The Eucharist in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin

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ABSTRACT. Several, divergent interpretations of the Eucharist had been circulating even before the Reformation. Yet, it was with the advent of the writings of Martin Luther, John Calvin and other reformers that the subject of the Eucharist—and of Sacraments in general—was given a special attention. The following study reviews the main aspects of the theology of the Eucharist in the writings of Luther and Calvin. The study attempts to analyze the degree to which their writings were grounded in the Scriptures and/or influenced by other theologians. It also sets the two authors in the context of their time, by analyzing the different sources that influenced the two and helped shape their theology of the Eucharist. In this sense, the study also takes into account the views of Thomas Aquinas and Zwingli, two of the main actors whose views must be taken into account if one wishes to understand the views of Luther and Calvin.

KEY WORDS: Lord’s Supper, Scholasticism, Eucharistic Controversy, Martin Luther, John Calvin

Introduction
The following article reviews and evaluates the theology of the Eucharist in the thought of Martin Luther and John Calvin.¹ In order to understand the two Reformers properly, we will read

¹ For this article I used some arguments and parts of my previous article, “Revisiting Luther’s Theology of the Eucharist”, Perichoresis 5.1 (2007): 97-116.
their work against the background of Thomistic theology and the background of contending, contemporary arguments like those of Zwingli and others. Due to constraints of space and purpose, we will not deal with the Eucharist controversy and its developments that involved theologians such as Carlstadt, Erasmus, Oecolampadius, Melanchthon, Bucer and Westphal.²

The Background of the Controversy: The Roman-Catholic View of the Eucharist

It has become a truism that, in order to understand the theology of the Eucharist in Roman Catholicism, one must become familiar with the place of Sacraments in the theology of Thomas Aquinas; in particular, with his integration of Aristotelian categories into the overall discourse over the Eucharist.³ A sacrament, argued Thomas Aquinas (1226-1274), is “the sign of a holy thing so far as it makes men holy”; indeed, “the sacred sign of the invisible sacrifice”.⁴ But to understand the notion of “sign” we must be aware of the fact that Aquinas inclined more toward Aristotelian metaphysics than the platonic dualism that had influenced Augustine and earlier medieval thought. As such, since “it is part of man’s nature to acquire knowledge of the intelligible from the sensible”, sacraments must be sensible things: “just as in the Divine Scriptures spiritual things are set

before us under the guise of things sensible”. The Aristotelian categories helped Aquinas explain how bread and wine could enclose the physical body of Christ while remaining unchanged in their external aspects. In the first place, Christ’s expression “this is my body” should be interpreted literally, just as it was originally intended. Also, one must exhibit faith that it is Christ’s body indeed which is present in the sacraments. Luther too will speak about taking Jesus’ words seriously and approaching the sacraments in real faith. Then, common sense teaches one that the substance of the bread (matter plus form) could not change by itself in the substance of the body of Christ. But such a change “can be made by the power of an infinite agent, which has control very all being, because the nature of being is common to both forms and to both matters”. The act of transformation—or transubstantiation—then occurs because the very words of Christ, “this is my body”, are repeated by the

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5 Ibid, article 4.
6 See The Complete Works of Aristotle, J. Barnes ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1984), vol. 1:170 ff.; 2:1624 ff.; Coppleston F., A History of Philosophy, vol. 1, “Greece and Rome” (New York: Image Books, 1983) 302ff. For Aristotle an individual, that is, a particular being like “this chair”, is a primary substance, whereas “chair”, as an abstract concept delineating the whole class of chairs is a secondary substance. The primary substance consists of a synthesis between matter—or substratum, the ground of all being—and form, “the shape present in the sensible thing”. The substratum exists only as a potential entity until joined by form. Hence form is its principle of actualization, giving the substratum (matter) its shape and individual configuration. Belonging to the same individual being there are such things as qualities; for example color, height and the like. Aristotle called them accidental attributes, because they were dependent on the substance in which they inhere. In other words they are relative or temporary properties, “something which may either belong or not belong to any one and the same-self thing”. In the case of whiteness, for example, “there is nothing to prevent the same thing from being at one time white and at another not white.

7 Thus Aquinas explains that “the presence of Christ’s true body and blood in this sacrament cannot be detected by sense, not understanding, but by faith alone, which rests upon Divine authority” (Quest. 75, Art. 1, Pt. 3).
8 Summa Theologica, Q. 75. Art. 4, Part. 3.
priest at consecration. Hence, by divine power, the substance of the bread and wine is sacramentally converted into the substances of the body and blood of Christ in such a way that the accidents of both bread and wine remain visible. In other words, the “new substance” of the accidents is the Divine power which now sustains them. This argument is essential to understanding Luther’s objection against both Scholastic sophistry and the misuse (or misunderstanding) of Aristotelian metaphysics.

Yet Aquinas still shared into the mystical worldview of sacraments that was typical of Patristic theology. As such he finds in sacraments “the very cause of our sanctification, which is Christ’s passion; the form of our sanctification, which is grace and the virtues, and the ultimate end of our sanctification, which is eternal life”. And all these effects are generated by the sacraments, since Christ, who is the very character of the sacraments, imprints Himself on the soul of the believer. We will show that, Luther too will later speak about the believer’s transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit (pouring in love) through the proclamation of the Word in the sacraments.

9 However, Aquinas had to specify that these accidents do not inhere in their original substance anymore; the new substance is now Christ’s body and blood. The accidents “continue in this sacrament without a subject” because “God who is the first cause both of substance and accident, can by His unlimited power preserve an accident in existence when the substance is withdrawn …, just as without natural causes He can produce effects of natural causes” (Q. 77, Art., Pt. 3). This argument is essential to understanding Luther’s objection against Scholastic “sophistry”. On Aquinas’ view on “accidents” and “substance” see also Coppleston, A History of Philosophy, vol. 2, “From Augustine to Scotus” (New York: Image Books, 1983), 326ff.


11 Ibid., art. 4; see also Quest. 63. Peter Lombard elaborated on this aspect in a similar manner before Aquinas. In his Sentences he argued that sacraments “were not instituted merely in order to signify something, but also as a means of sanctification”. From The Catholic Tradition—Mass and the Sacraments: vol. 1, Rev. Charles J. Dollen et all, eds. (Willmington, NC: Consortium, 1979), 194.
The mystical influences, integrated along with Aristotelian physics, led Aquinas to his belief that the Lord’s Supper embodies the very sacrifice of Christ and “works in man the effect which Christ’s Passion wrought in the world”. It has the “nature of a sacrifice inasmuch as in this sacrament Christ’s Passion is represented, whereby Christ offered Himself a Victim to God (Ephesians 5:2). That is because in this sacrament “the body is offered for the salvation of the body, and the blood for the salvation of the soul (according to Leviticus 18:14, ‘the life of the animal is in the blood’), although each works for the salvation of both, since the entire Christ is under each”.

As far as the effects are concerned, as a sacrifice the sacrament “has satisfactory power”. Aquinas qualifies this assertion by further explaining that “although this offering suffices of its own quantity to satisfy for all punishment, yet it becomes satisfactory for them for whom it is offered, or even for the offers, according to the measure of their devotion, and not for the whole punishment”. Though Aquinas’ ideas here do not fully reflect the theology of “works righteousness”, the object of Luther’s attack in the controversy over the Mass, one will note an apparent tendency toward requiring the sinner to amend his spiritual life before he or she approaches the sacraments.

**Martin Luther**

We may now assess better the critique, and also the integration by Luther, of some elements of Aquinas’ theology of the Eucharist. In the following pages we will review Luther’s notion of divine presence in the Eucharist (the doctrine of Consubstantiation), the role of faith in the Eucharist, the issue of the worthiness of the believer and the Eucharist, and his rejection of the Eucharist as sacrifice.

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12 Quest. 79, Art. 2, Pt. 1, 2.
13 Ibid., Art. 7.
14 Ibid., Art. 5.
Not surprising, for Luther a *sacrament* must integrate three parts, namely, *sign, significance, and faith*. The bread and the wine help believers reflect on the life and passion of Christ, which may in turn help one truly understand his or her own personal experience. The bread reminds the believer of Jesus’ own life and good works, while the blood points to His passion, martyrdom and death. It also helps the believer face the spiritual struggles that he endures in this fallen world. For when “I” see these signs, Luther exclaims, “I” am reminded that amidst all misery and tribulation and Satan’s attacks “I have on my side Christ’s righteousness, life, and sufferings, with all holy angels and the blessed in heaven and all pious men on earth”.

Luther believed that, apart from philosophical speculation, the elements teach one that “Christ and all saints are one spiritual body”. Thus to “receive this sacrament in bread and wine ... is nothing else than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints”. The *significance* of the sacraments should be understood against the background of Luther’s ideas of *sin, falleness and human despair*. As he put it: “Though I am a sinner and I have fallen, though this or that misfortune has befallen me, nevertheless I will go to the sacrament to receive a sign from God that I have on my side Christ’s righteousness, life, and sufferings”. But how does all this work?

Luther’s understanding of *faith*, the third part of the sacrament, is essential here. In his view, “it is not enough to know

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15 *Luther’s Works*, 35:49. The sign equals the external and visible elements of the Eucharist, the bread and the wine. See my article “Revisiting Luther’s Theology of the Eucharist”, 103.
17 Ibid., 35:54.
18 Ibid., 35:51.
19 One may not some apparent, old Catholic vestiges here, since this work comes in the beginning of Luther’s career as a Reformer.
20 *Luther’s Works*, 35:54.
what the sacrament signifies”. One “must also desire it and firmly believe that you have received it”. It is very likely that Luther’s concept of faith differs from the Catholic idea of “intellectual assent” to a revealed truth or Church teaching. Faith, for Luther, conveys one’s existential trust in the person of Christ, an attitude often born out of one’s suffering or guilty consciousness. Here too the believer trusts in Christ’s ability to help him or her overcome the conflict; for “as if he were what we are, he makes whatever concerns us to concern him as well, and even more than it does us”. Yet Luther does not end on a note of despair.

In his words “This is my body which is given for you, this is my blood which is poured out for you. As often as you do this, remember me”, it is as if Christ were saying “I will make your suffering and misfortune my own … And I leave you this sacrament as a sure token of all this, in order that you … may be strengthened, and also bear one another in the same way.”

To sum up, by the sign we “are pledged, granted, and imparted Christ”, his life, good works along with his passion and martyrdom, in order that we may be strengthened in tribulation and in turn strengthen others as well”. And finally, “just as the bread is made out of many grains ground and mixed together … we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common”. The Lord’s Supper is a pledge which assures the Christian that he or she truly belongs to the kingdom of God; a sure union with Christ’s sufferings, death, and resurrection.

Now, to differentiate further between Aquinas’ and Luther’s view of the Eucharist we must also ask “Who is worthy of the

21 Ibid., 35:60.
23 Ibid., 35:59.
24 Ibid., 35:55.
25 Ibid., 35:58.
cup?” In the view of Aquinas, professing sinners should “not be allowed to touch this sacrament”, and the priest must not share the Lord’s body and blood with them.\textsuperscript{26} Only those who confess and renounce their sins and are reconciled with the Church can approach the Lord’s Table and receive Christ’s grace. Yet, according to Luther, “this holy sacrament is of little or no benefit to those who have no misfortune or anxiety, or who do not sense their adversity”.\textsuperscript{27} Throughout his entire theology he argued that sin “assails us as long as we live”, that is, “the sin which remains in our flesh after baptism: the inclination to anger, hatred, pride, unchastity, and so forth”.\textsuperscript{28} Hence, the reason why God has imparted us the sacraments was to “strengthen and encourage us against sin”. And it is also God, believes Luther, who says “take this sign by which I give you my pledge that this sin is assailing not only you but also my Son, Christ”. That is why the believer must hear Christ’s words, “Which is given for you. Which is poured out for the forgiveness of sin”.\textsuperscript{29}

Another dimension of Luther’s theology of the Eucharist was touches on the critical issued of the Mass as sacrifice and works versus the Mass as promise and grace. According to Aquinas, as far as its effects are concerned, as a sacrifice the sacrament “has satisfactory power”.\textsuperscript{30} He argues that “although this offering suffices of its own quantity to satisfy for all punishment, yet it becomes satisfactory for them for whom it is offered, or even for the offers, according to the measure of their devotion, and not for the whole punishment”.\textsuperscript{31}

In the vision of Luther the sacrament is primarily a promise where Christ proclaims forgiveness of sins and life everlast-
ing.\textsuperscript{32} The Christian “believes Christ to be true in these words, and does not doubt that these infinite blessings have been bestowed upon it”. What follows, then, is “a most sweet stirring of the heart, whereby the spirit of man is enlarged and enriched (that is love, given by the Holy Spirit) ... and made a thoroughly new and different man”. That is why, if the Lord’s Supper is a promise, it cannot be a sacrifice offered up by the priest on behalf of the people. Christ “has sacrificed Himself once (Hebrews 7:27; 9:25-26) henceforth he will not be sacrificed by anyone else”.\textsuperscript{33} Furthermore, “We do not”, Luther argues, “offer Christ as a sacrifice, but ... Christ offers us” and he offers Himself willingly on our behalf.\textsuperscript{34}

One will note again the importance of faith in Luther’s vision of the Eucharist. In his words, “we lay ourselves on Christ by a firm faith in his testament and do not otherwise appear before God with our prayer, praise, and sacrifice except through Christ and his mediation”. On the one hand, in the promise one receives God’s forgiveness simply by faith; in the sacrifice, on the other hand, “we present and give to God something of our own”.\textsuperscript{35} The believer can bring nothing except his or her faith in God’s mercy and in Christ’s forgiveness; no purchase or exchange of favors, no human work. Faith allow God to apply His forgiveness to us, that is, through believing that “God is trustworthy and cannot lie (Numbers 23:19) that he keeps his promise”.\textsuperscript{36} Hence the Lord’s Supper is a gift to be received in faith; it is divine grace which heals a troubled conscience and brings in “peace, life, inheritance, eternal honor and blessedness in God”.

\textsuperscript{32} Luther’s Works, “The Babylonian Captivity”, 36:40.
\textsuperscript{33} Luther’s Works, “The Misuse of the Mass”, 36:146. See also Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 309ff.; For the general background of this controversy see also Berkouwer, The Sacraments, 259-78; Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma, 55ff.
\textsuperscript{34} Luther’s Works, 35:99. See also Erickson, Christian Theology, 1117.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 35:169, 175.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 35:176.
Finally, it is important to discuss the notion of the divine presence in the Eucharist, a critical and often controversial dimension of the theology of Martin Luther. As we argued in the previous article, according to Dillenberger, “it is in the mode of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper that Luther’s views set him in marked contrast to both the Roman Catholic and other Protestant traditions”.\textsuperscript{37} What Dillenberger had in mind by “other Protestant traditions” are the schools of Zwingli, Westphal, Calvin and the other reformers.

Even though our purpose here is not to argue for the degree of Roman Catholic influence upon, or distance away from, Luther, we should not underestimate the similarities between the two at this point. To understand Luther correctly, one ought to be aware that Luther sought to “preserve the truth of the ‘Real Presence’ found in the Roman position”, and thus take Christ’s words seriously.\textsuperscript{38} Yet he also disagreed over the use by Aquinas of the metaphysics of Aristotle in the debate over the presence Christ in the Eucharist. Thus Luther gradually realized that the “opinions of the Thomists, whether approved by the council, remain only opinions, and would not become articles of faith even if an angel from heaven were to decree otherwise.\textsuperscript{39}

So, even though Luther disagreed over the use of Aristotelian metaphysics, he had to rely in his argument on the issues of

\textsuperscript{37} Martin Luther. Selections From His Writings (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1962), xxxii.

\textsuperscript{38} Thus Rob Staples, Outward Sign and Inward Grace, 217; Erickson, Christian Theology, 1117ff.; see also the analysis of Pelikan, Reformation of Church and Dogma, 199-203.

\textsuperscript{39} See 36:29 and the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians 1:8. Luther observed that Aristotle’s accidents could not subsist apart from their subject; in other words, the accidents would have to be the accidents of this or that subject. But in Aquinas’ interpretation, the accidents of bread and wine inhere in their original substance, but in the divine power which sustained them in union with the new substance of the body and blood of Christ. And, Luther pointed out; this is a plain contradiction of what Aristotle meant on this subject.
faith and a literal interpretation of Christ’ words “this is my body”. He took “the words of Jesus quite literally at this point”. Hence, “For my part”, he confessed, “if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, yet I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) …, and firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ”. Even the human soul is “at the same time present throughout the whole body, even in the smallest toe”. In essence, Luther shared in the interpretation of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen and other church fathers over the issue of the presence of Christ in the Sacraments.

Obviously, the controversy raised a series of collateral questions, such as whether Christ could be present in the Eucharist and sit at the right hand of the Father simultaneously? Luther

40 Erickson, Christian Theology, 1117.
41 Luther’s Works, 36:338.

43 Oecolampadius, Luther’s critic on the subject, could not grant him this premise, for “the nature of a body is to be in one place. A body which can be at the same time in many places will not be regarded as a true body” (LW 37:55). Luther’s argument came to depend on the classical formulation of the communication idiomatum (the interchange of attributes) developed by Cyril in 431. Cyril sought to defend the dual nature of Christ—God and man—against the heresy of Monophysitism. Hence he argued that because of the union of the two natures in one hypostasis, predicates belonging to one nature could be applied to the other. In this way Luther thought he was right to contend that Christ’s divine attributes could be conjoined with the physical bread and body, just as his divine nature coexisted with the human nature in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.
argued that the notion of presence must be understood as a synonym for power, conveyed by the very phrase “He sitteth at the right hand of the Father”. Hence, as God’s very activity manifested in the universe, power must be essentially present “even in the tiniest tree leaf”. In his view, power “is uncircumscribed and immeasurable, beyond and above all this or what may be”.44 He also argued that one’s acceptance or rejection of the ubiquity of Christ would depend on his or her concept of body. As Pannenberg pointed out, Luther insisted that “by union with the divine Logos, Christ’s human nature has taken on the divine attributes of majesty, including omnipresence … so that the exalted Christ can be present in the Eucharistic elements”.45 Luther believed that as God, ultimately Christ “is above body”, and “above spirit, above everything man can say or think”.

However, in contrast to the Catholic vision and argumentation of the notion of “divine presence”, the concept put forward by Luther always had a practical force to it. Not that Luther was incapable of scholastic argumentation. Yet, from the very beginning his purpose was to appropriate the doctrines of Christendom to the heart, mind and practice of the common believer. This also was the case with the controversy of the “presence of Christ” in the Eucharist.

We will now shift our analysis of the concept of the Eucharist to John Calvin.

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44 Luther’s Works, 35:57. Furthermore, as Creator and Sustainer of the universe God “must be present and must make and preserve His creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects”. For wherever Christ is, the Godhead “itself is essentially and personally present”, just as Christ was present in the womb of Mary and in the Godhead at the same time.

45 Pannenberg, Systematic Theology, 312.
John Calvin and the Theology of the Eucharist

The Background of Zwingli’s Symbolism

Along with Luther, Zwingli condemned the sacrificial value of the Mass as defined by the Catholic Church, where, the believer could obtain forgiveness through Christ’s death on the cross reenacted in the sacraments.\(^{46}\) He thus argued that “Christ, who offered Himself once for all on the cross, is forever the effectual sacrifice and victim for the sins of all the faithful”\(^{47}\). But if this reenactment is an illusion, and if the bread and wine do not cleanse the sins of the participants, then why exactly would the Church celebrate the Eucharist?

In Zwingli’s view, there exists no reason to invoke Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist any more. Speaking rather of “commemoration”, he argued that “the blood of Christ is given to us for drink that we may have a sign that what was once done on the cross holds good and is effectual forever”\(^{48}\). Personal faith is the basis for salvation and the presupposition for the possibility to receive divine grace. The Eucharist, which is not an instance of perpetual expiation and forgiveness of sins, must always presuppose one’s personal reconciliation with God through faith in the death and blood of Christ. Also, the words “this is my body” suggest nothing but a semnificative meaning by which Christ did not identify, but associate his body and blood with the bread and wine of the Passover Meal. True, there was grace bestowed at the cross, but that event cannot be replicated any more. Since the bread and wine function only as

\(^{46}\) With some small corrections, the material on Zwingli also appears in my article, “Revisiting Luther’s Theology of the Eucharist”, *Perichoresis* 5.1 (2007): 97-116.


\(^{48}\) Stone, *History*, 41. See also D. H. Tripp, “Protestantism and the Eucharist”, 300.
a sign by which the church remembers the real grace bestowed at the cross, it is doubtful whether they are able to convey grace or not. The “sacraments are given for a public testimony of that grace which is previously present to each individual”. Grace and salvation are conferred by the Holy Spirit through personal faith, even before any sacramental act takes place.

The Old Testament View on Sacraments in Calvin’s Institutes
Although Calvin’s theology of the sacraments was essentially grounded in the New Testament writings, he often made use, especially when attempting to validate the practice of infant baptism, of the Old Testament concepts of circumcision, sacrifice, and purification. The classic scriptural reference on sacraments in the Old Testament goes back to Genesis 17:10, where “God said to Abraham …, ‘This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: every male among you shall be circumcised’” (NRSV). Then, “to it were afterwards added purifications (Leviticus 11-15), sacrifices, and other rites (Leviticus 1-10) from the Law of Moses. These were the sacraments of the Jews until the coming of Christ”.

Since circumcision served as a token and “reminder” of God’s promise of the “blessed seed” to Abraham, where God was to bless him, his nation, and all the earth’s people, once this promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (the “saving seed”), circumcision was abrogated and replaced by the two sacraments of the Christian Church, namely, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper”.

In its historical context circumcision commanded as much spiritual and religious value as Baptism did after Christ himself instituted it. In the view of Calvin, the Apostle Paul also taught that “baptism is today for Christians what circumcision was for

49 Ibid., 41-42.
51 See Wallace, “Sacraments”, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 965, for this concept in the theology of Reformation.
As the physical expression of circumcision was to be transcended by a new spiritual transformation effected by God in the believer’s heart, so has water baptism been thought to coincide with our being regenerated by the Spirit, as we die and rise again to a renewed spiritual and moral life (Romans 6:3; Colossians 2).  

Calvin’s Sacramental Theology  

**The Triadic Role of the Sacraments: Signification, Matter and Effect**

It is imperative that one should continually refer back to the three major theories of the Eucharist as he or she seeks to make sense of Calvin’s own views. Although not all scholars agree with this interpretation, Calvin appears to have sought a middle path between the sacramental theologies of Aquinas and Luther, on the one hand, and Zwingli’s memorialist views on the other. Hence he felt comfortable to describe the Eucharist both in *semiotical* (related to signs) and *soteriological* (related to salvation and sanctification) categories. In the first place, the signs which are the bread and wine *signify* “for us the invisible  

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52 *Institutes*, 4.9.24.  

53 Hence the concept of “heart circumcision”, in Deuteronomy 30:6, “the Lord your God will circumcise your heart … so that you will love your God with all your heart and with all your soul”; also see Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25.  

54 Thus Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 313; Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 230ff. Calvin will guard us that “we should not, by too little regard for the signs, divorce them from their mysteries, to which they are so to speak attached. Secondly, we should not, by extolling them immoderately, seem to obscure somewhat the mysteries themselves” (*Institutes*, 4.17.5). For a more controversial interpretation of Calvin’s theology of the Eucharist in relation to those of Aquinas, Luther and Zwingli see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1119; Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 337ff., and also the references cited by Berkouwer in *The Sacraments*, 230. For the historical development and formation of Calvin’s theology of the Eucharist see Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Developments of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker House, 1997), 329-355.
food that we receive from the flesh and body of Christ”. But God has intended them not only as outward signs, but also as instances of nourishment in a spiritual banquet “where Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality”. Believers do not only observe their covenantal relationship with God through the Lord’s Supper, but they also feed on Christ’s body, which sustains and keeps the life of their body as well (observe Calvin’s use of such words like “nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden”).

Even before the Passover meal, Christ related his death and resurrection (the matter of the sacraments) to our life and salvation when he said: “The bread which I shall give you is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). The Scholastics would contend that in the Eucharist believers eat the real body and drink the very blood of Jesus. As we noted, Zwingli rejected any emphasis on literalism, and preferred to speak rather of the remembering significance of the Lord’s Supper. For Calvin, personal belief precedes the grace of the sacraments (via Zwingli) and makes it possible that one eats Christ’s flesh and receive his grace in the sacraments (contra Zwingli). In other words, individual faith, while sufficient to appropriate divine grace apart from the sacraments, does not invalidate the grace bestowed through the Lord’s Supper (the effect—materialized in righteousness, sanctification, and eternal life). Since God employs all necessary means to bring about the believers’ final glorification He has resolved to achieve this in part through the institution of the Lord’s Supper. There “the believers are nourished unto eternal life”.

55 Calvin, The Institutes, 4.17.1.
56 The Institutes, 4.17.8.
The Power of the Sacraments: The Work of the Spirit and the Preaching of the Word

The sacraments are physical signs which have been also designed to bring about our spiritual nourishment and final redemption. But how could physical entities elicit grace? We want to argue that, along with the doctrines of divine sovereignty and Christology, one other instrumental element which informed Calvin’s theology was his emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Through “the secret power of the Spirit” the faithful are bound with Christ. The Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ to the individual believers who partake of the Lord’s Supper faith. Christ instituted the symbols of the Eucharist, and He descends on the believers through the Holy Spirit; hence the “spiritual” interpretation of the sacraments. Calvin also describes the dynamics of the Lord’s Supper by using the idea of spiritual ascent. As we comprehend the ultimate meaning of the symbols, that is, the blood and body of Christ, the Holy Spirit lifts our minds and eyes to “seek Christ there in the glory of His Kingdom”. Rather than demanding that “God’s power make flesh to be and not to be at the same time”, one ought to simply allow the Spirit carry him or her in the presence of Christ.

Calvin’s sola scriptura provided him with a pneumatological framework instrumental in defining the miracle of the Eucharist. Namely, this is Christ’s union with us elicited by the Holy Spirit, who “alone causes us to possess Christ completely and have him dwelling in us”. The bond so formed is “like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us”.

58 Calvin, The Institutes, 4.17.33.
59 Ibid., 4.17.18.
60 Ibid., 4.17.24.
61 Ibid., 4.17.12. Also see Romans 8:9, “Christ dwells in us only through His Spirit”.
As in other situations, Calvin found it necessary to relate his sacramental theology to the Word of God; and specifically to the power of preaching. He saw the Lord’s Supper as an instance when grace ought to be appropriated. But abuses were not uncommon, and one of them took the form of silence; namely, turning the Lord’s Supper into a silent action at best completed by “some magic incantation” or “mumbled words” addressed to the sacraments. Calvin objected that the Lord’s Supper became less oriented to the people, as the attention became focused more on the intention of the priest or on the elements themselves. It was against this abuse where Calvin contended that “whatever benefit may come to us from the Supper requires the Word”.\(^6^2\) The Word to be proclaimed “edifies its hearers, penetrates into their very minds, impresses itself upon their hearts and settles there, and reveals its effectiveness in the fulfillment of what it promises”. The faithful do not need to be perfect in order to benefit from the grace of the Lord’s Supper. However, as in Zwingli’s case, they need to exhibit faith and mutual love, and take seriously Paul’s words to examine themselves before approaching the Lord’s Supper.

“Praesentia Realis”. The Presence of Christ in the Sacraments
Calvin agreed with Aquinas that the mystery of “Christ’s secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible”, and therefore, in order that the believers may fully benefit from the workings of grace, they were given visible signs best adapted to their small capacity.\(^6^3\) The parallels between body and bread and between wine and blood enhanced people’s understanding of the purpose of the mystical union, namely, “to confirm for us the fact that the Lord’s body was once for all so sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice”. But along with the signs, one also has the words “take, this is my body which is given for

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\(^{6^2}\) The Institutes, 4.17.39.
\(^{6^3}\) Ibid., 4.17.1.
you” (1 Corinthians 11:24). How exactly, then, should one understand the reference to Christ’s presence?

Along with Zwingli, Calvin believed that the only appropriate interpretation of Christ’s words was to be *analogical*. In other words, since Christ’s reference to the body “which is given for you” and the blood “which is shed for you” pointed to his passion and death, one must understand that “they had once for all been given for our redemption and salvation”.⁶⁴ Therefore, when approaching the Lord’s Supper “we are led by a sort of analogy to spiritual things”, which in turn implies that the presence of Christ cannot be but spiritual.⁶⁵ Christ was already made the bread of life; he did suffer, died, and was resurrected in a definite moment of time. The logic, then, is this: *once for all* he gave his body to be made bread “when he yielded himself to be crucified for the redemption of the world”—*past tense; daily* “he gives it when by the word of the gospel he offers it for us to partake”—*present tense*.⁶⁶ It would be, therefore, unnecessary to speculate on how Christ is physically present in the elements, because he never intended his words in that sense in the first place.

Having been raised from the dead, Christ ascended to the right hand of the Father, thus eliciting the coming of the Holy Spirit in the world (strong emphasis on dispensations).⁶⁷ Unlike Luther, Calvin believed that Christ’s body is contained in hea-

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⁶⁴ Ibid., 4.17.3. See also Wendel, *Calvin*, 339ff.


⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.5.

⁶⁷ At this point Calvin argues that “the coming of the Spirit and the ascent of Christ are antithetical; consequently, Christ cannot dwell with us according to the flesh in the same way that he sends his Spirit … When Christ said, ‘You will not have me with you always,’ he was speaking of the presence of the body” (4.17.26).
ven until he returns in judgment, “so we deem it utterly unlawful to draw it back under these corruptible elements or to imagine it to be present everywhere”. 68 But at the Eucharist the Lord is present, “for unless a man means to call God a deceiver, he would never dare assert that an empty symbol is set forth by him”. 69 How then should one resolve this apparent contradiction? Since believers live now in the age of the Holy Spirit, their partaking of the true Christ at the Lord’s Supper is enabled by the Holy Spirit as well. The Spirit, explained Calvin, “truly unites things separated in space”. Also, since the purpose of the sacraments is one’s participation in the blood and body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16), the mode of Christ’s presence would be less important, as long as “the Lord bestows this benefit upon us through his Spirit so that we may be made one in body, spirit, and soul with him”. 70 Paul declared in Romans 8:9 that “Christ dwells in us only through his Spirit”.

In conclusion, one could assume that Calvin’s concept of “real presence” implies a spiritual, not physical or spatial presence to be empirically validated by one’s sense observations. The presence, though spiritual, is real. Through the agency of the Holy Spirit the faithful were united with Christ, and by partaking of the sacraments they in fact partook from the real body and blood of Christ. 71 Calvin used both the concept of ascent and descent in order to describe either Christ’s descent to us, or our ascent to Him through the power of the Spirit, as we “are lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds to seek Christ there in the glory of his Kingdom”. 72

68 Ibid., 4.17.12.
69 Ibid., 4.17.10.
70 Ibid., 4.17.12.
71 As Berkouwer argued in The Sacraments, 239, even though subsequent Lutheran theologians disagreed, Calvin and the reformers who followed him never intended to replace Christ with the Holy Spirit. They did not think of this work in terms of “replacement”, but rather “in terms of the work of the Trinity in the history of redemption.
72 Ibid., 4.17.18.
Conclusions
It should be fair to acknowledge that Calvin had much in common with Luther and Zwingli’s views on the sacraments, and that they all owed the Catholic tradition its due respect for its crucial role during adversities. On the other hand, the differences between them have been so influential that one could not understand one without at least being informed in general of the theology of the others. In this sense, several concluding remarks are in order.

First, we believe that Luther, Zwingli and Calvin’s polemical attitude against the traditional Scholasticism stemmed from his fear that, once the institutional church relegated to itself the doctrinal and moral authority due only to the Bible, this authority could be perverted and used toward inordinate human ends. One evocative example would be the Papal Mass, which “is a work by which the priest who offers up Christ … to be a kind of appeasement to make satisfaction to God for the expiation of the living and the dead”. Calvin believed that, not only were many ministers taking advantage of this self-entrusted authority, but by this substitution they both deprived Christ of his honor, and snatch from him the prerogative of that eternal priesthood, and tried to cast him down from the right hand of his Father, where he cannot sit immortal without at the same time remaining eternal priest”. Calvin concluded that in the Papal Mass human beings resolved to be their and other people’s own redeemers.

Second, another disturbing issue the Reformers encountered was the Scholastic tendency to speculate, to bypass the plain meaning of the Scripture in order to provide rational support for doctrines like transubstantiation, and the like. And the Reformers cannot be accused of anti-rationalism here; not if one considers the impressive number of Patristic authors they often quoted from the originals in their works. Again, their main reason for objecting against Scholasticism was that one could easi-

73 Ibid., 4.18.1-2.
ly manipulate the uneducated masses by appealing to the authority of the doctors of the Church. The Scriptures, Calvin believed, would be sufficient for matters of morality and salvation, which to be sure, were not the properties of the church and could not be offered for sale.

Finally, the question may be raised whether Calvin’s doctrine of the Eucharist proved to be the better option in relation to the Thomistic, Lutheran, and Zwinglian formulations. We saw that in order to secure a literary interpretation of Jesus’ words Aquinas had to begin with the premise of divine miracles and then reverted to Aristotelian metaphysics. Luther accused him of misrepresenting Aristotle’s theory of substance and accidents, but in the end he came to an almost identical position: the physical body and blood of Christ are present in the elements of the Eucharist, as well as anywhere else in the world. Then, emphasizing personal faith and appropriation of grace, Zwingli dismissed both accounts as too literary and contradicting common-sense logic. He proposed instead a memorialist understanding of the sacraments, in which the idea of presence was at best analogical. Calvin believed that Christ himself was present in the Eucharist, but His presence transcends human logic, and cannot be defined in either Thomistic or Zwinglian terms. Also his view could be coined “the pneumatological” view of the sacraments, because he believed the Holy Spirit was instrumental in bringing about the believer’s union with Christ.

Bibliography


