Foundations 68 (May 2015): 1-3

EDITORIAL

It surprises many people to learn that more was written on the sacraments at the time of the Reformation than on any other doctrine. Why spend so much time, effort and ink on what many Christians today consider to be a relatively trivial part of what we do when we gather together? Why not focus efforts on the "far more weighty doctrines" of the authority of Scripture or justification by grace alone? Well, I think the Reformers had two reasons: Firstly, they knew that no doctrine stands as an island. What we believe about the sacraments necessarily impacts our understanding of justification by grace alone through faith alone and our understanding of the relationship between Word and Sacrament. Secondly, the Reformers knew that the sacraments were not merely trivial things. They are gifts of the Lord Jesus Christ given to his bride, the Church. It is not the high view of the sacraments in the sixteenth century which should concern us, but the low view that the sacraments have today. Somewhere along the road we have lost the understanding of them as being "visible words" which present Christ and his work to us in a way which is particularly suited to our humanity.

Two years ago we dedicated an entire issue of Foundations to examining baptism from both Baptist and Paedobaptist perspectives. The current issue is dedicated to the Lord's Supper and again brings together contributions from a wide variety of perspectives. Before introducing those articles I would like to continue my editorial commentary on the importance of the "distinct but inseparable" maxim. In previous editorials, we have seen its significance for understanding the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ and sovereignty and human responsibility. My contention in this editorial is that the maxim also has the potential to offer great light in understanding the relationship between the sacraments and the reality to which they point.

While the Reformers spent much time engaging the church in Rome on the doctrines of *ex opere operato* and transubstantiation, there was a less well-known debate going on among the Reformers themselves about the presence of Christ at the Supper and the relationship between sign and reality. Martin Luther argued for consubstantiation, whereby Christ's body is physically present "in, with and under" the bread and wine. Huldrych Zwingli vigorously opposed this view and the debate often became heated, most notably at the Marburg Colloquy where Luther began his argument by taking out a piece of chalk and writing "This is my body" on the table! At the heart of the disagreement lay different views concerning the relationship between sign and reality in the sacraments.

Zwingli illustrated his view by reference to the Swiss Confederates' annual pilgrimage to Nähenfels where they gave thanks to God for their victory over the Austrians in 1388. In the same way, Zwingli argued, "the man who in the remembrance of the Supper gives thanks to God in the congregation testifies to the fact that from the very heart he rejoices in the death of Christ and thanks him for it". According to Zwingli, the problem for Luther was that he had fallen into error by conflating the sign of the sacrament with the thing signified: "if they are the things which they signify they are no longer signs; for sign and thing signified cannot be the same thing." In other words, Luther had mixed the sign and the thing signified. He had recognised that the two were inseparable but had failed to observe their distinction. The problem with Zwingli's view, however, is that he had made the opposite error by separating the sign from the thing signified. Calvin identified this problem many years later: "[T]he sacraments of the Lord ought not and cannot at all be separated from their reality and substance. To distinguish them so that they be not confused is not only good and reasonable but wholly necessary. But to divide them so as to set them up the one without the other is absurd… If God cannot deceive or lie, it follows that he performs all that it signifies." (John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ", in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid, Library of Christian Classics [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954], 147-148).

The sign of the sacrament and the thing signified should remain distinct but inseparable if we are to avoid, on the one hand, the errors of Rome and, on the other, the danger of emptying the sign. What that looks like in practice, however, is harder to define. Brian Gerrish has provided a helpful taxonomy which can assist us in analysing the various positions. He distinguishes between symbolic memorialism (where the sacrament merely points to something that has happened in the past), symbolic parallelism (where the reality happens simultaneously in the present), and symbolic instrumentalism (where the reality is actually brought about through the sign). In the articles that follow, each of those views will be represented and I will leave the reader to determine which most clearly represents the teaching of Scripture and the nature of Christ's gifts to the church.

Turning to those articles, we begin with a detailed treatment of Calvin's doctrine by William B. Evans. Evans sets Calvin's doctrine in its historical context and explains how it is integrally linked to his soteriology, eschatology and ecclesiology. Evans notes how subsequent developments in Reformed theology rendered Calvin's doctrine implausible to some but argues that it is both scripturally sound and consistent with the earliest practices of the church. Moreover Evans suggests that renewed attention to Calvin's doctrine will greatly benefit the church which has seemingly moved

away from a participationist understanding of salvation (emphasising union with the humanity of Christ) towards an appropriationist soteriology.

John Stevens, in a challenging and provocative article, argues that contemporary practice of the Lord's Supper bears little resemblance to the practice of the early church. Stevens provides a detailed exegesis of 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 and argues that when the church was forced to cease meeting in private homes it constructed a theological justification for its new practices which more closely resembled the pagan cults of the Empire. For Stevens, much has been lost in the move from the Supper being a corporate church family meal to it being a time of close and personal communion with God. He suggests that we need to re-emphasise the horizontal aspects of the Supper and that celebrating the Supper over a meal will greatly facilitate this.

Richard Wardman provides a careful analysis of Thomas Cranmer's views arguing that they most closely approximate to Gerrish's second category of symbolic parallelism. Wardman shows that, while Cranmer insisted on the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper, he resisted speaking about the sacraments as a seal. In his approach, Cranmer was closer to Bullinger than Calvin. Wardman proceeds to consider the views current in contemporary evangelicalism and argues that there is much to be gained from reflection upon Cranmer's insistence that it is as a ministry of the Word that the Supper can be said to convey grace.

Ian Clary's article takes us back to the interface between baptism and the Lord's Supper as he presents a historical overview of the open communion debate among the Baptists. He traces out its beginnings in the seventeenth century debate between John Bunyan and William Kiffin and shows how it was peaceably resolved within the Baptist Missionary Society by William Ward's willingness to "throw away the guns to preserve the ship" in the nineteenth century. As open communion increasingly becomes the majority position within Baptist circles in the UK, this is a timely article which ought to stimulate further thought and discussion. The issue also contains reviews of *Messy Church Theology* and a recent collection of essays on Sanctification.

I very much hope you enjoy reading this issue of Foundations. Correspondence and submission of articles are always welcomed. All articles are peer reviewed.

Ralph Cunnington
May 2015

Foundations 68 (May 2015): 4-25

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

William B. Evans[*]

Calvin's approach to the Lord's Supper, which sought to mediate between the local-presence theologies of Rome and Luther on the one hand and Zwinglian memorialism on the other, is closely connected with his soteriology, eschatology, and ecclesiology. In the Supper, the incarnate humanity of Christ is objectively offered and subjectively received by faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit, and through this union with Christ's "flesh" both the power of his deity and the forensic benefits of salvation are received. However, subsequent developments in Reformed theology rendered Calvin's formulations implausible to some, such that by the nineteenth century outright opposition to Calvin's doctrine of the Supper was being expressed by Reformed luminaries such as Charles Hodge, William Cunningham, and R. L. Dabney. Others, such as J. W. Nevin and J. B. Adger, vigorously supported Calvin's intentions. Nevertheless, Calvin's doctrine of the Supper is rooted in Scripture and in the great tradition of the church, and it offers important resources for the renewal of Reformed and Evangelical theology and practice.

If I am reading the contemporary Evangelical church situation correctly, issues related to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (often called the Eucharist in more liturgical Christian traditions) are less than prominent. Questions having to do with the relationship of the sign and the thing signified and related issues of sacramental efficacy are largely ignored, and a Zwinglian view of the sacrament as a symbolic mental exercise of the faithful seems to be largely assumed in Evangelical and even Reformed circles.

All this, of course, contrasts rather dramatically with the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, in which differences over the Supper not only were extensively discussed but also served to mark the boundaries between Roman Catholics and Protestants (who generally rejected the medieval dogma of transubstantiation), and also between different sorts of Protestants. Lutherans with their doctrine of what is sometimes (and controversially) called "consubstantiation" affirmed that the body and blood of Christ are locally present "in, with, and under" the elements of bread and wine, and accompanying this was a view of the person of Christ such that the incarnate

* William B. Evans is the Eunice Witherspoon Bell Younts and Willie Camp Younts Professor of Bible and Religion at Erskine College, Due West, South Carolina, USA, where he has taught since 1993. He holds degrees from Taylor University, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and Vanderbilt University.

humanity has become "ubiquitous" by virtue of its union with the deity and the resulting communication of attributes.[1] The Zurich Reformer Ulrich Zwingli explicated his own symbolic understanding of the Lord's Supper as a memorial of Christ's death and as an expression of the unity of the church as the body of Christ. For Zwingli, this view reflected an understanding of divine grace as purely spiritual and unmediated by created means of grace.[2] Anabaptists tended to follow Zwingli in a symbolic and memorialist understanding of the sacraments, which they augmented with a profound emphasis on the Supper as a call to ethical behaviour and as an expression of the solidarity of the Christian community.[3] Thus we see that understandings of the Lord's Supper were closely connected with other areas of theology – especially Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology – and that one's understanding of the Supper cannot be abstracted from these broader concerns.

The same is true with Calvin. As we will see, Calvin in his doctrine of the Lord's Supper sought to mediate between views that affirmed a local, physical presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements (both Roman Catholic and Lutheran) on the one hand, and largely symbolic and memorialist understandings (e.g., Zwingli and the Anabaptists) on the other. In short, he endeavoured to affirm a true presence of Christ in the sacrament but to do so in a way that was non-local, respected the integrity of Christ's ascended humanity, and recognised the centrality of the believer's union with Christ. In other words, Calvin's understanding of the Supper is closely connected with his Christology, eschatology, and soteriology. Thus, in his recent study of Calvin's Eucharistic doctrine Brian Gerrish rightly notes that "Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper was bound up with a total conception of what it means to be saved and of how the historical deed of Christ reaches out to the present."[4] In other words, it appears that we do not have the option of treating differences over the Lord's Supper as mere tempests in teapots, and that this is an area where our faith must diligently seek understanding.

---

[1] Luther wrote regarding the "Sacrament of the Altar": "It is the true body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ in and under the bread and wine which we Christians are commanded by Christ's word to eat and drink. As we said of Baptism that it is not mere water, so we say here that the sacrament is bread and wine, but not mere bread or wine as is served at the table. It is bread and wine comprehended in God's Word and connected with it." Martin Luther, "Large Catechism", in Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed., *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 447.

[2] See Ulrich Zwingli, "On the Lord's Supper", in G. W. Bromiley, ed., *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 185-238.

[3] For a subtle reading of the Anabaptist tradition on the Lord's Supper, see Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 184-208.

[4] B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 190.

The Sacraments and Union with Christ

Calvin begins his discussion of the application of redemption in Book III of the *Institutes* with a recognition of the central importance of the believer's union with Christ. As Calvin famously put it,

> 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? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.[5]

This union with Christ then serves for Calvin as an overarching reality in which all the benefits of salvation are received, and he points particularly to the way in which benefits both forensic (e.g. justification) and transformatory (e.g. sanctification) are found only in Christ.

> By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace [*duplex gratia*]; namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's Spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.[6]

---

[5] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.1.1.

[6] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1. Calvin's *duplex gratia* language has provoked considerable controversy, especially in recent years. Some, demonstrating zeal to safeguard the gratuity of justification from works righteousness, have argued for the priority of forensic justification in Calvin. On this way of thinking, justification rather than spiritual union with Christ is ultimately foundational for salvation. Such also often argue that alleged contrasts between Calvin and later Reformed thought on this issue are exaggerated and merely echo now-discredited "Calvin against the Calvinists" arguments. See, e.g., Thomas Wenger, "The New Perspective on Calvin: Responding to Recent Calvin Interpretations", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007): 311-28. See also John V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517-1700)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012); and Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 202-43. Here my own work has come in for criticism, focusing especially on an alleged failure to do justice to the complexity and diversity of Reformed Orthodoxy. Here it is important to say that Reformed Orthodoxy *was* complex and diverse, as Richard Muller in particular has demonstrated. But my own aim has been, rather, to identify certain ideas and developments within Orthodoxy that later would coalesce in the nineteenth-century Reformed opposition to Calvin. What Wenger, Fesko, Muller and others have failed to explain in their insistent defence of Reformed continuity is the dramatic and even vehement opposition to Calvin's sacramentology and view of union with Christ evident in mainstream nineteenth-century federalist champions of Reformed Orthodoxy such as Charles Hodge and William Cunningham, a matter we will explore further below.

While Calvin certainly does accord a sort of religious priority to justification (see, e.g., *Institutes* 3.11.1), such "Lutheranising" takes on Calvin fail to account for the Reformer's repeated insistence that the reception of the forensic benefits depends upon spiritual union with Christ. As Calvin himself puts it in *Institutes* III.11.10: "We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body – in short, because he deigns to make us one

Furthermore, according to Calvin this union with Christ involves both the work of the Holy Spirit and the faith of the recipient. What is objectively given by the Holy Spirit must be subjectively received by faith. This twofold emphasis is, as we shall see, important for our understanding of the Lord's Supper, for it enabled Calvin to avoid both overly subjective interpretations of the sacrament that reduced union and sacramental presence to the exercise of faith, and excessively objective views of sacramental presence. On the one hand, Christ "unites us to himself by the Spirit alone. By the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members, to keep us under himself and in turn to possess him".[7] Thus the union is "spiritual". But Calvin also insists that "faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit",[8] and that the faith which saves is that which engrafts one into Christ, for "it does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ".[9]

Both the richness and complexity of this spiritual/faith dialectic and its implications for sacramentology are evident in the fact that Calvin also refuses to reduce the believer's union with Christ to the work of the Holy Spirit or to the exercise of faith. Regarding the first (and referring specifically in this context to the Lord's Supper), he insists that he is "not satisfied with those persons who, recognising 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".[10] Regarding the second, Calvin contends that faith is the instrument of union rather than the union itself, and thus that union with Christ is "a remarkable effect of faith".[11] We will explore this matter further below.

At this point we must also recognise that Calvin did not view the union with Christ in the context of the sacraments to be different in kind from the believer's union with Christ through the ministry of the Word. The sacraments, he says, "have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace. But they offer and profit nothing unless received in faith."[12] But if there is no

---

with him." I have explored these issues at some length in William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 7-41. See also Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); Marcus Johnson, "New or Nuanced Perspective on Calvin? A Reply to Thomas Wenger", *JETS* 51 (2008): 543-558.

[7] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.3.

[8] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.4.

[9] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.2.30.

[10] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.7.

[11] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.5.

[12] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.14.17. The apparent tension here is largely resolved when we realise that the sacraments, for Calvin, are the Word of God in visible form. See Gerrish, *Grace and*

qualitatively special sacramental grace, why are the sacraments needed? They are given, Calvin says, as visible signs accompanying the Word because of human ignorance and weakness.

> By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness. Yet properly speaking, it is not so much needed to confirm his Sacred Word as to establish us in faith in it. For God's truth is of itself firm and sure enough, and it cannot receive better confirmation from any other source than from itself. But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped up on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.[13]

While its importance has generally gone unrecognised, the language of objective offer and subjective reception referenced above is highly significant for our understanding of Calvin's view of the place and role of the sacraments.[14] Foundational here is his conception of the sacraments as signs and seals of the covenant promises of God.[15] Furthermore, the substance of the divine promise is Christ himself, and so the sacraments are instruments used by the Holy Spirit to offer and convey Christ to the believer. Nevertheless, what is objectively offered must also be received by faith.

> I say that Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him… Therefore, the sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there.[16]

In all this Calvin demonstrates a keen concern for balance. He believed that he was able to avoid the errors both of those who make too much of the sacraments (e.g., Roman Catholics with their *ex opere operato* conception of sacramental efficacy, in which grace is conveyed in a more or less mechanical

---

Gratitude, 102-09. Here, of course, we are reminded of Augustine's famous dictum, noted by Gerrish, along this line.

[13] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.14.3.

[14] I have explored this offer-reception model in relation to baptism in William B. Evans, "'Really Exhibited and Conferred… in His Appointed Time': Baptism and the New Reformed Sacramentalism", *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 31 (2005): 72-88.

[15] See Calvin, *Institutes* IV.14.1, where he defines a sacrament as "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".

[16] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.14.16. See also IV.14.7-13.

fashion unless an "impediment" is presented by the recipient) and of those who make too little of them (e.g., the Zwinglian tendency to view the sacraments in largely symbolic and non-efficacious terms).[17]

Nevertheless, this dialectic of offer and reception does not detract from the objective nature of the sacraments, for, as Calvin insisted, "it is one thing to offer, another to receive."[18] Baptism and the Lord's Supper truly offer Christ, but these do not benefit the impious person bereft of faith. Calvin makes this point forcefully in his commentary on Ezekiel 20:20:

> We must hold, therefore, that there is a mutual relation between faith and the sacraments, and hence, that the sacraments are effective through faith. Man's unworthiness does not detract anything from them, for they always retain their nature. Baptism is the laver of regeneration, although the whole world should be incredulous (Tit 3:5): the Supper of Christ is the communication of his body and blood, (1 Cor 10:16) although there were not a spark of faith in the world: but we do not perceive the grace which is offered to us; and although spiritual things always remain the same, yet we do not obtain their effect, nor perceive their value, unless we are cautious that our want of faith should not profane what God has consecrated to our salvation.[19]

Thus there is for Calvin an objective sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified. The Lord's Supper is not a bare or empty sign, and here Calvin argues that the honour and truthfulness of God are at stake.

> For unless a man means to call God a deceiver, he would never dare assert that an empty symbol is set forth by him. Therefore, if the Lord truly represents the participation in his body through the breaking of bread, there ought not to be the least doubt that he truly presents and shows his body. And the godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there.[20]

Our understanding of this sacramental objectivity is further helped when we realise that, as a number of scholars have noted, Calvin often utilised the Chalcedonian Christological language of "distinction without separation" as a way of describing the sacramental relationship between the sign and the thing signified. In fact, B. A. Gerrish views this usage as "one of the most distinctive features of his sacramental theology", and one which "defined his position against the Zwinglians on the one side, and the Roman Catholics and

---

[17] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.14.17, writes: "When this doctrine is taught concerning the sacraments, their worth is 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." See also IV.14.14.

[18] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.14.16.

[19] John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844-1856; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948-1950), Commentary on Ezekiel 20:20.

[20] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.10.

Lutherans on the other".[21] Consistent with this, Calvin often speaks of the sacraments as "instruments" used by the Holy Spirit to communicate what they signify to the believer.[22] Representative of such instrumental language is this description of "the mystery of the Supper":

> I therefore say (what has always been accepted in the church and is taught today by all of sound opinion) 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.[23]

The Presence of Christ in the Supper

Thus far we have seen that, for Calvin, the sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant promises of God, that Christ himself is the material content of these covenant promises, that the sacraments are objective offers of Christ to the believer, and that they are instruments used by God to unite his people with Christ. Now we will explore the implications of this for the Lord's Supper.[24]

As the Jesuit scholar Joseph Tylenda has rightly observed, "Calvin is one with the other Christian communities in teaching a presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper".[25] In fact, Calvin's language at this point is strong indeed, insisting that Christ is truly present in the sacrament, that this presence extends to his "body and blood", and even that Christ's presence in the Supper is "substantial". In light of our earlier comments about the "spiritual" character of this presence, there is obviously more to be said.

In clarifying these matters, Calvin took pains to reject what he viewed as four misunderstandings of Christ's presence in the Supper. As we noted above, he opposed the theological successors of Zwingli who equated the exercise of faith with the reception of Christ in the Supper.[26] Second, he also opposed the notion that the presence of Christ is simply the reception of the

---

[21] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 53. See also p. 137.

[22] See, e.g., Institutes IV.14.12. Regarding Calvin's theory of sacramental sign as instrumentally communicating what it signifies, we should note Brian A. Gerrish's helpful and influential threefold typology of Reformed views on sacramental presence. He distinguishes "symbolic memorialism" (Zwingli), "symbolic parallelism" (Bullinger), and "symbolic instrumentalism" (Calvin). See Brian A. Gerrish, "Sign and Reality: The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," in *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), 122-23; *Grace and Gratitude*, 167.

[23] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.11.

[24] In this section I draw upon my more extended discussion of this issue in Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 19-29.

[25] Joseph Tylenda, "Calvin and Christ's Presence in the Supper – True or Real?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 65.

[26] See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.5.

work of the Holy Spirit, as if the Spirit is a surrogate for an absent Christ.[27] Third, Calvin further clarifies his position by noting that the believer's union with Christ goes beyond the mere reception of the benefits of Christ's work. Answering the Lutheran controversialist Tileman Heshusius, he writes, "Equally futile is he when he says that I keep talking only of fruit and efficacy. Everywhere I assert a substantial communion, and discard only a local presence and the figment of an immensity of flesh."[28] Finally, replying again to Heshusius, Calvin goes further in specifying the nature of the Christian's union with Christ by asserting that the union involves the incarnate humanity of Christ, as well as his deity: "When he represents me as substituting merit and benefit for flesh and blood, and shortly afterwards adds that I acknowledge no other presence in the Supper than that of the deity, my writings, without a word from me, refute the impudent calumny."[29]

Calvin's insistence on this real reception of Christ is driven by important soteriological considerations. Calvin was convinced that the believer must be united with the "flesh", or incarnate humanity, of Christ, for "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".[30] Crucial here is Calvin's view of the incarnate humanity of Christ as the channel through which all salvation grace is received: "For as the eternal Word of God is the fountain of life, so His Flesh is a channel to pour out to us the life which resides intrinsically, as they say, in His divinity. In this sense it is called life-giving, because it communicates to us a life that it borrows from elsewhere."[31] This mediatorial humanity of Christ functions in at least two ways for Calvin, corresponding to the *duplex gratia* structure noted above. First, as we just noted, the humanity of Christ acts as a "channel" for the power and life which are integral to Christ's deity. This first function relates primarily to the transforming aspects of salvation (i.e., sanctification). Second, communion with the humanity of Christ is crucial because it was particularly as a human being that Christ offered his atoning sacrifice for sin. This second function relates primarily to the forensic benefits of salvation (i.e. justification).[32] While Calvin nowhere fully explains this, his assumption is that the forensic benefits inhere in Christ's incarnate humanity.

---

[27] See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.7.

[28] John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, trans. and ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 287.

[29] Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 307-8.

[30] Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 308.

[31] Calvin, Commentary on John 6:51.

[32] See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.9; *Theological Treatises*, 308; Commentary on John 6:51; Commentary on Ephesians 5:30. Regarding this Calvinian emphasis on union with the humanity of Christ, see R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 146-149; E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 78-100.

Calvin insisted equally strongly, however, that this realistic presence of Christ's incarnate humanity in the Lord's Supper was not a local presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements themselves, as if the physical body and blood of Christ are physically chewed and swallowed in the sacrament. Here Calvin's broader concerns were Christological, eschatological and soteriological. With regard to the first, Calvin is especially concerned to safeguard the integrity of Christ's incarnate humanity: "Let nothing inappropriate to human nature be ascribed to his body, as happens when it is said to be infinite or to be put in a number of places at once."[33] Closely connected with this is the reality of the ascension. That Christ has ascended in glory to the right hand of the Father and is no longer present on earth in the manner of his earthly ministry has implications (if the integrity of his humanity is to be maintained) for the mode of Christ's presence in the Supper, and hence for the nature of the believer's union with Christ.

> 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 returns in judgement [Acts 3:21], so we deem it utterly unlawful to draw it back under these corruptible elements or to imagine it to be present everywhere.[34]

Calvin also advanced a set of soteriological objections to the notion of a local presence. When Christ's presence is understood locally, as in the case of both Roman Catholic transubstantiation and Lutheran consubstantiation, it becomes difficult to restrict reception to the believing community. The notion that the unbeliever received Christ in the Supper together with the believer was problematic in that it proved too much. On the one hand, such a view implied that Christ's flesh is not vivifying, and on the other hand it indicated that Christ may be separated from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.[35]

Thus the issue, for Calvin, involves the mode of Christ's presence in the Supper. Against the subjective memorialism of Zwingli on the one hand and the spatial/local objectivism of the Roman Catholics and High Lutherans on the other, Calvin asserted a true but spiritual communion with Christ, particularly with the incarnate humanity. By "spiritual", of course, Calvin does not mean that the believer's communion with Christ is somehow less than true and actual. Rather, the communion is accomplished by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes,

> Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his

[33] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.12.

[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.12. Here Calvin had in mind both Lutheran ubiquity and Roman Catholic transubstantiation.

[35] See Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 273, 321.

immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.[36]

For Calvin, the consecrated elements are important, not in themselves, but as they direct the believer's faith toward heaven where Christ's saving humanity exists at the right hand of the Father. In dependence upon Eph 2:5-6, he preferred to speak of the believer's true reception of Christ as a matter of the heart being lifted up to heaven.

But if we are lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds, to seek Christ there in the glory of his Kingdom, as the symbols invite us to him in his wholeness, so under the symbol of bread we shall be fed by his body, and under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink his blood, to enjoy him at last in his wholeness.[37]

This lifting up of the heart is not mere psychology, however, for "the Spirit truly unites things separated in space". In keeping with this emphasis, Calvin continued to utilise the *Sursum Corda* ("Lift up your hearts") of the Roman Mass in the Strasbourg and Genevan Reformed liturgies,[38] and he aptly characterises advocates of a local presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements as those who "refuse to lift up their hearts".[39]

Thus far Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Needless to say, there are complexities here. Many over the years have found Calvin's views on the Lord's Supper and the related issue of union with Christ to be perplexing, and more than a few have been unwilling to take the Reformer's statements at face value. As Brian Gerrish notes, some who have emphasised Calvin's teaching on "spiritual" communication, faith, and the symbolic nature of the elements have viewed him as a "subtle sacramentarian" (i.e., as a sophisticated Zwinglian). On the other hand, some who objected to Calvin's teaching on the vital importance of union with Christ's incarnate humanity as essential to the reception of all of salvation (including forensic justification) have viewed him as a "crypto-catholic".[40] This latter concern has been, as we shall see, particularly prominent in some later Reformed appraisals.

We will engage the second concern later in this article, but at this point it is sufficient to note that there is a dialectic of *in nobis* and *extra nos* thinking evident in Calvin that has often not sat well with later Reformed theologians who have sought rigorously to prioritise the forensic dimension of salvation. That is to say, there is in Calvin's thinking here a matrix of realistic, forensic, and personal categories that is sometimes difficult, especially from the

[36] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.10.

[37] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.18.

[38] See Bard Thompson, ed., *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 207.

[39] Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 275-76.

[40] See Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 2-9.

standpoint of later concerns, to untangle. On the one hand, the sacrificial work of Christ is accomplished outside the believer.[41] In addition, the believer, though fully justified, is not made fully righteous in this life.[42] Thus, from the standpoint of both the objective work of Christ and the fact that complete righteousness is never attained in this life, the justification of the Christian is to be found *extra nos*. On the other hand, as Calvin pointedly insists, "as long as Christ remains outside of us… all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us".[43] Whatever questions have been raised subsequently, it is clear that Calvin himself detected no contradiction here. As Paul Van Buren has rightly argued, subjective incorporation and objective substitution are not mutually exclusive categories for Calvin.[44]

The first concern (whether Calvin was a "subtle sacramentarian") may be fruitfully engaged by examining his language regarding "substantial" communion with Christ. Particularly striking is Calvin's use of the term "substance" (*substantia*) to describe the believer's union with Christ. Throughout his career and in a variety of contexts – exegetical, controversial, and sacramental – Calvin insisted that believers partake of Christ's "substance".[45] But such passages must be evaluated over against other statements by Calvin that appear to place severe limits on "substantial" communion. These are particularly evident in Calvin's polemic against the eccentric Lutheran Andreas Osiander, who argued that justification is not merely declarative, but renders one actually righteous. Thus Osiander proposed that union with Christ involved indwelling divine substance. In response, Calvin rejected Osiander's notion of a "gross mingling of Christ with believers", [46] and he repudiated Osiander's notion of an essential and unmediated union with the deity.

---

[41] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.4.

[42] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.23: "You see that our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches."

[43] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.1.1.

[44] Paul Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 97.

[45] See, e.g., Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 264, 287; *Institutes*, III.2.24; IV.17.19; Commentary on Eph 5:30; Thompson, *Liturgies*, 207. David Willis, "Calvin's Use of Substantia", in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, ed. Wilelm H. Neuser (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 289-301, documents Calvin's extensive and insistent use throughout his career of the term *substantia* to denote the believer's union with Christ in the Supper.

François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 236-38, contends that Calvin avoided use of terms such as *substantia* to describe the believer's union with Christ after the Osiandrian controversy of 1550-52, and the retention of such language in the 1559 *Institutes* is ascribed by Wendel to Calvin's "inadvertence". In fact, some of Calvin's most emphatic statements regarding the believer's reception of Christ's "substance" are found in Calvin's reply to the Lutheran controversialist Tileman Heshusius, "The True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper" (1561). See Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 258-324.

[46] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.10.

He says we are one with Christ. We agree. But we deny that Christ's essence [*essentiam*] is mixed with our own... Then he [Osiander] throws in a mixture of substances [*substantialem*] by which God – transfusing himself into us, as it were – makes us part of himself. For the fact that it comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit that we grow together with Christ, and he becomes our Head and we his members, he reckons of almost no importance.[47]

This is a complicated matter, and the literature on it is extensive. For our purposes, however, we can achieve needed clarity by focusing on two related issues. First, there is the precise nature of Calvin's polemic against Osiander. Here we see that Calvin combatted Osiander's notion of an essential union with the deity by emphasising the role of the mediatorial humanity of Christ. We have already seen that Calvin viewed the "flesh", or incarnate humanity of Christ, as the channel through which the power of deity flows to the believer. In this context, Calvin affirms that Christ's mediatorial work was accomplished primarily in his humanity, and that the benefits of that work are therefore received through union with that humanity. Here Calvin argues that

we are justified in Christ, in so far as he was made an atoning sacrifice for us: something that does not comport with his divine nature. For this reason also, when Christ would seal the righteousness and salvation that he has brought us, he sets forth a sure pledge of it in his own flesh. Now he calls himself "the bread of life" [John 6:48], but, in explaining how, he adds that "his flesh is truly meat, and his blood truly drink" [John 6:55]. This method of teaching is perceived in the sacraments; even though they direct our faith to the whole Christ and not to a half-Christ, they teach that the matter both of righteousness and of salvation resides in his flesh; not that as mere man he justifies or quickens by himself, but because it pleased God to reveal in the mediator what was hidden and incomprehensible in himself. Accordingly, I usually say that Christ is, as it were, a fountain, open to us from which we may draw what otherwise would lie unprofitably hidden in that deep and secret spring, which comes forth to us in the person of the Mediator.[48]

Thus Calvin's rejection of "substance" language in the context of his polemic against Osiander should not be understood as directed against "substantial communion" with Christ *per se*, but rather against substantial communion of a particular sort – one involving the unmediated compounding of the divine and the human.

Second, there is the issue of Calvin's use of technical language (e.g., *substantia*). Even in sacramental contexts Calvin uses the term *substantia* in a number of different senses – sometimes in its scholastic Aristotelian sense as the union of form and matter (denoting a local presence), and sometimes in reference to what may cautiously be termed a spiritually qualified substance (denoting a real but non-local presence).[49] Calvin's concerns

[47] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.5.

[48] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.9.

[49] Literature on this includes Wendel, *Calvin*, 236-37, 341-43; Helmut Gollwitzer, *Coena Domini* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937), 117-133; E. D. Willis, "Calvin's Use of Substantia", 289-301; Jill Raitt, "Calvin's Use of Persona", in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, ed. Wilhelm

become more clear when we realise that, for the Reformer, the mere reception of the physical material of Christ's body and blood is soteriologically irrelevant if those natural materials are abstracted from Christ's very being. Calvin viewed the crucial centre of Christ's vicarious humanity as something much more profound than material substance separately considered. Calvin writes:

> When I say that the flesh and blood of Christ are substantially offered and exhibited to us in the Supper, I at the same time explain the mode, namely, that the flesh of Christ becomes vivifying to us, inasmuch as Christ, by the incomprehensible virtue of his Spirit, transfers his own proper life into us from the substance of his flesh, so that he himself lives in us, and his life is common to us.[50]

Thus, for Calvin the spiritual "substance" of Christ's humanity received in the Supper is not an issue of local and material/spatial presence but of the animating force or life from which that material presence comes.[51] Here the religious genius of Calvin is apparent. He recognised that the Supper is, first and foremost, spiritual food for the soul. Yet the body and blood of Christ (physically considered) could not provide spiritual nourishment unless they were endowed with magical characteristics. This was precisely the problem inherent in all the local-presence theories Calvin combatted – the physical presence of body and blood was abstracted from Christ's mediatorial life. Only as the substance of Christ was understood as the very life of Christ was a true feeding of the soul upon Christ conceivable without resort to magical gimmickry.[52]

From all this we conclude that Calvin did indeed intend this "substance" language in an ontological sense, albeit one that does not correspond to any formal philosophical ontology. His contention that the incarnate humanity of Christ functions as a channel for the reception of the power of Christ's deity and that union with the substance of the humanity of Christ is therefore necessary seems to demand that *substantia* be taken as a reference to

---

H. Neuser (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984), 273-75. Wendel, *Calvin*, 342, is no doubt correct in his observation that Calvin's equivocal use of the term in Eucharistic debates "helped to give an appearance of ambiguity to his doctrine which his adversaries were prompt to exploit".

[50] Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 267.

[51] Here we follow the interpretation of August Ebrard, *Das Dogma vom heiligen Abendmahl und seine Geschichte*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Zimmer, 1845-46), which was, in turn, influential on John Williamson Nevin's later interpretation of Calvin on the Eucharist. On Ebrard's interpretation of Calvin and its influence on Nevin, see James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 100-101; Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 178-180.

[52] See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 228.

ontological reality. Similarly, Calvin's insistent refusal to reduce union with Christ to a "virtual" communion involving only the reception of the benefits of salvation, to the action of faith, or to the reception of the Holy Spirit seems to demand an ontological referent for *substantia*. E. D. Willis rightly observes:

> Calvin is not beginning with a general category – substance – of which Christ and our life in Christ are instances. *The* substance of the eucharist is the fundamental ontological fact, Christ himself. That is not a non-ontological statement; it is an ontological statement which forces into a subordinate position ancillary philosophical elucidations.[53]

As we shall see, this lack of philosophical apparatus is both a strength and, depending upon context, a potential weakness of Calvin's position.

The Reception of Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper

At this point we can summarise Calvin's doctrine of the Supper under four headings. First, the elements of bread and wine remain symbols; that is, they are not physically transformed and there is no localised presence. Second, the elements are nevertheless used by the Holy Spirit as instruments to communicate what they symbolise, and so there is a sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified. Third, there is a dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity as what is objectively offered and bestowed by the Holy Spirit must be subjectively received by faith. Finally, what is received is the whole Christ, whose incarnate humanity serves as a "channel" for the power of Christ's deity and all the benefits of salvation. In this section we will briefly examine the reception of Calvin's doctrine in the Reformed theological community.

We are fortunate to have the detailed study of the Eucharistic theology of Calvin's student and successor, Theodore Beza, by Jill Raitt. She concludes that Beza followed Calvin closely, but that key points were explained in an "increasingly scholastic manner".[54] Nevertheless, the key elements of Calvin's doctrine are quite present, including the importance of participation in Christ's incarnate humanity. Raitt describes Beza's position here in terms that apply equally well to Calvin: "According to Christ's total being as the

---

[53] Willis, "Calvin's Use of Substantia", 300. On p. 299 Willis notes: "For one of the strengths of Calvin's eucharistic doctrine is that he *does* use substance in expressing the eucharistic presence of Christ. Another strength is the way he uses it: he uses it critically as a theological term – not primarily, perhaps not at all, as a consciously philosophical term. Some may prefer that he had been more precise philosophically by identifying several senses which the term had been given in its varied history, and defending his own particular use of it – as was the custom with those who developed considerable chapters of *distinctiones* in their *summae*. But, in any event, Calvin here is philosophically eclectic."

[54] Jill Raitt, *The Eucharistic Theology of Theodore Beza: Development of the Reformed Doctrine* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1972), 70.

Word incarnate, there can be no direct participation. According to Christ's nature as man, there can be participation in his very substance."[55] But as we move into the post-Reformation period there were forces and influences – both scholastic and pietistic – at work that would result in increasing distance from Calvin's formulations. This issue is, to be sure, a controverted matter, and we can only briefly suggest some important developments that were to push the tradition away from Calvin's concerns.

Key here was the development of more extrinsic modes of soteriological thinking. As we have seen, Calvin highlights the importance of a single spiritual union that issues in a *duplex gratia* (the "double grace" of justification and transformation of life), and he saw no contradiction between such an intimate spiritual union and forensic justification. As Calvin powerfully put it, "We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body."[56] But as the covenant or "federal" theology trajectory continued to develop in the latter part of the seventeenth century some Reformed theologians began to speak of a justifying "legal" or "federal" union with Christ.[57] This notion of "federal union" as it developed was rather clearly a nominal relationship extrinsic to the persons involved. Accompanying this were seventeenth-century developments regarding the nature of imputation in the context of the Placaean controversy (named after the French Saumur theologian Josué de la Place), in which a distinction was made between "mediate imputation" (imputation mediated by participation in moral qualities) and "immediate imputation" (imputation via an extrinsic legal relationship). When imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer was framed in these terms, it was understandably understood by many as immediate and as communicated by a fundamentally extrinsic relationship.[58] Thus it was that

---

[55] Raitt, *Eucharistic Theology*, 47.

[56] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.10.

[57] For example, in 1655 Samuel Rutherford distinguished between a "naturall" or incarnational union, a "legall" union whereby Christ takes the debt of sin upon himself, a "federall" union by which Christ is the Surety for sinners (and which appears to be functionally identical to the "legall" union), and finally perhaps a "mysticall" union. See Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened: Or, A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (Edinburgh: 1655), 208-209. I have treated these developments at greater length in my *Imputation and Impartation*, 57-75. M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsell Press, 1985), 79, identifies Rutherford as the originator of the notion of a "legal union" with Christ. That may be, but such extrinsic ways of thinking did not emerge from a conceptual vacuum.

[58] For summary discussions of the Placaean controversy, see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1872-73), II:205-214; William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, 2 vols., 14th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), II:158-163; George Park Fisher, "The Augustinian and Federal Theories of Original Sin Compared", in *Discussions in History and Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880), 384-395; John

the forensic aspect of salvation came to be framed in extrinsic legal terms (a legal union with Christ) while the transformatory aspect of salvation came to be viewed in terms of the reception of the work of the Holy Spirit (a spiritual union), and this language of two unions – legal and spiritual – became widespread by the early eighteenth century. The distance from Calvin's formulations grew greater, though formal opposition to Calvin's Eucharistic doctrine was still rare at this point. That would come later.

Pietistic influences associated with Puritanism also were significant here. It has been a commonplace of modern scholarship that Puritans tended to depreciate the sacraments and sacramental efficacy,[59] but this eclipse of the sacramental was not uniform, and the careful work of Brooks Holifield in particular has underscored both the complexity and the diversity of Puritan opinion. While many early Puritans certainly intended to follow Calvin in their view of the Supper, and the Westminster Confession of Faith appears on the face of it to be rather faithful to Calvin's sacramental concerns,[60] there were factors at work that would eventually push some Puritan thinking in other directions. For example, Holifield has shown that the Puritan stress on subjectivity served to heighten interest in the faith of the recipient, and that this was sometimes expressed at the expense of recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit. We also see moves toward "virtual" conceptions of sacramental presence – a presence not of the substance of Christ's humanity but rather of the "virtue," or power and saving effects, of Christ's work.[61] Implicit in all these developments is a shift from a participationist model of salvation to an appropriationist model.[62] No longer was salvation concretely found through participation in Christ, but rather it was appropriated by external means and on the basis of what Christ has done.

Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 42-48. See also my *Imputation and Impartation*, 70-75.

[59] See, e.g., Geoffrey Fillingham Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 90-101; E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England 1570-172*0 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), ix, 73.

[60] See, e.g., the appropriation of Calvin's offer/reception language in WCF 28.6, the recognition of a "sacramental union" existing "between the sign and the thing signified" in WCF 27.2, and presence of Christ's body and blood "as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers" in WCF 29.7.

[61] See Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 130-133. Holifield, p. 26, also aptly notes, "Among later Reformed theologians, including English Puritans, some ministers were always tempted to describe the sacrament simply in terms of its efficacy." On these developments, see also my *Imputation and Impartation*, 78-81.

[62] I am indebted to Roger Newell for this terminology. See his "Participation and Atonement", in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, ed. Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), 92-101.

From such thinking it was but a small distance to outright Zwinglian memorialism, a step taken by many later New England Puritans. For example, Jonathan Edwards' view of the Supper is thoroughly Zwinglian – the elements symbolise an absent Christ; they do not mediate a real presence – and his New England Calvinist successors followed in this path. Edwards wrote:

> The sacramental elements in the Lord's Supper do represent Christ as a party in covenant, as truly as a proxy represents a prince to a foreign lady in her marriage; and our taking those elements is as truly a professing to accept Christ, as in the other case the lady's taking the proxy is her professing to accept the prince as her husband. Or the matter may more fitly be represented by this similitude: it is as if a prince should send an ambassador to a woman in a foreign land, proposing marriage, and by his ambassador should send her his picture, and should desire her to manifest her acceptance of his suit, not only by professing her acceptance in words to his ambassador, but in token of her sincerity openly to take or accept that picture, and so seal her profession, by thus representing the matter over again by a symbolical action.[63]

By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the gap between Calvin and mainstream Reformed thinking was so great that explicit and even strident opposition to Calvin's Eucharistic doctrine was being expressed by some Reformed champions of late federal orthodoxy. Assuming both a Scottish Common Sense metaphysic and that the forensic relationship between Christ and the Christian was extrinsic, they found Calvin's notion of a substantial union with the humanity of Christ foundational to both justification and sanctification to be at best odd, and at worst a betrayal of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith. Charles Hodge spoke of Calvin's theory as an "uncongenial foreign element" at odds with the doctrine of justification.[64] Scottish federal theologian William Cunningham termed Calvin's view of union with Christ's humanity "altogether unsuccessful" and "the greatest blot in the history of Calvin's labours as a public instructor".[65] R. L. Dabney declared, "We reject the view of Calvin concerning the real presence… because it is not only incomprehensible, but impossible."[66] Finally, Louis Berkhof averred that Calvin's view of the Supper is "an obscure point in Calvin's representation", and that the Reformer "seems to place too much emphasis on the literal flesh and blood".[67] So pervasive has been such

---

[63] Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church*, in *The Works of President Edwards*, 4 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1868), I:146.

[64] Charles Hodge, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper", *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 20 (1848), 251-253.

[65] William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866), 240.

[66] Robert L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Co. of St. Louis, 1878), 811 (?).

[67] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 654. For more on such criticisms, see Ralph Cunnington, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper: A Blot Upon His Labors as a Public Instructor?", *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011): 215-36.

thinking in certain circles that more recently Carl Trueman has presented as the "Reformed" position that "Christ was present in the eucharist *but only according to his divine nature*".[68]

Such sentiments have not been unanimous, however. The Mercersburg theologian John W. Nevin wrote a remarkable treatise, *The Mystical Presence*, in which he defended Calvin's position regarding communion with the incarnate humanity of Christ and strongly criticised the extrinsic soteriology and abstraction of later Puritanism and federal theology. Nevin subsequently engaged in an extended polemic with Charles Hodge over these issues.[69] Later in the nineteenth century Nevin (and Calvin) received strong support on this issue from the American Southern Presbyterian church historian John B. Adger.[70]

More recently, however, in America there has been a revival of interest in Calvin's Eucharistic doctrine and in the Mercersburg Theology which sought to champion it.[71] In the United Kingdom, Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper has always found exponents among Scottish Calvinists. Here we think especially of the work of Thomas F. Torrance, whose emphasis on the mediatorial humanity of Christ parallels Calvin's concerns at key points.[72]

---

[68] Carl Trueman, "Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena", in Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman, eds., *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 6.

[69] See John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1846). Materials relating to the Hodge-Nevin debate have recently been republished in John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence And The Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper*, ed. Linden J. Debie, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, Vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); and John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge, *Coena Mystica: Debating Reformed Eucharistic Theology*, ed. Linden J. DeBie, The Mercersburg Theology Study Series, Vol. 2 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

[70] See John B. Adger, "Calvin Defended Against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge", *Southern Presbyterian Review* 27 (1876): 133-66; "Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper", *Southern Presbyterian Review* 35 (1885): 785-800. On these debates, see E. Brooks Holifield, "Mercersburg, Princeton, and the South: The Sacramental Controversy in the Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 238-57; Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 219-27.

[71] See, e.g., Keith Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002). The growing body of literature on the Mercersburg Theology is too extensive to list here.

[72] See, e.g., T. F. Torrance, "The Paschal Mystery of Christ and the Eucharist", in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 106-138. A key text for this Scottish tradition of sacramental high Calvinism has been Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh in A.D. 1589*, trans. and ed. Thomas F. Torrance (London: James Clark, 1958). On some remarkable parallels between T. F. Torrance and John W. Nevin, see William B. Evans, "Twin Sons of Different Mothers: The Remarkable Theological Convergence of John W. Nevin and Thomas F. Torrance", *Haddington House Journal* 11 (2009): 155-173.

Calvin's Doctrine of the Supper as Material for Reformed and Evangelical Ressourcement

We conclude with some reasons why Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is worthy of renewed attention as a source for retrieval and the renewal of the Reformed and Evangelical tradition. The first is that Calvin demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to Scripture, both in refusing to say more *and* less than does the Bible. One cannot read the *Institutes*, the commentaries, and the controversial literature without sensing just how concerned Calvin was to do justice to what the Bible teaches. In Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians we find some striking statements regarding the efficacy and presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:16-22; 11:27-31). The first of these passages tells us that the Supper is a communion or participation in the body and blood of Christ, and it underscores the impossibility of communing with Christ and with the powers of darkness in pagan repasts. The second passage tells us that whoever eats and drinks in an unworthy manner is guilty of the body and blood of Christ. We also see here that the presence is something that must be discerned (in context, Calvin's interpretation of "discerning the body" in 1 Cor 11:29 seems to me quite superior to the currently fashionable but otiose Zwinglian interpretation of "body" as the "congregation" or "church"[73]).

Second, Calvin's Eucharistic doctrine can claim continuity with the Christian past that Zwinglian symbolic memorialism cannot. Writing shortly after the death of the Apostle John, Ignatius of Antioch condemned those holding "strange doctrine concerning the grace of Jesus Christ", who "allow not that the eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ".[74] Early on the church was content to affirm the real presence of Christ in the Supper without explaining it (e.g., the symbolic realism of Augustine), but in the medieval period there was a decided trend toward transformationalist understandings (i.e., the notion that the bread and wine are somehow transformed into body and blood), beginning especially with the ninth-century Eucharistic debates between Radbertus and Ratramnus of Corbie, and culminating in the codification of the doctrine of transubstantiation at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Zwinglian memorialism, however, represents a decided break with this tradition going back to the early post-apostolic period.

Third, in pointing to a more participatory view of salvation, Calvin's Eucharistic doctrine provides an alternative to the appropriationist soteriologies that have seemingly come to define modern conservative

[73] See Calvin, *Commentary* on 1 Corinthians 11:29.

[74] Ignatius of Antioch, "To the Smyrnaeans", 6, in J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 158.

Protestantism. We have already seen that Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is closely connected with his Christology and soteriology, and that a particularly prominent aspect is his emphasis on union with the incarnate humanity of Christ, through which the believer participates in all the benefits of salvation. In this Calvin stands in solidarity with the great tradition, which viewed the mediatorial humanity of Christ as the means whereby Christ and his work become determinative for human beings.[75]

This great tradition held until the Reformation and is certainly evident in Luther and Calvin and found its way into Reformed confessional documents.[76] But in the post-Reformation period more extrinsic ways of thinking about salvation emerged. In Reformed circles the tendency from the late seventeenth century onward was to construe justification as an extrinsic legal arrangement, and sanctification as the reception of the work of the Holy Spirit (who served as a sort of surrogate for Christ). In this move to extrinsic categories we see a shift from a participationist to an appropriationist model in which salvation in no longer "in Christ" but rather "on the basis of what Christ has done", and the humanity of Christ was increasingly eclipsed as a theological factor in that it became little more than a prerequisite for the Atonement. These structural moves produced results with which Reformed and Evangelical theology is still dealing. As the forensic dimension of salvation was abstracted from the persons involved it was also abstracted from the life of faith, and it became increasingly difficult to explain how the life of faith and perseverance is relevant to eternal destiny. Moreover, the unity of salvation in Christ was undercut as the forensic and transformatory aspects of salvation were understood in very different ways. The result of this dualistic soteriology was that those who emphasised the former sometimes tended toward antinomianism, while those who stressed the latter could lurch toward neonomianism. Perhaps it is time to revisit Calvin![77]

---

[75] John McIntyre, *Theology after the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 80, writes: "One of the most important aspects of the classical Christologies was the way in which they presented the humanity of Christ in universal terms, so that on the one hand the whole of humanity could be regarded as comprehended within the redemptive act and on the other the redemptive act could be made available for the whole of humanity. The humanity of Christ is the medium of universalization of the redemptive role of Christ, and it is at the same time the medium of the redemptive act itself, for it is through his humanity that Christ offers himself in life and in death to the Father in obedience to the Father's will for him and for the whole of humankind."

[76] See Scots Confession, Chap. 21; Belgic Confession, Art. 35; Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 79; Westminster Confession, 29.7.

[77] Interestingly, there now seems to be rising interest in just these issues. For example, Calvin's participatory soteriology has recently been examined at length by scholars such as Todd Billings and Julie Canlis. See J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (New York: Oxford, 2008); Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

But how can Calvin's notion of a realistic union with the incarnate humanity of Christ in the Supper (and more generally in union with Christ) be formulated such that it is neither unintelligible nor framed in terms of some particular (and timebound) philosophical ontology. Here the answer lies, not in any particular philosophy, but in the teachings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, who emphasises the identity and work of Christ as the Second Adam and root of a new humanity (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:45, 49; Col 1:18), the relationship of the resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 15:45; 2 Cor 3:17-18; 1 Tim. 3:16), the believer's participation in the new creation through union with Christ (2 Cor 5:17), and the eschatological transformation of the humanity of Christ by the Holy Spirit at the resurrection in anticipation of the general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20-22). Only as Christ's humanity has been transformed by the Spirit is it spiritually accessible and life-giving (1 Cor 15:42-45).[78] In the resurrection of Christ we encounter the nexus of the old and new creations, and here all attempts to arrive at a philosophical ontology common to both must cease. Now we also see why Calvin's conception of Christ's presence in the Supper as realistic and ontological but not tied to any particular philosophical ontology can be a great asset for today.

Fourth, the pastoral and ecclesial implications of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper for Reformed Christians today should not be missed. If the Supper is indeed spiritual food for Christian souls, if it is an instrumental means whereby Christ and all his forensic and transforming benefits are received, if it is a decisive expression of the unity of the church in Christ, and if it a key depiction of what Calvin eloquently calls the "wonderful exchange" by which Christ took what was ours so that we might receive what was his, then it should be treasured and received often.[79] Relevant chapters of the

[78] Twentieth-century biblical studies has paid some attention to this theme. See, e.g., Geerhardus Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit", in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1980), 91-125; Neill Q. Hamilton, *The Holy Spirit and Eschatology in Paul* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 12-15; Robin Scroggs, The Last Adam (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 92-112; Murray J. Harris, *Raised Immortal* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1983), 53-57, 94-97.

[79] Witness this eloquent expression of the blessings of the Supper from *Institutes* IV.17. 2: "Godly souls can gather great 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. As a consequence, we may dare assure ourselves that eternal life, of which he is the heir, is ours; and that the Kingdom of Heaven, into which he has already entered, can no more be cut off from us than from him; again, that we cannot be condemned for our sins, from whose guilt he has absolved us, since he willed to take them upon himself as if they were his own. This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that,

Institutes suggest that he viewed weekly communion as preferable (in contrast to the common Roman Catholic practice of his day of receiving once a year), but, as is often noted, the city fathers of Geneva forced him to settle for quarterly communion in the churches of the city, and quarterly communion has since become standard in many Reformed churches.[80] Again, if the sacrament is indeed what Calvin viewed it to be, then Reformed Christians should be looking for reasons to maximise rather than minimise the frequency of partaking by congregations.

Finally, we find in Calvin an approach to soteriology and the sacraments that is both evangelical in its concern for the necessity of the reception of Christ's righteousness by faith *and* robustly sacramental in its continuity with the great tradition of the church. To use a timeworn phrase, Calvin really was "evangelical, Catholic and Reformed". In an age when many younger evangelicals, in their quest for a more objective and historically rooted approach to Christianity than they have known, feel the tug of Rome and Constantinople, Calvin's approach to the Lord's Supper and the soteriology it implies are worth exploring.

---

receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness."

[80] See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.44-46. See also Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 70-71; Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament*, 252-53.

Foundations 68 (May 2015): 26-56

NOT REFORMED ENOUGH: CRITIQUING CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

John Stevens[*]

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is central to the life and worship of most evangelical churches. However contemporary practice of the Lord's Supper is far removed from that described in the New Testament. Whilst the magisterial reformers overturned the theology of the Roman Catholic Mass they retained its essential shape and failed to introduce a truly biblical pattern to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The contention of this article is that we need to recover the New Testament practice of the Lord's Supper as a community celebration meal of the New Covenant, eaten in the presence of the Lord Jesus as he dwells with his people by his Spirit in the new temple that is his church. A carefully reading of the key New Testament texts demands a reform that goes beyond resolving the well-trodden differences between a Calvinist and Zwinglian understanding of the Lord's Supper to a practice that embeds the identity-shaping, assurance-building and community-forming functions of the Lord's Supper.

I suspect that if any members of the earliest Christian communities, say from the first two centuries after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, were to visit a contemporary Protestant church, the area of church life they would find most surprising compared to their experience would be the way we celebrate the Lord's Supper. This would be so whether they visited a highly liturgical and ritualised Anglican service, a strongly sacramental High Presbyterian service, a low church Baptist service, or even a traditional Brethren "Breaking of Bread" service. They would be astonished to find us sharing mere token pieces of bread (or wafers) and drinking tiny sips (or tiny cups) of wine (or grape juice). They would be surprised by the solemnity of the occasion, the degree of morbid introspection that is expected and encouraged, and by the apparent individualism whereby the participants commune personally with the Lord but not with each other. They would find

[*] National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches. The views expressed are my own and do not reflect any position of the FIEC. The FIEC is an association of churches united by core gospel beliefs, as expressed in our Doctrinal Basis, and our affiliated churches have a wide variety of convictions on secondary matters such as the nature and administration of the sacraments. I am grateful for the helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article by Rev Dr Tim Ward (Associate Director, PT Cornhill Training Course), Rev W. James (Pastor, Emmanuel Church, Leamington Spa) and Ralph Cunnington (Editor, Foundations). All views are my own, not theirs, and I am solely responsible for all errors.

it astonishing that there are believers present who fail to participate in the Lord's Supper (despite the fact that they have shared in the rest of the worship service) because they do not feel worthy to partake of this celebration of grace. They would probably be shocked that there were unbelievers present at the Lord's Supper, let alone taking part in it. They would, I suspect, find it surprising that participation in this symbolic ritual is thought to be the moment at which believers will experience the felt presence of Jesus to the greatest extent.

The reason why they would be so surprised by our contemporary practice of the Lord's Supper is because it bears so little resemblance to anything we find described or mandated in the New Testament. This ought, at the very least, to make us pause for thought, if not pause for concern. If we are those who take the Bible seriously, we should be disturbed if our praxis is fundamentally different to that which we find in the pages of God's full, final and sufficient revelation[1] to us as to how we are to live as his people.

The aim of this article is to reconsider the New Testament teaching about the practice of the Lord's Supper, and to urge that we have the faith and confidence to obey it. It is understandable that the Reformers were consumed largely by the need to challenge the Roman Catholic theology and practice of the Mass, but whilst they rightly eliminated the false dogmas of transubstantiation and the re-crucifixion of Christ, the basic shape of the practice of the Lord's Supper remained unchanged. It was modified by Protestant convictions, and infused with Protestant theology, but not brought back into conformity with the biblical teaching.

The difficulty of constructing a theology and practice of the Lord's Supper[2]

The single greatest obstacle to establishing a theology and practice of the Lord's Supper is the relative paucity of material in the New Testament. This in itself ought to be a cause for some reflection given the central place it occupies in many churches. The high importance that has been placed on the Lord's Supper as a means of grace in the life of the church may be disproportionate to the significance it warrants in the New Testament. The Lord's Supper is only mentioned explicitly in 1 Corinthians, and there only because Paul is correcting abuses in the practices of the church – and

[1] See Hebrews 1:1-3; 1 Timothy 3:15-16; 1 Corinthians 11:23.

[2] For major theological and pastoral studies of the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper see I. Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lords' Supper* (Vancouver, BC.: Regent College Publishing, 2006) and Ben Witherington III, *Making A Meal of It* (Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2007). For a helpful survey of alternative views see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Nottingham: IVP, 1994) Ch 50, or John H Armstrong (ed.), *Understanding Four Views of the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2007).

specifically its worship gatherings. It is mentioned in the three Synoptic Gospels, but only Luke gives any indication that the actions of Jesus in his final meal with his disciples before his crucifixion are to be repeated by the church. Mark and Matthew make no mention of the command to "do this in remembrance of me",[3] and taken alone they would naturally be read as describing an enacted prophetic parable whereby Jesus explained the nature and meaning of his imminent death to his disciples. John makes no mention of the Lord's Supper in his Gospel, although subsequent commentators have tended to construct their theology from Jesus's teaching in the "bread of life" discourse in John 6.[4] It is a moot point as to whether this chapter has any relevance at all to the practice and purpose of the Lord's Supper, and commentators' exegesis is more often driven by their pre-determined systematic or confessional position regarding the nature of the Lord's Supper than by the text itself properly understood in its own specific context.[5] John 13-16 records a final meal between Jesus and his disciples but he does not specifically identify it as the Lord's Supper.[6] John's purpose is to highlight Jesus' teaching to his disciples about his coming death, resurrection and ascension to the Father, and to prepare them for their ongoing mission as his witnesses in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit he will send to them. John's account is not in conflict with that of the Synoptics; rather, he chooses to emphasise a different aspect of the ministry of Jesus to his disciples that night, which may well have been more relevant to the churches that he was addressing because they were experiencing growing hostility and persecution at the hands of the Roman authorities.

The net result is that we are left with very little in the way of direct description or theological explanation of the Lord's Supper. We are largely dependent upon the witness of Luke-Acts and the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians. The relatively paucity of material regarding the Lord's Supper may well be because it was such a well-established and ordinary aspect of the life of the early church that it was non-contentious and did not require explicit mention. It seems likely that the many reference in Acts to the early disciples "breaking bread together" are references to the common practice of the Lord's Supper, and that this is also in view in the much greater quantity of material in the New Testament addressing the difficulty of Jewish and Gentile believers eating together. Whether this is the case or not, the fact remains that the primary text from which we have to construct a theology

[3] Luke 22:19.

[4] John 6:25-59.

[5] For a full discussion see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Nottingham: IVP, 1991), 276-280, who concludes that there is no exegetical case for importing a sacramental reading into the "Bread of Life" discourse. A similar conclusion is reached by Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 2003), 689-691.

[6] See for example Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 87-95.

and practice of the Lord's Supper for the post-Pentecost church, living after the New Covenant has been inaugurated by the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, are the two key passages in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:17-34. At the very least, we can say that if our contemporary practice of the Lord's Supper is substantially different to what we find in these passages then we are no longer reflecting the apostolic teaching, which is itself the Spirit-inspired word of the Lord Jesus to his church.

Context of 1 Corinthians

Paul's instructions and teaching regarding the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians are given in response to problems in the church, concerning both their relationships with unbelievers outside the church and with each other within the church. In the first place some of the Corinthian believers from a pagan background were seeking to maintain their social connections by participating in the life of the city temples.[7] These were the centre of social, civic and business life, and functioned rather like restaurants and private dining clubs. The Corinthians reasoned that, since the pagan gods did not exist, they were free to take part in meals at the temple where meat would be served that had been sacrificed to idols. In the second place, the rich and socially superior members of the Corinthian church were mistreating the poor and socially inferior members of the church by failing to honour them as equal brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus. The class and social hierarchy that was part and parcel of Corinthian culture was being carried over into the church rather than being transformed by the gospel and lordship of Jesus.[8] This social hierarchy was especially relevant to customs of hospitality, so pagan attitudes were being imported into the practice of the Lord's Supper.

Paul's answer to both of these problems, external and internal respectively, is to point to the nature and practice of the Lord's Supper. In 10:14-22 he shows that those who join in the Lord's Supper, and thereby express their union with the Lord Jesus, cannot at the same time join with pagans who worship false idols, which are in fact a cover for demonic spiritual beings. Disciples of Jesus can only participate in one of these meals, and to participate in pagan feasts is to compromise or deny their union with Christ. In 11:17-34 he shows that the perpetuation of class and social hierarchies within the church is incompatible with their unity as the body of Christ. The fundamental equality of believers in Christ is to be expressed by the way that they eat together. The Lord's Supper thus embodies and enacts fundamental truths about the believer and his or her relationship with

[7] 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1.
[8] See 1 Corinthians 2:26-31.

Christ, and also with fellow believers. The proper practice of the Lord's Supper will reinforce these truths whereas violations of the Lord's Supper will undermine them and the identity and unity of the community.

If 1 Corinthians is taken as the fullest explanation of the meaning and significance of the Lord's Supper, and as the most complete, explicit record of its practice, then it ought to have the dominant role in determining our understanding and practice. The fact that Paul wrote to correct abuses does not prevent us discerning a relatively clear picture of what he believed the ideal should be. More generally, 1 Corinthians 11-14 gives us the fullest insight we have in the New Testament into the worship practices of the early church at their gatherings. Other references to the habits, practices and rituals of the early church in Acts and the other Epistles confirm what we find described in 1 Corinthians 11-14. Although some might question whether the practices described in 1 Corinthians are intended to be normative for the church, the context indicates that they are. 1 Corinthians 11:2-14:40 forms a coherent unit in which Paul addresses the conduct of the weekly church gathering in Corinth. He addresses issues as diverse as the role of women[9] and the use of spiritual gifts in public worship.[10] In both cases he makes clear that his instructions reflect the practice of the whole church and not merely its local expression in Corinth. They are applicable precisely because they reflect universal church practice[11] and derive from apostolic authority.[12] It is inconceivable that Paul would not have critiqued the Corinthians' practice of the Lord's Supper if it had deviated from that of both the Gentile and Jewish churches across the Empire at that time.

1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:17-34 contain four key terms that must shape a genuinely Biblical understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper. These are: "Supper", "body", "remembrance" and "participation." I will examine each of these terms and consider its implications for our contemporary practice.

(i) "Supper" – The Lord's Supper ought to be a meal

1 Corinthians 11:1-34 names the meeting of the church at which bread and wine are shared in remembrance of Jesus' death, in obedience to his command on the night he was betrayed, the "Lord's Supper".[13] This terminology is highly significant, and the common use of alternative language for the ritual such as "Mass", "Communion" or "Eucharist", and

[9] 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.
[10] 1 Corinthians 12-14.
[11] 1 Corinthians 11:16.
[12] 1 Corinthians 14:28-40.
[13] 1 Corinthians 11:20.

indeed the non-Biblical terminology of "sacrament", only serves to distract attention from a crucial aspect of the celebration.

The word "Supper" is not a technical, theological or religious term, but is simply the designation of the ordinary evening meal.[14] In the culture of the time this would have been the main meal of the day, not just a light snack before bedtime, which is how we are culturally attuned to hear the term. The "Lord's Dinner" might be a more accurate rendition of what is meant. The language itself makes clear not merely that the context for the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a meal, but that the Lord's Supper *was* a meal. Although the familiar words of institution refer to the "elements" of the bread and the wine it is clear from 1 Corinthians 11:20 that the terminology of "Lord's Supper" refers to the meal as a whole. Paul directly equates the "Lord's Supper" with "private suppers", which unquestionable refers to meals. Coupled with this there is no evidence anywhere that the early church celebrated the Lord's Supper outside of the context of a meal, nor that it was something other than the meal as a whole.[15] As Ben Witherington points out, the *Didache* refers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a meal.[16] He goes on to assert that the transition of the Lord's Supper from a meal to the sacrifice of the Mass only happened after Christianity went public and "worship moved from the house to the basilica".[17] The conversion of Constantine, replacement of Jewish thinking by Greek philosophical categories and the rise of clericalism all contributed to this process. I. Howard Marshall also states that "it should scarcely need saying that the Lord's Supper is the church's meal".[18] This only highlights the dissonance between the practice of the early church and the contemporary church. Do many participants, let alone any outside observers, understand that the Lord's Supper is a "meal"?

The fact that the Lord's Supper is a meal should not be surprising. Jesus inaugurated the sharing of bread and wine in his memory in the context of a Passover Meal with his disciples on the night that he was betrayed. The Passover involved more than just the sharing of the elements of bread and wine, but was a full meal enjoyed by the participants, recreating and re-enacting the meal that the Israelites had shared before their redemption from slavery in Egypt. Every possible implicit reference to the Lord's Supper in the New Testament involves a full meal, and there is no evidence that

---

[14] Witherington, *Making a Meal of It,* 98.

[15] In his short book *The Meal Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), Tom Wright assumes throughout that "Communion" is meant to be a true meal, though he fails to carry this through to Anglican practice of the sacrament.

[16] Ibid., 93.

[17] Ibid., 113. He also notes that it is virtually certain that for Ignatius of Antioch the Lord's Supper was a meal in about AD 110 (100) as did Tertullian in AD 197 (104-105).

[18] Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper*, 153.

would indicate any ritual sharing of bread and wine outside of the context of a meal as a means of honouring and obeying the commands of the Lord Jesus.[19] 1 Corinthians suggests an evening meal on the first day of the week, with slaves and others joining the meal as soon as they were able after finishing work, but the richer members of the church gathering ahead of their delayed arrival.

Eating a meal together was a central, if not the central, gathering of the early church.[20] This makes it highly likely that all the references to the disciples "breaking bread" in Acts are references to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.[21] Bread and wine were daily staples, enjoyed at almost every meal. The basic gathering of the church was in the form of a meal in a home, and this remained the case for much of the first century or two of the church's existence. The great concern of Paul to ensure that Jewish and Gentile Christians are able to eat together, despite their different convictions about the continued relevance of the Old Testament dietary laws to believers, is therefore vitally relevant to their ability to meet together for worship and teaching, and to express their unity and mutual acceptance.[22] This is the reason why the dispute between Paul and Peter in Antioch, recorded in Galatians 2, is of such significance. If Peter refused to eat with uncircumcised Gentile Christians then there could be no united church, but rather distinct Jewish and Gentile churches. They would be unable to celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 indicates not just that the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the context of a meal. Rather, it appears that the entire meal constituted the Lord's Supper. Jesus words of institution are recorded in such a way that they bracket the entire meal enjoyed by the congregation. The bread is shared at the beginning of the meal, and the cup is then shared "after supper".[23] Participation in the Lord's Supper provides opportunity for the physically hungry to be satiated,[24] and for the over-indulgent to get drunk.[25]

By the time of the Reformation the celebration of the Lord's Supper had long since ceased to be a proper meal in a home. The false doctrine of the Mass meant that the Reformers inevitably focused their attention on the elements of the bread and the wine, and whether these became, in any sense, the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. However, they retained the

---

[19] For a fuller treatment of the place and significance of meals in the ministry of Jesus see Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus* (Nottingham: IVP, 2011).

[20] As Ben Witherington observes, in the early church "meals, the Lord's Supper, and worship, were all part of one ongoing event" (*Making a Meal of It*, 54).

[21] Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11. See also Luke 24:30.

[22] See Acts 15:29; Romans 14:1-15:13; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Galatians 2:11-14; Colossians 3:16-23; 1 Timothy 4:1-5.

[23] 1 Corinthians 11:25. Cf. also Luke 22:20.

[24] 1 Corinthians 11:21 & 34.

[25] 1 Corinthians 11:21-22.

fundamental assumption that it is the bread and the wine that constitute the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. A more faithful reading of 1 Corinthians and the New Testament would surely conclude that it is the meal as a whole, incorporating the sharing of the bread and the cup, that constitutes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. To put it more sharply, the Lord's Supper is never truly celebrated when there is no real presence of a supper!

As has already been noted, the fact that the Lord's Supper *is* a meal finds its primary background in the Old Covenant ritual of the Passover, something to which Paul also refers in 1 Corinthians 5:7, where he states that "Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed".[26] More generally, the law mandated communal meals from sacrifices and for the major festivals celebrating God's great acts of redemption on behalf of this people. The Passover was a celebratory meal at which the lamb was shared by the family as a reminder of God's deliverance of his people from Egypt. Within the multiple sacrifices required by the sacrificial system an animal offered as a fellowship offering was to be eaten as a meal by the worshipper and his family in celebration and thanks to God.[27]

It is striking that most contemporary practice of the Lord's Supper does not involve a meal. In contrast we have taken the biblical sign of a communal meal, bracketed by the sharing of bread and cup in memory of Jesus death, and turned it into a mere token "sign of the sign". It is deeply ironic that the Reformers, and those who have followed them, speak of the Lord's Supper as a "meal" even when in reality it is nothing more than a tiny portion of bread and a merest sip of wine. Given Calvin's linkage of the Lord's Supper with Jesus' teaching in John 6 it is somewhat paradoxical that our contemporary celebration is almost a reversal of the feeding of the five thousand, in which God's abundant gracious provision for his people, evidenced in the corporate meal at which both rich and poor are fed, is reduced to a tiny morsel that would not feed anyone. The twelve baskets of scraps are symbolically reduced to even less than five loaves!

The transformation of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper from a genuine meal to a mere token of a meal has been driven by erroneous theology, but also by practicality. In the early church the believers met in the homes of the wealthy women, like Lydia,[28] and they provided the food. Hospitality by patrons to their clients was already expected and established, and the practice was continued, albeit with a redefined relationship, as brothers in Christ rather than benefactors and clients. However the real question is whether this failure to reflect the biblical pattern, established by Jesus and repeated by the apostles, matters. In my view the failure to recognise that

[26] See Marshall, *Last Supper and Lords' Supper*; Wright, *The Meal Jesus Gave Us.*

[27] Leviticus 3:1-17 & 7:11-21.

[28] Acts 16:11. See also Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19.

the "Lord's Supper" is the meal-as-a-whole, and not just the elements, leads to a distortion of the Supper so that the sacramental sign does not achieve the full purpose for which it was given. The lack of a meal, which involves social interaction and mutual service and acceptance,[29] exacerbates the tendency to regard the Lord's Supper as a primarily personal and private spiritual encounter with Jesus and individualistic experience of his presence. It encodes an unduly solipsistic understanding of the faith. Attempts to express unity through, for example, the exchange of the "sign of the peace",[30] cannot come close to the corporate unity required to eat together. The failure to eat and share prevents the Lord's Supper serving as a social leveller within the church community between people of different classes. The fact that the congregation can share token bread and wine in church but then return to their homes and continue their socially stratified lives, often signified by the kind, quantity and quality of food they eat, undermines a key purpose of the Supper.

The lack of a meal also contributed to the assumption that the Supper should be a time of deep solemnity and experienced presence of Jesus. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is often accompanied by high ritual, solemn liturgy and periods of silence. An atmosphere is created for the Lord's Supper in which it is expected that Jesus will make his presence known. It is rarely a time of joyful exuberance and celebration. In essence this creation of a solemn atmosphere is no different in kind to the way that a charismatic worship band might use music and lighting to try to create a sense of the presence of Jesus. If the Supper is a meal, this ought to fundamentally change the dynamic and experience. Although there will be a place for minimal liturgy and prayer as thanks is given for the bread and cup and their significance explained using the words of institution,[31] and also for singing in praise and thanks,[32] it will also be a time for fellowship with each other over the meal. It will be a time of joyful celebration and enjoyment, especially for those whose social circumstances mean that they would otherwise go hungry or enjoy only basic subsistence food. One can imagine how the slaves and working classes amongst the congregation at Corinth might feel sharing a meal with the upper-class members of the church, who have provided the food for them. Where there is a meal the dynamic of communion and fellowship will be at least as much, if not primarily, horizontal rather than vertical. If the pattern in 1 Corinthians is observed, then the Lord's Supper will be at the very heart of the gathering of the local church. It will take place at the start of the gathering, and then will be followed by worship and

[29] As, for example, modelled by Jesus on the night that he was betrayed, John13:1-16.

[30] Best seen as a contemporary and culturally English equivalent of the "holy kiss": Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 12:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14.

[31] As indicated by 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

[32] As was the case at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30).

teaching as the gifts that Christ has given to his church are exercised for the edification of the body.[33]

1 Corinthians, together with the rest of the New Testament, would also suggest that the Lord's Supper was celebrated regularly. Calvin advocated weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper by the church.[34] The Corinthian church gathered on the first day of the week[35] and their meeting took the form of the Lord's Supper. The earliest disciples devoted themselves to "the breaking of bread".[36]

If we were to recapture the true New Testament understanding of the Lord's Supper as a meal, and not just the elements, and as the basic meeting of the church, then this would render many of the disputes about the nature of the Supper, the presence of the Lord Jesus and the purpose of the sign redundant. They only come into play because of the way we celebrate the Supper in the first place. The Supper is a sacrament given to reinforce the identity of the church as the people who belong to Christ and who have been redeemed by his death for them, and to sustain them in their faith as they await his return. Churches find other ways to achieve this precisely because they have not followed the New Testament practice of the Lord's Supper. It would be better if they followed the pattern of the New Testament, in full recognition that this will require them to entirely reshape the nature and purpose of church gatherings. The reduction of the Lord's Supper to a sign of a meal rather than a meal as a sign has the same effect, therefore, of reducing true baptism by immersion (or at least effusion) to mere sprinkling. It ceases to point clearly to the thing that is signified.

(ii) "Body" – Christ is present with his people as they celebrate the Supper

A second key term that appears in 1 Corinthians as crucial to the Lord's Supper is "body". It is clear from 1 Corinthians 11:29 that in some sense the body of Jesus is present at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and that it is incumbent on the participants to ensure that they "discern" it so as not to fall subject to the judgment of God.

It would be superficially natural to assume that the reference to the "body" of Christ here is connected with the bread that is broken and shared at the beginning of the meal. After all, Jesus himself said of the bread, "This is my body, which is for you."[37] Much of the debate at the time of the

[33] 1 Corinthians 14:26-40.

[34] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.17.46. Weekly observance is also advocated by Marshall, *Last Supper and Lords' Supper*.

[35] 1 Corinthians 16:2.

[36] Acts 3:42.

[37] 1 Corinthians 11:24.

Reformation concerned the question as to exactly what it means that the bread shared at the Lord's Supper is the body of Jesus. For Roman Catholics the doctrine of transubstantiation meant that the bread that is consecrated quite literally becomes the physical flesh of the Lord Jesus.[38] For Lutherans the doctrine of consubstantiation meant that, whilst the bread remains physically bread, Christ is literally "in, with, under and around" the bread. Both these interpretations are predicated on a literalistic significance to Jesus' words of institution. In contrast Zwingli and Calvin insisted that the bread itself remained nothing but ordinary bread. The element was not changed in any way by the act of consecration. They regarded Jesus' words as symbolic or figurative, and pointing to the fact that the physical body of Jesus was now glorified and located in heaven, where he has dwelt since his ascension, and where it will remain until he returns. However Calvin continued to regard the reference to the "body" in 11:29 as in some way related to the element of bread utilised in the Supper, so that to eat and drink unworthily was primarily to eat and drink without faith and love for Christ. This in turn leads him to an inwardly introspective understanding of what it means for participants to "examine themselves" so that they do not eat or drink unworthily:

> By this he means that each man descend into himself, and ponder with himself whether he rests with inward assurance of heart upon the salvation purchased by Christ; whether he acknowledged it by confession of mouth; then whether he aspires to the imitation of Christ with the zeal of innocence and holiness; whether after Christ's example he is prepared to give himself for his brethren and to communicate himself to those with whom he shares Christ in common.[39]

However the context of 1 Corinthians would suggest that the relationship between bread and body is less straightforward than this, and that the body of Christ that is present at the Lord's Supper, and which must be recognised by those who share in the meal, is the church itself. As Richard B. Hays succinctly summarises:

> the problem that Paul is addressing at Corinth is not (overtly) a problem of sacramental theology; rather it is a problem of social relations in the community.[40]

It is clear from 1 Corinthians 10:17 that the bread that is shared in the Lord's Supper is symbolic not just of the physical human flesh of the Lord Jesus, but also of the church as the people of Jesus. Paul writes, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf."[41]

---

[38] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2.1.3.

[39] Calvin, *Institutes,* IV.17.40.

[40] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, (Louisville, KY.: John Knox Press, 1997), 193-194.

[41] For this reason, Howard Marshall, *Last Supper and Lords' Supper*, argues for the use of a common loaf .

The identification of the church as the body of Christ is a thoroughly Pauline concept, and is present throughout 1 Corinthians. In 6:12-20 Paul is horrified at the idea that Christians could engage in sexual immorality with prostitutes, pointing to the union between Christ and believers which results in their bodies being the limbs of his body:

> Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never![42]

The body analogy is then more fully developed in 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, where all those who are united to Christ by means of Spirit-baptism are said to "form one body" and the church is expressly told "now you are the body of Christ".[43] The analogy is most fully stated in Ephesians 5:25-33, where Christ is described as "the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour".

The meaning of eating and drinking "in an unworthy manner" and of "discerning the body of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 11:27 & 29 must therefore be determined in the specific context, and the majority of recent commentators agree that Paul is referring to the social sin that the rich Corinthians are committing because they are not sharing their meal with the poorer believers as equal brothers and sisters in Christ.[44] The warnings are bracketed by references to the mis-practice of some members of the Corinthian church. In 11:21-22 Paul condemns the fact that the richer members of the church are going ahead and eating before the poorer members have arrived. It may be that they are eating all the food that has been prepared, so that the latecomers are left with nothing, or that they are keeping themselves separate from the poorer members of the church and eating better food at a private table.[45] Either way, the result is that the poorer members of the church are demeaned, excluded and left to go hungry. Paul's response is that those who cannot wait to eat with the latecomers should eat before they come out to church so that they do not need to discriminate against them. In 11:33-34 he applies the principles he has set out about discerning the body and self-examination to this problem, and his solution is that the church "should all eat together".[46] Once again those who are too hungry to wait for the arrival of the poorer brethren are urged to eat at home before they come out.

---

[42] 1 Corinthians 6:15.

[43] 1 Corinthians 12:27.

[44] E.g. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1987), 531-545; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2000), 848-866.

[45] The rich Christians are treating the Lord's Supper, which is a meal in the social setting of a home, as if it were a private Greco-Roman dinner party. See Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 48.

[46] 1 Corinthians 11:33.

Thus as Ben Witherington concludes, the language of "the body" in 1 Corinthians 1:29 is most likely, in the larger context, to "refer to the body of believers".[47] It follows from this that the failure to "discern the body" in 1 Corinthians 11:29 refers to the rich Corinthians' failure to recognise their unity and equality with their poorer brothers and sisters. They are still in the grip of the prevailing cultural attitudes of social hierarchy, considering themselves to be superior and more important. This was endemic in the Corinthian church as it had failed to grasp the character of God and the implications of the foolishness of the cross.[48] Paul calls these rich believers to examine themselves, to confirm to themselves that they are indeed members of the body of Christ, and to understand their equal standing in Christ with the other members of the body.

The social sin of the rich Corinthian Christians is no small matter, as their failure has attracted the direct judgment of God. Christ is so identified with his people that to persecute them is to persecute him,[49] and to refuse to accept and honour them is to reject him.[50] A number of the members of the church are sick, or have died, and Paul declares that this is a result of God's judgment on them.[51] If they continue to eat and drink unworthily, failing to eat together and share a meal in equality of social status in Christ, then they will experience judgment rather than blessing.

It is striking that it is the social sins of Christians towards each other that attracts the direct judgment of God in the New Testament, and this must surely mean that we ought to take this more seriously in our churches and our practice of the Lord's Supper. The Corinthians were not struck sick or dead because of their sexual immorality or charismatic excess in the gathering; they were disciplined by God because they behaved as snobs who would not accept one another on equal terms as members of Christ. The theme of judgment for social sin recurs in the life of the early church. In Acts 5 Ananias and Sapphira are quite literally slain in the Sprit because they have hypocritically pretended to be generous to the poor members of the church community.[52] It seems highly likely that the sin-caused sicknesses in James 5:13-16 and the "sin that leads to death" in 1 John 5:16-18 also refer to social

[47] Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 59.

[48] 1 Corinthians 2:26-31.

[49] Acts 9:4.

[50] Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 15:7.

[51] 1 Corinthians 11:29-32.

[52] Acts 5:1-11. This passage recapitulates the death of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-2 when they defiled the newly erected Tabernacle where God dwelt by their unauthorised sacrifices. Ananias and Sapphira are struck dead because they defile the newly inaugurated new temple of the church gathering, where God dwells by his Spirit, by their hypocritical gift and attempt to appear more generous to the poor than they were.

sins, since both letters emphasise the wickedness of rich believers ignoring the needs of their poor brothers and sisters in Christ.[53]

The language about the "body" in 1 Corinthians 11 therefore demands that we place greater emphasis on the social and communal dimension of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It expresses not just our relationship with the Lord Jesus but also our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Eating "together" and sharing the same food are an enactment of our acceptance of one another and of our equality before Christ. We share the same table, invited by the same host, and eat the same food. There is to be no private dining. We lose this dimension when we celebrate the Lord's Supper in an atomised and individualistic way. It is not a time for mere personal spiritual refreshment and experience, but for actively expressing our union with each other. The sacrament is given to strengthen and maintain our unity and equality in Christ.

The fact that "the body" that needs to be discerned at the Lord's Supper is the congregation rather than the elements has implications for the way that we understand the Lord's presence with his people at the Supper. The Lord is present, but his presence is not mediated by the bread and the wine as such. He is present with his people because they are his body, gathered together as his temple, connected with him as their vital life-source and utterly dependent upon him. He is present with them because they are the temple of the Holy Spirit, both individually and collectively.[54] Christ is never absent from his people, and he is spiritually present with them whenever they gather. He dwells in their hearts by faith through the power of the Spirit.[55] In 1 Corinthians 5:54 the Lord Jesus is expected to be present with them when they gather to exercise church discipline against an unrepentant sinner. In 1 Corinthians 14:25 God is expected to be amongst them as they pray and prophesy, using the gifts that he has sovereignly distributed amongst them. The Lord Jesus is present with his church as it gathers to eat together just as much as the demonic spirits are present with the pagans as they gather to celebrate their idol feast in their temples. Jesus has promised his people that whenever two or three are gathered together then he is present with them,[56] and the gift of his Spirit means that he is present with them always until the very end of the age,[57] when he will return to be with them in his glorious physical person. It follows that we see the glory of the Lord Jesus present amongst us when we look to our brothers and sisters and

[53] James 2:1-19, 5:1-6; 1 John 3:11-18.

[54] 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

[55] Ephesians 3:17. Note that in Ephesians 2:19-22 the church is described as a temple "in which God lives by his Spirit".

[56] Matthew 18:20.

[57] Matthew 28:20; John 14:15-21.

see those who "are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, his Spirit".[58]

The Lord's Supper is therefore best understood as the equivalent of a covenant meal under the Mosaic dispensation, which was eaten in the presence of the LORD in the precincts of the Temple. Such Old Covenant meals were consumed in the presence of God, but they were not the means by which the presence of God was experienced or made known.[59] God was already present because he had chosen to make his dwelling amongst his people. The Lord's Supper is similarly celebrated in the presence of the Lord Jesus, but it is not itself the means by which his presence is manifested, experienced or magnified in intensity.

It follows from this that the celebration of the Lord's Supper can never be a "bare memorial" because Christ has promised to be present with his people by his Spirit. There is never a "bare gathering" of believers from which Christ is absent. However this does not mean that it is the fact of the meal, still less of consecrated elements, that mediates the presence of Christ to his people. Zwingli rightly argued against Papist and Lutheran doctrines that insisted that the consecrated bread and wine were somehow the means by which Jesus was present amongst his people. When properly understood he did not advocate a "real absence" of the Lord Jesus from his Supper. Towards the end of his life he wrote to King Francis I of France:

> We believe that Christ is truly present in the Lord's Supper; yea, we believe that there is no communion without the presence of Christ. This is the proof: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20). How much more is he present where the whole congregation is assembled to his honour! But that his body is literally eaten is far from the truth and the nature of faith. It is contrary to the truth, because he himself says: "I am no more in the world" (John 17:11), and "The flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:63), that is to eat, as the Jews then believed and the Papists still believe. It is contrary to the nature of faith (I mean the holy and true faith), because faith embraces love, fear of God, and reverence, which abhor such carnal and gross eating, as much as any one would shrink from eating his beloved son… We believe that the true body of Christ is eaten in the communion in a sacramental and spiritual manner by the religious, believing, and pious heart (as also St. Chrysostom taught). And this is in brief the substance of what we maintain in this controversy, and what not we, but the truth itself teaches."[60]

However this does not mean that Jesus is more present, or especially present, or present in a qualitatively different way, in the Lord's Supper than

---

[58] 2 Corinthians 3:18. See especially N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (London: T & T Clark, 1991).

[59] See Hays, *First Corinthians*, 168, where he states of 1 Corinthians 10:16-18: "Paul is not thinking of some sort of mystical union affected through the meal – an idea foreign to the Old Testament. The meal is, however, to be eaten 'in the presence of the Lord' as a sign of the covenant relationship between God and the people, a covenant that binds the people together."

[60] Philip Schaff , *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The History of Creeds,* Vol 1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1878), 375.

he is when the church is gathered for prayer, praise and to hear the word of God. To put it in Anglican terms, Jesus is not less present with his people at Morning or Evening Prayer, or the Service of the Word, than he is at the Eucharist. Nor is Jesus less present with the members of the Salvation Army because they choose not to celebrate the Lord's Supper, albeit that this is disobedient to his command. Jesus is present with his people whenever they gather because he has made his dwelling with them by his Spirit. The New Testament gives no unequivocal indication that it is intended to be understood as a mystery, and the Lord's Supper contributed virtually nothing to the development of a wider doctrine of the presence of God.[61] The New Testament says surprisingly little about the Lord's Supper precisely because it affirms that Jesus is present with his people whenever they gather. As Paul writes in Colossians 3:15-16:

> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell amongst you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

The search for the "real presence" of Christ, whether physical or spiritual, in and through the elements of the bread and wine, sadly distracts us from discerning Christ's body and experiencing Jesus where he has promised to be. He is in and with his people, dwelling with them by his Spirit. We should not expect the celebration of the Lord's Supper to be a hyper-realised personal encounter with Jesus. We trust and believe that Jesus is present with us whenever we are gathered with his people. Whilst this might seem to make the Lord's Supper more ordinary or mundane, what it should do is heighten our expectation and appreciation of every gathering that we might have as "church". We need to "discern the body" every time, whether we are sharing bread and wine or not.

(iii) "Remembrance" – The Lord's Supper is a covenant celebration

The key term that unpacks for us the essential nature of the Lord's Supper, explaining both why we are commanded to observe it and what we are to expect from it, is "remembrance." In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul repeats Jesus' words of institution, which emphasise his command to share bread and wine, before and after the supper respectively, "in remembrance of me". As has already been noted, if it were not for the record of Luke-Acts we would not be aware that the Lord's Supper was anything other than a one-off

[61] It is noticeable that the Lord's Supper does not feature in a recent study on this subject: J. Ryan Lister, *The Presence of God: Its Place in the Storyline of Scripture and the Story of Our Lives* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2015).

event, although this might have been discerned from the fact that it was a reworking of the Passover Meal. However, the analogy with the Passover on its own might have suggested an annual festival, rather than the regular, probably weekly, gathering of the church.

The primary function of the Lord's Supper, and the way in which it strengthens the faith, unity and identity of believers, is to bring to their memories the fact of the once-for-all-time, unrepeatable, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Lord's Supper is, like other biblical signs, a visible enactment of the gospel word.[62] In essence it reminds those who participate of the foundational truths of the faith and their connection to them. It is a drama that declares the very gospel truths that in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 Paul describes as "of first importance":

> that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

Paul's assertion that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of the Lord's death until he comes is an inevitable concomitant of the fact that it is an enacted gospel word. Christians who celebrate the Lord's Supper together preach the gospel to each other.

Given that the Lord's Supper is a visible enacted gospel word we should not expect that it will operate differently amongst the people of God than a preached gospel word. At the very least the idea that the Lord's Supper is a mystical meeting with Christ that feeds the faith of believers in a different way to the hearing of the word of God, which is equally said to be a way in which the Lord "feeds" his people, cannot be supported from the words of institution themselves, and such claims must be exegetically rooted elsewhere.

The Lord's Supper is not merely a remembrance of the events of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but also a reminder that these events have inaugurated the New Covenant between God and his people. Both 1 Corinthians and Luke 22 highlight the way in which Jesus defined the cup in reference to the "new covenant in my blood".[63] Once again the other Synoptic Gospels are not as specific. Mark makes no mention of the covenant, whereas in the most reliable manuscripts Matthew refers to the "covenant" but not the new covenant.[64] Celebration of the Lord's Supper is therefore a reminder to God's people that he has kept all his promises to them in and through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It is not that the Lord's Supper is a pledge of God's promises, reminding us that he will keep them. Rather it is a

---

[62] See John Stevens, "*Infant Baptism: Putting Old Wine into New Wineskins?",* Foundations 63 (2012).

[63] 1 Corinthians 11:25; Luke 22:20.

[64] Matthew 26:28.

reminder that he has kept them and that consequently we live under grace and truth.[65] The package of blessings promised under the New Covenant include the forgiveness of sins, personal knowledge of God, the gift and presence of the Spirit of God, spiritual gifting to serve God and new hearts of flesh on which the law of God is written.[66]

Celebrating the Lord's Supper would thus have been a means for the first Christians to remember "redemption accomplished and applied". It was a reminder to the church that they no longer lived under the old dispensation of the law, but that they were living in the new age of the Spirit, which is also the final era of salvation history before the consummation of the Kingdom of God.[67] It would be a weekly reminder to them that the "fulfilment of the ages"[68] had come upon them, and that the blessings that they enjoyed in Christ and by the Spirit were better and more substantial than the apparently tangible ongoing temple worship of Judaism. The Lord's Supper would have been an especially important reminder of the reality of the New Covenant in the context of mixed churches following the Gentile mission. It is clear from the majority of the New Testament letters that the predominant issue facing the churches was the relationship between the church and Judaism, between believers in Christ and the Old Testament Law. Remembering that the New Covenant had been inaugurated, that the Law had been rendered obsolete by the coming of the Spirit, and that Gentiles were welcome to the Lord's feast without circumcision, would have been an important bulwark against the teaching and practices of the circumcision party. It is clear from the Corinthian correspondence as a whole that at least part of the problem in the church was a result of the influence of Judaising "super-apostles" who looked to Moses, the Law and the Old Covenant for their spiritual authority.[69]

The Lord instituted the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a regular reminder to his people of what he had done for them. The reason that he did this is because he was aware that the greatest spiritual danger they faced would be to forget these foundational truths. The Bible is replete with signs and rituals that were given to remind and teach God's people what he had done for them, so that their identity as his people might be formed and their loyalty maintained. Again and again they strayed from him to worship other gods because they forgot what he had done for them.[70] The New Testament letters similarly underline the repeated dangers that Christians will forget

[65] John 1:17; Romans 6:15.

[66] Jeremiah 31:23-37; Ezekiel 36:24-32.

[67] Acts 2:1-21; Romans 7:1-6; Galatians 3:14.

[68] 1 Corinthians 10:11.

[69] 2 Corinthians 11:21-22.

[70] Note the way that the Psalms repeatedly call God's people to remember the mighty acts of salvation on their behalf in the Exodus.

the gospel, and either assume it or move on from it. Paul's letters, for example, usually begin with an indicative reminder of the gospel before moving to an imperative command to live out the gospel. The gospel word at the start of his letters functions in much the same way as the visible word of the Lord's Supper in the church gathering, establishing a clear gospel foundation for the community before it proceeds to teaching and mutual edification. Faith is not sustained by daily personal experience, even spiritual experience in celebrating the Lord's Supper, but rather by remembering the great acts of God in history on our behalf for our salvation, and then living faithfully in the light of them.

It follows that the Lord's Supper operates to strengthen and sustain our faith mentally rather than mystically. The way in which we benefit from participating in the Lord's Supper is by being reminded of these great truths. Calvin rightly emphasises that the benefit of the Lord's Supper is something beyond the mere intellectual receipt of information when he writes, "…no one should think that the life that we receive from him is received by mere knowledge".71

In order to avoid this danger he couches his understanding of the way in which the Lord's Supper benefits and blesses believers in the language of "spiritual feeding" drawn from John 6. This lends itself to a more mystical interpretation of the operation of the Lord's Supper. However, the proper antithesis to be drawn is not between "mere knowledge" and "spiritual feeding", but rather the distinction between "mere knowledge" and "faith". Faith is more than mere intellectual assent to truth, but an appropriation, believing and trusting of that truth.[72] Justification is not received merely by intellectual assent to the truth about justification, but by means of faith in Christ. Faith is essentially a mental act, which requires understanding of specific truths, but it is more than a mere act of knowing those facts to be true.

Calvin's own description of the way in which the benefits of the Lord's Supper are appropriated by the believer sometimes suggests that it is not the act of eating itself, but the mental reflection that takes place as a result of eating which strengthens faith:

> When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden. For if we sufficiently consider what value we have received from the giving of that most holy body and the shedding of that blood, we shall clearly perceive that those qualities of bread and wine are, according to such an analogy, excellently adapted to express those things when they are communicated to us.[73]

---

[71] *Institutes*, IV.17.7.

[72] As Kevin Vanhoozer makes clear in *Is There A Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2009).

[73] *Institutes*, IV.17.3.

His language here makes clear that it is the "mental action" of "reflecting", "considering" and "perceiving" prompted by the eating and drinking, rather than the eating and drinking itself, that result in the strengthening of faith. However this is not exhaustive of his understanding, and elsewhere he insists that the benefit derived from the Lord's Supper is not appropriated mentally but in some mysterious way by the act of eating with faith. Having exposed the errors of both Roman Catholic transubstantiation and Lutheran consubstantiation he goes on to write:

> But when these absurdities have been set aside, I freely accept whatever can be made to express the true and substantial partaking of the body and blood of the Lord, which is shown to believers under the sacred symbols of the Supper – and so to express it that they may be understood not to receive it solely by imagination or understanding of the mind, but to enjoy the thing itself as nourishment of eternal life.[74]

Zwingli, in contrast, rejects Jesus' teaching in John 6 as determinative of the nature of the Lord's Supper. He summarises:

> The primitive Fathers, and we ourselves in the *Commentarius* and *Subsidium*, have shown quite clearly that in the teaching brought before us in John 6, when Christ referred to eating his flesh and drinking his blood he simply meant believing in him as the one who has given his flesh and blood for our redemption and the cleansing of our sins. In this passage he is not speaking of the sacrament, but preaching the Gospel under the figure of eating and drinking his flesh and blood.[75]

As G. W. Bromiley summarises, Zwingli's main point was that "a proper exegesis of John 6 makes plain that faith is the true feeding on Christ",[76] not that the celebration of the Lord's Supper has no spiritual benefit to confer because it is a "bare memorial".

Zwingli's exegesis and application of John 6 is supported by most modern commentators,[77] and this cuts off the branch on which Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper is perched. It is extraordinary that Calvin's reliance on this text to construct his systematic theology of the Supper has so dominated the discussion about the nature of the Lord's Supper. In my opinion Calvin provides no convincing exegetical support for his understanding.[78] His use of

---

[74] *Institutes*, IV.17.19.

[75] Ulrich Zwingli, *On the Lord's Supper*, *The Second Article*, in Zwingli & Bullinger, *The Library of Christian Classics*, Book 24, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia, PA.: The Westminster Press, 1953), 199.

[76] Ibid., 178.

[77] See note 5 above.

[78] For a strong defence of Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper see Carl Trueman, "The Incarnation and the Lord's Supper" in David Petersen (ed.), *The Word Became Flesh: Evangelicals and the Incarnation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2003). For a briefer contemporary explanation of the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper see Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books 2002) Ch. 7.

John 6 as his controlling paradigm is both exegetically incorrect and pastorally unhelpful because it is liable to misunderstanding of the essential means by which we benefit from partaking of the Lord's Supper. Our faith is strengthened when we meditate on Christ, remembering what he has done for us and the blessings he has brought to us. We do this whether our meditation is prompted by the preaching of the gospel word, or the enactment of the gospel word made visible in the Supper. The biblical concept of meditation is one of mental appropriation, in contrast to the fundamentally mystical, Eastern understanding of meditation that has come to dominate contemporary Western culture. Biblical meditation is rational rather than ecstatic, word-based rather than experiential.

The fact that the Lord's Supper is a "remembrance" of what Jesus has done, and of his inauguration of the New Covenant, has important practical and pastoral implications for our contemporary celebration of the Lord's Supper. In the first place it further suggests, along with the understanding of "the body" outlined above, that the Lord's Supper is not intended to be an introspective experience of personal self-examination. All too often the practice of the Lord's Supper seems to suggest that it is meant to be a meditation on ourselves, and especially on our inherent sinfulness and sins. However, it is surely meant to remind us to look not to ourselves, but to Christ. It is not a time to turn inwards, but to be challenged to look outwards once again to what he has done or us. No doubt the intention of many liturgies is to lead participants through a process of self-examination and re-appropriation of gospel truth and assurance, but the balance of time is usually given to preparation and confession, together with the issuing of warnings that misconstrue what it means to be "worthy". The impression is created, perhaps wrongfully, that it is a celebration of our sanctification rather than of our salvation by grace.

Secondly, and closely related to this, is the fact that the Lord's Supper is meant to be a joyful celebration of what Christ has done for us. This is suggested by the connection with the Passover. The Passover was commanded to be observed as a "commemoration"[79] of God's great rescue of his people from their slavery in Egypt. It was meant to be celebrated with "great rejoicing".[80] It was a feast and not a fast, a time for praising and thanking God for his deliverance, and for passing the story on to the next generations. If, as Ben Witherington observes, "Passover was meant to be the most joyful of meals, not the most sorrowful",[81] this ought to be even more so

[79] Exodus 12:14. Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith as explained by Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*: *Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: P&R, 2009), 348-359.

[80] Cf. 2 Chronicles 30:21 & 26.

[81] Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 24.

for the Lord's Supper, which commemorates our far greater redemption from our eternal enemies of sin, death and Satan.

Sadly our contemporary re-enactments of the Lord's Supper often lack this element of "celebration". This is partly a result of a Calvinistic heritage that equated sobriety with reverence, and had little place for exuberance and expressed joy. However it is also a result of the misconstrual of the worship service of the church as a weekly "covenant renewal" ceremony. This imports the worship patterns of the Old Covenant into the church in much the same way as Roman Catholicism imported the patterns of worship of the Temple into the Mass. The Lord's Supper is a celebration of the inauguration of the New Covenant, and unlike the Old Covenant which could be broken and needed to be renewed, the New Covenant does not need to be renewed. Instead we are to celebrate the fact that we live under grace, are justified and adopted, and can enjoy bold access to God our Father. The church gathering is primarily a celebration and enjoyment of the blessings we have in Christ, not a weekly renewal of them. The cup that we share together is a cup of "thanksgiving".[82] When we leave the Lord's Supper we ought to be full of joy and assurance in Christ, and spurred on to live for him in thankful gratitude as we await his return. The way that we practice the Supper will significantly contribute to what we remember and how we are transformed by our participation.

(iv) "Participation" – The Lord's Supper signifies covenant allegiance

The final word that determines our understanding of the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper is also the most controversial and emotive. In 1 Corinthians 10:15 Paul describes the cup we share and the bread we break as "a participation" in the blood and body of Christ. I hope that my explanation of the three words above has made clear that I think that they already bear much of the weight that is placed on the idea of "participation" in traditional Reformed thinking. The Lord is present with his people when they gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper. As they remember and meditate on what he has done for them through his death and resurrection, and the New Covenant he has inaugurated, their faith is strengthened and they are encouraged to press on in the race until he returns or calls them home. The benefits of the Lord's Supper are appropriated by faith as we hear the gospel word that is made visible to us by the sharing of the bread and the wine.

However the language of "participation" has been taken to mean that those sharing in the Lord's Supper thereby experience some kind of special mystical communion with Christ by reason of eating the consecrated bread and drinking the consecrated wine. It has proved, however, more difficult for

[82] 1 Corinthians 10:16.

theologians to explain exactly what this experience might be. Calvin, for example, voiced the impossibility he faced in comprehending or stating the spiritual presence of Christ in the bread and the wine:

> Now, if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And to speak more plainly, I rather experience it than understand it. Therefore I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them.[83]

Whilst it is indisputable that Paul describes sharing the Lord's Supper as a "participation" in Christ, it is more questionable whether he means by this that eating the bread and drinking the wine are in themselves the cause of an experienced communion with Christ. That is to confuse the sign of the sacrament with the thing that is signified by the sacrament, in much the same way that it is a confusion to regard baptism as conferring union with Christ rather than as picturing the union with Christ that is already the result of placing faith in Christ Jesus as the risen Lord.[84]

Paul's primary point in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 is that the Corinthian Christians cannot join in the celebration of idol feasts in the pagan temples. To do so is to "participate" in the worship of demons and incompatible with the exclusive loyalty that they owe to the Lord Jesus. He contrasts the cup of Christ in the Lord's Supper and the cup of demons in the pagan idol feast, and the table of Christ with the table of demons, and says that it is impossible to have a part in both.

The term "participation", sometimes rendered "communion", does not have a uniquely religious meaning that conveys an experiential relationship with God. It is more usually rendered "fellowship" or "sharing", and describes being a partner with someone in a common venture. It is descriptive of being united with a person or group in a way that suggests a common identity and common purpose.

Paul's point is not, therefore, that the Lord's Supper is the mystical means by which Christians are united with Jesus and share in the blessings he brings. Rather, his wider theology would suggest that we celebrate the Lord's Supper precisely because we are already united with Christ and "have participated", or have a share, in him and his coming kingdom. Right at the beginning of the letter Paul states that God has called the Corinthians "into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord".[85] This "participation", for the

---

[83] *Institutes,* IV.17.32.

[84] See John Stevens, "*Infant Baptism: Putting Old Wine into New Wineskins?"* Foundations 63 (2012).

[85] 1 Corinthians 1:9.

word is identical to that used in 1 Corinthians 10:14, occurred when they put their faith in Jesus as a result of the preaching of the foolish word of the cross.[86] As a result they already belong to Christ[87] and are, figuratively speaking, the members of his body.[88] They are "in Christ Jesus" who has become for them "wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.[89] In Christ they have been washed, sanctified and justified.[90] In summary, as a result of their faith in Christ, they have been called and set apart "to be his holy people".[91] Given Paul's clear understanding that the Corinthians are already "in Christ" by faith, and thereby possessed of all his benefits, it seems highly unlikely that the purpose of 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 is to teach that the benefits of being in Christ are somehow mediated by means of the Lord's Supper.

This comports with Paul's teaching elsewhere. It is through faith in Christ that believers come to be united with Christ and to "participate" in the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of Christ with his people.[92] It is by faith in Christ that they receive all spiritual blessings.[93] It is by faith in Christ that they are united with him in his crucifixion and share in his new resurrection life.[94] The sacramentalism that is often derived from the "participation" language in 1 Corinthians 10 lacks discernible support in any other New Testament texts, except John 6, which has already be argued to be irrelevant to the theology of the Lord's Supper.

The closest parallel text to 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 is 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, where Paul is also dealing with the problem of social engagement with pagans. In 1 Corinthians 10 the issue is joining pagan idol feasts in the temple, whereas in 2 Corinthians 6 it is entering joint business ventures with pagans. In both cases the discussion is framed as a warning against idolatry. 2 Corinthians 6:14 uses the same language of "participation" as 1 Corinthians 10, although this is often concealed by our translations:

> Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship ["participation"] can light have with darkness?

Paul's point is that to join a joint business venture with a pagan, which would of necessity require involvement with the trade guilds centred on their temples, would be utterly inconsistent with the fact that they are already

---

[86] 1 Corinthians 2:5.
[87] 1 Corinthians 3:23.
[88] 1 Corinthians 6:15.
[89] 1 Corinthians 1:30,
[90] 1 Corinthians 7:11.
[91] 1 Corinthians 1:2.
[92] Philippians 2:1 & 3:9.
[93] Ephesians 1:1
[94] Romans 6:1-14.

united with Christ and share in him. They cannot be united to both God and pagan idols. Their fellowship with Christ requires that they separate themselves from social interactions that would compromise their exclusive loyalty to him. They must "come out from them and be separate".[95]

The belief that eating the Lord's Supper acts as a means of grace whereby the faithful consumer experiences participation with Christ is ultimately an unjustified reading of the convictions of a systematic theology into 1 Corinthians 10. Most New Testament experts admit that it finds no support in the text itself. Gordon Fee, for example, writes of 1 Corinthians 10:16:

> But what the evidence does not seem to allow is a sacramental understanding of the meal itself, as if they were "participating in the Lord" by the actual eating of the food, as though the food were the Lord himself. Neither the language and grammar nor the example of Israel nor the examples from pagan meals allow such a meaning. The "fellowship", therefore, was most likely a celebration of their common life in Christ, based on the new covenant in his blood that had previously bound them together in union with Christ by his Spirit.[96]

In his opinion this refers to the "fellowship" the participants in the meal have with each other, and not to fellowship with Christ himself, although he is the basis and focus of their worship.[97] He allows no distinction between the use of the participation language in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 1 Corinthians 10:20. 1 Corinthians 10:16 is thus treated as ecclesiological rather than mystical, and "almost certainly refers to their sharing in the provision and blessings" of the covenant inaugurated through the sacrificial death of Christ.[98] Thiselton, likewise, finds no support for the idea of a participation in Christ himself through the meal:

> …to participate or to have a share in the body and blood of Christ is neither merely a self-referring allusion to belonging to the church nor an argument which depends upon a quasi-sacramental theology of the Lord's Supper. Rather, it places at centre stage (i) the commonality (with concern for "the others") and (ii) the exclusivity (in the framework of covenant loyalty) of a cruciform lifestyle which witnesses to identification with Christ in the practical stance and lifestyle of witnessing to the practical entailments of Christ's dying for "others" and being raised by God.[99]

A theology of the Lord's Supper that, according to the two leading evangelical commentators on the key passage, lacks credible exegetical support, ought to be in serious trouble.

---

[95] 2 Corinthians 6:17.

[96] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 467.

[97] Ibid., 466.

[98] Ibid., 468. See also Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1995), 226. He states that the participation language in 1 Corinthians 10:16 "does not refer here to a direct sharing in Christ's metaphysical being, much less in his physical or glorified flesh". Rather, he argues that believers who share in the Lord's Supper share in the material and spiritual blessings of Christ's sacrifice.

[99] Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 751.

It is therefore highly unlikely that Paul's purpose in 1 Corinthians 10 is to provide a comprehensive positive explanation of the nature of the Lord's Supper, still less to suggest that the eating of bread and wine at this meal is in itself a means of experienced communion with Christ. The issues addressed are covenant status, identity and exclusive loyalty. Some of the Corinthian Christians were arguing that there was no obstacle to their joining with their erstwhile pagan friends at idol feasts because the idol has no true reality. This argument would have had no substance in the first place if "participation" in the idol feast involved some kind of experiential communion with the demons behind the pagan gods. Paul does not argue his point on experiential grounds. To share in the meal is to identify with the host and to express loyalty to him. Joining an idol feast is thereby to express union and loyalty with the false god, irrespective of what is personally experienced. Sharing in the Lord's Supper is, in contrast, to express union and loyalty to Christ. Eating and drinking is an act signifying and confirming union with him and belonging to him. It is constitutive of identity, both individually and corporately.

The participation language of 1 Corinthians 10 is thus properly understood in terms of status, identity and belonging rather than spiritual experience. This is not to say that believers who join the Lord's Supper do not experience communion with Christ, rather that it is not the partaking of the elements of the bread and wine that effect this communion. It is faith in the truth of the gospel that establishes and maintains participation in Christ. The Christian life is from "faith to faith" not "faith to bread", albeit that the bread reminds us of the object of that faith.

1 Corinthians 10 is therefore a reminder to us that all meals are in some sense sacramental, in that they signify a unity and identity with those with whom we eat. This is why disputes about sharing meals with others figured so prominently in the ministry of Jesus.[100] Social interactions with others are not neutral. One implication of a proper understanding of the Lord's Supper is that we have to be careful with whom we are prepared to eat. In 1 Corinthians, for example, believers are commanded not to share fellowship with those who profess faith in Christ but are subject to the discipline of the church because of their refusal to repent of their sin.[101] Whether a Christian can eat with unbelievers without compromising their loyalty to Christ will depend upon the context of their eating, and what the meal signifies. Eating at home or in a restaurant with an unbeliever who is a Freemason in a purely social context may be unproblematic. Visiting a guest evening at a Masonic Lodge with a colleague who is a Freemason would be an inappropriate participation. Having a meal with a Hindu colleague at home is not

[100] See Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus*.
[101] 1 Corinthians 5:11.

prohibited, but attending a Hindu wedding feast might be more questionable, depending upon what attendance might signify. It is exactly these kinds of difficult distinctions that Paul teases out in 1 Corinthians 9-10. These challenges will become ever more relevant to us as we live in an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-faith post-Christian society.

However the inverse of the problem that Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 10 is a far more prevalent issue in many contemporary churches, namely that of whether unbelievers can join in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This is rendered more problematic where we follow the New Testament pattern of a full meal, and not just the tokens of bread and wine, since it seems inhospitable to exclude unbelievers and inconsistent with the teaching and example of Jesus. However the problem is generated not primarily by the Lord's Supper itself, but by the way that our church gatherings have become open public meetings. In New Testament times the church gathering would have been more akin to a private meeting, which took place in a private home. Evangelistic preaching took place publicly, whether in the Jerusalem Temple precincts, the synagogue or the city marketplace, and sometimes public buildings were hired for the purpose of explaining and proclaiming the gospel. However the family gatherings of the people of God for their own edification and encouragement were primarily private affairs. To some extent they would have been clandestine, because of the risk of persecution or opposition. It is unlikely that most unbelievers would have wanted to take the risk of attending. The fact that public officials thought that the early Christians gathered to practice cannibalism is indicative of the fact that their meetings, incorporating the Lord's Supper, did not take place in full public view. This would almost certainly have been the case in Corinth where, as has been noted, 1 Corinthians 11-14 describes the church assembly in a private home.

The nature of the Lord's Supper as a "participation" in Christ would make it inappropriate for an unbeliever to take part. Sharing the meal would be a sign of belonging to Christ, of being united with him by faith. It would be just as inconceivable for a pagan to participate in the Lord's Supper as for a Christian to participate in a pagan idol feast. This was presumably not a problem that the early church had to address because there was no social advantage to pagans attending church gatherings. The rise of Christendom changed this dramatically. All the Reformers were at pains to stress that mere eating of the sacrament without faith would bring no benefit to the participant. Paul would more likely have declared that it was inappropriate for them to eat at all.

The idea of the Lord's Supper as a participation in Christ therefore has significant implications for the "fencing of the table". Only those who have put their faith in Christ, evidenced by baptism as the initiation ritual signifying union with Christ, are appropriately qualified to share in this meal. In a context where there are divergent views about the practice of baptism, I

would welcome to the table all those who profess personal faith in Christ and who believe in conscience they have been validly baptised, whether as an infant or as a believer. The invitation to the Lord's table is extended to all those who have been united to him and baptised in his Spirit, and it would be akin to the Galatian heresy to insist that we will not eat with them unless they have conformed to a specific form of baptism as we understand it.

The central problem here is, however, the idea that the gathering of the church for edification and fellowship ought to be an open public meeting. By all means hold church services that are public at which the gospel is preached, but the family meetings of the church ought to be exactly that – family events, not meetings for all-comers. In contemporary church life it might be better to regard our home groups, or a mid-week meeting for church members, as the appropriate context for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The traditional idea of a separate Sunday "Gospel Service" that is open and a "Breaking of Bread" for believers has merit and might be reconsidered. The idea that "Parish Eucharist" is to be the main public service of the church is simply a way of creating unnecessary problems and fails to reflect the New Testament pattern.

However, whilst it seems inappropriate that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated in a way that invites the participation of unbelievers, the traditional understanding has also over-emphasised the spiritual harm that is caused if an unbeliever does participate in the meal. If the body of Christ at the Supper is the church family, not the bread itself, and the dire warnings of judgment in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 are directed to believers who mistreat each other by failing to honour their social equality in Christ, then the unbeliever does themselves no serious spiritual harm if they eat. They are already under judgment because they are not in Christ,[102] and their participation does not exacerbate that judgment. 1 Corinthians 14:24 anticipates that an unbeliever might come in to a worship meeting of the church, albeit this is not actively encouraged and is presented as an unusual occurrence. It is a possibility rather than a likelihood, and certainly not something the church is actively encouraging as an evangelistic strategy. However, if such a person came in while the church was eating their communal supper it seems unlikely that the church would refuse to allow the outsider to eat. Jesus, for example, permitted Judas to participate in the Last Supper knowing full well that he was not a true disciple.[103] In his fictional account of life in the first century church in Corinth, Ben Witherington imagines that occasional unbelievers may occasionally have come into the Christian gathering and joined in their meal.[104] Perhaps we have over-

[102] Romans 1:18-32; Ephesians 2:1-10.

[103] Matthew 26:17-30.

[104] Ben Witherington III, *A Week in the Life of Corinth* (Downers Grove, IL.: IVP, 2012).

emphasised the dangers of participation in the Lord's Supper for unbelievers whilst simultaneously underestimating the danger for believers who are failing to apply the gospel to their social relationships with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

A further issue is that of paedo-communion. This is essentially a problem for Paedobaptists rather than Baptists, and I personally find the arguments offered by the Reformers to deny children the right to participate in Lord's Supper unconvincing. It seems odd to admit the children of believers to baptism, believing that this signifies their union with Christ and membership of the covenant, but then to deny them the right to feed at the covenant meal which is meant to strengthen and sustain their faith and membership of the covenant.[105] The idea that they are unable to participate because they are unable to "discern the body" and "examine themselves" can only exclude the very youngest of children, not the vast majority of baptised infants who are barred from communion in most paedobaptist churches. It also flows from a false interpretation of what Paul means by "discerning the body" as explained above. Young children are perfectly able to understand that the congregation is the people of God to whom they belong and therefore own duties of love and respect. Paedobaptists who insist on confirmation or covenanted church membership before the baptised can join the family meal seem to me to be deeply inconsistent. In practice it means that they function as if they were Baptists in relation to participation in the covenant but have invented another ritual to achieve what Baptism was meant to signify. It is not surprising that there are therefore some who have advocated the adoption of paedo-communion.[106] I don't agree with this, but it is at least logically consistent.

Summary and suggestions for contemporary practice

The purpose of this article has been to question the contemporary practice of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Despite the great achievements of the

[105] See for example Mark Horne, "What's for Dinner? Calvin's Continuity with the Bible's and the Ancient Church's Eucharistic Faith", Ch. 4 in Wilkins & Garner (eds.), *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA.: Athanasius Press, 2004). For a critique see Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*: *A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: P&R, 2006).

[106] Tom Wright advocates paedo-communion in his short book *The Meal Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 81. He writes: "I see no justification for keeping Communion as an adults-only event. At a Jewish Passover the youngest child present has a speaking part… I look forward to the day in my own church when the liturgy will include the youngest child present asking, "Why is this different from all other meals?" – and getting a good answer". One might somewhat mischievously suggest that a child in an Anglican church would rather rapidly spot that the reason "this is different from all other meals" is because it doesn't look anything like a meal at all – a problem that no child would have at a Jewish Passover celebration.

Protestant Reformation, in many churches it retains the basic shape and format of the Roman Catholic Mass. It fails to reflect the pattern set out in the New Testament, which was universally followed in the first two centuries of the life of the church. As Ben Witherington explains:

> While the Reformation brought change, it was not always or necessarily a change that amounted to a return to a more New Testament model of approaching the Lord's Supper.[107]

The primary reasons for this failure to observe the Lord's Supper are practical considerations. As soon as churches ceased to meet in private homes they no longer connected their worship service with a meal together. Churches became public religious venues and took their lead more from the pagan cults of the Empire than the pages of the New Testament. Theology was shaped to justify the tradition, and the idea of the Lord's Supper as a time of deep and personal communion with God became embedded. To celebrate the Lord's Supper as a meal inevitably detracts from the solemnity and ritual that seems to convey the special presence of Jesus and the idea that this is a moment of high revelation and spiritual encounter. To celebrate a meal together just seems too ordinary and lacking in spiritual uplift.

However, it needn't be this way. Churches can be constructed so as to provide adequate kitchens and dining facilities to eat together. If this isn't possible church members can bring their own lunch and share together. By failing to celebrate a meal, and over-spiritualising the experience of eating bread and drinking wine together, we miss out on major aspects of what the Lord's Supper in meant to signify. It proclaims that we are one body who accept one another as social equals because we are brothers and sisters in Christ. It proclaims that Christ is present with us by his Spirit because we are a temple in which he has made his dwelling. It proclaims that Jesus has died for our sins, that he has risen in triumph, and that he will return to consummate his kingdom, and that we live under the blessings of the new covenant he has inaugurated. By participating we proclaim that we are in Christ, united to him by faith, that we have fellowship with him and share in the blessings he has brought. It reminds us of the grace we have received and leads us to joyful celebration and thanksgiving. It deepens our faith, identity, unity and love for one another. Many of these aspects are lost, downplayed, or displaced to another aspect of church life if the Lord's Supper is not faithfully observed.

For a short period of time when I was Pastor of City Evangelical Church, Birmingham we celebrated the Lord's Supper after our morning service in the context of a church lunch. We met in a school and were able to make use of the kitchens. We began our meal seated around tables with a hymn, a

[107] Witherington, *Making a Meal of It*, 114.

prayer of thanksgiving and the words of institution for the bread. We then shared bread before eating our lunch together. After we had eaten lunch we ended by sharing the cup. We spoke the words of institution and gave a prayer of thanksgiving. After we had all shared the cup we would sing a hymn that gave thanks to God for the salvation that we had received in Christ. In the end a change of venue and a shift towards different congregations in the morning and evening meant that we were unable to sustain this pattern. On reflection I think we lost something significant. I felt that we had come nearer to the practice of the early church, and were blessed in our mutual fellowship as a result. We avoided making too much, or too little, of the Lord's Supper. It became both more ordinary and more precious. I miss it and would love to be able to recapture something like it again.

As Jesus said, discipleship consists in obeying everything he commanded.[108] Sadly, our contemporary practice of the Lord's Supper all too often reflects what has been received from the Reformers rather than from the Lord, admittedly with the best of sincere intentions. In the end our contemporary practice owes more to tradition than to Scripture. It is not reformed enough.

[108] Matthew 28:20.

Foundations 68 (May 2015): 57-83

THE LORD'S SUPPER IN ENGLAND: THEN AND NOW – A LOOK AT HOW THOMAS CRANMER'S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY COMPARES WITH TODAY

Richard Wardman[*]

What happens in the Lord's Supper? To answer that question this article critically explores the mature Eucharistic theology of Thomas Cranmer. Cranmer's theology is then used as a point of reference for discussing the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in contemporary English Evangelicalism. The relevant scriptural passages are also explored when discussing both Cranmer and contemporary Evangelicalism. The conclusion seeks to offer comparative remarks and also provide a basis for further discussion.

Introduction

There is little doubt that Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) left a considerable mark on English Christianity, not only for the Anglican Communion but also for all who profess a Reformed, Evangelical, Protestant faith. At the centre of Cranmer's legacy are his writings and disputations concerning the Lord's Supper, a doctrine that was only seriously debated in England for the first time during his Archbishopric. His mature doctrine of the Eucharist became enshrined in liturgy, a form of which is still being used every Sunday in churches across England and indeed worldwide.

Today, however, many English Evangelicals appear less concerned with the doctrine of the Lord's Supper and it could be said that this apathy is also seen in practice. It is only as we understand the theological significance of breaking bread and drinking wine that we can begin to appreciate the importance of why the Lord Jesus gave this meal to his church.

Therefore, the interest of this article is to first examine Cranmer's mature doctrine of the Lord's Supper to aid our understanding of its spiritual benefits and effects and how we receive such benefits. We will then use Cranmer as a framework for determining whether contemporary English Evangelicalism has remained faithful to biblical principles or drifted from

* Richard Wardman is Pastor of New City Church Milton Keynes. He completed his MTh at Wales Evangelical School of Theology in 2012.

them. Along the way we will interact with other key contributors, from both historical and contemporary sources.

Cranmer's mature doctrine of the Lord's Supper

Early Influences

Evidence suggests that Cranmer was raised and educated to be a staunch Roman Catholic and that it wasn't until he began working on the matter of Henry VIII's divorce that he was exposed to Reformation thinking in European universities. By the time he was appointed as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1532 Cranmer was ready to set in motion the English Reformation.[1] The Church of England formally broke with Rome in 1534 paving the way for significant change theologically and practically.[2]

Concerning the Eucharist, Cranmer held to a more or less Lutheran "real presence" theology until around 1547.[3] After this Cranmer began to publicly uphold a "spiritual presence" understanding of the Lord's Supper. It will be beneficial to briefly consider some of the key known influences that led Cranmer to develop his understanding.

In his public writings Cranmer makes little mention of the ideas of others, favouring to reflect his own ideas adopted from Scripture, the Fathers and "right reason".[4] This should not be considered arrogance, but rather understandable caution. At a time when public figures were being regularly executed, citing their name in one's own publications, particularly as an influence, was dangerous. As such, this makes it somewhat difficult to determine who was influencing Cranmer and to what extent.[5]

(i) Nicholas Ridley

However, at his trial in 1555 Cranmer testified that it was Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of Rochester and London, who had been the main agent of change.[6] Ridley had introduced Cranmer to the Eucharistic theology of a ninth century

---

[1] "Supremacy, Acts of", *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* 1571.

[2] See Albert Frederick Pollard, *Thomas Cranmer and the English Reformation (1489–1556)* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 96-104.

[3] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), 354-355.

[4] Basil Hall, "Cranmer, the Eucharist and the Foreign Divines", in *Thomas Cranmer: Churchman and Scholar* (ed. Paul Ayris and David Selwyn; Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 1993), 220fn.

[5] Ibid., 221.

[6] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 355. See also, Peter Newman Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist: An Essay in Historical Development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 38.

monk, Ratramnus of Corbie.[7] Ratramnus opposed transubstantiation prior to it being adopted as official Roman doctrine, concluding that the bread and wine remain what they were before consecration and that they are only the body and blood of Christ in a "spiritual" sense.[8]

It is understood that Ridley shared this discovery with Cranmer, possibly sometime in the late 1540s, and at the very least planted a seed of thought that would mature into Cranmer's mature Eucharistic doctrine.

(ii) Martin Bucer

Bucer had sought to combine elements of the Zwinglian and Lutheran positions.[9] With Zwingli he held that "the bread and wine… in themselves are completely unchanged but merely become symbols"; and with Luther he held that in the Eucharist we receive "the very body and blood of the Lord, so that by their means we may increasingly and more perfectly share in the imparting of regeneration".[10]

It was Bucer, along with Peter Martyr, who made suggestions for the necessary changes to the language used in Cranmer's 1549 Book of Common Prayer, moving it further away from the Roman Catholic Mass.[11] Cranmer himself mentions Bucer in his *Answer* to Stephen Gardiner, as being a supporter of his Eucharistic views, suggesting an influence.[12]

(iii) Peter Martyr Vermigli

Martyr Virmigli spent considerable time with Cranmer at Lambeth Palace, and is believed to have shown Cranmer and Ridley works by Chrysostom and Theodoret, both of which affirmed their discoveries in Ratramnus concerning the "spiritual presence" of Christ in the Eucharist.[13] Passages from Chrysostom gleaned from Martyr were freely incorporated into Cranmer's 1550 polemic, the *Defence*, suggesting the considerable influence Martyr had on the Archbishop.[14]

---

[7] Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, Wash.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), §127.

[8] Ibid,. §127. See also Ratramnus on *Christ's Body and Blood* in George E. McCracken (ed.), *Early Medieval Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Knox Press, 2006), 90-118.

[9] Tony Lane, *A Concise History of Christian Thought* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 176.

[10] Quoted in ibid., 173.

[11] Ibid., 173. See Bucer's *Censura*, translated in E. C. Whitaker, *Martin Bucer and the Book of Common Prayer* (Great Wakering: Matthew-McCrimmon, 1974), 176-183.

[12] Thomas Cranmer, *The Remains of Thomas Cranmer* (ed. Henry Jenkyns; 4 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1833), 3:340.

[13] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 382. See also, Hall, "Foreign Divines", in Ayris & Selwyn (eds.), *Churchman and Scholar*, 227-228.

[14] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 382.

However, Cranmer gives hardly any real evidence for his influences, but instead determines to show that his principle authorities were the Early Church Fathers and, not least, the Word of God.

Doctrine of Scripture

Central to Cranmer's refutation of the Roman Catholic Mass was his appeal to the authority of Scripture.[15] It was Cranmer's clear assertion that Rome had devised its doctrine of transubstantiation out of thin air. "No man ought to be so arrogant and presumptuous to affirm for a certain truth in religion, any thing which is not spoken of in holy Scripture."[16]

Moreover, people ought not to have their consciences troubled by things that are contrary to Scripture. With regards to the Lord's Supper, what was spoken and done by Christ, written by the apostles, and testified to by Paul are sufficient for the faith of all Christian people.[17]

> The most sure and plain way is, to cleave unto holy Scripture. Wherein whatsoever is found, must be taken for a most sure ground and an infallible truth; and whatsoever cannot be grounded upon the same (touching our faith) is man's device, changeable and uncertain.[18]

J. I. Packer has noted that Cranmer consistently affirmed two facts about Scripture: that it is sufficient for salvation, and that it is useful and has value as a means of grace.[19] "Nothing, he held, matters more for the Christian than to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, the Bible."[20] It is interesting to note, not only in Packer's description but also in Cranmer himself, the language of eating, feeding and ingesting with regards to Scripture as a means of grace.[21]

It therefore appears that Cranmer the Reformer held firmly to the principle of *sola scriptura*, and that this guided and girded his Evangelical reforms of the Church of England, particularly with regard to the Lord's Supper.[22]

---

[15] D. A. Scales, "Thomas Cranmer's 'True and Catholick Doctrine of the Sacrament'", *Churchman* 104/2 (1990): n.p.

[16] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:395.

[17] Ibid., 2:296-297

[18] Ibid., 2:292

[19] J. I. Packer, introduction to *The Work of Thomas Cranmer,* by Thomas Cranmer (ed. G. E. Duffield; The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 2; Appleford, Berkshire: Courtenay, 1964), xxii-xxiii.

[20] Ibid., xxiii.

[21] "In the Scriptures be the fat pastures of the soul; therein is no venomous meat, no unwholesome thing; they be the very dainty and pure feeding." This comes from Cranmer's prologue to the Great Bible of 1539. See Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:110.

[22] John Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3.

However, Cranmer does not appeal to Scripture alone; he also demonstrates a wide expertise in the Early Church Fathers.[23] He continually appeals to the Fathers to support his view of Scripture, and to substantiate his position that the Mass was an invention of the Church of Rome.[24] Clearly, tradition was important in determining biblical orthodoxy, particularly with regard to the doctrine of the Eucharist.

However, for Cranmer the whole controversy is related to the more essential matter of reconciliation between God and man.[25] On this note, Cranmer the Archbishop demonstrates a pastoral and evangelistic zeal; his desire is that all people would come to a saving knowledge, and faith in the finished work, of Christ, the work which is displayed in the Lord's Supper.[26]

The Lord's Supper is therefore worth contending over and engaging in sharp debate because it is given to the Church as a continual reminder of Christ's finished work, which is the comfort needed for troubled consciences. Cranmer holds Scripture as the primary source of authority on all matters of faith, and in particular he views Scripture as being essential to the proclamation of the gospel, including and especially as it takes place in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Cranmer's high view of Scripture and his expertise in the Fathers is clearly evident in his main works relating the Lord's Supper, his *Defence* of the Reformed doctrine, and his *Answer* to Stephen Gardiner's response. These works will be critical in outlining Cranmer's mature doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

Summary of Defence *and* Answer

It appears that by the late 1540s the maturation of Cranmer's Eucharistic thinking was almost complete.[27] In March 1548 a new liturgical form of the communion service was introduced called *the Order of the Communion*. The Royal proclamation announcing the new liturgy avoided any use of the word "Mass"; instead, the phrase "Holy Communion" became the preferred description.[28]

---

[23] Maurice Elliott, "Cranmer's Attitude to the Bible: 'Lucerna pedibus meis verbum tuum'", *Chm* 109/1 (1995): n.p.

[24] Cranmer, *Remains*, 4:126-127.

[25] Peter Newman Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist: An Essay in Historical Development* (London: MacMillan, 1965), 79.

[26] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:307.

[27] See the exchanges between Archbishop Cranmer and members of a parliamentary convocation discussed in MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 379-380.

[28] Various, "The Order of the Communion 1548", n.p. [cited 22 April 2015]. Online: http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/Communion_1548.htm. See also, MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 384.

While MacCulloch maintains that Cranmer's Eucharistic thought was complete by 1548, with *the Order of the Communion* as evidence, Jeanes argues that even in the years between 1548 (when the new *Order* was published) and 1552 (when the revised Book of Common Prayer was published), Cranmer's theology was still developing.[29] Jeanes highlights some key differences between the theology of the *Order* and Cranmer's mature theology. For example, the rubrics in the *Order* speak of the bread and wine as consecrated, whereas such language is absent from the 1549 Prayer Book; there, it is not referred to as "consecrated bread" but as "the bread prepared for the communion".[30] Jeanes summarises the key differences between the 1548 liturgy and Cranmer's mature theology: "the bread and wine of the Eucharist… are seen as being at least instruments of the grace signified."[31]

It is possible, as Jeanes suggests, that these differences are because Cranmer had not quite reached maturity of thought on the Eucharist, as he would in only a matter of years. However it is just as plausible that Cranmer and his colleagues were struggling to find and use the correct language for the new-look communion service as they broke tradition with the Mass, leaving Cranmer open to the charge of inconsistency in his Eucharistic doctrine.[32]

To make matters worse, soon after the publication of *the Order of the Communion*, It is thought that Cranmer was personally involved in overseeing and prefacing the *Catechism*. Despite this the revisions were not substantial enough to make a clear break from "real presence" language, and Cranmer came under scrutiny from his opponents. He could not simply borrow language from his influences, nor could he adopt the phraseology previously associated with the Mass and "real presence" theology. Instead, Cranmer needed to express his mature Eucharistic theology in fresh, clear and acceptable language to the laity, Episcopal colleagues and his Reformation contemporaries.

The Book of Common Prayer 1549 did little to help, and the revised Prayer Book with improved Eucharistic language did not appear until 1552. In the intervening years, Cranmer sought to give a "semi-official explanation" of the Eucharistic theology of the Prayer Book, known as *A defence of the true and catholic doctrine of the Sacrament of the body and blood of our saviour Christ* (hereafter, the *Defence*).[33] Divided into five books, the *Defence* is

---

[29] Gordon P. Jeanes, *Signs of God's Promise: Thomas Cranmer's Sacramental Theology and the Book of Common Prayer* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 111.

[30] Ibid., 111-112,

[31] Ibid., 113.

[32] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 386-387.

[33] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 461. The full title was, *A defence of the true and catholic doctrine of the sacrament of the body and blood of our saviour Christ Jesus, with a confutation of sundry errors*

largely a polemical work written to aggressively refute the doctrine of transubstantiation and "real presence" theology, at the same time affirming the mature theology that Cranmer had arrived at by now.

In the First Book of the *Defence* Cranmer sets out his understanding of the nature of the sacrament, including all of the relevant Gospel and Pauline texts.[34] To provide a clear understanding of the Sacrament, he makes eight observations, considered below:

1. All people, being sinners, desire to be delivered from judgment and hell. Scripture speaks of this as the "hunger and thirst of the soul".[35] Christ spoke plainly of spiritual (not carnal) food and drink, provided by God to comfort this spiritual hunger and thirst.

2. This food and drink is our Saviour Christ, who himself said, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37–38), and "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

3. Though Jesus likens the bread and wine to his body and blood as that which feeds the believer, he more than surpasses all carnal food that feeds the body. His nourishment and feeding so preserves the believer that both body and soul live eternally.[36] "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25).

4. True knowledge of these things is true knowledge of Christ. "And the more clearly we see, understand, and believe these things, the more clearly we see and understand Christ, and have more fully our faith and comfort in him."[37]

5. Christ chose the sacramental bread and wine to represent our spiritual feeding, as these (opposed to other foods) "do most lively represent unto us the spiritual union and knot of all faithful people, as well unto Christ, as also amongst themselves".[38] Bread being made of diverse ingredients, mixed and baked together in one loaf, and wine consisting of many grapes pressed into one cup; both elements signify the whole multitude of Christian people spiritually united in Christ and with Christ.

6. Bread and wine, when digested, become part of the body and blood of the one who eats and drinks; likewise, all faithful believers are spiritually joined to Christ and to one another.[39]

7. The Lord's Supper "aptly and effectuously" moves the Christian community to live together in love, peace and unity. It causes those partaking to reflect that they are all members of one spiritual body, of which Christ is head. Where the Lord's Supper does not stir up love in a

---

concerning the same, grounded and stablished upon god's holy word, and approved by the consent of the most ancient doctors of the church. Made by the most reverend father in god, Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury, primate of all England, and metropolitan. See Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:275.

[34] Ibid., 2:291-313

[35] Ibid., 2:298.

[36] Ibid., 2:301-302.

[37] Ibid., 2:302.

[38] Ibid., 2:304.

[39] Ibid., 2:305.

person's heart for Christian brothers and sisters but instead hatred and malice, this is a clear sign that the Spirit of Christ does not indwell that person.[40]

8. The spiritual food of Christ's body and blood is not received in the mouth and digested in the stomach like corporal foods. Rather it is received "with a pure heart and a sincere faith".[41] "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:17).

What follows in the First Book, and in the entire Second Book, is an extended refutation of the doctrine of transubstantiation. We will consider Book Three in more detail as it concerns Cranmer's understanding of the presence of Christ in the Supper.

The Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper

This was a topic as contentious as transubstantiation.[42] Not only does Cranmer deny transubstantiation, he also flatly denies Luther's consubstantiation.[43]

Cranmer's own argument is focused on the ascension of Christ: if Christ has ascended to heaven and is now corporally present at the right hand of the Father, then he cannot be corporally present on earth.[44] Cranmer proceeds to give a skilled argument armed with "Scripture, Reason, and the Fathers".[45]

(i) The argument from Scripture

Cranmer presents his argument from Scripture in one paragraph, which amounts to little more than two hundred words, and consists of seven New Testament proof texts supporting his case (John 16:28, Mt 26:11, Mt 24:23, Mk 16:19, Col 3:1, Heb 8:1 and Heb 10:12).[46]

It is clear that Jesus spoke plainly to his disciples of his returning to the Father; that he would no longer be with them; that they would no longer see him; but that he would be present with them by his Spirit until his return. Moreover, Paul and the writer to the Hebrews clearly understand Christ to

[40] Ibid., 2:305.

[41] Ibid., 2:306.

[42] Ibid., 2:355.

[43] Luther argued that the bread and the body of Christ were present simultaneously, without any change in substance in the bread. For Luther, the reality of Christ's presence was more important than the manner in which he was present. "Why could not Christ include his body in the substance of the bread just as well as in the accidents? … Why should it not be… possible that the glorious body of Christ be contained in every part of the substance of the bread?" See Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in William R. Russell (Ed.), *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

[44] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:358-359.

[45] Brooks, *Historical Development*, 84.

[46] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:359-360.

be seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven, having completed his redemptive work on earth. This seems to support Cranmer's argument that Christ is no longer physically present on earth, and that he therefore cannot be physically or corporally present with his people in the Supper.

(ii) The argument from the Church Fathers

In contrast to his brief reference to Scripture, Cranmer devotes three lengthier chapters to providing proof from the Early Church Fathers, suggesting that they also supported his argument that Christ is no longer present in the world in respect to his humanity. Among the ancient authors used are Origen, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Ambrose and Gregory of Nazianzus.[47]

Cranmer makes confident use of the Fathers, and despite the accusations levelled against him at his trial and subsequently that he purposefully misused and mistranslated patristic texts, evidence from the marginalia of his own editions suggests wide reading and careful examination.[48] However, that is not to say that Cranmer did not employ selectivity when appealing to the Fathers, being keen to demonstrate that they were on his side even when he does not always present their views in full.

(iii) The argument from reason

Some have argued at length that Cranmer was a "nominalist".[49] Nominalism was a philosophical trend chiefly concerned with what kind of reality "universals" possessed.[50] The theory denies that universal principles possess any kind of objective reality and only exist in the mind of the individual. Whilst there is general consensus that Cranmer displayed certain nominalistic traits, some doubt that he was ever consciously operating in such a philosophical way.

> Cranmer was a nominalist, but in a very popular sense, thinking of things as self-enclosed objects, without further reflection… It was by a blunt common sense, as sober as it was superficial, that he tried to make short work of transubstantiation.[51]

---

[47] See ibid., 2:359-371.

[48] D. G. Selwyn, "Cranmer's Library: its potential for Reformation Studies", in Ayris & Selwyn (eds.), *Churchman and Scholar*, 68. See also, K. J. Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers, especially in the Defence", *JRH* 11.2 (December 1980): 227-246.

[49] See the exchange between McKee and Courtenay in the *Harvard Theological Review*. Eugene K. McKee, "Cranmer and Nominalism", *HTR* 57.3 (July 1964): 189-216; W. J. Courtenay, "Cranmer as a Nominalist, *Sed Contra*", *HTR* 57 (1964): 367-380; Eugene K. McKee, "Cranmer's Nominalism Reaffirmed", *HTR* 59.2 (April 1966): 192-196.

[50] D. C. Davis, "Nominalism", *New Dictionary of Theology,* 471.

[51] Cyril C. Richardson, "Cranmer and the Analysis of Eucharistic Doctrine", *Journal of Theological Studies,* 16.2 (October 1965): 422.

Richardson goes on to note that Cranmer's popular nominalistic tendencies determined how he viewed the presence of Christ.[52] For Cranmer, an object (such as the corporal body of Christ) can only be present in one location at any one time. Hence there is no notion in Cranmer that the body of Christ could have both mystical and empirical qualities, permitting a location in heaven but also a "pervasive, substantial presence on earth".[53]

Nominalist or otherwise, Cranmer certainly seemed to display a simplistic "common sense" approach to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist: if Christ is corporally present in heaven he cannot be present anywhere else.

(iv) The sun and its rays

A popular analogy used when debating the presence of Christ in the Eucharist was that of the relationship between the sun and its rays.[54] Bucer and Gardiner both contended that, just as the rays of the sun are of the same substance as the sun itself,

> so our Lord, even though he be comprehended in one place of the secret and divine heaven, that is to say, the glory of his Father, yet nevertheless by his word and holy tokens he is exhibit present truly whole God and man, and therefore in substance in his holy supper.[55]

However, Cranmer (along with Zwingli) voiced the opposite opinion: that the rays of the sun are not of the same substance as the sun. However, though the sun is corporally present "in the heavens" it is nevertheless present on earth by its "operation and virtue" (i.e. its rays); the power of the sun pervades all things but not its substance.[56] Likewise, though Christ is corporally present in heaven, he has promised to be with his people spiritually through all ages, and is so by virtue of his divinity.[57]

Cranmer quite clearly denied that Christ was physically or corporally present in the sacrament because he is presently at the right hand of the Father in heaven. Moreover, Cranmer went further to say that the physical or corporal presence of Christ is irrelevant to faith.[58] How, then, *is* Christ present in the sacrament according to Cranmer? "In the nature of his humanity he is gone hence, and present in the nature of his Divinity."[59]

---

[52] Ibid., 422.
[53] Ibid., 426.
[54] Jeanes, *Signs*, 158.
[55] Quotes in ibid., 159.
[56] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:358.
[57] Ibid., 2:358.
[58] See Jeanes, *Signs*, 162.
[59] Cranmer, *Remains*, 3:90.

(v) "True Presence" or "Spiritual Presence"

MacCulloch notes that in the wake of the publication of the *Catechism* in 1548 the language used caused considerable consternation and criticism of Cranmer: it was said by one critic that the Archbishop

> has all but consented to that foul and sacrilegious transubstantiation of the papists in the holy supper of our Saviour; all the rest of Luther's dreams seem to him to be sufficiently well-grounded, evident and plain.[60]

Cranmer went on to categorically dismiss the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, devoting an entire chapter to its refutation in the *Defence* in 1550. As well as making these denials, he also affirmed his mature understanding of the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, moving away from the "real presence" language and doctrine of Luther.

The Archbishop begins Book Three by outlining thirteen points of comparison between "the heinous errors of the papists" and his own understanding.[61] To list them here will help to demonstrate Cranmer's emerging theology of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

1. Rome insists that Christ is in the bread and wine, whereas Cranmer argues that he is present in those who worthily eat and drink the bread and wine.

2. The "papists" hold that when a person receives the bread and wine, Christ goes into the mouth or stomach "and no further". However, Cranmer holds to a more holistic understanding, in which Christ is in the "whole man, both the body and soul of his that worthily eateth the bread and drinketh the cup".

3. "They say, that Christ is received in the mouth, and entereth in with the bread and wine: we say, that he is received in the heart, and entereth in by faith."[62]

4. Cranmer insists that Christ remains in the worthy receiver so long as he remains in Christ. However, Rome holds that Christ "flyeth up" from the receiver once the bread has been chewed and digested.

5. They say that the whole Christ is contained in each part of the bread and wine, feet, arms, head etc. Cranmer merely dismisses this as an "abominable invention… to make of the most pure and perfect body of Christ such a confused and monstrous body!"

6. According to Rome, even dogs can eat the body of Christ if they happen to eat the sacramental bread! Cranmer insists that only humans can eat the body of Christ and drink his blood.

7. Moreover, only those who are "lively members of his body" can eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, says Cranmer. For Rome, everyone receives the body and blood of Christ, whether regenerate or unregenerate.

---

[60] This came in a letter from London to Zurich by a disciple of Bullinger, John Ab Ulmis. See MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 390.

[61] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:356-358.

[62] Ibid., 2:256.

8. They also say that people only eat the body of Christ and drink his blood when they receive the sacrament. "We say, that they eat, drink and feed of Christ continually, so long as they be members of his body."

9. Rome says that the body of Christ has its own form and quantity in the sacrament, while Cranmer holds that Christ is there without form or quantity, but only sacramentally and spiritually.

10. The patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament did not eat the body nor drink the blood of Christ, according to Rome. However, Cranmer insists that, though Christ was not yet born or incarnated, they did eat his body and drink his blood.

11 Furthermore, Christ's body was made only once, of the substance of his mother Mary (i.e. human flesh and blood). Rome says that the body of Christ is made numerous times each day, whenever a Mass is held, and that he is made of bread and wine.

12. Rome also holds that the Mass is a "sacrifice satisfactory for sin", on the basis of the devotion of the offering priest, and not of the thing offered. "But we say, that their saying is a most heinous lie and detestable error against the glory of Christ." Only the death of Christ, offered once for the sins of the world, is able to make satisfaction for sin.

13. Rome says that Christ is simultaneously corporally present in multiple places. Here Cranmer draws on the analogy of the sun and its rays, insisting that the sun is only present in the heavens, but its operation and virtue makes it present on earth. Likewise, Christ is bodily and corporally in heaven at the right hand of God, but is spiritually present on earth, and godly people spiritually eat his flesh and drink his blood by faith.

MacCulloch and Brooks differ on what phrase best describes Cranmer's understanding of the presence of Christ. Brooks highlights Cranmer's use of the phrase "true presence" in one section of the *Answer* to Stephen Gardiner to demonstrate that this is the most appropriate way to represent the Archbishop's views.[63]

However, MacCulloch argues that this is a rare occurrence in Cranmer's later writings. Rather, it is more characteristic of Cranmer to speak of Christ being "spiritually" present, as has just been demonstrated in the thirteen points of difference with Roman doctrine.[64] Jeanes makes the same observation when he says that "the most common theme is of the presence of Christ that is enabled by the Holy Spirit".[65]

Cranmer's emphasis on the spiritual presence of Christ is so strong that it can be applied to all of life, and not merely restricted to the celebration of the Lord's Supper.[66] Indeed this is probably deliberate as Cranmer views the regeneration and sanctification of the believer as normative aspects of the Christian life.[67]

---

[63] Brooks, *Historical Development*, 93.

[64] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 392.

[65] Jeanes also observes that Cranmer fails to maintain an independent identity of the Holy Spirit who gets "totally subsumed to his Christocentric emphasis". See Jeanes, *Signs*, 155. Hall also agrees, pointing out that Catholics believe in the True presence and using inverted commas makes little difference. See Hall, "Foreign Divines", in Ayris, *Churchman and Scholar*, 251.

[66] Ibid., 154.

[67] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:358.

No doubt scarred by the attacks following the *Catechism* and the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, Cranmer clearly wanted to make a clean break from any talk of "real" or even "true" presence, terms that evidently could be mistaken for Rome's transubstantiation and Luther's consubstantiation. As such, in the *Defence* and *Answer* he made sure that he could not be mistaken, but consistently spoke of the "spiritual" presence of Christ with his people, both in the Eucharist and at all other times.

(vi) "The Spirit giveth life, the flesh availeth nothing."

This emphasis on the spiritual force of Christ's presence and work, leads Cranmer to make repeated use of the words of Christ in John 6:63: "The Spirit giveth life, the flesh availeth nothing."[68] In a brief exegesis of that passage Cranmer seeks to demonstrate that Christ made a clear distinction between carnal eating and spiritual eating. Having announced that he was the "bread of life" and that "whosover should eat his flesh, and drink his blood, should have everlasting life", many were offended with his words and declared, "This is an hard saying; for how can he give us his flesh to be eaten?" Cranmer argues that Christ's purpose was to turn away all thoughts of carnal eating and instead to make clear that he meant spiritual eating, because to actually eat his flesh would not profit them at all.[69] Rather they should spiritually eat of him by faith, as did the patriarchs many years before he was incarnate (cf. 1 Cor 10:3-4).[70]

He goes even further in the *Answer* to Stephen Gardiner, in saying that salvation is not dependent upon believing that "the natural body and blood of Christ is really, substantially, and naturally present in the sacrament".[71] If this were so, it is certain that Christ and the Apostles would have taught the doctrine carefully and clearly; indeed Christ would not have said, "The Spirit giveth life, the flesh availeth nothing" if the eating of his own flesh were so necessary for salvation.

Cranmer dispelled any notion that he held to a doctrine of the Eucharist that included either Rome's transubstantiation or Luther's consubstantiation. Rather than "real presence" theology, Cranmer affirmed a "spiritual presence" of the ascended Christ. As such, participants of the Lord's Supper ought not to think of themselves as feeding carnally on the body and blood of Christ, but spiritually feeding on all the benefits of Christ's finished work on the cross, and thus being nourished in their Christian walk.

---

[68] This text was also frequently used by Zwingli, most notably at the Colloquy of Marburg: "The soul is fed with the Spirit, not with the flesh." See Schaff, *History*, §108.

[69] Cranmer, *Remains*, 2:377-378.

[70] Ibid., 2:378.

[71] Ibid., 3:435.

This leads us to the other major query of Cranmer's mature doctrine of the Lord's Supper: the Lord's Supper as a means of grace.

The Lord's Supper as a means of grace

In what way are we to understand the Lord's Supper representing or effecting the grace it signifies? Cranmer sought to answer this question in the *Defence* and his *Answer* to Stephen Gardiner.

Brian Gerrish has provided a helpful structure in order to make the distinction between three viewpoints concerning the Lord's Supper within the Reformed camp: symbolic memorialism, symbolic parallelism and symbolic instrumentalism.[72]

> In all three the shared component is the notion that a sign or symbol "points to" something else. They differ in that the reality pointed to is variously thought of as a happening in the past, a happening that occurs simultaneously in the present, or a present happening that is actually brought about through the signs.[73]

(i) Symbolic memorialism

Gerrish ascribes symbolic memorialism to Zwingli, for whom the sacraments could not be "vehicles of grace".[74] Rather, for Zwingli the sign points to "a happening in the past". In response to Gardiner's suggestion that he thought of the bread and wine as "tokens only to signify Christ's body and blood", Cranmer insists:

> They be no vain nor bare tokens, as you would persuade, (for a bare token is that which betokeneth only, and giveth nothing, as a painted fire which giveth neither light nor heat), but in the due ministration of the sacraments, God is present, working with his word and sacraments.[75]

Although Cranmer would certainly agree that as signs the bread and wine point to the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ in the past, nevertheless it is evident that he viewed the sign as more than a mere memorial. That leaves symbolic instrumentalism or parallelism.

(ii) Symbolic instrumentalism

Gerrish finds that symbolic instrumentalism is most evident in Calvin.[76] The emphasis here is on "a present happening that is actually brought about

---

[72] Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 167.

[73] Ibid., 167.

[74] Jeanes, *Signs*, 164.

[75] Cranmer, *Remains*, 3:38.

[76] Ralph Cunnington has noted, along with Gerrish, that the three distinctions are not mutually exclusive, and that Calvin could be viewed as straddling both symbolic memorialism

through the signs".[77] MacCulloch stresses that Cranmer and Calvin would find themselves on common ground in a number of areas related to the Eucharist.[78] In particular, there would be an agreement in emphasising the complementary ministry of word and sacrament. Gerrish comments that for Calvin "the indispensable component in a sacramental action is not the sign but the Word, which sign confirms and seals; and we are not to imagine that a sacrament adds to the word an efficacy of a totally different order".[79]

However, Cranmer would not concur with Calvin's assertion that the sacraments could "confer" or "contain" grace.[80] For Cranmer, it is not the elements themselves that confer grace upon the believer; rather "communion was a liturgical event which was only complete when a congregation made an experience of God's grace effectual by its act of willing acceptance in faith".[81] This rules out symbolic instrumentalism for Cranmer.

(iii) Symbolic Parallelism

Cranmer does not speak of the sacraments conferring grace, but "prefers to speak of God, not the sacraments, working, and it is more typical for him to say that God works *by* his sacraments *in* those who rightly receive them".[82] This puts Cranmer more in line with the symbolic parallelism of Bullinger.[83]

Richardson has said that for Cranmer, "sacraments *teach*, while incarnation and redemption (with the corresponding faith in them) are what *effects*."[84] The emphasis here is not on the signs themselves but on those who receive them in faith. It is faith then, and not the symbols, that brings about a real relationship between the sign and the reality, the sacrament and the grace.[85] This is the essence of symbolic parallelism: as the people of God exercise faith in the things signified, God works grace in them alongside the elements and action of the sacrament.

For Cranmer, though, grace does not come to the recipient through a mere "speech act".[86] The analogy of speech acts was employed by some

---

and instrumentalism. Ralph Cunnington, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper: A blot upon his labors as a public instructor?" *WTJ* 73 (2011): 220.

[77] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 167.

[78] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 615-616.

[79] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 162-163.

[80] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 616.

[81] Ibid., 616.

[82] Ibid., 614. Emphasis original.

[83] MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 615.

[84] Richardson, "Cranmer Analysis," 431.

[85] Jeanes, *Signs*, 166.

[86] Ibid., 177

reformers (notably Peter Martyr) as a way to explain sacramental efficacy. Speech act theory argues that words create relationships; in the case of the Eucharist, the words of the minister in the action of administering the bread and wine create a relationship between the sign and the grace they signify, thereby effecting the grace in the recipient. For Cranmer, however, the idea of speech acts in the Eucharist unhelpfully "link the grace too closely with the action and the minister. That link can only be made in the private world by the individual's reception by faith."[87]

It is as though, for Cranmer, the sacrament is hardly necessary. If the link between grace and action is made privately in the world of the recipient, then the "elements and action of the sacrament are left somewhat exterior and incidental".[88] In other words, what is the point of the elements and the action if the grace is received by virtue of the recipient's faith alone? It seems that this is a compromise on Cranmer's part in his determination to use the language of signification, and to avoid the language of exhibition where the signs are also the seals. As such, he appears to suggest that the work of God pointed to in the sacrament is actually a continual action.

> We say, that the presence of Christ in his holy Supper is a spiritual presence: and as he is spiritually present, so is he spiritually eaten of all faithful Christian men, not only when they receive the sacrament, but continually so long as they be members spiritual of Christ's mystical body.[89]

Despite clearly falling into the symbolic parallelism category, Cranmer would strongly claim to hold to an instrumentalist view where the elements are not empty tokens.[90]

Cranmer's studies led him to understand a spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as opposed to a real corporal presence. In this model, Christ is physically present in heaven, but is present with his people by virtue of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Cranmer held that grace was conferred on the recipient of the Supper not by the action itself but by faith in the realities signified by the action.

Cranmer spent almost a decade trying to find the correct language with which to express his mature doctrine of the Lord's Supper, wherein there could be no suggestion from his opponents that he retained Roman Catholic

---

[87] Ibid., 177.

[88] Ibid., 184.

[89] Cranmer, *Remains*, 3:131. Further evidence of this is found in the rubrics concerning the Visitation of the Sick in the BCP (1552), which states that if a man is too ill to attend the Service of Communion "he doeth eate and drinke the body and bloude of our Saviour Christ, profytably to his soules health, althoughe he doe not receyve the Sacrament with hys mouth". Various, "The Book of Common Prayer 1552," n.p. [cited 18 May 2015]. Online: http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1552/Visitation_Sick_1552.htm.

[90] Jeanes, *Signs*, 186.

or Lutheran views. This highlights the intense nature of the sacramental debates that were raging at the time, not only in England but also on the continent. That these debates rage on today is perhaps indicative of how difficult it is to determine the true biblical teaching on the matter. Nevertheless it remains an important topic for debate, and it is to contemporary English Evangelical views of the Lord's Supper that we now turn.

The Lord's Supper in contemporary English Evangelicalism

In the years since Cranmer the debate over the Lord's Supper has continued and there are as many conflicting views concerning the sacraments today as there were then. In contemporary Evangelicalism in England alone there are numerous different positions. That said, comparatively little has been published by English authors on the subject, making it difficult to trace contemporary understanding and practice, which may be indicative that, for the majority of English Evangelicals, the Lord's Supper is either a non-contentious issue, or indeed that it is not a theological priority.[91]

It could be argued that this silence has led to some level of ignorance amongst Evangelical congregations in England. Would the average believer participating in a communion service be able to express what was happening in that moment? We cannot know, but the suspicion is that very few could. One thing is clear: a theological understanding of what happens when we break bread and drink wine as the gathered church, however superficial, has a direct impact on our practice of the Supper.

The Supper as sign

So, from the evidence available, what do contemporary Evangelicals believe is signified in the Lord's Supper? Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in volume three of *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, lists five things signified in the Supper, which will serve as a basis for our discussion here.

(i) It signifies the Lord's death

Paul in 1 Cor 11:26 is sufficient to demonstrate this: "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This continues to be the case even when there is a lack of cross-centred preaching from the pulpit.[92] Tim Chester, co-founder of *The Porterbrook*

[91] The neglect of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in contemporary Evangelicalism is discussed at length in a fascinating article, rejoinder and surrejoinder by Letham and MacLeod in Robert Letham and Donald MacLeod, "Is Evangelicalism Christian," *EvQ* 67:1 (1995): 3-33.

[92] David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things* (vol. 3 of *Great Doctrines of the Bible;* Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1998), 50.

Network and a prolific author, affirms that while the communion meal is more than a memorial, it is certainly not less than a memorial of Christ's death.[93] Likewise, Derek Prime states that the purpose of the Lord's Supper as a memorial is that believers "should recall to mind Christ's sufferings on our behalf".[94] Robert Letham, an ordained Presbyterian minister, author and lecturer, says that the Lord's Supper is most commonly thought of as a memorial of Christ's death because "we all know how to remember past events".[95] Consequently, he bemoans, the Lord's Supper is most commonly thought of in this way only.

(ii) It signifies participation in Christ and his death

Romans 6:4-5 uses the language of participation to describe how the believer is united with Christ in his death, and even participates in his death. This is clearly signified in the Lord's Supper. "It reminds us of… our union with Him and, therefore, of our participation in His death."[96] Prime agrees, and also adds that the Lord's Supper is a reminder that by *faith* we share in the benefits of Christ and his death.[97] For Letham, this relates to the believer's "union with Christ and its cultivation by the Holy Spirit as [they] eat and drink the physical elements", a point which will be expanded when discussing the Lord's Supper as grace "sealed" below.[98]

(iii) It signifies participation in the benefits of the New Covenant

The Communion Service is a reminder to believers that God has made a new covenant with them (cf. 1 Cor 11:25) through the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ.[99] Lloyd-Jones cites Heb 8:8-12 to describe the benefits of the "marvellous" new covenant in which believers share.

(iv) It signifies the help we receive in living the Christian life

"Each mouthful is a reminder that we cannot save ourselves."[100] Partaking in the bread and wine reminds the believer of the life and strength they receive

---

[93] Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community and Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011), 121.

[94] Derek Prime, *Bible Answers: To Questions about the Christian Faith and Life* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2001), 127.

[95] Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2001), 6.

[96] Lloyd-Jones, *Church and Last Things*, 50.

[97] Prime, *Bible Answers*, 127.

[98] Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 7

[99] Lloyd-Jones, *Church and Last Things*, 51. Also Prime, *Bible Answers*, 127.

[100] Chester, *Meal with Jesus*, 122.

from Christ to live the Christian life.[101] Here, Lloyd-Jones refers to John 6:56: "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him." Lloyd-Jones explains his understanding that Jesus is using the language of eating his flesh and drinking his blood as a picture of the life believers receive from him. The example Jesus uses is of the life he receives from the Father: "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me." (John 6:57)

Jesus cannot mean that he draws his spiritual life and strength from eating the substance of the Father; he cannot, therefore, be suggesting that believers receive their strength for living the Christian life by the eating and drinking of his body and blood. Rather, using a text favoured by Cranmer, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). As such, when the believer eats the bread and drinks the wine they should be reminded of the need to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ in a *spiritual* sense, "if [they are] to be a strong and a virile and a conquering Christian".[102]

(v) It signifies the union of believers with one another

Believers are not only united to Christ but they are also united to one another.[103] Lloyd-Jones says that careful attention must be given to 1 Cor 10:16-17:

> Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

The "one loaf" that is used in the communion service is therefore a representation of the union between believers. Even when the loaf is divided into multiple parts, it serves as a visual picture of the unity shared by multiple believers.[104]

Chester argues that the church proclaims the Lord's death when it comes together as a community reconciled by the cross.[105] This was being undermined in Corinth as the wealthy looked down on the poor precisely at the point of their celebration of the Lord's Supper. Moreover, Paul's teaching concerning the unity of believers in 1 Cor 10 is what drives his teaching in 1 Cor 11 concerning the divisions that were seen in the church at Corinth, especially when they gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper. "Paul talks

[101] Lloyd-Jones, *Church and Last Things*, 52.
[102] Ibid., 52.
[103] Ibid., 53.
[104] Ibid., 53.
[105] Chester, *Meal with Jesus*, 123.

about the divisions and the heresies and he condemns them because they are a contradiction of everything that is represented by the Communion Service."[106]

The five things signified in the Lord's Supper, as described by Lloyd-Jones, would all be endorsed by Cranmer. Indeed, at the very least, most Evangelicals in England would agree that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic signification of the spiritual realities outlined above. The more contentious issue is how, or even if, the Lord's Supper *seals* the grace that it signifies.

The Lord's Supper as grace "sealed"

As we have seen, Cranmer's basic understanding was that sacraments are signs, but he was at pains to resist referring to them as seals. Jeanes notes that Cranmer's model was a weak attempt at symbolic instrumentality, where the connection between the sacrament and the grace it signifies is effected by prayer and faith, "appropriating God's promise".[107] Consequently, Cranmer is to be understood to have held more to symbolic parallelism. In contemporary English Evangelicalism, it appears that there are diverse meanings when speaking of the Lord's Supper as a "seal" of the grace it signifies.

(i) Grace confirmed

Lloyd-Jones speaks of the Lord's Supper giving assurance to the believer that Christ died for them, that they are united to him, and have died and risen with him.[108] Earlier he has described the sacrament as a seal, as something that "authenticates a promise"; nothing is added to the promise but rather it confirms the truth of the promise to the one to whom the promise is made.[109] For example, circumcision was the seal of the promise made to Abraham, as was the rainbow to Noah and his descendants. Each of these was a further confirmation of what had already been promised.

Lloyd-Jones uses the illustration of the wedding or engagement ring to describe how the Lord's Supper (as well as baptism) is a seal of the grace it signifies.[110] The ring is given to seal the statement or promise that has already been made (i.e. the promise to marry the person receiving the ring). Nothing is added to the original statement, but the ring "simply tells the same thing in a different way".[111] The person receiving the ring is reminded of what it represents whenever they look at it; the ring is a constant assurance to the wearer of the love of the person who gave it. Likewise,

[106] Lloyd-Jones, *Church and Last Things*, 53.
[107] Jeanes, *Signs*, 136.
[108] Lloyd-Jones, *Church and Last Things*, 54.
[109] Ibid., 29.
[110] Ibid., 30, 54.
[111] Ibid., 29.

according to Lloyd-Jones, the bread and the wine are a special assurance of the love of God and the benefits by them signified.[112] For Lloyd-Jones, therefore, to speak of the Lord's Supper as a seal of grace is to understand it as giving assurance of the promises of God. Just as a man gives a ring to his beloved, so God has chosen to speak to the believer and give affirmation of the benefits of their salvation by means of the communion meal, and that is how it is to be received.

Chester, while not using the word "seal", certainly speaks of the communion meal in much the same way as Lloyd-Jones. Objectively, salvation is not dependent upon participation in the Lord's Supper, but as believers partake in the meal "salvation becomes a subjective reality for us afresh. We enact our union with Christ, and in him find we're forgiven, justified, and adopted."[113] Again we find that the Lord's Supper is spoken of as affirming the promises of God in Jesus Christ and his work to those who, by faith, take part in the Lord's Supper. More than simply representing what Christ has done, the action of the communion meal confirms to the senses the reality of salvation in Christ.

Again, we find in the FIEC booklet, *Light for Life* (a commentary on its Basis of Faith) that the Lord's Supper is spoken of as confirming grace to the believer:

> The Lord's Supper enriches our Christian lives because in a special way it focuses our minds and hearts on the Saviour and all that he has accomplished for us at Calvary. As we think about these things with faith, our hearts are encouraged and strengthened (John 6:57-58).[114]

Furthermore, the FIEC Basis of Faith states that all the blessings of the Lord's Supper are received by faith. Clearly the Lord's Supper is understood to seal the grace it signifies by affirming to the faith of the participant all the salvific accomplishments of Christ. It is as these truths are brought to mind with faith that the blessings of salvation flow to the believer.

David Wenham, an Evangelical Anglican theologian, has posited the idea that at the Last Supper Jesus was enacting a parable, whereby he "acted out" with bread and wine what he was about to have done to his body and blood.[115] Moreover, he was not merely giving theological information but involving his disciples in a "theological experience".[116] "In the Last Supper they experienced for themselves what the cross was all about – about the body and blood of Jesus being given up, broken, poured out *for them*, and

---

[112] Ibid., 53.

[113] Chester, *Meal with Jesus*, 123.

[114] Andrew Anderson et al., *Light for Life: Unlocking the Christian Faith* (ed. Andrew Anderson; Market Harborough: Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, 1992), 35.

[115] David Wenham, "How Jesus Understood the Last Supper: A Parable in Action," *Themelios* 20.2 (January 1995): 14-15.

[116] Ibid., 15.

about the need to take that death to themselves ("eat … drink").[117] The meal is now a communication to all who partake that Jesus' death is something he shares with them, that they are to take into themselves. It is a reminder that the cross is the source of life for the believer, "food for our spiritual life, as we take it to ourselves".[118] As the bread and wine are taken it is a way of saying that the believer has accepted the death of Christ into themselves. The language is moving somewhat more in the direction of the conveyance of grace. However, Wenham makes clear that his meaning is not that by physically eating the bread and wine the believer receives life; rather the eating and drinking is an expression of faith in the death of Christ. For Wenham, therefore, the Lord's Supper affirms the grace it signifies in the sense that it is an enacted parable, which vividly displays the work of Christ and also involves the participants in the action.

There are some, therefore, who think of the Lord's Supper as a seal which affirms the promises of salvation in Christ to the believer. How else is the Lord's Supper thought to be a seal of grace?

(ii) Grace conveyed

Melvin Tinker, an Evangelical Anglican Vicar, has contested Wenham's concept of the Last Supper or Lord's Supper as an enacted parable, arguing for a strengthened view.[119] For Tinker, far from being merely grace acted out, the whole action of the Lord's Supper is an "illocutionary act", in which the Lord *does* things by his Spirit.[120] As the bread and wine are given, and the accompanying words are spoken, "the correlated aspects of divine love, forgiveness and eschatological hope are not merely attested to, but imparted".[121] Tinker evokes Lloyd-Jones' analogy of the wedding ring, but takes it further; the ring doesn't simply "speak" of love and commitment, but its giving partly "brings it about" in establishing the wedding covenant. The giving and receiving of the bread and wine, he says, can be understood in the same way: God has committed himself to the believer at Calvary (signified in the Supper) and the believer responds accordingly.[122] By paying attention to the "performative nature" of the Lord's Supper, Wenham's "multi-media parable" concept is augmented as the grace signified is actually said to be conveyed via the bread and wine.[123]

---

[117] Ibid., 15.

[118] Ibid., 15.

[119] Melvin Tinker, "Last Supper / Lord's Supper: More Than a Parable in Action", *Themelios* 26.2 (Spring 2001): 18-28.

[120] Ibid., 25.

[121] Ibid., 25.

[122] Ibid., 25.

[123] Ibid., 27.

Letham has no problem with the view that the Lord's Supper confirms or affirms the grace it signifies; the Lord's Supper "serves to sign and seal in our consciences the promises of the gospel… As a result we will have a right assurance of salvation."[124] However, Letham goes further in his understanding of the Lord's Supper as a seal: it not only assures us of the promises of God, but it also gives assurance that "this (i.e. the Lord's Supper) is our true spiritual nourishment".[125] More than being just a confirmation and affirmation of salvation to the believer, the Lord's Supper is actually a means by which the believer is fed spiritually. Elsewhere, Letham has described what happens in the Lord's Supper in this way:

> As we exercise faith in Christ through the Spirit, the Spirit enables us in eating the bread and drinking the wine to grow into union with Christ. We thus share or participate in the body and blood of Christ.[126]

It is actually as the communicant eats and drinks the bread and wine that they grow in their union with Christ, as a work of the Spirit through faith. Along with Calvin, therefore, we find that Letham uses the explicit instrumentalist language that Cranmer could not bring himself to use.

The justification for this view is largely taken from John 6:47-58.[127] Following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus introduces the idea that he is the bread of life come down from heaven to give life to the world (v. 33). He must be received by faith, which is a gracious gift from the Father (vv. 44, 47). Jesus says it is his flesh that is given for the life of the world, a clear reference to his work of atonement on the cross (v. 51). Jesus then begins using the language of "eating" and "drinking" his flesh and blood in order to receive this life. Letham draws on Newbigin to highlight the explicit nature of what Jesus is saying. The use of *sarx* (flesh) instead of *soma* (body) "shifts the content of what it means to receive Jesus away from a purely mental and spiritual hearing and believing, in the direction of a physical chewing and swallowing".[128] Letham then claims, along with Newbigin, that this is the Johannine equivalent of the words of institution spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper recorded in the Synoptic Gospels.[129] The only way to reconcile Jesus' seemingly cannibalistic language is to view it as being "theologically

---

[124] Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 33.

[125] Ibid., 33.

[126] Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 83.

[127] Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 7-15. Discussions of the Supper as it relates to John 6 is worthy of far greater consideration than is possible here. We will refer to it only briefly as part of our examination of contemporary sources.

[128] Leslie Newbigin, *The Light has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), 84-85.

[129] Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 11.

connected with the Eucharist".[130] Faith and feeding, therefore, are synonymous – "*both* go together and *both* are necessary and indispensable".[131]

> Eating and drinking go together with faith. They are two sides to the same coin. The eucharist is central to the gospel. While the eucharist without faith profits us nothing, *so faith without the eucharist is barren and empty*. In the Lord's Supper through faith (the gift of the Holy Spirit) we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood and so are nourished to everlasting salvation.[132]

This is differs significantly from Thomas Cranmer, who held that eternal life comes by faith, and that the Christian is nourished continually by the Spirit, not only at the Lord's Supper.[133]

It is difficult to see how Letham can suggest that faith is "barren and empty" without the Eucharist. Certainly, faith in the atoning work of the cross, signified in the Eucharist, is essential and without such faith there is no eternal life and no union with Christ. It is faith in Christ and the giving of his flesh that leads to eternal life (John 6:51). All talk of eating and drinking in this passage proceeds *after* talk of faith and believing. There is significant cause, therefore, to understand the former as a picture that points to the latter. "Coming" and "believing" are replaced by "eating" and drinking".[134] Consequently, there are grounds for understanding the Lord's Supper in much the same way; eating and drinking the bread and wine is a visible sign and affirming seal of the life that comes by faith in Christ. But to suggest that participation in the Eucharist *itself* is as essential as saving faith seems to go beyond the teaching of Christ.

Recalling Lloyd-Jones' argument, in this passage Jesus drew a comparison between feeding on his flesh and blood to receive life and the life he himself received from the Father.

> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. (John 6:56–57)

From where did Jesus receive life? Clearly, he received it from the Father, but the spiritual life Jesus drew upon from the Father in his incarnation was not dependent on him partaking in a sacrament, nor on any kind of eating and drinking.

> As the Son lives "through the Father", i.e., has his life from and is sustained by the Father, so the believer has life from and is sustained by the Son… the Father has given to the Son to have life in himself, and through him alone can that divine life be known by man.[135]

---

[130] Ibid., 13.
[131] Ibid., 13. Emphasis original.
[132] Ibid., 13. Emphasis added.
[133] Cranmer, *Remains*, 3:131.
[134] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Dallas, Texas: Word, 1987), 94.
[135] Ibid., 95.

We must not ignore the comparison Jesus makes in v. 57: "so the one who feeds on me will live because of me". In other words, Christians receive spiritual and eternal life because of Christ's work of atonement on their behalf, in which they have placed their faith. The Eucharist is given to the church as a means of signifying and affirming the substitutionary work of Christ to the believing participant, and indeed to strengthen their faith in that work as a spiritual nourishment for sustaining them through their earthly pilgrimage. But the eternal life spoken of in John 6 comes to the believer through the ministry of the Holy Spirit as they come to God in faith. Likewise, the ongoing feeding of that faith comes by the Holy Spirit who draws the believer into closer union with Christ through the work of sanctification.

Letham certainly sees the reference to the cross, and can speak of it as providing "eternal nourishment", in the language of John 6.[136] Yet he goes further to suggest that "Christ is to us the bread of life as we feed on him in the eucharist, as we eat and drink his flesh and blood."[137] Both faith and eating and drinking are indispensable, according to Letham.

Clearly Letham's understanding of the Lord's Supper as a seal of grace differs substantially from that of Lloyd-Jones and Chester. That Letham's view is in accord with historical Reformed Christianity, as expressed by Calvin and the Westminster Confession, is beyond dispute. Rather than simply affirming or confirming the grace that is signified in the action of the meal, grace is instrumentally conveyed as the bread and wine are chewed and swallowed. For Letham "this is a matter more to be adored than investigated", and with Calvin, it is "a high and incomprehensible mystery".[138]

However, the New Testament does not refer to the Lord's Supper as a mystery.[139] In fact, it appears that it was instituted precisely at the moment when Christ was speaking to his disciples in the plainest of language (cf. John 16:29). Neither is it spoken of as exhibiting, conferring or conveying Christ crucified and his benefits to the believer. To be sure, the mode and means of the believer's spiritual growth in Christ, and the believer's growth into union with Christ, may be a mystery, in that it is not understood precisely how it takes place; sufficient for us is the knowledge, and more importantly, the promise that it does take place. Therefore, it is the promise that is to be believed in, and thereby the grace of God is sealed and confirmed to the believer who rightly looks to Christ in the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is clearly given to the church by Christ to be observed by all who come to him in faith. There are words of institution (Matt 26:20-

[136] Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 10-11.

[137] Ibid., 11.

[138] Ibid., 14, 32.

[139] See D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel according to John* (Leicester, IVP: 1991), 281.

29, Mark 14:17-25, Luke 22:14-38, cf. 1 Cor 11:23-26); there is a right and wrong way to approach and partake in it (1 Cor 11:17-34); it must be observed in obedience and with worshipful reverence to Christ; it clearly signifies spiritual realities, and can even be said to "seal" or confirm those realities to the believer (1 Cor 10:16,17). But it is surely not to be understood as instrumentally conferring grace to the participant; that appears to be absent from the plain teaching of Christ himself in Scripture.

Rather, as with Cranmer, believers should partake by faith, and lean on the promises signified and sealed to them in the sacraments, seeking the growth and nourishment promised by Christ and available to them continually, not only in the sacraments. However, the sacraments are an appointed means by which the church is made mindful of the promises of God and are called to respond to him in faithful obedience. Those promises come to the mind and heart of the believer by virtue of the word of God spoken and received. Indeed, Cranmer spoke of the necessity of feeding on Scripture as a means of grace. Therefore, it is as a ministry of the word of God that the Lord's Supper can be said to convey grace to the faithful believer.

As such, despite denying that there is any instrumental conveyance of grace in the Lord's Supper, Cranmer can say that the bread and wine are not "bare tokens"; God is working *with* his word and sacraments.[140]

> And the true eating and drinking of the said body and blood of Christ, is with a constant and a lively faith to believe, that Christ gave his body and shed his blood upon the cross for us, and that he doth so join and incorporate himself to us, that he is our head, and we his members, and flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bones, having him dwelling in us, and we in him. And herein standeth the whole effect and strength of this sacrament. And this faith God worketh inwardly in our hearts by his Holy Spirit, and confirmeth the same outwardly to our ears by hearing of his word, and to our other senses by eating and drinking of the sacramental bread and wine in his holy Supper.[141]

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to critically assess Thomas Cranmer's doctrine of the Lord's Supper and to compare it with that of contemporary English Evangelicalism. In particular, the subject of what happens in the Eucharist has been a key focus.

Cranmer has bequeathed to the English an immense legacy with his doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Working at a time when this was a hotly debated topic, Cranmer remained committed to faithfully expounding the scriptural teaching on the subject, and was steadfast in achieving an appropriate language with which to express his views. What is regrettable is

[140] Cranmer, *Remains*, 3:38.
[141] Ibid., 2:306.

that, compared with other key reformers, Cranmer is a relatively neglected figure. This is particularly the case with regard to his Eucharistic theology.

The notion of spiritual presence, as opposed to "real" or even "true" presence, is now so accepted that contemporary English Evangelicals barely mention the subject of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The spiritual presence of Christ is also a sound footing for understanding the spiritual feeding that takes place when faithful believers partake of the Lord's Supper, looking to and trusting in the promises of God in Christ found in Scripture.

While the doctrine of the Lord's Supper was considered so important in England during Cranmer's time that men (such as Cranmer) were burnt at the stake for their views, the subject has to a large extent been neglected today. Perhaps much of English Evangelicalism has now lapsed into a more-or-less memorialist position; or maybe the Lord's Supper is seen as a resolved issue, while other matters such as eschatology and atonement are more readily defended and debated; or perhaps the Lord's Supper has been neglected to the extent that it is now considered a "mystery", not theologically but intellectually, with a great many Christians not really grasping its significance. Whatever the causes or reasons, the doctrine of the Lord's Supper has generally drifted away from Evangelical thought in England.

It is likely that there is no easy solution. It may be that it will take a doctrinal controversy to spark off another Cranmer-like debate concerning the Lord's Supper. Should that happen, Cranmer's legacy will be available to reinvigorate Evangelical discourse concerning the *true and catholic doctrine of the sacrament of the body and blood of our Saviour Christ.*

Foundations 68 (May 2015): 84-101

THROWING AWAY THE GUNS: ANDREW FULLER, WILLIAM WARD, AND THE COMMUNION CONTROVERSY IN THE BAPTIST MISSIONARY SOCIETY[1]

Ian Hugh Clary[*]

Since the Baptists first emerged in seventeenth-century England the question of open vs. closed communion has been strongly debated. The majority of Baptists in history were closed communion, believing that only those who have been baptised by immersion on profession of faith should be admitted to the table. This debate had the potential to ruin the Baptist Missionary Society in the eighteenth century. Were it not for the friendship of men like Andrew Fuller and William Ward, who were on opposing ends of the controversy, and their shared sense of mission, the society may have been derailed. This essay traces the history of the debate in early Baptist history and pays particular attention to the BMS. It concludes with brief thoughts on how differences over important doctrines can be handled in the church today.

Introduction

One of the sad ironies of the Protestant Reformation is that it was divided over a sacrament that was to bring unity. John Calvin (1509-1564), in his reflections on the Eucharist in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, wrote: "Now, since he [Christ] has only one body, of which he makes us all partakers, it is necessary that all of us also be made one body by such participation. The bread shown in the Sacrament represents this unity".[2] Yet, much to Calvin's great disappointment, infighting amongst the various strands of the Reformation over the presence of Christ in the Supper gave way to deep division and almost destroyed the movement.[3] Since the

[1] This essay was originally delivered at the 7th Annual Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies Conference held at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, on 28 September, 2013.

* Ian Hugh Clary (PhD. cand., University of the Free State) is a fellow and teaching associate of the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies, a ministerial assistant at West Toronto Baptist Church, Canada, and lecturer at Munster Bible College, Ireland.

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.17.38.

[3] For Calvin on the Eucharist and Protestant unity see D. J. Smit, "Calvin on the sacraments and church unity", *In die Skriflig* 44, Supplement 3 (2010): 247-270.

sixteenth century Protestants have remained divided on the Eucharist with Zwinglians and Calvinists huddled together in the Reformed wing of Protestantism, staring warily at their Lutheran brethren.

Baptists – who stand in the Reformed tradition – have experienced protracted intramural debate over the Lord's Supper, and not just over the presence of Christ in the elements. This essay considers a different Eucharistic dispute that, as at the Reformation, threatened unity; namely that of the first Baptist mission to India in the early nineteenth century. Though its roots stem back to a disagreement in the earliest days of the denomination in England, the effects of the dispute continued throughout the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth and can still be felt today. We will examine this debate along three lines. First, the historical context of the Baptist communion controversy will be considered, looking briefly at key figures involved in the history of the dispute. Second, a more detailed examination of the controversy, as it involved the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS), will be given. Our focus will narrow to Andrew Fuller's (1754-1815) position and his concerns about William Ward (1769-1823). Third, the ongoing effects of the debate in subsequent Baptist history will only briefly be discussed before forming the conclusion that consists of contemporary reflection. Throughout each major section, the acrimonious nature of the historic debate will be highlighted, and how that one element largely passed by the disagreement between Fuller and Ward – strong though it was – and saved the BMS from losing focus on its mission.

Communion in context: debate over strict communion among English Baptists

Since their origins the Baptists have faced various controversies. In the seventeenth century they wrestled through questions such as the place of hymn-singing in worship, the nature of baptism, and the doctrines of grace. As we approach the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the controversies did not abate. The denomination was faced with the stagnation of High Calvinism and its corresponding outgrowth in Antinomianism, as well as Socinianism and Sandemanianism. However, across the generations, the controversy that dogged both the Particular and General Baptists from within was the debate over communion. The question at hand was not, as at the Reformation, about the presence of Christ in the elements. Baptists were generally in line with the Second London Confession of Faith (1689) that states: "Worthy receivers… feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of His death" (30.7). Rather, the point of dispute centred on whether a Christian who had not been baptised by immersion had the right to partake of the Lord's Supper; this, of course, had infant baptism in mind. The view that

argues against allowing non-baptised Christians to the table is often called "close/closed communion", though in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was often referred to as "strict communion".[4] Andrew Fuller defines "the principle of the strict Baptists" as "that baptism is an indispensable prerequisite to fellowship at the Lord's Table".[5] The opposing view, that allowed non-baptised Christians to the table, was called "open" or "mixed communion". This controversy was, as David Bebbington writes, "the issue that most troubled nineteenth-century English Baptists".[6] In this section we consider the historical context of the communion debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

"What kind of a you *am I?": the seventeenth century*

Geoffrey R. Breed writes, "The matter of strict- versus open-communion had engaged some of the leading apologists from both sides, each party claiming to base its position upon scriptural warrant and, therefore, divine authority."[7] This is certainly the case in the seventeenth century when strict communion first became a point of conflict, particularly between two key leaders. For the "open communion" view – a rarity amongst Baptists at this period – was John Bunyan (1628-1688), pastor in Bedford and author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Opposing him was the respected Londoner William Kiffin (1616-1701), a signatory of both the First and Second London Confessions of Faith. Arguing alongside Kiffin, among others, was Henry Danvers (1622?-1687), pastor in Houndsditch, London.[8]

Bunyan not only argued for open communion but also, like his friend Henry Jessey (1601-1663), for the concomitant open membership, thus allowing paedobaptists to join his church without the need for being

---

[4] For various attempts to demonstrate when the term "strict" was first used then applied, see Robert W. Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771-1892: From John Gill to C. H. Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006); Peter Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists: A Study of English Calvinistic Baptists from the Late 1600s to the Early 1800s,* Studies in Baptist History and Thought 7 (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2003), 69-93.

[5] Andrew Fuller, "On the Rev. John Carter's 'Thoughts on Baptism and Mixed Communion, in Three Letters to a Friend; in Which Some Animadversions are Made on the Rev. Abraham Booth's Apology'", in Joseph Belcher ed., *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* 3 vols. (1845; repr. Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 3:501.

[6] David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 91.

[7] Geoffrey R. Breed, *Particular Baptists in Victorian England and their Strict Communion Organizations* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 2003), 13.

[8] For Danvers see Richard L. Greaves, *Saints and Rebels: Seven Nonconformists in Stuart England* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985), 157-177; idem., "The Tangled Careers of Two Stuart Radicals: Henry and Robert Danvers", *Baptist Quarterly* 29.1 (January 1981): 32-43; Geoffrey F. Nuttall, "Henry Danvers, His Wife and the 'Heavenly Line'", 29.5 *Baptist Quarterly* (January 1982): 217-219.

immersed.[9] It was for this reason, as Michael A. G. Haykin and C. Jeffrey Robinson observe, that "although John Bunyan is currently one of the most celebrated Christian authors of the seventeenth century, in his own day he had little influence among his fellow Baptists".[10] In 1672 Bunyan wrote *A Confession of my Faith, and A reason of my Practice* where he encouraged his readers to not make baptism a "wall of division" between believers.[11] For Bunyan, who argued for what he called "mixt communion", baptism was not a prerequisite for church membership or participation at the Lord's Table. Danvers soon replied with *A Treatise of Baptism* in 1673 that focused mainly on arguments in favour of believer's baptism. Bunyan replied in turn with *Differences in Judgment About Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion* in 1673 where he argued that his "rigid brethren" needed "to repent of their church rending principles".[12] As with later open communion arguments, Bunyan's concerns were largely to do with unity. The sacraments are fundamental to Christianity and the only prerequisites should be faith and holiness. The Lord's Supper is a church ordinance and should be for all Christians, while the question of baptism is up to the individual's conscience.[13]

Without naming Bunyan, William Kiffin published *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* in 1681, an obvious response to the Bedford pastor.[14] He had earlier penned a preface to Thomas Paul's short book *Some Serious Reflections On that Part of Mr. Bunion's Confession of Faith* (1673). An important part of Kiffin's argument for closed communion in *Sober Discourse* was based on the "regulative principle of worship", that taught that only those elements of worship prescribed in scripture may be enjoined by Christian churches.[15] As baptism and the Lord's Supper were positive institutions they were thus to be obeyed and in a particular order: belief, baptism, Lord's Supper. Baptism was for professing Christians and was to be

---

[9] Joseph D. Ban, "Was John Bunyan a Baptist? A Case-Study in Historiography", *Baptist Quarterly* 30.8 (October 1984), 367-375. For Jessey's influence on Bunyan, see Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists*, 97.

[10] Michael A. G. Haykin and C. Jeffrey Robinson, "Particular Baptist Debates about Communion and Hymn-Singing", in Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones eds., *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism,* Reformed Historical Theology 17 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 285.

[11] John Bunyan, *A Confession of my Faith, and a Reason of my Practice* in T. L. Underwood, ed., *Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 4:171.

[12] John Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment About Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion, in answer to a book written by the Baptists and published by Mr. T. P. and W. K.* in G. Offor ed., *The Works of John Bunyan* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 2:641.

[13] Richard Greaves has argued that Bunyan's de-emphasis on baptism brought him close to Quaker ecclesiology. Richard Greaves, *John Bunyan* Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 138-139.

[14] So B. A. Ramsbottom, *Stranger Than Fiction: The Life of William Kiffin* (Hertfordshire: Gospel Standard Publications, 1989), 68-69.

[15] Cf. Haykin and Robinson, "Particular Baptist Debates", 293.

by immersion; it was an ordinance that marked the believer's entrance into the church. "Baptism is an Ordinance of Christ" Kiffin argued, "yea, the very first, or initiation Ordinance into Church-Fellowship, without which, no man may be regularly admitted to the Supper".[16] As Haykin and Robinson observe, "To Kiffin's *Sober Discourse*… Bunyan made no written response."[17] Yet, in the closing decades of the seventeenth century a number of churches admitted both Baptists and paedobaptists into membership.[18]

As is often the case with public disputes, feelings were involved. Bunyan was upset because he thought that Kiffin despised him due to "my low descent among men" and stigmatised him "for a person of *that* rank, that needed not to be heeded or attended to". Bunyan quotes Kiffin – whom Christopher Hill calls "the very rich Kiffin" – as saying, "I had not meddled with the controversy at all, had I found any of parts that would divert themselves to take notice of *you*". Hill says that Bunyan was "justifiably indignant": "What need you, before you have showed one syllable of a reasonable argument in opposition to what I assert, thus trample on my person, my gifts and graces have I any, so disdainfully under your feet. What kind of a *you* am I? Why is *my* rank so mean, that the most gracious and godly among you may not duly and soberly consider of what I have said?"[19] This may reflect more on Bunyan's sensitivities rather than anything inappropriate Kiffin might have said. Historian B. A. Ramsbottom defends Kiffin, pointing to a number of positive quotes by the London pastor regarding Bunyan's stature. Yet, as Ramsbottom observes, "Sadly a great deal of bitterness appeared in the controversy, proving that 'the best of men are only men at best'".[20]

"Latitudinarian Baptists": the eighteenth century

Peter Naylor has shown that the communion controversy in the eighteenth century made for strange theological bedfellows.[21] John Collett Ryland (1723-1792), pastor of the College Lane church in Northampton since 1759,

---

[16] William Kiffin, *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church Communion* (London: George Larkin, 1681), 88-89.

[17] Haykin and Robinson, "Particular Baptist Debates", 291, though Bunyan did write a short poem dealing with the issue of communion just before his death in a book titled *A Book for Boys and Girls*.

[18] Ernest A. Payne, "Abraham Atkins and General Communion", *Baptist Quarterly* 26.7 (July 1976), 317.

[19] Cited in Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 140-141. Emphasis his. Later Hill writes that Kiffin "sneered" at Bunyan's "lowly origins and ignorance". Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man*, 295.

[20] Ramsbottom, *Stranger Than Fiction*, 74.

[21] Cf. Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists*.

was a "moderately High Calvinist".[22] It is strange, therefore, to find him side with Daniel Turner (1710-1798) of Abingdon whose orthodoxy was suspect. Though the details of his theological problems are unknown, what is clear is that he did not believe in the doctrine of particular redemption, a teaching that Ryland held dear.[23]

For Ryland, the issue of open communion was connected with his desire for unity. During his early pastorate in Warwick, Ryland had befriended a number of paedobaptist leaders like Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) and Augustus Toplady (1740-1778). His appreciation for such men with whom he differed on baptism "helps to explain his impatience with the practice of closed communion".[24] Turner's reasons are likely slightly different. A strong advocate of political and religious freedom, and an early sympathiser with the French Revolution, Turner encouraged more love for liberty among Dissenters.

In June 1772, Ryland, under the pseudonym "Pacificus" wrote a tract entitled *A Modest plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table: between True Believers of all Denominations: In a Letter to a Friend*. At the same time Turner, under the pseudonym "Candidus", published a similarly titled work, *A Modest Plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table; Particularly between the Baptists and the Paedobaptists. In a Letter to a Friend*.[25] Like the titles, the tracts are virtually identical, and Robert Oliver has helpfully established the identity of the two authors of the so-called "Candidus-Pacificus Tract" as Ryland and Turner.[26] While not a major writing in the ensuing controversy, it is important for its role in re-opening the earlier debate between Bunyan and Kiffin. Their basic argument was that, since Christ accepts paedobaptists as genuine believers at the table, holding to strict communion is "a setting of our faces against the LORD JESUS CHRIST".[27] Strict communion was opposed to the spirit of unity and was a contributing cause of infidelity![28]

Although the General Baptist Daniel Taylor (1738-1816) offered a short reply with *Candidus Examined with Candour* under the pseudonym Philalethes, the first substantial reply came from Abraham Booth (1734-

---

[22] Peter Naylor, "John Collett Ryland (1723-1792)" in Michael A. G. Haykin ed., *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910* (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 1998), 1:191.

[23] In a letter, Turner wrote of "the stupid Athanasian plan", Oliver, *History*, 60-61.

[24] Oliver, *History*, 34.

[25] John Collett Ryland [Pacificus], *A Modest plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table: between True Believers of all Denominations: In a Letter to a Friend*, n.d. [1772]; Daniel Turner [Candidus], *A Modest Plea for Free Communion at the Lord's Table; Particularly between the Baptists and the Paedobaptists. In a Letter to a Friend* (London, 1772).

[26] Robert W. Oliver, "John Collett Ryland, Daniel Turner and Robert Robinson and the Communion Controversy, 1771-1781", *Baptist Quarterly* 29 (April 1981), 77-79, reprinted in Oliver, *History*, 357-359.

[27] Pacificus, *Modest Plea*, 1.

[28] Pacificus, *Modest Plea*, 2.

1806), pastor of Prescott Street Church in London. His *Apology for the Baptists* (1778) became the standard defence of closed communion throughout remaining controversies.[29] This could be due to the fact that he not only replied to Ryland and Turner, but took into account the debate between Bunyan and Kiffin. In the preface Booth explains to readers that he did not write because of "a fondness for controversy", but "to vindicate the honour of Christ" and his positive institution, as well as to "exculpate" the Baptists from "odious" charges, particularly "bigotry".[30] Written in an irenic tone, and with admiration for paedobaptists, Booth nonetheless argued that unbaptised Christians – as he believed those only baptised as infants to be[31] – could not be received at the table. Like Kiffin, Booth appealed to prescriptions laid out in scripture and that a "gospel church has no more power to fix the terms of communion… than to make a rule of faith".[32] Also like Kiffin, he argued that scripture, namely the Great Commission, set forth a distinct order with baptism coming first followed by attendance at the table.[33]

As irenic as Booth was towards paedobaptists, his language was strong against open communion Baptists. For example, he called them "Latitudinarian Baptists" who held to the doctrine of baptism with a "loose hand" – Latitudinarian being an epithet fraught with negative historical weight.[34] The Baptist historian Joseph Ivimey (1773-1830) notes that Booth received no response "and at that time put an end to the controversy".[35] Though Robert Robinson (1735-1790) of Cambridge, author of the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing", wrote *The General Doctrine of Toleration, applied to the particular Case of Free Communion* (1781), it was not of the scale of Booth's *Apology*, which did not receive a substantive reply until early in the nineteenth century.

---

[29] This essay quotes from Abraham Booth, *An Apology for the Baptists; In which they are Vindicated from the Imputation of Laying an Unwarrantable Stress on the Ordinance of Baptism and against the Charge of Bigotry in Refusing Communion at the Lord's Table to Paedobaptists* (Boston, Manning and Loring: 1808).

[30] Booth, *Apology*, iv. See the subtitle's use of the word "bigotry".

[31] The title page to the *Apology* has a quote from Tertullian (*c*. 160-*c*. 225): "They who are not rightly baptized, are, doubtless, not baptized at all." For this quote see Tertullian, "Baptism" in William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970), 1:127-128.

[32] Booth, *Apology*, 30.

[33] Booth, *Apology*, 87.

[34] Booth, *Apology*, 170-173. "Latitudinarian" was a term used derisively in the seventeenth century of those who conformed to the Church of England and denigrated doctrinal distinctions. See Martin I. J. Griffin Jr., *Latitudinarianism in the Seventeenth-Century Church of England* Brill Studies in Intellectual History (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

[35] Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Isaac Taylor, 1830), IV:36.

"Not men, but things": The BMS, communion, and Andrew Fuller

"The Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen", later the Baptist Missionary Society, was founded in the home of Martha Wallis on 2 October, 1792.[36] While there were fourteen in attendance at this famed gathering, a committee of five was set up to oversee the work, and a resultant inner-circle became its foundation, namely Fuller, John Sutcliff (1752-1814), John Ryland Jr. (1753-1825) and William Carey (1761-1834). [37] Carey, of course, became the BMS's famous missionary to Serampore, India, and while he had the support of his friends in England, he was joined by other missionaries over time, in particular Ward and Joshua Marshman (1768-1837), who, with Carey, have become known as the "Serampore Trio".[38]

Though the members of the BMS and the Serampore Mission were friends, such friendship did not inoculate them from theological disagreement. From its earliest days the issue of strict communion dogged the Society in England and India. While Booth's *Apology* had done much to quell any possible open communion sentiment in its time, by the 1810s many Baptists were starting to adopt it, including members of the BMS, most notably Ryland at home as well as Marshman and Ward overseas. The three of them were influential in the life of the mission from their respective home-stations. On the other hand, Fuller, who was the secretary of the Society, held strongly to strict communion as did Carey, though the latter had a period where he joined the open communion side. In this section we will consider in more detail the communion controversy as it touched on the BMS, first by looking at historical events pertaining to the BMS and the practice of open communion in India, then Fuller's theology of strict communion, and his response to Ward.

"This is exclusion": communion and the mission to India

Though Ryland, pastor of Broadmead Baptist Church in Bristol and principal of the Baptist Academy in the same city, had long shrugged off the High

---

[36] For a history of the BMS, see E. Daniel Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793-1837: The History of Serampore and its Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

[37] Samuel Pearce (1766-1799) was later to play a key role before his untimely death. Cf. Andrew Fuller, *A Heart for Missions: The Classic Memoir of Samuel Pearce* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005).

[38] John Clark Marshman, *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman, and Ward. Embracing the History of the Serampore Mission* 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans & Roberts, 1859). A standard life of Carey is Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Missions of William Carey* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991).

Calvinism of his father, he maintained the senior Ryland's theology of open communion. In 1814 he wrote *A Candid Statement of the Reasons which induce Baptists to differ in Opinion and Practice from so many of their Christian Brethren* where he expressed his views: "I say, 'It is the Lord's Table, and not mine; therefore I dare not refuse those whom he has accepted… unless he had commanded me.'"[39] Ryland had a good reputation in the broader evangelical community and was known to have a catholic spirit when it came to non-Baptist evangelicals, especially Anglicans: "Very few of my own denomination have ever had more of my affection and esteem, than several of the Ministers of the Establishment."[40] His father had been close with leaders in the Established church, like the hymn-writer John Newton (1725-1807), who was a mentor-of-sorts to the younger Ryland.[41] As principal of the Baptist Academy, he also stood in a line of open communion principals such as Hugh (1712-1781) and Caleb Evans (1737-1791).[42]

Ward, somewhat like Turner before him, had a politically radical streak, particularly in his early years. A. Christopher Smith sees "evidence of inspiration from the writings of Tom Paine [and] John Locke" on Ward, especially during his time with the "Derby Society for Political Information".[43] As a political activist he had been the printer for a number of radical periodicals, a trade that he carried with him to India as the mission's printer. He also maintained his desire of personal liberty, though tempered, which, with a love for unity, would have motivated his views of open communion.[44] Ward's early biographer, Samuel Stennet (1727-1795), tells of Ward seeking concord with others of like faith but who did not share his Baptist convictions: "[H]e could freely walk with all those christians who conscientiously differed from him in that particular [baptism], and much regretted, that differences on this, and other comparatively minor points, should have so divided the church."[45]

Ward's principle of unity meant that Christians of all theological stripes should be able to share in communion, provided that they were living upright lives. Something of Ward's perspective can be seen in a letter dated 3 March,

---

[39] John Ryland Jr., *A Candid Statement of the Reasons which induce Baptists to differ in Opinion and Practice from so many of their Christian Brethren* (London: W. Button, 1814), x-xi.

[40] Ryland, *Candid Statement*, ix.

[41] For a detailed discussion, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, his friends and his times* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1994), 75-81.

[42] Oliver, *History*, 85.

[43] A. Christopher Smith, "William Ward (1769-1823)" in Michael A. G. Haykin ed., *The British Particular Baptists 1638-1910* (Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 2000), 2:257.

[44] For Ward's social concern see William Ward, *Farewell Letters to a Few Friends in Britain and America, on Returning to Bengal in 1821* 2nd ed., (London: S & R Bentley, 1821). I owe this reference to J. Ryan West of Alpharetta, Georgia.

[45] Samuel Stennett, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. William Ward* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1825), 241-242.

1810 where he wrote, "I think you cannot abstain from communion with any real Christian, whose moral conduct substantiates the truth of his faith in Christ, without a *positive crime*. The first law of Christ is LOVE, and the first law of the infernal regions is *disunion*."[46] The impetus for this unity of Christians is love, because God is love.

As much as he was driven by unity and love, Ward could express his views in strong language: "I think shutting out from communion such a man as Doddridge, or [Richard] Baxter, because he was a paedobaptist, arises from the same spirit as that, which burnt men alive: this is exclusion; that was exclusion from life."[47] Yet, as Stennett says, "though firm in his sentiments, and holding no truth with a loose hand, he was never dogmatical."[48] Ward and Marshman held to open communion before they left for India, though this was not the policy of the BMS for the first years of its mission.[49] As they sailed on *The Criterion*, the missionaries would share in communion with the ship's captain, Benjamin Wickes, who was a Presbyterian from Philadelphia. But, when the missionaries finally made it to Bengal, they acquiesced to the principles of the Society and did not observe communion with Wickes when he later visited them. Carey jokingly criticised the would-be missionaries and their "mixt communion business on board ship".[50] Though he submitted, Ward was nonplussed at the decision. As John C. Marshman explains, "Mr. Ward more particularly deplored this rigid, and, as he thought, unlovely proceeding, though he considered it his duty not to disturb the harmony of the church and Mission."[51]

He remained an active influence on the mission and helped it finally adopt an open communion policy in 1805. This happened after David Brown (1762-1812), Provost of the College of Fort William, moved near Serampore and impressed convincing open communion arguments upon them. Carey was a hold-out for the strict view, but after lengthy remonstrance by Marshman, acquiesced and changed his mind. With Carey finally on board, the missionaries wrote a letter to the secretary informing him of their decision saying, "[N]o one has a right to debar a true Christian from the Lord's table, nor refuse to communicate with a real Christian in commemorating the death of their common Lord, without being guilty of a breach of the Law of Love." As with Ryland Sr. before them, their admiration for paedobaptists was a motivation: "We cannot doubt whether a [Isaac] Watts, an [Jonathan] Edwards, a [David] Brainerd, a Doddridge, a [George]

[46] Quoted in Stennett, *Memoirs*, 244. Emphasis his.

[47] Quoted in Stennett, *Memoirs*, 244.

[48] Stennett, *Memoirs*, 248.

[49] Stennett, *Memoirs*, 242.

[50] E. Daniel Potts, "'I throw away the guns to preserve the ship': A Note on the Serampore Trio", *Baptist Quarterly* 20.3 (July 1963), 115.

[51] Marshman, *Life and Times*, 214.

Whitefield, did right in partaking of the Lord's Supper, though really unbaptized, or whether they had the presence of God at the Lord's Table?"[52]

John Marshman writes that "the alteration was not effected by [Ward's] arguments, though he should have thought it an honour if it had been so". Ward did, however, write on May 31 that, "I rejoice that the first Baptist church in Bengal has shaken off that apparent moroseness of temper which so long made us appear unlovely in the sight of the Christian world."[53] The decision by the mission moved Fuller into action. For fear of offending strict communion Baptists in England, he did not publish the change in the mission's policy in the *Periodical Accounts*, the Society's magazine, and on 1 November 1806 he wrote a letter to Carey criticising this new course of action. Over time Fuller convinced Carey to return to his previous position, and together, the two of them reasoned with Marshman to adopt strict communion. By 31 August 1811 Marshman wrote to Fuller "that the Church of Christ as Serampore has restored its primitive and scripture puriety [*sic*] in point of communion, and I think is not very likely soon to lose it again".[54]

"A regard to the revealed will of Christ": Andrew Fuller on strict communion

In 1814 he wrote a letter to William Newman (1773-1835) Principal of Stepney College (now Regent's Park College, Oxford), outlining his closed communion principles.[55] Fuller asked Newman to keep the letter private, though "if any thing be written on the other side [open communion], it may, if thought proper, be printed, but not else".[56] After Fuller's death in 1815, Robert Hall Jr. (1764-1831) reopened the communion debate and Newman felt compelled to publish Fuller's letter. It appears as "The Admission of Unbaptized Persons to the Lord's Supper Inconsistent with the New Testament" in the third volume of Fuller's *Works* and was recently edited and introduced by Michael Haykin in *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*.[57]

---

[52] Cited in Timothy George, "Controversy and Communion: The Limits of Baptist Fellowship from Bunyan to Spurgeon" in David W. Bebbington ed., *The Gospel in the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 53.

[53] Marshman, *Life and Times*, 215.

[54] Cited in Potts, "I throw away the guns", 117.

[55] Fuller had long held to strict communion. When he was inducted at the church in Kettering in 1783 he shared his confession of faith that included the statement, "I likewise believe Baptism as administered according to the primitive plan, to be pre-requisite to church communion; hence I judge, what is commonly called Strict Communion, to be consistent with the word of God." Cited in Naylor, *Calvinism, Communion and the Baptists*, 218.

[56] See Newman's "Advertizement" in Andrew Fuller, "The Admission of Unbaptized Persons to the Lord's Supper Inconsistent with the New Testament", in Joseph Belcher ed., *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* 3 vols. (1845; repr. Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 3:508.

[57] Fuller, "Admission", 508-515. Cf. Andrew Fuller, "The Admission of unbaptized Persons to the Lord's Supper, inconsistent with the New Testament", *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 17.2 (Summer 2013): 68-76. This paper follows the edition printed in Fuller's *Works*.

Fuller begins his letter by acknowledging his friendships with open communion Baptists and assuring readers that his purpose was not to indulge in sectarian squabbles, nor to witlessly attack Paedobaptists, whom he also held in high regard. The issue was not about whom he esteemed, but the authority of Scripture: "I have been used to think that our conduct on such questions should not be governed by affection any more than by disaffection, but by a regard to the revealed will of Christ."[58] Was there an instituted connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament? If there was, they were not to be divided. This was not about liking or disliking paedobaptists like John Owen, Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge or Jonathan Edwards. Fuller says, "If it were a question of feeling, their names would doubtless have weight." But when compared with the revealed will of Christ, "they weigh nothing". For Fuller, "The question respects not men, but things."[59]

After distinguishing between paedobaptist and open communion Baptist concerns about strict communion, Fuller "calmly examines" what he sees as the dual foci of the debate. The first concerns the connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament, and the second is whether a candidate's opinion about their own baptism should suffice for their being treated as a baptised person, even if theirs was an infant baptism. We will consider these two, and leave aside, due to our limitations, the short section where Fuller answers objections.[60]

Of the first of the two foci, Fuller argues that there *is* a connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament. He admits that if this were not the case, then "Mr. Bunyan's position" is tenable. Yet why, he asks, would it take so long for the Christian church to discover that the two sacraments are actually severed? Such a notion, he observes, was never advanced until the time of Bunyan and his friends. Quoting Doddridge – a name often emotively brought up by proponents of open communion – he says, "no unbaptized person received the Lord's Supper" in the ancient church.[61]

To prove his point about this connection, Fuller highlights a number of New Testament texts. He reasons in John 4:2 that the disciples at the Lord's Table were necessarily baptised, because they would not have been able to baptise others if they were not. In Acts 2:38-42 all who heard Peter's sermon were told to "repent and be baptised" and then came together to break bread. Paul, in Acts 19:3, takes for granted that the Ephesians had been baptised, thus proving that there were no Christians at this time who had not

[58] Fuller, "Admission", 509.

[59] Fuller, "Admission", 509.

[60] Fuller, "Admission", 514-515.

[61] Fuller, "Admission", 510. Fuller quotes from Philip Doddridge, *A Course of Lectures on the Principal Subjects in Pneumatology, Ethics, and Divinity* (London: 1776), 511.

been.[62] According to Fuller, the New Testament clearly pointed to baptism as an initiatory ordinance not merely for a particular church, but – as seen in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) – into the body of professing Christians. Baptism in this sense functions as a badge of Christianity: "To admit a person into a Christian church without it were equal to admitting one into a regiment who scrupled to wear the soldier's uniform, or to take the oath of allegiance."[63]

Though Paul does not speak specifically about water baptism in 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, the allusion is that those who were baptised into Moses also ate the same spiritual meat and drank the same spiritual drink, which has a parallel with baptism and communion. Fuller says, "The manner in which these allusions are introduced clearly shows the connexion between the two ordinances in the practice of the primitive churches."[64] 1 Corinthians 12:13 also has a similar Eucharistic allusion: that we are all "baptised into one body" and "all made to drink into one spirit".[65] These passages from the New Testament suffice to prove the point, for Fuller, that the two ordinances are connected.

The second of Fuller's two foci looks at whether a candidate for communion should be treated as baptised by a church irrespective of the mode of their baptism, due to the principle of "Christian forbearance". Fuller readily subscribes to the general principle of forbearance, and cites instances in the New Testament, particularly Romans 14, where this is appropriate. But, he argues, this does not apply in cases of direct command, as with strict communion. Few would argue that the forbearance principle should be applied without discrimination. For Fuller, it is a misapplication to relate it to communion: "[A]s we are not to apply this forbearance principle in matters of doctrine as to raze the foundations of divine truth, neither shall we be justified in applying it to the dispensing with any of the commandments of Christ."[66] To answer the question, if to be baptised is basic for communion, it is "absurd" to assume that it belongs to the candidate to judge of it. "It is contrary to the first principles of all society", Fuller says, "for a candidate to be the judge of his own qualifications".[67]

On 21 September 1800, five years before the mission adopted, for a time, open communion, Fuller wrote a letter to Ward answering a question the missionary had put to him. This question well-reflects Ward's view: "Do not

---

[62] Fuller, "Admission", 511-512.

[63] Fuller, "Admission", 512.

[64] Fuller, "Admission", 512.

[65] Fuller points to the work of Matthew Poole (1624-1679), Matthew Henry (1662-1714), and Thomas Scott (1747-1821) in support. Michael Haykin notes that this interpretation was also held by Kiffin in his debate with Bunyan. See the *SBJT* edition of Fuller, "Admission", 76, n.18.

[66] Fuller, "Admission", 513.

[67] Fuller, "Admission", 513-514.

the bounds of Scriptural communion extend to all who are real Christians, except their practice is immoral, or they have embraced dangerous heresies?"[68] Fuller responds first to what he sees as the "three different grounds" on which open communion is defended. The first, that baptism is not essential to church communion; the second, that believer's baptism by immersion is not essential to baptism; the third, that the judgment of what constitutes baptism lies in the individual, not the church. He sees Ward's question as based on the first of these and thus keeps his answer to it.

Like Fuller, Ward does not observe communion indiscriminately with all Christians, but limits it, in his case to those who walk uprightly with the Lord and hold to orthodox doctrine. The difference between Fuller and Ward, then, was over Ward's failure to add "essential corruption of instituted worship" as a limiting factor. This, Fuller argues, is necessary to any dissent from the Established church, or even Roman Catholicism. For Fuller, "To treat a person as a member of Christ's visible kingdom, and as being in a state of salvation, who lives in the neglect of what Christ has commanded to all his followers, and this, it may be, knowingly, is to put asunder what Christ has joined together."[69]

"I throw away the guns": The BMS, the Mission and Friendship

Though the differences between Fuller and Ward were at times strongly worded, the historically hostile debate over communion does not touch the BMS. This was so for two reasons: the mission was too important to allow an intramural dispute to disrupt it; and the men involved in the Society were all very close friends. Both mission and friendship acted as preservatives against acrimony.

In his biography of Fuller the open communion John Ryland Jr. explained: "Most of our common acquaintance are well aware, that I am his oldest and most intimate friend."[70] The two had been friends since their first meeting in 1778 while Fuller was still in Soham and Ryland was ministering with his father in Northampton. Together, with Sutcliff and others, they would leave High Calvinism, in large part due to Fuller's influence as he wrote *Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*.[71] Ryland's closeness with Fuller allowed him to speak frankly about their differences on communion: "I repeatedly

---

[68] Quoted in Andrew Fuller, "Thoughts on Open Communion, in a Letter to the Rev. W. Ward, Missionary at Serampore, Dated Sept. 21, 1800" in Joseph Belcher ed., *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* 3 vols. (1845; repr. Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 3:503.

[69] Fuller, "Thoughts on Open Communion", 505.

[70] John Ryland, *The Work of Faith, the Labour of Love, and the Patience of Hope Illustrated; in the Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (London: Button & Son, 1816), viii.

[71] Cf. Oliver, *History*, 94.

expressed myself more freely and strongly to him, than I did to any man in England; yet without giving him offence."[72]

Ward too, from early on, held Fuller as a friend and when he embarked for what Kipling called that "place beyond all others",[73] was "deeply affected at having to say goodbye to Sutcliff and Fuller". Ward saw these men, and Ryland, as "a three-fold cord binding him to his native land".[74] When the Serampore Mission re-adopted closed communion, Ward was again forced to acquiesce. Writing about this in a letter to Ryland some years later Ward said that he "lament[ed] that my Brethren are mistaken in this point, and that they should not perceive that such a practice is a violation of the law of love: but I throw away the guns to preserve the ship."[75] Were it not for this deferential perspective, the Serampore Mission might have been shipwrecked and the work that God had called Ward to would have been sinfully derailed. Ward's self-sacrifice helped keep the mission on course. Sadly, this was not the perspective of later Baptists when the public debate over communion again disrupted church life in England.

The Hall-Kinghorn Conflict

In one sense, Booth's *Apology* had closed the debate. The discussion between Fuller and Ward came not long after, but theirs was not a public dispute and does not directly answer the issues brought up by Ryland, Turner or Booth. That, instead, came from the pen of Robert Hall Jr., and his interlocutor, Joseph Kinghorn (1766-1832). Of the debates over communion to this point, the Hall-Kingorn conflict was by far the most drawn out and rancorous.

Hall, who was known as a powerful and eloquent preacher, and pastor in Leicester, restarted the controversy by writing *On Terms of Communion* in 1815, the year of Fuller's death – as we saw, this is what prompted the posthumous publication of Fuller's letter to Newman. Hall wrote that the principle of closed communion injured the testimony of the Baptists and kept them in a state of "separation and seclusion" from other Christians.[76] Due in large part to the successful joint efforts at missions between the BMS and other societies such as the multi-denominational London Missionary Society, Hall wanted to see greater unity between various church bodies, including the Established Church. To bar non-Baptists from the communion table would result in "a series of animosities and divisions".[77]

---

[72] Ryland, *Work of Faith*, viii.

[73] Rudyard Kipling, "Thrown Away" in *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888; repr. Cornwall: Stratus, 2009), 13.

[74] Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul*, 262.

[75] Quoted in Potts, "I throw away the guns", 117.

[76] Robert Hall, "On Terms of Communion", in Olinthus Gregory ed., *The Works of Robert Hall, A. M.* 4th ed. (London: Samuel Holdsworth, 1836), 246.

[77] Hall, "On Terms of Communion", 113.

The Norwich pastor Joseph Kinghorn, known for his scholarly sobriety, replied the following year with *Baptism a Term of Communion at the Lord's Supper* arguing that the New Testament describes a Christian church as consisting of those who "were baptized in his name… baptism was intended to be a visible evidence of connexion with the Christian church".[78] A long series of replies bounced between the two of them that descended into bitter words and hurt feelings. Hall wrote *A Reply to the Rev. Joseph Kinghorn* in 1817 that deeply cut its recipient. Speaking of Hall's tone and "impetuous character", Kinghorn's biographer Martin Wilkin (1832-1904) writes, "We cannot but feel that the manner in which it was conducted is indeed deeply to be lamented."[79] In a letter to Joseph Jarrom (1774-1842), a General Baptist, written in 1818, Kinghorn wrote that Hall treated him with "downright violence".[80]

Hall and Kinghorn did not settle the dispute. In 1813 the Particular Baptists formed the Baptist Union; by 1891 they admitted the New Connexion General Baptists into the fold. The Baptist Union continues today as the largest Baptist denomination in Britain, and allows for open communion and open membership churches. A separate association, the Strict Baptists, emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, led by men like William Gadsby (1771-1844) and J. C. Philpott (1802-1869). As their name indicates, they held strongly to closed communion, and many, like Gadsby, were also High Calvinists.[81] They are a small denomination who continue today, and are largely marked by the controversy of the previous century.

Conclusion: The Ongoing Debate

As the controversy raged in Britain and open communion gained ground, North American Baptists were largely closed communion in their practice. In Canada the "Regular Baptists" followed this as a rule, as did the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States.[82] Yet as time progressed, closed communion has become less popular, especially in our day. An example of

---

[78] Joseph Kinghorn, *Baptism, a Term of Communion at the Lord's Supper* (Norwish: Bacon, Kinnerbrook and Co., 1816), 22.

[79] Martin Hood Wilkin, *Joseph Kinghorn of Norwich: A Memoir* (1855; repr. in Terry Wolever ed., *The Life and Works of Joseph Kinghorn* [Springfield: Particular Baptist Press, 1995], 1:405). I am thankful to G. Stephen Weaver Jr., of Frankfort, KY, for this reference.

[80] Cited in Wilkin, *Joseph Kinghorn*, 407.

[81] For their history see Oliver, *History*, 173-336. Cf. Kenneth Dix, *Strict and Particular: English Strict and Particular Baptists in the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society for the Strict Baptist Historical Society, 2001), who explains the growth of High Calvinism in Strict and Particular Baptist life.

[82] Cf. Daniel C. Goodwin, "'The Footprints of Zion's King': Baptists in Canada to 1880", in George A. Rawlyk ed., *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997), 198-200; Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.

this is John Piper, the recently retired pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who publicly stated that he would adopt Bunyan's model of open communion and open membership if his church's constitution allowed.[83] This brought criticism,[84] and though there was little in the way of controversy – Piper's church did not agree with his sentiments – it did spark a discussion that is good to have.[85]

From this writer's perspective, the arguments in favour of closed communion are compelling. While the catholic sentiments of the open communion position are understandable and laudable, they do not have the same scriptural and theological weight. As the arguments put forth by Kiffin, Fuller and Kinghorn have shown, there is deeper biblical support for the closed view. Those put forward by the open communion side are more rooted in the desire for catholicity than they are exegetical arguments. Yet the scriptures seem to point to the view that baptism is an entrance rite into the church while the Supper is for those already in. Bobby Jamieson explains this well in his recent book on church membership: "Baptism is the front door into the house, and the Lord's Supper is the family meal."[86] In his words, the Supper's "ecclesial shape" is given by its roots in the Passover, its communal participation in Christ's death, its role as part of covenant renewal, and the responsibility the church has to administer it as a sacrament. All of this presupposes membership in the people of God and thus baptism. The Christian who has not been properly baptised (or baptised at all) does not bear the mark of entrance into that community and should refrain from the community's meal until that mark is taken up.

This does not mean that the closed communion position should not appreciate charity or catholicity. For instance, issues of liberty of conscience are important to consider. A paedobaptist is convinced on exegetical and theological grounds that they have been biblically baptised. In this light, how closed communion is practiced in a local church should consider liberty of conscience for one-off visitors. All of this is not said to put forth a fully articulated argument for closed communion, but is merely to observe that the closed communion position articulated in Baptist history has a more thorough grounding. That said, while scripture is ultimately determinative,

---

[83] John Piper, "Response to Grudem on Baptism and Church Membership," http://www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/response-to-grudem-on-baptism-and-church-membership (accessed September 24, 2013).

[84] Stan Fowler, "Baptism and Church Membership: John Piper's Proposal", eleven page unpublished paper, presented to the Evangelical Theological Society, 16 November 2012; in the author's possession.

[85] See Nathan A. Finn, "Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Southern Baptists: Some Options", http://betweenthetimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/baptism-the-lords-supper-and-southern-baptists.pdf (accessed September 24, 2013).

[86] Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2015).

the historic debate also needs to inform any discussion about the practice of communion in Baptist churches, especially the example of the men involved in the Baptist Missionary Society. Yet there is a larger lesson to learn as well: that of charity. While other debates were hostile, the men of the BMS did not let their disagreements shipwreck their friendships or the mission. As E. Daniel Potts wrote in 1967: "[T]his quarrel was kept on a friendly plane and, basic though it was, was not allowed to mar their extraordinary labours in unitedly promoting the cause of the Christianization of India."[87]

[87] Potts, "I throw away the guns", 117.

Foundations 68 (May 2015): 102-108

REVIEW ARTICLE: *MESSY CHURCH THEOLOGY*

MESSY CHURCH THEOLOGY: EXPLORING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MESSY CHURCH FOR THE WIDER CHURCH
(Ed. George Lings; Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013), 288pp, £9.99

Introduction

I first heard of Messy Church a few years ago but finding out more about it was not a priority. Then last summer I was invited to preach at a fellowship in the south of England, with a view to perhaps becoming its pastor. Looking at the church profile I noticed that they had been running a monthly "Messy Church" for a few years now. Apparently some tens of new contacts had been made and maintained, although apart from coming along to special seasonal events none of these had made the hoped-for transition to the traditional weekly services. Having had an enjoyable preaching visit I thought I should look into this phenomenon, hence buying the book ("the first title to encapsulate the theology of Messy Church") and now offering this brief review.

Definition

What exactly is "Messy Church"? The editor, George Lings, sums it up in five statements, each containing an affirmation and a denial:[1]

- It is for all ages; it is not merely a children's activity.
- It is about creativity; it is not narrowly about craft.
- It is about worship and community; it is not a bridge back to real church.
- It aims for transformation of family life; it is not simply fun for kids.
- Its hospitality is a conscious missional value; it is not merely easy access.

[1] Chapter 8: George Lings, "What is the DNA of Messy Church?", 158.

These underlying values find expression in an "advised shape" or itinerary:[2]

- 3.30: A period of welcome, games and light refreshment
- 4.00: Craft time in families
- 5.00: Celebration service in church
- 5.15: Hot meal together
- 5.45: Time to go home

In 2004, Lucy Moore and her husband Paul, a Church of England vicar, began the first Messy congregation in Portsmouth on a Thursday afternoon. The name and format were soon copied and after five years there were ninety-nine known Messy Churches, a figure that has doubled yearly so that by August 2013 two thousand such congregations were registered in the UK alone.[3] The vast majority are in this country and the bulk of these are in an Anglican context.[4] However, other denominations, notably Methodist, are utilising the brand. On average one new Messy Church registers on the website every day.[5]

Comment

This volume deserves a more in-depth review than I am able now to provide, and I should perhaps point out that I have yet to attend a Messy Church event; hence my observations on the movement are not borne out of first-hand experience but on the theology and practice described and advocated here. There is indeed some considerable variety amongst practitioners and churches, and this is reflected in the book itself. As Lucy Moore says, "We deliberately chose to invite a messy selection of writers, people with whom we didn't necessarily see eye to eye, in order... not [to] produce a 'look how wonderful Messy Church is' tome."[6] This openness to constructive criticism is commendable, as are the following five aspects of Messy Church that I noticed.

Positives

(i) Recognition of a problem/challenge

The percentage of Britons identifying as Christian is sharply declining, from 72% in 2001 to 59% in 2011. This may not be all that bad a thing if merely

[2] Ibid., 169.

[3] Chapter 7: Bob Jackson, "From Sunday school to Messy Church: a new movement for our age?", 145.

[4] Ibid., 146.

[5] Chapter 3: Lucy Moore, "How does Messy Church travel?", 54. www.messychurch.org.uk

[6] Afterword: Lucy Moore, 278-9.

nominal believers are realising that they are not actually followers of Jesus. But this statistic also reflects the sad fact that fewer people are being exposed to the gospel. "By 2000, Sunday schools were reaching no more than about five per cent of the population of children in the UK."[7] In 2006, two-thirds (32.2 million) of our people had no connection with any church.[8] Similar trends are evident in other Western countries and none of the contributors to this book is either ignorant of the situation or resigned to it.

(ii) Willingness to take action

Almost all of the authors have, quite literally, got their hands dirty, being involved in Messy congregations in their own localities. There are hundreds of volunteers who sacrificially give of their time, effort and sometimes money,[9] in addition often to continued attendance at the services of the sending church. The biblical, Christ-like motivation behind this is evident throughout the book.

(iii) Thinking "outside the box"

Messy Church is clearly not a movement beholden to the past and a "but-we've-never-done-it-that-way-before" mentality. Although hers is the weakest chapter, Beth Barnett is not wrong to call us to "an openness, an adventurous spirit, the capacity for risk, a willingness to go out as well as come home, [that] will characterise a healthy maturity".[10]

(iv) Success in attracting / retaining people

The pioneer Messy congregation in Portsmouth has consistently had around 60 invitees at its meetings.[11] Others have seen even more.[12] The common experience has been that it has proved easier to attract women and children rather than men, and that retaining the interest of youngsters as they mature can be challenging. Nevertheless, in a day of small things such numbers are impressive. It would indeed seem that "Messy Church can create the

[7] Jackson, 138.

[8] http://www.vexen.co.uk/UK/religion.html; accessed 10 April 2015.

[9] E.g., over four years one Messy Church in the Wirral prepared 450 crafts and cooked 4500 meals (p259). In County Durham, women sold their gold jewellery to fund a Messy Church in a very deprived village (pp218-20).

[10] Chapter 9: Beth Barnett, "Messy maturity: paradox, contradiction or perfect match?", 197.

[11] Paul Moore, 245.

[12] Case Study: Marie Beale, "St Andrew's Church, Bebington: the journey of an older Messy Church", 259.

opportunity to take the good news of Christ to people who would never enter a church."[13]

(v) Recovery of the agape meal?

Finally, perhaps we might see in Messy Church's emphasis on hospitality a harking back to an ancient yet abandoned apostolic practice. The *agape* meal, or "love feast", alluded to in the New Testament (1 Cor 11:17-34; 2 Pet 2:13; Jude 12), appears to have been essentially a fellowship lunch to which the observance of the Lord's Supper was conjoined. In spite of the fact that Paul does not argue against its use but its misuse, the meal was discarded by the early Catholic church and Protestants, with few exceptions, have not thought it worth retrieving. But, as Bishop Paul Butler observes, "[t]here is something special about community, friendship and family that only happens around eating together".[14] Maybe it is time we re-examined our attitude to the love feast and consider whether it is really something we can afford to do without.

Negatives

So there are several things to be thankful for in Messy Church. However, I also have some concerns about the theology and practice described and advocated in the book. The negatives are really counterparts to the positives and I put them in the form of questions.

(i) Has the biggest problem been identified?

Undoubtedly the church in the UK is enjoying less influence than it used to, with increasing numbers of people either ignorant of, or resistant to, the gospel. While certain unsavoury aspects of traditional church may have had a role in contributing to this estrangement, we must not forget that the Bible warns us to expect widespread opposition even to genuine Christianity (John 15:18; Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14). The biggest obstacle to faith is not old-fashioned services but unregenerate hearts. Although I do not recall any author denying this, neither was a robust doctrine of sin and total depravity evident in the book. If we do not grasp the radical nature of the problem we will inevitably come up with an inadequate solution, which leads on to my next criticism.

[13] Chapter 10: Tim G. Waghorn, "Messy Church: how far can you go before reaching the limit?", 216.

[14] The Rt Reverend Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, "Introduction,", 7.

(ii) Is the most necessary thing being done?

A Messy Church event will typically last for over two hours with just fifteen minutes allotted for the "celebration service", and not all of this is reserved for the reading and teaching of God's word. In effect, believers in your average Messy Church are getting the equivalent of what traditional churches call an epilogue, and that only once a month. Even then, "[m]any Messy Churches are reluctant to push a strong Christian message for fear of putting parents off".[15] Such a programme simply does not reflect apostolic priorities (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2). Of course preachers should be winsome and non-threatening, but if we are not going to present "a strong Christian message" in *church*, when on earth are we going to preach it? Engaging in Bible-themed crafts is no substitute for sitting under Spirit-empowered, Christ-centred, expository preaching. It is through the living, abiding word of God that sinners are born again, "and this word is the gospel which was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:23-25).

(iii) Doesn't the Bible prescribe what we do in church?

To a lesser or greater extent all the writers in the book are guided by Scripture in their thinking about Messy Church. Yet it would be fair to say that they mostly find *principles* there, rather than specific *prescriptions*. But are the details of New Testament church life merely *descriptive* or are they also *prescriptive*? For example, there are specific instructions on who and who should not be speaking/leading in the church (1 Cor 14; 1 Tim 2:8-3:13), and there is already a discernible tradition of the disciples meeting together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10). Messy Church appears to proceed on the assumption that such things are no longer binding on us, but I disagree. If we wish to be thought of as a church in our own right and not merely as an "outreach" of another church (a distinguishing mark of "pure" Messy Church) then we have to play by the rules, "for God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Cor 14:33). By all means let us think "outside the box" of human tradition, but never "outside the book" of divine revelation.

(iv) Is the distinction between believer and unbeliever being blurred?

As noted above, Messy Church has proved very successful at getting both so-called "unchurched" and "de-churched" individuals and families across the threshold. While it is only right that we give a warm welcome to any non-Christians who come along to our meetings, a clear distinction must be

[15] Jackson, 150.

maintained between believers who are (as far as we can tell) truly in the church, and unbelievers who are not.[16] Balancing these responsibilities is not easy! I fear that precisely because they place such a premium on providing a pleasurable and engaging experience for their invitees, Messy Churches may be in particular danger of blurring the necessary distinction. An unconverted husband helping his Christian wife serve refreshments is one thing; "being part of the planning, and helping to develop the 'spiritual' bits"[17] is surely quite another.

(v) Aren't many of the positive aspects also found in traditional churches?

Messy Church clearly excels at some things – friendship, food, fun, flexibility – and we can learn from its practitioners in all these areas. But it would be gross slander against many traditional churches to suggest that these things are entirely absent from their life and witness. Typically such a fellowship will have someone at the door to greet people as they arrive; hospitality will be available during the afternoon, perhaps even the occasional fellowship lunch; social events will take place, to which non-Christians will usually be invited; and at least some services/activities will specifically seek to address the spiritual needs and questions of unconverted friends, rather than focus on the saints. Of course there will always be room for improvement. But just as not all Messy Churches are characterised by shameful disorderliness, neither are many traditional churches by hypocritical lovelessness. This needs to be appreciated.

Conclusion

When the Jerusalem mother-church heard about a new plant in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to investigate (Acts 11:22ff). Most likely he did not find everything being done exactly the way it was in Jerusalem, but he certainly did observe the grace of God at work. True to his nickname ("Son of Exhortation"), he "encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (v 23).

In this review, I have tried to adopt a Barnabas-like approach towards Messy Church, seeing the positives as well as the negatives. I believe the grace of God is in evidence in this movement. Like Barnabas, I want to encourage all those who have come to faith in Jesus to go on following the Lord. Sadly, unlike him, I feel that here the negatives are at least equal to the

[16] True, only "the Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim 2:19) in an infallible way, but he expects us to exercise discernment (1 Cor 12:3; 1 John 2:29; 3:10).

[17] Bob Hopkins, Chapter 11: "Some frameworks to explore Messy Church and discipleship", 237.

positives. The chief problem is the insistence by most of the authors that Messy Church *is* church; in that case, it falls far short of the New Testament standard. But kept in its proper place, as an outreach or ministry of a more traditional and biblically-organised church, it could well fulfil its limited purpose of making first contact and building bridges with people; winning their trust and friendship; assisting in their conversion; preparing them for the transition to traditional church that must, sooner rather than later, take place.

Oliver Gross
Member, Kingswood Church, Welshpool, Powys.

Foundations 68 (May 2015): 109-111

BOOK REVIEW

Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice
Kelly M. Kapic (ed.), IVP Academic, 2014, 275pp, £19.99

This volume is a collection of essays arising out of the 2011 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference which addressed the doctrine of sanctification. With much attention currently given to the doctrine of justification, the editor (Kelly M. Kapic) felt rightly that an examination of the doctrine of sanctification was required that was both scholarly and ecclesial. This collection of essays seeks to deliver just that, with a wide range of offerings from internationally renowned theologians.

Following an opening homily on Colossians 3:5-17 by Derek Tidball the volume is divided into three parts. The first part explores the relationship of sanctification to faith, grace, and union with Christ. The second part explores human agency and sanctification's relationship to ethics. The third and final part of the book offers some more pastoral reflections on the doctrine.

Richard Lints opens part one by examining the ways in which both justification and sanctification are dependent on divine grace through faith. Sanctification, argues Lints, is not primarily about moral improvement. The believer is *simul sanctus et peccator.* The law for the believer has a sapiental not juridicial function. Lints' essay concludes that in sanctification "it is not a believer's moral progress in view, but rather the restoration of their worship organs… Obedience is motivated not by reward but by delight" (55). Much of this is a helpful corrective to legalistic tendencies in the church, but I am not persuaded Lints takes significant account of passages which do place law and sanctification in a more juridicial perspective (e.g. Rom 8:13; 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:6-15; 2 Cor 5:10; Eph 6:8).

Henri Blocher continues in a similar vein exploring the relationship between sanctification as decisive moment and process. He argues that sanctification, like justification, must be *sola fide* since it happens "in Christ" by virtue of our Spirit-enacted union. However, sanctification differs from justification in that there is an element of work and progress present. Such work is not meritorious but is related to our adoption and transformation, and is therefore a gracious gift of God for our good.

In the third essay of part one Brannon Ellis considers union with Christ, arguing that union is not simply one part of the *ordo salutis* but rather it spans the application of redemption from beginning to end. Ellis' thesis is that "being in Christ and belonging to his church are materially equivalent, as complementary ways of describing the whole of our participation in the very same covenantal reality" (81). His essay contains a significant discussion of baptism as covenantal union. His thesis and the discussion which follows

raises a number of questions concerning soteriology, ecclesiology, and the sacraments, and his essay is in danger, in the opinion of this reviewer, of collapsing these distinct categories into one another.

In the final essay of the opening section Bruce McCormack compares the contributions of Wesley and Barth to the discussion of sanctification. These apparently odd bedfellows share the view that Christian "perfection" is possible now. Wesley views "entire sanctification" in terms of that which Christ works in us, whereas for Barth perfection concerns that which Christ does for us, and is therefore ours by virtue of our union with him. The difference is one of location – for Wesley it is Christ in us; for Barth it is us in Christ.

Part two begins with Michael Horton's essay on human agency in sanctification. For this reviewer Horton's essay was the highlight of the book. His opening explanation of Aquinas' analogical predication as it pertains to human and divine freedom is almost worth the price of the book alone. Horton moves to explore the way in which Trinitarian formulations of divine agency are not only helpful but necessary. Horton's analogical and Trinitarian coordinates provide a much-needed way through the contemporary maze of muddled thinking.

Oliver O'Donovan offers practical reflection on Barth's threefold cord of justification, sanctification and vocation and its alignment with the virtues of faith, love, and hope (in that order). In particular O'Donovan develops the theme of love as the faithful and expectant life of the believer.

In the final essay of part two James Eglington outlines Bavinck's theology of sanctification as ethics. For Bavinck sanctification involved both the objective declaration of holiness and the subjective process of experiencing increasing holiness – "one known and declared by God, the other incrementally discovered by the Christian" (181). Further, Bavinck argues for the priority of "passive sanctification" as the basis for "active sanctification".

Part three opens with reflections on gospel holiness by Ivor Davidson. The author is concerned that we approach the subject from the right end – i.e. starting with God's nature and action, rather than the believer's duty. Holiness is established for believers externally, and realised in them experientially – "they have their holiness entirely in him, as planned, secured and realized by him" (204). The *imitatio Christi* is not crudely exemplary, but is correspondence to the reality into which we have already been brought. We will only ever make progress when we start with God who is at work in us.

Kelly Kapic offers a pastorally helpful meditation on sanctification and suffering, drawn from his own (and his wife's) experience of suffering. He argues that living by faith is something from which we never graduate. The cross, the resurrection, and the feast are three anchor points which aid and enable the Christian to persevere in suffering.

In the penultimate essay Julie Canlis examines the way in which union with Christ and sonship inform our view of sanctification. Union is about receiving the person, not simply his benefits. Canlis, citing Calvin, says "in order to prevent the *unity* of the Son with the Father from being fruitless and unavailing, the power of that *unity* must also be diffused through the whole body of believers" (249). Thus union with Christ must include unity with one another.

The final essay explores Chrysostom's desire to move people toward greater holiness through his preaching. Peter Moore ably traces the interplay between Chrysostom's desire to teach (*docere*), to delight (*delectare*), and to move (*mouere*). For Chrysostom his locution always carried an intended perlocution for his hearers.

Overall this is a useful and edifying collection of essays on a comparatively neglected doctrine. For this reader there were a couple of neglected areas which could have made the volume even better. First, there was little reflection on the relationship between sanctification and mission. Admittedly this reviewer is biased as this is his area of research. Nevertheless, some exploration of the ways in which sanctification serves those outside the covenant people would have enriched the volume. Second, there was a distinct lack of engagement at the level of biblical studies. Admittedly these papers arose out of the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, but two or three invited responses from the field of biblical studies would have offered another perspective on the discussion. A final observation would be that some of the overlap and difference brings a sense of confusion rather than coherence. The book, at times, feels like a slightly random collection of papers rather than a considered whole. That said, this book remains a stimulating and instructive introduction to a crucial yet neglected area of theological discussion.

Martin Salter
Associate Pastor at Grace Community Church, Bedford