is the only source of faith,¹⁵⁸ and is the means by which it develops in us and therefore by which we can grasp the benefits of faith in participating in the body and blood of Christ. The Spirit then is 'not only the initiator of faith, but increases it by degrees, until by it he leads us to the Kingdom of Heaven.'¹⁵⁹

This role in initiating and increasing faith is not only in terms of the general economy of salvation but clearly also in the Eucharist. The Spirit creates the faith, gives the gift and connects the believer and Christ across the separation of the Ascension. The real presence does not stem from the act of faith of the believer; the Spirit both effects the presence of Christ and gives the faith that enables the believer to participate.¹⁶⁰ The Spirit is the driving force in the Sacrament, the authority and enabler for the sanctification which comes about through the Eucharist: 'Godly souls can gather great

¹⁵⁵ *Short Treatise*, 166.

¹⁵⁶ *Inst.* 3.2.35.

¹⁵⁷ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 265.

¹⁵⁸ *Inst.* 3.1.4.

¹⁵⁹ *Inst.* 3.2.33.

¹⁶⁰ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 266.

assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours.'¹⁶¹

8.10 Conclusion: Substance, significance and meaning, Calvin's *inventio*

The reference to Christ as the substance of the Sacrament in the *Short Treatise*, combined with the words of the liturgy, present a strong argument that the understanding behind Calvin's liturgy is that the reality behind the visible signs is that which is signified. The truth and meaning of the Sacraments is Christ himself. Although Calvin seems to be directing his arguments more to contemporary liturgical practice, it is arguable that, in seeking an explanation of the presence of Christ as the meaning and reality of the Sacrament, he is undertaking a comparable process to that seen in the formulation of the doctrine transubstantiation. His philosophical framework and concern regarding what he considers gross errors of theology leads, however, to marked difference in liturgical form. This different form stems from a shift in emphasis away from the material to the meaning. The true significance of the Sacrament, its substance, is Christ and all that he has achieved for us.

Given that Aquinas explicitly denies a local presence in terms of the physical in *Summa Theologica*¹⁶² (which Calvin may admit),¹⁶³ Calvin's work seems to be directed to recasting the very doctrine that he so vehemently opposes. By using a different philosophical framework he is attempting to avoid the errors that have developed both in terms of overemphasis on the material understanding of substance and the reduction of the Sacraments to mere visual aids. In this he is looking back to a 'primitive and purer' Church before it became corrupted by, among other things, a belief in 'such a

¹⁶¹ *Inst.* 4.17.2.

¹⁶² *Summa Theologica* III.q.60.a.1.

¹⁶³ *Inst.* 4.17.13.

carnal presence of Christ' as that which he and others such as Zwingli and Oecolampadius opposed.¹⁶⁴ In the sense then of the rhetorical '*inventio*' (discovery) we might claim that is, in fact 're-inventing' transubstantiation from a point prior to the difficulties (Calvin would probably say 'corruption') that a materialist interpretation brings. We can return to the suggestion by T.H.L Parker that Calvin is 'inviting the Church to go back some five, or even seven, centuries before the doctrine had become fixed,'¹⁶⁵ and consider that he is indeed looking to rediscover the doctrine of an earlier age and does connect to the Church of a 'primitive and purer' age.

It can be argued that Calvin's aim through the course of the various eucharistic controversies was to achieve clarity of thought and expression on a matter that was, to him, of utmost importance and which was an area in which he saw many others seriously straying from the true path.¹⁶⁶ He seeks to guide his readers away from error through what was 'written a little too extravagantly by the ancients to enhance the dignity of the Sacraments' by a doctrine through which the Sacraments have their worth 'duly commended, their use clearly indicated, their value abundantly proclaimed, and the best mean in all these things retained, so that nothing is given to them which should not be given, and conversely nothing taken away which belongs to them.'¹⁶⁷ Whether he truly achieved this aim is, of course, open to debate but he does set a tone that rings clear. The Sacrament offers the body and blood of Christ, which is received by faith through the action of the Holy Spirit. Calvin does not seek to explain away the Sacrament, rather he might be said to clarify he thinking round it rather than thinking through it.¹⁶⁸ His discussions seem to be based as much in polemic against abuse and false practice than in an attempt to unravel the mystery. At the heart of the Sacrament

¹⁶⁴ *Short Treatise*, 164.

¹⁶⁵ Parker, *John Calvin*, 44.

¹⁶⁶ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 217.

¹⁶⁷ *Inst.* 4.14.17.

¹⁶⁸ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 219.

lies a mystery where God is at work and before which we can only wonder. In his commentary on Matthew 28:2 Calvin draws a parallel between the wonder of the women at Christ's tomb, awed by the earthquake and raising their minds 'to a work of God which was new, and surpassed the expectations of men' and the attitude required of us in the receiving the Sacrament where: 'the visible signs of his presence are exhibited to us, that our minds may conceive of him as invisible; and that, under bodily forms, we obtain a taste of his spiritual essence, that we may seek him spiritually.'¹⁶⁹

While it is no simple matter to set aside the practices to which Calvin objects, there is in this drive to affirm the central mystery of God's grace in the Sacrament that has the potential for the *via media* that many see in Calvin's theology. In conjunction with the work of modern Catholic theologians such as Schillebeeckx there may be ground here for ecumenical engagement. The crux of the matter is in how the term 'substance' is understood. With a materialist understanding there is little ground for reconciliation, for Calvin cannot countenance a material, physical or carnal presence held locally in the elements. But if the understanding is more in terms of the meaning of the sign, as Schillebeeckx suggests with the idea of transignification, then the possibility exists for a Reformed understanding of the Eucharist to come significantly closer to a Roman Catholic understanding. This Reformed understanding emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God upon which we depend; it is an antidote to the dangers of over-emphasis on the ritual action (and the concomitant suggestion that our 'sacrifice' in some manner coerces God to our salvation) and to the reduction of the Sacrament to a simple didactic exercise.

¹⁶⁹ CTS *Gospel Harmony* 3.342 (on Matt. 28.2).

Chapter 9. Concluding thoughts: the Sacrament as the place of encounter with Christ.

9.1 Reinvention and renewal: the potential of Calvin's understanding

There has been much debate regarding the question of whether Calvin was 'Catholicizing' or 'Crypto-Zwinglian'. The idea that his theology of the Eucharist 'reinvents' the doctrine of transubstantiation may offer a way through the labyrinth. Rather than sitting in one camp or another it is possible that Calvin was developing a distinct understanding which has elements that can be seen in others. Rather than seeing his wish to stress the effectiveness of the Sacraments, with a 'real but spiritual' presence of Christ, as 'Catholicizing', we can place it in the context of his understanding of knowledge as affective and its connection to faith and our participation in Christ. This ties the Sacrament to the preaching of the Word, as the exhibition of the promise of redemption in Christ. The Sacraments 'seal' the Word, accommodate the promises into our cognisance and make them 'real' to us. Rather than seeing his rejection of any substantial presence in the bread and wine as reflecting his 'Crypto-Zwinglian' tendencies, we can sense his concern to avoid the materialist errors that he sees having corrupted the practices of the Roman Catholic Church (a danger which the Lutheran approaches did not circumvent). He develops a *via media* by a reclaiming the notion of 'substance' in terms of meaning, thus the Sacrament is real and effective because it is *affective* under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Without faith (the gift of the Spirit) we are unable to be *affected*, we are not 'lifted up' into the presence of Christ. The Sacrament then offers what it signifies to those with faith, the assurance of justification, but nothing (or worse, judgement) to the unbeliever who cannot respond with thankful worship and cannot participate in the *koinonia* that is participation in Christ.

In this light we can sense the passion at the heart of worship in Calvin's theology. This is a place where we encounter Christ, where we receive life and through which the *imago dei* is restored in us (albeit a little at a time). If nothing else, such passion deserves attention for the possibility to renew the sense of wonder and mystery at the heart of the Eucharist.

9.2 'Come out from among them': a necessary separation.

Considering John Calvin's background as a second generation reformer may yet shed more light on the nature of his theology. As discussed in the second chapter of this study, he grew up in a devout Catholic family, and was apparently destined for the Catholic priesthood. His description of himself as 'obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery'¹ suggests that he was involved in Catholic forms of worship until the mid-1530s. However, as the political and ecclesiastical background shifted it forced a separation. It is possible to speculate on which of the many elements may have tipped the balance for Calvin, but evidence is sparse. What is clear that following his 'conversion' Calvin is part of a movement for reform within the French Church. His sense of prophetic calling grows,² and it becomes clear that such reform is not possible from within.³ The need for separation, in the face of highly conservative anti-reform elements, was not Calvin's likely first intent. However as it became inevitable one can see possible impacts on Calvin's approach. Firstly in regard to those who were not prepared to make the same step of separation as Calvin had done – the Nicodemites – whose continued presence in the Roman Church Calvin saw as an unacceptable compromise. If purity of worship was a prime concern, then it would be paramount to avoid contamination with the 'superstitions' associated with the unreformed Church.

¹ CTS *Psalms* 1.xl

² For an assessment of Calvin as prophet Max Engammare provides a useful starting point. Max Engammare, 'Calvin: A Prophet without a Prophecy,' *Church History* 67.4 (1998).

³ Ganoczy argues that Calvin's conversion was a sense of prophetic calling to reform of the church rather than an immediate break with the Roman Church. Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, 241-66.

Secondly, and more importantly for the study in hand, where else would Calvin look to challenge those ‘superstitions’ than in the central acts of worship – the Sacraments. The Sacraments were the focus of identity for the churches. His opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation is therefore necessary as part of his prophetic calling to purify worship and to challenge superstitious practice. The opposition to the doctrine that is trapped in a materialist understanding – apparently confining Christ under the elements – is balanced by the consideration of the Sacrament as instituted by Christ. Therefore Calvin cannot simply relegate the Sacraments to a supplementary role in respect to preaching as they carry (at least the two sacraments he recognises) divine authority. His reworking of the understanding of the Sacraments needs to recognise their effectiveness while avoiding the dangers inherent through the human tendency to focus on the material. With his background in rhetoric, an awareness of Platonic ideas, and an epistemology that stresses that effective knowledge is affective, Calvin sees the Sacraments as ‘signs and seal’, in which the Holy Spirit works to convey and convince the promise of Christ to us, the ‘meaning’ or ‘substance’ of the Sacrament. This I have termed a ‘re-invention’ of the doctrine, because it parallels the Aristotelian understanding of ‘substance’ without fixing the presence to the elements. But the doctrine is not transubstantiation as generally accepted; it is a ‘re-discovery’ rather than a ‘re-creation’ or a copy. Terms such as supstantiation or transignification might well describe it better. However, in the context in which Calvin was set, this understanding was distinct from that of the Church from which Calvin himself had come and would in turn spend much effort calling others to ‘come out from among them.’

9.3 Continuing the reform of worship

Calvin saw himself as a prophet calling out for the purification of the worship of God’s people. Consideration of his life and work can suggest possibilities for the

contemporary Church as it looks to renew and revitalise its own worship. Pamela Moeller has used the 1559 *Institutes* as a basis for considering contemporary worship reform.⁴ She picks up the importance of pedagogy in worship, not simply in teaching right doctrine but also in terms of conveying ‘the affections of the heart’:

authentic worship manifests God’s affections toward us. So also worship as our response must be faithful to and embodying of our affections toward God and others.⁵

Here, Moeller follows the principle of knowledge being affective. John Jefferson Davis’ more recent work, *Worship and the Reality of God*,⁶ argues that some aspects of contemporary worship fail to lift our hearts beyond the earthly and that ‘a vivid awareness of God’s presence as the central reality in worship’ is all too frequently missing.⁷ In this light Calvin stands as a reminder that persuasion is not an end in itself, for faith rests in the knowledge of God’s love and redemption in the person of Jesus Christ his Son. The message, the substance, rather than the medium is key.

In terms of renewing worship it is hard to disagree with Timothy Hessel-Robinson, who suggests that Calvin’s sacramental theology challenges contemporary Reformed churches to rediscover the place of the Holy Spirit in our liturgy.⁸ For Calvin, the Holy Spirit is crucial in making the Sacraments effective, and stands as a vital counter to any understanding that their efficacy in any way depends on human action or response. But it is the richness of the Eucharist in Calvin’s understanding that stands out for our attention. The knowledge we gain of God is deeply affective, existential. Michael Horton sums this up well when he uses a very modern image for the Eucharist as Calvin

⁴ Pamela Ann Moeller, *Calvin’s Doxology. Worship in the 1559 Institutes, with a View to Contemporary Worship Renewal*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, ed. Dikran Y. Hadidian (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 1997).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶ John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God. An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ Hessel-Robinson, ‘Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper: Modern Reception and Contemporary Possibilities’, 188.

saw it, ‘it is a banquet, not a drive-through meal.’⁹ The challenge to the modern Church is to offer that spiritual banquet.

One aspect that deserves further investigation is the question of inclusion in the Sacraments. While Calvin argued for paedobaptism,¹⁰ it seems he was less inclined towards paedocommunion. The evidence from the *Institutes* is, admittedly, sparse. The reference in *Institutes* 4.16.30 suggests that the requirement for self-examination meant that Calvin perceived the Eucharist as intended for those of ‘riper years’, and that the Passover on which it was modelled only admitted those ‘old enough to be able to inquire into its meaning.’ This does not make it clear what age Calvin considered ‘riper years,’ and there was also variation in how his fellow reformers viewed the issue. For example, Wolfgang Musculus in Bern held that children of believing parents were not only permitted but encouraged to take their place at the communion table.¹¹ The extension of Calvin’s understanding of effective knowledge as affective knowledge would suggest that the test of self-examination should not have been an intellectual exercise, but a more heart-felt examination. This would suggest that inclusion in communion should be based not on the ability to *understand* (in a noetic sense) but to be *affected by* the Sacrament. This will have to be the subject of a different study.

⁹ Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 140.

¹⁰ For example in *Inst.* 4.16

¹¹ in Musculus, *Common Places*, 762-763 ‘First, if he which is partaker of the thing that is signified, may be made partaker of the sign, and the children of them that do believe, be partakers of Christ’s death, that is to say, of the redemption purchased by him: ergo they may be partakers also of the Lord’s Supper. Secondly, if our little children be parcel of the Church, which is the body of Christ: it followeth that they do pertain also to the communion, whereby according unto the saying of the Apostle, we be one body, which do participate of one bread, and of one cup. Christ is the feeding of his whole body, ergo of our children also. Wherefore like as the little children of the Jews did appertain to the Passover, the Sacrament of their redemption, as well as their parents: So our children also do as well belong unto the sacrament of our new Passover, as we.

Thirdly, if Christ did vouchsafe to have children come unto him to embrace them, to lay hands upon them, and bless them, how shall we judge them unworthy to be admitted unto the Sacrament of his body and blood, seeing that there is no man, I suppose, that will esteem it to be preferred above Christ himself?

9.4 The importance of the Eucharist

Through this study I have sensed the passion that drove Calvin to share the experience of the love of God, and that most effectively through the Eucharist. In Calvin's eyes it is neither simply an *aide memoire* that can readily be replaced in a changing cultural environment, nor a means by which the Church dispenses something on behalf of God. It is an encounter with the living Christ in which we are lifted up by the Spirit to experience his presence.¹² In the Sacrament Christ is really present to us, made real by the Holy Spirit at work in us. Knowing he is present, in Calvin's full sense of 'knowing,' we are drawn through the encounter to share in the fullness of his grace. The Eucharist is indeed at the heart of worship in Calvin's theology, for it is the place where we most immediately encounter Christ. As Calvin understood, the Eucharist is embodied in the call to 'lift up your hearts', a call to experience the mystery.

¹² Commenting on Calvin's use of the *Sursum corda*, Sue A. Rozeboom describes it as a call to: 'Exercise your faith. Assent to the work of the Spirit, that you might here—in the sacramental act of communion—truly *experience* the *ascent* of your soul to Christ in heaven to be nourished by him there. Hessel-Robinson, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper: Modern Reception and Contemporary Possibilities', 188.

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<i>CO</i>	Calvin, <i>Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia</i>
<i>CTS</i>	Calvin Translation Society
<i>Inst.</i>	Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> 1559 edition
<i>Inst.</i> 1536	Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> 1536 edition

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