Calvin's Controversial Vivifying Flesh Doctrine

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ABSTRACT
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John Calvin taught that by virtue of the incarnation and hypostatic union of Christ, our Lord's flesh was enabled to be a channel for the divine life from the Godhead, that we as Christians need for salvation, to flow through and then be given to us by the power and agency of the Holy Spirit. Since Christ's flesh was so enabled it can rightfully be called "life-giving" and not just in the sense that this flesh is united to the Logos or because the second person of the Trinity did His work of accomplishing redemption in that very flesh. No, the flesh of Christ can be called life-giving chiefly because it functions as a channel of divine life that is given to us when we are united to Christ by faith and it is this life that regenerates us, sanctifies us, and eventually brings us to glorification. Calvin often uses the word "vivify" or its derivates to describe the flesh of Christ and its specific efficacy.

This doctrine for Calvin applies to both the gospel and the sacraments. Its primary application is to the gospel, but due to historical circumstances Calvin was forced for polemical reasons to focus and explain this doctrine primarily in connection with the Eucharist, and for this reason this thesis will primarily detail Calvin's doctrine as it pertains to the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, the Eucharistic elements symbolize this partaking of Christ's flesh and so we can say that in a very real way we eat and drink from the Lord's body and that He is present with us, in His flesh, in a very genuine and

special way during the second sacrament of the New Covenant.

This thesis argues that Calvin did clearly articulate the vivifying flesh doctrine, that his doctrine is in error, that the fact that the Reformed community in large part abandoned his doctrine was a good thing, and all calls for a return to Calvin on this point are misguided.

To the abiding legacy of John Calvin

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Need for this Work

Despite John Calvin's unquestioned greatness, his vivifying flesh teaching is very problematic and has been very controversial. Thankfully, the Reformed community for the most part abandoned Calvin's thought on this point. At the same time, all is not well today. The unfortunate reality is that the bulk of the Reformed laity is unaware of Calvin's error and furthermore Keith A. Mathison, an excellent and prominent Reformed theologian, is calling for a return to Calvin's doctrine in his book *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper*.[1] If we are to maintain a correct understanding of the Lord's Supper, as well as a consistent Reformed witness, this situation must be remedied. In order to accomplish this remedy we must explain Calvin's doctrine, prove that he did teach it, and clearly demonstrate some of its shortcomings.

Presupposed in all of this on the part of the reader is a thorough background in all areas of theological inquiry. The reader should also keep in mind a few other crucial factors. The first factor is that this work is not intended to personally attack anyone, only to give needed critique. The second factor has to do with originality. I understand that many others have discussed this issue in the past, but with the present resurgence the subject must be addressed afresh. Finally, this is a work dealing with the history of doctrine and therefore while it is my hope that the person with a solid grasp of theology will find my theological arguments compelling, direct interaction with specific biblical texts is not to be expected. However, this not intended to be a mere historical survey.

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[1] See Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002).

After presenting all of my research I will in the conclusion be making strong theological assertions that have deep practical and pastoral implications.

Calvin's Vivifying Flesh Doctrine

Explanation

As a disclaimer I need to say here that in this explanation section I will not be providing footnotes or quotes directing the reader to where Calvin did in fact teach the things I am going to attribute to him. That will come in the body of the work. This section is simply to provide the reader with background information so that he will know where I am going and can test my assertions here by the body of this work and through his own research. The same will be true of the material dealing with Ligon Duncan on the question of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Supper.

Calvin's vivifying flesh doctrine teaches that in the Lord's Supper the believing recipient feeds on the flesh of Christ and not merely in a figurative manner. Calvin says that while this feeding is not done in an overly literal crassly corporeal manner, it is still a real feeding nonetheless. This feeding does not simply refer to a strengthening of faith, or of the spiritual life within us, or a further filling of the Spirit, all of which are grounded in the work Christ did in His flesh and is continuing to do at the right hand of God the Father. While Calvin recognizes those truths, he is adamant that when the Scriptures speak of us feeding upon the flesh of Christ in the Lord's Supper that it primarily refers to the life that is channeled through Christ's flesh which He through the Spirit gives to us. All of this is symbolized in the Lord's Supper in that the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ and the nourishment from them symbolizes the life we receive from Christ's flesh. Calvin explains that the way this takes place is due to the fact that

Christ's flesh functions as a conduit for the divine life of God to travel through in its route to us.

Calvin says that the way this life is taken from the flesh of Christ and is then transmitted to us is through the power and agency of the Holy Spirit. Calvin even calls the Spirit a second channel in that it is He that takes the life from the flesh of Christ and brings it to believers. But Calvin is not using the channel analogy in the same way with the Spirit as he is with the flesh of Christ. The Spirit is called a channel merely because He functions as the means by which the life is taken from Christ and is brought to Christians, whereas with the flesh of Christ, Calvin uses the term "channel" in a more substantial way. For Calvin the flesh of Christ is a channel or a conduit because the life of God is literally poured into it and is ready to be taken by the Holy Spirit when believers are in a position to receive it.

Calvin carefully avoids any magical conception of the sacramental elements. He maintains that they do not in themselves bring this life to us. They are symbols of the body and blood of Christ, but they are not naked symbols. By them our faith is lifted up to Christ and through the Spirit we feed upon Christ's flesh as we receive the life that has been poured into it. It may seem odd to continually see Calvin referring to eating or feeding on Christ's flesh and not in a purely figurative way when it should be clear by now to the reader that Calvin rejects any overtly literal feeding upon the flesh and blood of Christ. For Calvin though, to partake of this life from the flesh of Christ *is* to eat of that flesh and blood in a real and not merely figurative way, although not in a purely literal corporeal way either.

While for Calvin this doctrine is primarily discussed under the topic of the Lord's Supper, it by no means is limited to the Eucharist. Calvin explains that this life was given to the flesh of Christ as part of the incarnation and hypostatic union. This life is then given to believers only when they are united to Christ in faith. However, Calvin is adamant that faith should not be symbolically equated with eating or partaking of Christ's flesh. While one is united to Christ by faith and one receives the life that is given at the Supper only by first coming to the Supper in faith, the actual partaking of Christ's flesh is a subsequent act where the believer freely takes the life that is offered to him and this symbolically corresponds to eating and drinking.

This life is what regenerates believers, what sanctifies them, and what brings them to final glorification. This life is given without ceasing throughout the Christian life both directly and through means, especially through the means of the word and the sacraments. As far as the sacraments are concerned, baptism is the ordinary initiation into this life and in the Supper this life is continually given.

It is important to note here that the life that is given in the Lord's Supper is not qualitatively different from the life that is given to believers in the gospel in general. It is the same life, but the reason it becomes so prominent in discussions over the Lord's Supper is because the Lord's Supper so vividly symbolizes the body and blood of Christ which is where this life is taken.

According to Calvin then, a real partaking of Christ takes place in the Supper and because of this Christ can be said to be present in the Supper in a very special way because He is bringing His life to us in the Supper. This presence is very different from the Catholic or Lutheran "Real Presence" wherein Christ's flesh is literally and physically

present in the Eucharist. However, Calvin's conception is not to be confused with those who would advocate a presence of Christ only to our minds and hearts. While Calvin recognizes those elements, Christ according to Calvin can still be spoken of as being present in a way that is beyond this in that the power of His flesh is being brought to us in the Lord's Supper.

In Calvin's thought there is a twofold element to this presence. In one sense Christ can be said to be coming down to us through the power of the Holy Spirit via the life that is given to us from His flesh. But there is also a sense in which we can be said to be lifted up to heaven to be present with Christ in that the Holy Spirit lifts our minds and hearts to contemplate Christ in heaven while we partake of His life from His flesh. Both of these aspects are great mysteries that are not to be overly explained as is the case with the entire vivifying flesh of Christ concept and our union with Him.

All of this can be very confusing, therefore, I think an analogy is in order. Mathison gives one of the best analogies summarizing Calvin's thought in print. We would do well to read it in full. He explains:

> It is difficult to find a good illustration of Calvin's doctrine because, as he himself argues, there is no analogy in the natural world to what happens in the Lord's Supper. With that in mind, I would suggest that certain elements of Calvin's doctrine may at least be roughly ill-ustrated using the concept of electricity. Calvin himself speaks of the human nature of Christ and the Holy Spirit as "conduits" of divine life, so the analogy may not be too far afield.
>
> If we approach Calvin's thought using this analogy, we can say that the body of Christ, which is locally present in heaven, is analogous to the power plant or electrical generator. God is analogous to the source that powers the generator. The divine life of God is analogous to the electricity. The Holy Spirit is analogous to the power lines that transmit the electricity and connect the power plant to millions of individual homes, while the sacramental signs are analogous to the individual light switches in these homes. The individual communicants in the church are analogous to the millions of light bulbs that receive the electricity

> from the plant, and the individual communicant's faith (or lack thereof) is analogous to the filament in the light bulb (either broken or whole).[2]

My Contention

It is my contention that Calvin did in fact teach what I have just ascribed to him, that this doctrine is very unsound for a number of reasons, although this does not mean that I believe every element of Calvin's thought here is mistaken, and, therefore, the fact that the Reformed community by and large abandoned his doctrine was advancement and all calls for a return to his teaching are misguided. In order to demonstrate this contention, I must prove that Calvin taught the vivifying flesh doctrine as this is denied by some (chapter two), examine the way in which Calvin's doctrine fits into the history of doctrine (chapter three), and in the conclusion (chapter four) provide some very specific critique of Calvin.

In order to prove that Calvin did teach this doctrine, we will examine his *Institutes*, some of his other works besides the *Institutes* and his commentary on John 6, and finally his specific commentary on John 6 itself. In chapter three we will place Calvin's doctrine within the broader scope of the history of theology. This will include how his doctrine applies to the very controversial question of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Supper, how the Reformed world reacted to Calvin's teaching, which will include examinations of the Reformed Confessions, Reformed theologians, and the infamous debate between John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge.

In the section on the question of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Lord's Supper, we will use Ligon Duncan's assessment of this historical question as a grid by which to discuss Calvin's doctrine in relation to how other Christian theologies have

[2] Ibid., 285-286.

answered this crucial theological and pastoral dilemma. Whether or not Christ is present in the Lord's Supper is of the utmost importance to any believing Christian. If Christ is in fact present, how He is present also then becomes a question of extreme interest to those who love their Savior. Duncan lays out what he sees as five primary positions that have had the largest followings throughout Christian history.

The first is the *transubstantiation* view which is held by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities. This model states that in the Lord's Supper the bread and wine are literally and completely changed into the body and blood of the Lord Jesus even though to all appearances the elements remain. The second view is known as *consubstantiation,* and is held by Lutherans. In this perspective, the elements do remain, but the body and blood are added to the elements. In both of these views a very literal approach to the "Real Presence" of Christ is adopted.

The third view is the *memorial* view. This position was articulated by many before the Reformation, but during the Reformation it became most associated with Ulrich Zwingli. This position was later adopted by the Anabaptists, many other Protestant groups, and is more than likely the majority report among Evangelicals today, especially in the United States. In this view Christ is said to be present only in memory of what He did for us on the Cross two millennia ago. This view would of course not deny the fact that Christ is present in light of His omnipresence, but points out that Christ is always present in His divine nature.

The final two positions have primarily been limited to those within Reformed camps. These two positions will make up the bulk of the focus in this section because it is these two positions that have been most concerned with fidelity to Calvin because he is

the father of Reformed theology. The first of these two positions, and the fourth within Duncan's broader classification, is termed by Duncan the *real presence view within Reformed circles*. The second of these two positions, and the fifth in the bigger schema, is called by Duncan the *true communion with Christ view.*

In both of these camps the crass literalism of the first two positions is rejected, while the minimalist stance of the third position is seen as inadequate. Both camps are convinced that Christ can be spoken of as present in the Supper in a special, dynamic, and unique way, without adopting a literal, local, corporeal presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The disagreements center on sacramental efficacy, the language of "Real Presence", and doctrinal emphasis.

The fourth camp believes very strongly in an objective inflow or growth of spiritual life each time the worthy recipient partakes of the Supper, that because of this power we are brought much closer to the person of Christ in the Supper, and therefore we are wholly warranted in using the language of "Real Presence" so long as such a presence is properly qualified. This camp is adamant that these three factors best represent the spirit of Calvin, are very important to a fully orbed understanding of the Lord's Supper, and that this should be *the* Reformed position on the question of the presence of Christ in the second sacrament of the New Covenant.

The fifth camp is more diverse than the fourth camp, containing within it at least three sub-camps according to Duncan. These differences will be more fully detailed in chapter three, but suffice it to say for now that you have some within this camp that would hold to an objective influx of spiritual life in the Eucharist, while others would only hold to a subjective strengthening of faith that is still rooted and grounded in the

objective promises of the gospel. Some within this camp are more open to the language of "Real Presence" while others are less so, but all within this camp would point out that great caution should be used with such language especially given the fact that Calvin intentionally avoided such language because of the literalistic connotations it had in his day. Finally, those within this camp who do hold to an objective inflow of spiritual life each time the regenerate partake of the Supper would by and large not be so adamant about making this element to the overall doctrine of the Lord's Supper such a sticking point within Reformed theology.

This section will then end with a brief overview of the parallelism/instrumentalism debate and where Calvin should be placed in light of those discussions. Briefly, the two doctrines known as parallelism and instrumentalism came to the forefront of sacramental debate in the High Middle Ages. Parallelism was associated with the Franciscans and instrumentalism was taught by the Thomists. Parallelism teaches that the sacraments do not directly effect grace but God brings about His grace when the sacraments are used. Hence, there are parallel actions taking place. The Christian, on the one hand, partakes of a sacrament, and God, at the same time, brings the grace that is symbolized in the sacrament, but that grace is not directly and, in the most narrow sense conceivable, causally effected by the sacrament itself. Instrumentalism, in contrast, sees the sacraments themselves as effecting what they symbolize.

By the time we are finished with that section we will see that the fourth position from Duncan's presentation really does retain the spirit of Calvin's thought to the greatest degree, and that Calvin's view should be seen as a mediating position between

instrumentalism and parallelism. In the conclusion I will point out that both Calvin's vivifying flesh doctrine in general and his specific understanding of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper in connection with his vivifying flesh doctrine should be forever left behind.

Keith A. Mathison

Due to the fact that Mathison is the most outspoken advocate of a full return to Calvin's doctrine, which will lead to him being referenced quite often in this work, a brief summary of his overarching position is in order. If my overview of Calvin's position is correct, then, the passage from Mathison above should be more than enough to demonstrate that Mathison has a penetrating understanding of Calvin's view. Mathison though, does not simply understand Calvin's doctrine, he wholeheartedly endorses it. Mathison states where he is coming from when he says:

> Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is one of his greatest contributions to Christian theology, but is unfortunately also one of his most overlooked contributions. Formulating his doctrine during a time of great ecclesiastical and theological controversy, Calvin managed to walk a fine line between several extremes. He accurately pointed out those places within Roman Catholic eucharistic doctrine where the church had deviated from or added to the doctrine of the early church in ways that were self-contradictory. He did so, however, without moving to the opposite extreme and falling into the trap of symbolic memorialism. He recognized the problems inherent in both of those views, and he offered an alternative that managed to maintain continuity with the teaching of the early church without falling into some of the dangerous errors that had become so dominant in the medieval church.[3]

It should also be noted that at no time, not on a single page, does Mathison ever provide the reader with any critique of Calvin's doctrine in his book on the subject. The only thing the reader will find from cover to cover is support and endorsement.

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[3] Ibid., 272-3.

Mathison's plea for a return to Calvin's view is not based solely on the erudite exposition he sees Calvin give for his position. Mathison is also quite clear that in his mind there is no historical doubt that Calvin's position *is* the position that was adopted in the early days of the Reformation and that was codified in the Reformed Confessions. Hence, according to Mathison, a departure from Calvin here, is a serious departure from Reformed orthodoxy. Mathison makes himself unequivocally clear when he writes, "We must come to the conclusion that Calvin's doctrine can most legitimately claim to be the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper."[4]

Mathison makes his case by first detailing Calvin's doctrine, then providing an outstanding historical sketch of Reformed theology on the subject of the Supper, followed by his biblical defense of Calvin's view, a critique of contrasting theologies of the Eucharist, guidance towards a renewed Reformed orthodoxy on the topic, and finally a section on pastoral issues and debates concerning the communion.

As to the "Real Presence" and parallelism in contrast to instrumentalism, Mathison again endorses Calvin's view of the presence of Christ in the Supper and also sees this as being of the utmost importance, and he believes Calvin was a true parallelism proponent. Mathison writes:

> Calvin's doctrine of the presence of Christ was never given a [name similar to transubstantiation or consubstantiation], but I would suggest that the term *suprasubstantiation* might be an appropriate and accurate designation. The prefix *supra* means "above," or "beyond," or "transcending." According to Calvin, Christ's body is present in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but the mode of his presence is not specifically connected with the substance of the elements. The elements of bread and wine are a necessary part of the sacrament, but they are not the primary focus. Christ is present by virtue of the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit, not by the transformation or combination of material substances.
>
> Because Calvin taught that Christ's body is made present in the sacrament by the working of the Holy Spirit, his view of Christ's sacramental presence has

[4] Ibid., 91.

> sometimes been referred to as a doctrine of "spiritual presence." Unfortunately, this term is often misunderstood to mean that only Christ's Spirit or divine nature is present in the sacrament. Calvin explicitly denied any such idea. The term *suprasubstantiation* might avoid some of these misunderstandings because it communicates the idea that there is a real participation in the substance of Christ's body and blood, as Calvin taught, but that this participation occurs on a plane that transcends and parallels the plane in which the physical signs exist. It communicates Calvin's focus on the presence of Christ in the sacrament, not the presence of Christ in the substance of the elements.[5]

Here we see not only Mathison's very clear understanding of Calvin, but he is also plainly advocating Calvin's view, as this long passage from Mathison comes from a chapter where he is trying to persuade the Reformed community to fully go back to the thought of Calvin here, and again we find no repudiation of any element of Calvin's thinking on the Supper. As far as parallelism is concerned Mathison states:

> The third aspect of Calvin's general doctrine of the sacraments that is important to remember is his concept of parallelism. According to Calvin, God truly accomplishes what he signifies in the sacraments. There is a parallelism between the action of the minister and the action of God. What is promised and offered through external sacramental signs is truly given by God to those who receive the promise in faith.[6]

Summary

With all of that background information in place we now move into the first chapter of the body, which will establish that Calvin did in fact teach the vivifying flesh doctrine as I have presented it in this introduction. It will be recalled that in order to do this we will be looking at the *Institutes,* some of his other works, and his very important commentary on the highly significant section of Scripture as far as the Eucharist is concerned, John 6.

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[5] Ibid., 279-80.
[6] Ibid., 271.

CHAPTER TWO

ESTABLISHING CALVIN'S DOCTRINE

Calvin's Doctrine in the *Institutes*

The Vivifying Flesh Doctrine in General

In Chapter seventeen of the fourth book of the *Institutes* entitled, "The Sacred Supper of Christ, and What it Brings to Us" Calvin repeatedly makes reference to eating or partaking of Christ's flesh and blood. As an example, Calvin states:

> To summarize: our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life. For the analogy of the sign applies only if souls find their nourishment in Christ – which cannot happen unless Christ truly grows into one with us, and refreshes us by the eating of his flesh and the drinking of his blood.[7]

It is difficult from this passage or from many of the other places where Calvin discusses the eating of Christ's flesh to discern exactly what Calvin means by eating or partaking of Christ's flesh. This is why Calvin dedicates an entire section in his chapter on the Lord's Supper to answering this very question. The reader may wish for more explicit passages from Calvin in the *Institutes* detailing his vivifying flesh teaching, but in this section alone Calvin gives to his audience a full and clear statement on the matter and he is abundantly clear; thus there is no reason why it should not suffice. The section marks the most complete statement of Calvin, from any of his works, on his vivifying flesh doctrine. It comes from the ninth section in his chapter on the Lord's Supper within the *Institutes* and is titled, "Sense in Which Christ's Body is Life-Giving" and therefore gets right to the point as to what Calvin means when he so often speaks of Christ's flesh being the believer's life in the *Institutes* and in his other works. Here Calvin says:

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[7] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics series, vols. 20-21 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 4.17.10.

> But the flesh of Christ does not of itself have a power so great as to quicken us, for in its first condition it was subject to mortality; and now, endowed with immortality, it does not live through itself. *Nevertheless, since it is pervaded with fullness of life to be transmitted to us, it is rightly called "life-giving."* In this sense I interpret with Cyril that saying of Christ's: "As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" [John 5:26, cf. Vg.]. For there he is properly speaking not of those gifts which he had in the Father's presence from the beginning, but of those with which he was adorned in that very flesh wherein he appeared. *Accordingly, he shows that in his humanity there also dwells fullness of life, so that whoever has partaken of his flesh and blood may at the same time enjoy participation in life.*
>
> We can explain the nature of this by a familiar example. Water is sometimes drunk from a spring, sometimes drawn, sometimes led by channels to water the fields, yet it does not flow forth from itself for so many uses, but from the very source, which by unceasing flow supplies and serves it. *In like manner, the flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours into us the life springing forth from the Godhead into itself. Now who does not see that communion of Christ's flesh and blood is necessary for all who aspire to heavenly life?* (Emphasis mine).[8]

In this extensive text all of the most basic elements to Calvin's vivifying flesh doctrine can be seen. Calvin says that Christ's flesh is life-giving and by this he means that it has been given a fullness of life that flows from the Godhead into the flesh of Christ that can then be transmitted into believers for their heavenly life. At first glance Calvin's water analogy may seem to contradict what was said in the introduction about Calvin seeing the flesh of Christ as a sort of channel for the divine life of God that becomes the Christian's life in salvation. This is due to the fact that in this analogy the flesh is compared to a fountain. However, upon examination such a reading is only apparent. The flesh of Christ is clearly a channel of sorts for the divine life of God in that this life flows into the flesh and can then be transferred to Christians from Christ's flesh. And it must be remembered that a fountain is a conduit; a fountain must have water brought to it and only then can water flow out from it.

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[8] Ibid., 4.17.9.

Calvin does speak of the Holy Spirit as a channel as well, but it is clear that by this he simply means that the third person of the Trinity is the one who takes this life from the flesh of Christ and transfers it into believers. The Spirit is the bond or "channel" in this sense. Calvin never speaks of this life being poured into the Spirit which is how he speaks of the flesh of Christ. Hence, it is clear that he sees the flesh of Christ as a real conduit for the sanctifying life of God that is needed by believers. Calvin says of the Spirit in this regard, "The bond of this connection is therefore the Spirit of Christ, with whom we are joined in unity, and is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us."[9]

If one wished to make the case that a more literal interpretation of Calvin's channel allusions with regard to the flesh of Christ should be ruled out because of the way in which Calvin uses channel imagery in regard to the Spirit, it must also be remembered that if Calvin were saying essentially the same thing about the flesh of Christ and the Holy Spirit, then in Calvin's mind one could speak of eating or partaking of the Holy Spirit as well. But this idea is nowhere to be found in Calvin.

When perusing the writings of Calvin scholars and theologians on Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper one is immediately struck by the fact that Calvin's specific vivifying flesh teaching is almost completely absent. When it comes to the fact that Calvin did clearly teach that believers do in a very real way feed upon the flesh of Christ in the Supper, there is a clear consensus. However, when one wishes to discover what these scholars think Calvin meant by this, there is little explicit information to be found. The conduit or channel aspect to his thought is almost completely ignored or explained away. While, thankfully, Calvin's emphasis on a true presence of Christ in the Supper,

[9] Ibid., 4.17.12.

and the importance of understanding his doctrine of union with Christ as a backdrop to his teaching on the Lord's Supper, are discussed at length, Calvin's vivifying flesh component is remarkably neglected.

Many seek to downplay Calvin's language altogether. Kilian McDonnell for example writes, "Calvin does speak of the body of Christ as 'life-giving,' but this is mostly a manner of speaking…."[10] Others, such as Gerrish come very close to articulating the clear conduit or channel aspect to Calvin's thought. Gerrish says, "Calvin is content to acknowledge that it is the divine power of the Spirit that pours this life from heaven to earth. But he does try an analogy to represent the Spirit's mysterious operation: while the body of Christ remains in heavenly glory, life flows from it to us as a root transmits the sap to the branches."[11] And, "[For Calvin] the flesh of Christ is life-giving because in it everything requisite to salvation was accomplished. But it does not actually save us unless we draw life from it. And no redemption could have been wrought in Christ's flesh if it were not the 'channel' of his own divine life."[12] In the second statement Gerrish almost seems to fully recognize the channel element in Calvin's thought, but in neither passage does Gerrish give to the reader anything that makes it entirely clear what he thinks Calvin means exactly when Calvin speaks this way.

Two other scholars also come close to doing justice to Calvin's thought here, but again fall short of fully explicating what Calvin actually has to say about the vivifying flesh of Christ being a channel or conduit for the divine life of God that comes to

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[10] Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1967), 212-213.
[11] B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 129.
[12] Ibid., 131. It should be noted that in neither of these quotes is Gerrish commenting on the extensive quote from Calvin's *Institutes* (4.17.9) that I have been focusing on.

believers in the Eucharist. Thomas J. Davis says, "It is clear that [Calvin] does mean Christ's literal body…. Calvin emphasizes that the flesh of the ascended Christ is true human flesh."[13] Davis adds, "Thus, the reality of the Supper of which the believer partakes is the human flesh of Jesus Christ."[14] H.R. Mackintosh tells the reader, "[Calvin's] praiseworthy effort to keep step with Luther… leads him, it must be confessed, to lay a false emphasis, in the higher reaches of his theory, on the reception by the communicant of the real flesh and blood of Christ, as distinguished somehow from the spiritual reception of Christ himself."[15] Both of these scholars are quoted by Charles Partee in what seems to clearly be in a favorable fashion. Hence, Partee may be another scholar who comes close to having a full understanding of Calvin on this point, but unfortunately there is nothing in him that is explicit enough.

However, most sound more along the lines of Ronald S. Wallace. As an example, Wallace handles a key passage from Calvin in the following manner:

> This communion can be ours only through participation in His flesh. For the flesh is the "*channel* which conveys to us that life, which dwells intrinsically, as we say, in His divinity, and in this sense it is called life-giving because it conveys to us that life which it borrows from another quarter…." Thus everything we need for our sanctification and righteoussness is to be found near to us, in our own nature, in the humanity of the Son of God, "in our own flesh." Where the humanity of Christ is, there is the divinity; but apart from the humanity we cannot communicate with the divinity. What is therefore effected in the Lord's Supper is communion with the whole Christ, with all His gifts, so that He becomes wholly ours, and we are pledged as wholly His. But since this communion cannot take place without participation in His flesh, it is necessary in the definition of the gift given in the Supper to stress this aspect of the communion (emphasis mine)."[16]

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[13] Thomas J. Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God: The Development of Calvin's Eucharistic Teaching* (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 110, quoted in Charles Partee, "The Sacraments of the Church," in *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 276.
[14] Ibid.
[15] H.R. Mackintosh, "John Calvin: Expositor and Dogmatist," *The Review and Expositor* 7, no 2 (April 1910), 193, quoted in Partee, 277.
[16] Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 200-201.

Everything Wallace says here of Calvin is true, but the crucial channel element is completely ignored. Wallace may believe that all that he has just said is all Calvin intended to convey by the channel allusion, but as was seen from the key passage from Calvin above and as will be seen further as this work progresses, that is simply not the case.

It seems most likely that the reason for the absence in so many scholars is that they realized that if Calvin was saying what this work attributes to him, then Calvin would have been off in the ways that this work is seeking to demonstrate, and most simply do not want to go so far as to say something that strong. Charles Hodge certainly found out what can happen to a person when seeking to show Calvin's errors in regard to his doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

It seems that the only scholars unashamed to fully document Calvin's peculiar point here are R.L. Dabney, Charles Hodge, and Keith A. Mathison. It must be said though that it does seem that Nevin understood Calvin here as will be seen in chapter three. However, Nevin still never explicitly gives any statements that fully formulate Calvin's doctrine on this point.

Dabney has this to say about Calvin's doctrine:

> Both Romanist and Lutheran minds, accustomed to regard the Eucharist from points of view intensely mystical, received the Zwinglian with loud clamor, as being odiously simple and rationalistic. Calvin, therefore, being perhaps somewhat influenced by personal atachments to Melancthon, and by a desire to heal the lamentable dissensions of Reformed and Lutherans, propounded (in his Inst. and elsewhere) and intermediate view. This is, that the humanity, as well as the divinity of Christ, in a word, his whole person, is spiritually, yet really present, not to the bodily mouth, but to the souls of true communicants, so that though the humanity be in heaven only, it is still fed on in some ineffable, yet real and literal way, by the souls of believers. The ingenious and acute defense of this strange opinion, contained in the Inst. Bk. 4: Ch. 17, proceeds upon this postulate, which I regard as correct, and as eminently illustrative of the true nature of the

> sacramental efficiency; that the Lord's Supper represents and applies the vital, mystical union of the Lord with believers. Such therefore as the vital union is, such must be our view of the sacrament of the Supper. Is the vital union then, only a secret relationship between Christ and the soul, instituted when faith is first exercised, and constituted by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit: or, is it a mysterious, yet substantial conjunction, of the spiritual substance, soul, to the whole substance of the mediatorial Person, including especially the humanity? *In a word, does the spiritual vitality propagate itself in a mode strictly analogous to that, in which vegetable vitality is propagated from the stock into the graft, by actual conjuction of substance? Now Calvin answers emphatically: the union is of the latter kind. His view seems to be, that not only the mediatorial Person, but especially the corporeal part thereof, has been established by the incarnation, as a sort of duct through which the inherent spiritual life of God, the fountain is transmitted to believers, through the mystical union*. His arguments are, that the body of Christ is asserted to be our life, in places so numerous and emphatic… that exegetical fidelity requires of us to understand by it more than a participation in spiritual indwelling and influences purchased for believers by His death; that the incomprehensibility of a spiritual, though true and literal, substantial conjuction of our souls with Christ's flesh in heaven, should not lead us to reject the word of our God; and that faith cannot be the whole amount of the vital union of believers to Christ, inasmuch as it is said to be by faith. The union must be more than the means which constitutes it (emphasis mine).[17]

Dabney adds in a famous statement, "We reject the view of Calvin… because it is not only incomprehensible, but impossible."[18]

Hodge describes Calvin's teaching in the following concise manner:

> While Calvin denied the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharist, in the sense in which that presence was asserted by Romanists and Lutherans, yet he affirmed that they were dynamically present. The sun is in the heavens, but his light and heat are present on earth. So the body of Christ is in heaven, but from that glorified body there radiates an influence, other than the influence of the Spirit (although through his agency), of which believers in the Lord's Supper are the recipients. In this way they receive the body and blood of Christ, or, their substance, or life-giving power. He held, therefore, that there was something not only supernatural, but truly miraculous, in this divine ordinance.[19]

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[17] R.L. Dabney, "Conclusion to the Lord's Supper," in *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 810.
[18] Ibid., 811.
[19] Charles Hodge, "Calvin's Doctrine," in *Systematic Theology* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008) 3:628 (3.10.16).

Hodge was chastised by many, John Adger especially,[20] for his comparison of Calvin's view to a force that emanates from Christ's body that comes to believers. Adger clearly misses Hodge's point though. Hodge is not intending to be overly literal here, but is only trying to convey the idea of power or life coming from Christ's flesh unto His people. Hodge is simply articulating the fact that Calvin is saying much more than the idea that Christ's flesh is the believer's life merely because of what it did for them on the Cross and because it is ever united to the divine nature. Furthermore, Calvin does use language of that nature. The reformer, for example, says, "… the spiritual efficacy which *emanates* from the body of Christ (emphasis mine)."[21]

The propriety of Mathison's adoption of Calvin's doctrine aside, Mathison is most correct in his understanding of Calvin on this particular idea. To summarize his thought, it will be recalled that Mathison gives a fine analogy of Calvin's doctrine by comparing it to electricity. In this analogy God is said to be the source that powers the plant or generator. The divine or spiritual life of God that animates spiritual life is represented by the electricity itself. Power lines are like the Holy Spirit, the believer is represented by a light bulb, and the believer's faith corresponds to the filament in the light bulb which can either be broken or whole. Mathison also adds that the light switches could be likened to the sacraments. Interestingly, Mathison does not seem to realize how unique and potentially controversial this analogy truly is. Throughout his work he details his belief that his presentation is what scholars have been saying for centuries is the doctrine of Calvin. While on most other points Mathison is correct, when it comes to the specific

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[20] John Adger, "Calvin Defended Against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 27 (January 1876): 133-166.
[21] Calvin, Comm. On Heb. 9:11, C.R. 55:110, quoted in Wallace, 202.

vivifying flesh element, especially the channel or conduit aspect, of Calvin's thought, there is far from a scholarly consensus there as was shown above.

Returning to Calvin himself, this life from Christ's flesh was given to His flesh in the incarnation. In the section titled "Christ Had to Become Man in Order to Fulfill the Office of Mediator" there is a very pertinent passage. Calvin says, "… for God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body, flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones, that he might be one with us…. Ungrudgingly he took our nature upon himself *to impart to us what was his*, and to become both Son of God and Son of man in common with us (emphasis mine)."[22] When compared with the extended text from section nine in chapter seventeen of Book four of the *Institutes* given above, it becomes clear that this life was given to Christ at the moment of His conception and hypostatic union because in that text it will be recalled that Calvin said that this life is a part of the gifts which His flesh was given in the incarnation.

From the rest of the *Institutes* it is quite clear that this imparting of what is Christ's to believers refers to far more than just the internal transformational life that the Holy Spirit gives to them from Christ's flesh. Yet there is certainly no reason to exclude that aspect of Calvin's thought from what he says above. All redemptive benefits are imparted to Christians from Christ both because of His work, but also just as much because *of His person*.[23] All are connected, but there is a logical order. Gerrish makes a critical observation about the communion believers have with Christ as a result of their union with Christ according to Calvin. He says, "The communion in question is

[22] Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.2.
[23] Cf. ibid., 2.12 and 2.17.

something subsequent to the union with Christ *that was already effected by the incarnation*, but antecedent to the communication of his benefits (emphasis mine)."[24]

According to Calvin this life from Christ's flesh is received via union with Christ which is effected by the Holy Spirit. It seems that in Calvin's thinking the Holy Spirit comes upon a person which in turn creates faith in such a person and on that basis the Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ so that he may partake of all the blessings from Christ. Calvin states:

> We must now examine this question. How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son–not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called "our Head" [Eph. 4:15], and "the first-born among many brethren" [Rom. 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be "engrafted into him" [Rom 11:17], and to "put on Christ" [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscrim-inately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.[25]

He also says, "To sum up, the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself."[26] Calvin adds, "Hence he is called the 'Spirit of sanctification'… because he not only quickens and nourishes us by a general power that is visible both in the human race and the rest of the living creatures, but he is also the root and seed of *heavenly life* in us (emphasis mine)."[27] Later, Calvin tells his readers, "This unique life which the Son of God inspires in his own *so that they become one with him*, Paul here

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[24] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 128.
[25] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 3.1.2.

contrasts with that natural life which is common also to the wicked (emphasis mine)."[28] And finally, in this regard, Calvin states, "We know, moreover, that he benefits only those whose 'Head' he is [Eph 4:15], for whom he is 'the first-born among brethren' [Rom 8:29], and who, finally, 'have put on him' [Gal. 3:27]. This union alone ensures that, as far as we are concerned, he has not unprofitably come with the name of Savior. The same purpose is served by that sacred wedlock through which we are *made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone* [Eph 5:30], and thus one with him. But he unites himself to us by the Spirit alone."[29] Calvin then goes on to say that faith is the work of the Spirit alone.[30]

All of these texts make it clear that that the spiritual life that is given to believers through their union with Christ is identical to the life that he was talking about under his discussion of the vivifying flesh in regard to the Lord's Supper. The reference to "heavenly life" in one of the passages above and in the key text from section nine, chapter seventeen, Book four (which comes far after the former quote in the *Institutes*), taken in conjunction with all that is said in these other passages is more than enough to establish the point. To top all of that off, Calvin, in his chapter on the Lord's Supper, has a section entitled "Union with Christ as the Special Fruit of the Lord's Supper" wherein he substantiates the conclusions just reached.[31] As Gerrish tells his audience, "What Calvin does *not* say, however, is that this mysterious union with Christ is given exclusively in the Eucharist. On the contrary, we have seen already… that it is in fact the function of the gospel, according to Calvin, to make Christ ours, so that we might be

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[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 3.1.3.
[30] See ibid., 3.1.4.
[31] See ibid., 4.17.2.

engrafted into his body."[32] And, "… The 'uncongenial foreign element' that Hodge discovered in Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper *is already present in Calvin's gospel* (emphasis mine)."[33]

Also, the reference to "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone" needs to be remembered as it is one that will become very important in further discussions on Calvin's overall doctrine of the vivifying flesh.

If at this point anyone was tempted to say that perhaps these passages are only referring to the eternal life that is given to Christians legally by the imputation of Christ's righteousness and to the relationship that results from their union with Christ, one only needs to look at what Calvin says about this life in regard to justification. He says, "By partaking of him, we principally *receive a double grace*: 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. Of regeneration, indeed, the second of these gifts, I have said what seemed sufficient* (emphasis mine)."[34]

For Calvin regeneration is borne of faith and is synonymous with repentance which consists in the death of the old man and in the renewal of the new man in Christ.[35] Calvin's thought is not sharp here, but he seems to be saying that redeemed man is passive in regeneration insofar as it is the Spirit and the life of Christ that is behind everything, but that redeemed man is active in that in repentance he hates his sin and commits himself to holy living. With all of this in mind, if one were to go over the

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[32] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 128.
[33] Ibid., 158-159.
[34] Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.
[35] Cf. ibid., 3.3.

passages above on union with Christ it becomes clear that this union effects both justification and inward renewal. Furthermore, these texts show that this second aspect of inward renewal comes from the transformational life of Christ applied to believers by the Spirit which makes them more and more one with Christ.

This inward life that comes from being united to Christ and is made effectual to believers by the Spirit grows throughout the Christian life and will culminate in glorification. Calvin makes these points: "… through his Holy Spirit he dwells in us and by his power the lusts of our flesh are each day more and more mortified; we are indeed sanctified, that is, consecrated to the Lord in true purity of life, with our hearts formed to obedience to the law."[36] And, "Hence, he arouses hope of a full renewal 'because he who raised Christ from the dead will quicken our mortal bodies, because of his Spirit that dwells in us' [Rom 8:11 p.]."[37] This inward life never ceases to be given. It according to Calvin continually nourishes, sustains, and preserves believers. He says, "*Therefore the Sacrament [of the Lord's Supper] does not cause Christ to begin to be the bread of life*; but when it reminds us that he was made the bread of life, *which we continually eat*, and which gives us a relish and savor of that bread, it causes us to feel the power of that bread. *For it assures us that all that Christ did or suffered was done to quicken us; and again, that this quickening is eternal, we being ceaselessly nourished, sustained, and preserved throughout life by it* (emphasis mine)."[38]

In Calvin's thought the sacraments are closely tied to soteriology, and therefore it is not at all surprising that this doctrine comes into sharp focus in his discussion of the sacraments, primarily the Eucharist. For Calvin the basic thrust of the sacraments is that

[36] Ibid., 3.14.9.
[37] Ibid., 3.1.2.
[38] Ibid., 4.17.5.

they are signs and seals of God's grace. Calvin makes his thought known here when he relays these statements: "… [A sacrament] is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men."[39] And, "… A sacrament is 'a visible sign of a sacred thing,' or 'a visible form of an invisible grace….'"[40]

Calvin believes that many other things can loosely be called sacraments, but for him the only two primary or full sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper.[41] In Calvin's theology baptism signifies and seals the initiation of grace and all that it entails and the Lord's Supper signifies and seals the continuation of grace and all that it entails.[42] Calvin also had a strong desire to retain the long standing doctrine within the catholic Church that the sacraments in some measure effect what they symbolize.[43] Thus baptism normally effects regeneration in adults or the seed of regeneration in infants.[44] The Lord's Supper likewise continually feeds worthy recipients with the life of Christ's flesh.[45] This is a very important point because Calvin does often speak of the confirming and strengthening of faith, but he is also very clear that along with these aspects comes an influx of the life from Christ's body each time a believer receives the elements in faith. Calvin says, "Once for all, therefore, he gave his body to be made bread when he yielded himself to be crucified for the redemption of the world; *daily he gives it when by the word of the gospel he offers it for us to partake, inasmuch as it was crucified, when he*

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[39] Ibid., 4.14.1.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Cf. ibid., 4.14.18-22.
[42] Cf. ibid., 4.14.22.
[43] Cf. Gerrish, "The Eucharistic Offering," in *Grace and Gratitude*, 124-156.
[44] Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15-16.
[45] Cf. ibid., 4.17.

seals such giving of himself by the sacred mystery of the Supper, and when he inwardly fulfills what he outwardly designates (emphasis mine)."[46] This life as has been seen is identical to the life that believers receive in general from Christ's flesh. The sacraments are simply one specific way in which they receive it, a very special and powerful way. The other ways include direct operations and indirect means, especially the word.[47]

The sacraments only benefit the elect. Calvin knows nothing of any notions of sacraments helping those without faith or of having faith only to lose it.[48] The sacramental elements have no power of themselves and are simply tools that God uses to bestow His grace.[49] Finally, the sacraments are not so bound to grace that God cannot work without them or when they are being neglected, misused, or abused.[50] All ideas of sacramental *ex opere operato* are rejected.[51]

Calvin's Doctrine and the Lord's Supper

It is in Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper that the vivifying flesh doctrine comes into its full force. Believers do in a very specific sense feed on Christ's flesh according to Calvin. Calvin is extremely careful to avoid what he sees as two extremes. The one extreme would be any conception of eating Christ's flesh in a literal or corporeal

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[46] Ibid., 4.17.5. Also, cf. the entire section on the Supper as well, and consider the fact that Calvin again and again in the Institutes and elsewhere pounds home the point that the sacraments convey what they symbolize and since Calvin has made it clear what he understands the eating of Christ's flesh to mean, it follows by a resistless logic that the believer is fed with the life of Christ each time he partakes of the Supper and is not merely confirmed and strengthened in his faith by the sacrament even though those realities are not absent.
[47] All that has been said thus far should be enough to establish the first point and in regard to the word see Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3 and 11.
[48] Cf. ibid., 4.14.16-17. As to losing faith see all that Calvin says on redemption; the security of the believer is everywhere asserted by Calvin either explicitly or implicitly.
[49] Cf. ibid., 4.14.14.
[50] All that has been said on Calvin's understanding of the union with Christ and his thought found in the sections on the sacraments throughout more than make this clear.
[51] Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.14.

manner.[52] This would rule out the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Lutheran doctrines. Each of these three had (and still have) differing dogmas here and Calvin primarily only dealt with the latter two, but all three are excluded from Calvin's thought. The other extreme to be avoided according to Calvin would be any conception of eating Christ's flesh that says that it only refers to the spiritual nourishment believers gain directly from the Spirit based on Christ's work.[53] For Calvin eating of Christ's flesh is neither to be thought of in overly literal terms but neither only in a manner of speaking. To the reformer, Christians truly partake of Christ's flesh in the Supper because they are fed from His flesh with the spiritual food of spiritual life that comes from that flesh and they are thereby more and more united to Him, becoming "… of his bones and of his flesh".[54]

Calvin also strongly believed in the long held catholic belief that in the Lord's Supper Christ is present in a very special and unique way. Much more will be said about this important point, not only in Calvin's thought, but in the history of theology as well, in chapter three. For now it is enough to say that it seems almost certain that Calvin avoided the very heated term "Real Presence" because of the way in which it was traditionally associated with a literal, corporeal, local presence of Christ's humanity or flesh in the Supper.[55]

With all of that established, Calvin did strongly advocate a true presence of Christ in the sacrament whereby Christians are lifted up to heaven in a sense by the Holy Spirit

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[52] Cf. ibid., 4.17.13-37.
[53] Cf. ibid., 4.17.1-11.
[54] See ibid., 4.17.9-10.
[55] Cf. Ligon Duncan, "True Communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper: Calvin, Westminster, and the Nature of Christ's Sacramental Presence," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. Ligon Duncan (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 2:429-430.

who causes them to contemplate Christ while receiving His benefits and also there is a sense in which Christ comes down to them through the life that comes from His flesh to them by the power of the Spirit. Calvin makes himself clear on this point when he says:

> *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, under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink his blood, to enjoy him at last in his wholeness. For though he has taken his flesh away from us, and in the body has ascended into heaven, yet he sits at the right hand of the Father–that is, he reigns in the Father's power and majesty and glory. This kingdom is neither bounded by location in space nor circumscribed by any limits. *Thus Christ is not prevented from exerting his power wherever he pleases, in heaven and on earth. He shows his presence in power and strength, is always among his own people, and breathes his life upon them, and lives in them, sustaining them, strengthening, quickening, keeping them unharmed, as if he were present in the body*. In short, he feeds his people with his own body, the communion of which he bestows upon them by the power of his Spirit. In this manner, the body and blood of Christ are shown to us in the Sacrament (emphasis mine).[56]

Calvin is very adamant about the fact that this presence is not one that is solely unto the minds and hearts of God's people. There is a sense in which, according to the reformer, Christ, especially His flesh, is present to believers in a more literal manner, although not in a crassly corporeal and local manner, by the life that comes from Christ's flesh. For Calvin this life is so closely tied to Christ's flesh that the believer can really be said to eat Christ's flesh and in that sense Christ's flesh is present to the communicant and not just in a more figurative manner to his mind and heart. Calvin states:

> *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 Spirit towers above all our senses.[57]

Notice here how Calvin says that it is not just the power of Christ's flesh that penetrates to believers, but that it is Christ's flesh itself. Clearly then, for Calvin, the life

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[56] Calvin, *Institutes,* 4.17.18.
[57] Ibid., 4.17.10.

that comes through the flesh of Christ is so identified with that flesh that the believer can be said to receive the flesh of Christ in a semi-literal manner, although not an absolutely literal or corporeal manner.

The Term "Vivifying"

The final thing to address in this section is the word "vivifying". This word coupled with flesh is an apt description of Calvin's doctrine in that he uses the word vivification to refer to the work of the Spirit applying the life of Christ to believers in regeneration/repentance,[58] and it has been shown that this is the same life that is received in the Supper. The word "vivify" means "to give life to; make come to life; animate."[59] It has also been shown how Calvin calls the flesh of Christ life-giving in regard to the Supper, making the term very appropriate.[60] John Williamson Nevin adds this, "The living energy, *the vivific virtue, as Calvin styles it*, of Christ's flesh, is made to flow over into the communicant, making him more and more one with Christ himself… (emphasis mine)."[61] Nevin doesn't specify where Calvin said those words explicitly. Nevin may have taken them from another work or may be paraphrasing Calvin's thought from the *Institutes*. Either way, the word and the full term (vivifying flesh) are good ones from the perspective of the history of doctrine.

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[58] Cf. ibid., 3.3.
[59] David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd college ed. (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1970), 1590.
[60] I cannot say for certain if this is the case as I don't know Latin, but it certainly seems very possible to me that where the English translation I have been using of the *Institutes* says "life-giving" in the ninth section from Calvin's chapter on the Lord's Supper, the original Latin may have been *vivificare*.
[61] John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist (1867)* (Philadelphia: S.R. Fisher and Co., 1867), 61.

Calvin's Doctrine in His other Works

Three Important Works

In Calvin's *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* he says this:

> Moreover, if the reason for communicating with Jesus Christ is to have part and portion in all the graces which he purchased for us by his death, the thing requisite must be *not only to be partakers of his Spirit, but also to participate in his humanity*, in which he rendered all obedience to God his Father, in order to satisfy our debts, although, properly speaking, the one cannot be without the other; for when he gives himself to us, it is in order that we may possess him entirely. Hence, *as it is said that his Spirit is our life, so he himself, with his own lips, declares that his flesh is meat indeed, and his blood drink indeed*. (John vi. *55.) If these words are not to go for nothing, it follows that in order to have our life in Christ our souls must feed on his body and blood as their proper food*. This, then, is expressly attested in the Supper, when of the bread it is said to us that we are to take it and eat it, and that it is his body, and of the cup that we are to drink it, and that it is his blood. This is expressly spoken of the body and blood, in order that we may learn to seek there the substance of our spiritual life (emphasis mine).[62]

A *prima facie* reading of this section does not automatically lead to the vivifying flesh doctrine. Calvin does speak of participating in the humanity of Christ, of Christ's flesh being meat and drink, and that believers must feed on the body and blood of Christ as their proper food.

In Calvin's Geneva Catechism the scholar responds to a question as to the meaning of the Supper by answering, "It was instituted by Christ in order that by the *communication of his body and blood*, he might teach and assure us that our souls are being trained in the hope of eternal life (emphasis mine)."[63] In answer to the next question the scholar replies, "We are hence taught that such virtue as bread has in nourishing our bodies to sustain the present life, *the same has the body of our Lord*

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[62] Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper: What is Requisite in Order to Live in Jesus Christ," in *Treatises on the Sacraments*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2002), 170-171.
[63] Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in *Treatises on the Sacraments,* 89.

spiritually to nourish our souls. As by wine the hearts of men are gladdened, their strength recruited, and the whole man strengthened, *so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls* (emphasis mine)."[64] Here are clear statements but ones that are not in themselves so explicit as to prove the vivifying flesh doctrine beyond all doubt.

This next passage is very important because it is one of the most explicit statements from Calvin on the fact that he did not believe that the spiritual nourishment received by the believer in the Supper is limited to this sacrament or qualitatively different from the spiritual life received from Christ in general. After the master asks, "Do we obtain this communion by the Supper alone[?]," the scholar responds, "*No, indeed*. For by the *gospel also*, as Paul declares, *Christ is communicated to us*. And Paul justly declares this, seeing we are there told *we are flesh of his flesh and bones of his bones* – that he is the living bread which came down from heaven to nourish our souls – that we are one with him as he is one with the Father, etc. (1 Cor i. 6; Eph. v. 30; John vi. 51; John xvii. 21) (emphasis mine)."[65] It is seen once more how Calvin consistently understands the idea of being flesh of Christ's flesh and bone(s) of Christ's bone(s) as part and parcel to his notion of the vivifying flesh.

In the Consensus Tigurinus the closest statement to the vivifying flesh doctrine comes when Calvin writes:

> When it is said that Christ, by our eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood, which are here figured [in the Lord's Supper], feeds our souls through faith by the agency of the Holy Spirit, we are not to understand it as if any mingling or transfusion of substance took place, but that *we draw life from the flesh once offered in sacrifice and the blood shed in expiation* (emphasis mine).[66]

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 90.
[66] Calvin, "Mutual Consent as to the Sacraments: Article 23," in *Treatises on the Sacraments*, 219.

One should not make too much of this document as it was the result of compromise which was necessitated by a long debate between Calvin and Bullinger. It is difficult to tell, given the fact that the Second Helvetic Confession penned by Bullinger does sound very Calvinian at points,[67] if Bullinger was in essential agreement with Calvin and simply couldn't get past some of the wording Calvin initially wanted to use, or if Bullinger really was at odds with Calvin theologically over the specifics of the Lord's Supper. Whichever is the case, what is clear is that Calvin was extremely cautious in how he articulated himself throughout the document. This leads the document to have a very different feel from not only what Calvin writes elsewhere, especially in the *Institutes,* but also, as will be seen in chapter three, from the rest of the mainstream Reformed Confessions.

Paul E. Rorem has this to say about the debate and the eventual document that surfaced from that struggle, "In this light, the *Consensus Tigurinus* can hardly be called a clear victory for Calvin in the sixteenth-century Reformed debate over the Lord's Supper, whether over Zwingli's lingering influence or over Bullinger's own substantial position."[68] Mathison is therefore certainly correct when he says, "It is unwise to take this document as a representative statement of Calvin's… eucharistic doctrine."[69] Calvin himself reacted to the document in a letter to Bucer with these words:

> You devoutly and prudently desire that the effect of the sacraments and what the Lord confers to us through (*per*) them be explicated more clearly and more fully

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[67] Cf. Mathison, 68.
[68] Paul E. Rorem, "The *Consensus Tigurinus* (1549): Did Calvin Compromise?," in *Calvin as Confessor of Holy Scripture*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 87.
[69] Mathison, 68.

> than many allow. Indeed it was not my fault that these items were not fuller. Let us therefore bear with a sigh that which cannot be corrected.[70]

The three works from Calvin just examined are some of the most important that Calvin wrote on the subject, and, therefore, it was necessary to reference them. However, it was seen that they do not offer a great deal by way of explicit statements when it comes to the flesh of Christ being the channel of divine life. It must always be kept in mind, though, that a treatise, a catechism, and a confession are by their nature concise documents. They are filled with words and terms that are often loaded with meaning or left without further in-depth explication for the sake of brevity. It is also often the case with confessions that bare statements are made to which many can adhere to, but when individual subscribers are probed as to how they understand the deeper intricacies and questions that pertain to those propositions, differences of opinion emerge. This certainly is the case with the Consensus.

When some of Calvin's other works are referenced, however, one discovers much stronger and more explicit statements even if they do not reach the level of the completeness of the quote from section nine, chapter seventeen, Book four, of the *Institutes* that was quoted at length towards the beginning of chapter two of this work. It will also be seen in these quotes that Calvin frequently uses the words "vivify" or "vivifying" or "vivific" in regard to the flesh of Christ.

Why Calvin is not as clear in the first two documents examined above at least by way of a sentence or two is still a good question. It seems that the most likely explanation is that these works were targeting a more lay audience and, therefore, Calvin simply wanted to make it very clear that a real feeding on Christ's flesh takes place while

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[70] Calvin, CO 3.439, in Rorem, 89.

leaving out some of the more philosophical and theological nuance regarding the vivifying flesh that is found in his more scholarly works.

Key Passages and Calvin's Debate with Westphal

Here is a sampling of some key passages from some of Calvin's other works: "The discussion concerns only *the communication that flows from his heavenly virtue and breathes life into us* and causes us to grow together into one body with him. What I say is that the moment we receive Christ by faith as he offers himself in the gospel, we become truly members of his body, and life flows into us from him as from the head…. *Thus we draw life from his flesh and blood*, so that they are not undeservedly called our 'food' (emphasis mine)."[71] The literal nature of this text must not be downplayed. Calvin gives no indication that he is speaking figuratively. According to him, the moment believers receive Christ in faith they draw life from his flesh and blood which is breathed into them.

In the next selection Calvin says, "*Believers come into this communion on the very first day of their calling*. But insofar as Christ's life *grows in them*, he offers himself *every day to be enjoyed by them…. This is the communication that they receive in the Holy Supper* (emphasis mine)."[72] From this passage we see Calvin again make himself very clear about the fact that the life they receive in the Lord's Supper is the very life they receive from Christ from the beginning of their salvation. Calvin adds, "… I distinctly affirm, that our flesh *which he assumed is vivifying by becoming the material of spiritual life to us*. And I willingly embrace the saying of Augustine, *As Eve was formed out of a rib of Adam, so the origin and beginning of life to us flowed from the side of*

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[71] Calvin, Calvin to Peter Martyr, 8 August 1555, CO 15:722-723, quoted in Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 128.
[72] Ibid., 129.

Christ (emphasis mine)."[73] Here Christ's flesh is called vivifying, clearly according to Calvin not only because it is given a fullness of spiritual life, but because it is the source of life that is to be given to believers. Calvin explains that, "*As Eve was formed out of the substance of her husband*, and thus was a part of himself; so, if we are the true members of Christ, we share his substance, and by this intercourse unite into one body…. Paul says that *we are members of his flesh and of his bones*."[74]

And finally Calvin says, "… By the gift of his Spirit he *transfuses into us the vivifying influence of his flesh* (emphasis mine)."[75] In this text Calvin explicitly talks about the influence of the flesh of Christ. It seems very difficult to interpret this in a manner that would have Calvin merely saying that the flesh of Christ is the grounds for the life that comes to believers. On the contrary, it is a much more natural interpretation in light of all that Calvin says about the channel element to Christ's flesh in his thought to see Calvin as saying that because the divine life of Christ literally flows through the flesh of Christ, Christ's flesh can be said to influence Christians in this vivifying manner.

In summary, these texts have Calvin calling Christ's flesh vivifying, saying that it breathes spiritual life into believers, Christians come into this communication when they are first united to Christ and this communication grows and is with them throughout their Christian lives, and it is this same life and communion that takes place in the Lord's Supper. Also, notice again the use of one of Calvin's favorite analogies taken from Scripture to describe the union Christians have with Christ and the subsequent life

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[73] Calvin, "Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, in Order to Dispute the Mists of Tileman Heshusius," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 2:507, quoted in Mathison, *Given for You*, 18.
[74] Calvin, *Commentaries* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 21:323, quoted in Mathison, *Given for You*, 17.
[75] Calvin, "Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith Concerning the Sacraments, in Answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. Beveridge and Bonnet, 2:282, quoted in Mathison, *Given for You*, 33.

believers receive from His flesh. This analogy is that of Eve being taken from the side of Adam and being called "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh".

Gerrish makes these conclusions: "Calvin is content to acknowledge that it is the divine power of the Spirit that pours this life from heaven to earth. But he does try an analogy to represent the Spirit's mysterious operation: while the body of Christ remains in heavenly glory, life flows from it to us as a root transmits the sap to the branches."[76] Gerrish continues by saying, "Calvin then adds: 'This is the communication that they receive in the Holy Supper.' He cannot mean '*only* in the Supper.' Like the initial gift of union with Christ himself, the gifts of the Spirit, too, are surely received by the preaching of the word."[77] Wallace adds, "Participation in the blessings which Christ died and rose to win for us is inseparable from communion with His person, and Calvin insists that this union can be attained only through participation in the 'flesh' of Christ."[78]

Some of the most explicit statements from Calvin come from his debate with the exorbitant Lutheran theologian of Calvin's day, Joachim Westphal. From this debate read the following exchange:

> The mystery centers in the soul, and is wrought by *the vivific power of the Holy Spirit*, under a mode of existence that transcends all natural experience and conception. But it is not a mere influence. *The Spirit actually binds Christ and his people into one life*; not as a river may join two cities which are many miles apart, by merely flowing through both; but as being the very form and medium (*modus habitationis Christi in nobis*) under and by which the life of the first is made to pass over into the last…. The communication that we have with Christ in the sacrament, *is by no means limited to his divine nature, but extends to his humanity also, as the real seat and fountain of salvation for our dying world*; in which sense it is, we are said to eat his flesh and drink his blood unto everlasting life…. Dynamically and organically things may be joined together in the most intimate unity, which are at the same time wide apart in space. *Christ's body remains indeed always in heaven; but by the power of the Holy Spirit, as*

[76] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 129.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Wallace, 145-146.

> *something that transcends all local and mechanical relations, not only his divine life, as this is present in all places, but the proper life of his body also, the quickening vigor of his flesh and blood, is made to pass into the souls of his people,* as a true ailment of immortality (emphasis mine).[79]

At one point Westphal tries to force Calvin into saying that by this life from Christ's flesh Calvin merely means the spiritual life believers receive from Christ as a result of His work in the flesh. Westphal retorts, "Your 'virtue' and 'vigor' of Christ's body resolve themselves, when all is said, into the idea of a mere influence proceeding from him through the Spirit; and mean simply the efficacy and value of his death, made available for our benefit by God, and so appropriated on our side by faith."[80] To which Calvin firmly replies, "Miserable misrepresentation…. By 'virtue' or 'efficacy' here, I understand always the essential living force of the Redeemer's body, once slain and now in heaven; as I use the word vigor also to express its actual power and substance, the very sap of its heavenly constitution."[81]

Calvin's Doctrine and His Commentary on John 6

No work on Calvin's vivifying flesh doctrine would be complete without a section on John 6. This is so because almost all discussions about the efficacy of the Lord's Supper must at some point deal with John 6. The language in that chapter sounds so strikingly Eucharistic[82] that one either has to say in what way this language pertains to the Lord's Supper, or if one is going to assert that the language is not sacramental, then he must give a strong defense of his position.

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[79] Calvin, *Second Defense Adversus Joachimi Westphali Calmunias*, in Nevin, "John Calvin and Joachim Westphal," in *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, eds. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology vol. IV (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1966), 337-339.
[80] Ibid., 340.
[81] Ibid., 341.
[82] For an excellent discussion on this point see Robert Letham's "Jesus as the Bread of Life," in *The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2001), 7-15.

In this "Bread of Life" discourse found in John 6:25-59, Jesus consistently talks about the "food", "real food", "real drink", "bread from heaven", "true bread from heaven", "bread of God", and "bread of life" as the nourishment that is needed for eternal life. Jesus makes it very clear throughout that this refers to His body or His flesh and blood.

Calvin takes all of this information and does not at all leave his readers in the dark as to how he understands it. In the first part of his section on verse 27 Calvin makes these comments:

> Here He teaches us what *He wants His people to be aiming at–eternal life*. But because from the dullness of our understanding we are always devoted to earthly things, He corrects this innate disease before pointing out what we ought to do. The simple teaching would have been, 'Work for incorruptible food.' But He knows that men's senses are bound by earthly cares as so first bids them be loosed and freed from these fetters that they may rise to heaven. Not that He prohibits His people from labouring to get daily food. But He warns them that *the heavenly life must be put before the earthly*, for the only reason the godly have for living here is that, as pilgrims in the world, *they may hasten to their heavenly homeland* (emphasis mine).[83]

Here Calvin makes it unmistakably clear that the food Jesus is talking about is the food that is received unto eternal life. Calvin also refers to this life as "heavenly life". This is highly significant in light of what was read going all the way back to Calvin's fullest statements on the vivifying flesh doctrine from the *Institutes* (4.17.9). It will be remembered that in that section Calvin calls the life believers receive from the flesh of Christ in the Lord's Supper "heavenly life", thus showing that this sacramental life is no different from the life that is received from Christ in the gospel in general.

Later in his commentary on the discourse Calvin goes on to say, "… *the bread* which ought truly and properly to be reckoned *heavenly* is that *which is the spiritual*

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[83] Calvin, *The Gospel According to St. John: 1-10*, Calvin's Commentaries (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 153.

nourishment of the soul (emphasis mine)."[84] Calvin continues, "When He afterwards adds *My Father giveth you*, it is just as if He were saying, '*The manna that Moses gave your fathers did not bring heavenly life*, but now *the bread from heaven is indeed offered to you*….' [A]s if He were saying, 'Acknowledge me as God's minister, by whose hands He wishes *to feed your souls unto eternal life* (emphasis mine).'"[85] It is established from these statements that this bread is synonymous with the food spoken of earlier by Jesus and Calvin makes it clear throughout his commentary that he understands Jesus to be using all of the food, drink, and bread terms interchangeably.

With it demonstrated that Calvin understands Christ to be saying that the Father through the Son will give to Christians this spiritual nourishment unto eternal life, the next question is how do they partake of this nourishment? Calvin answers, "Now He defines the manner of feeding–*when we receive [Christ] by faith* (emphasis mine)."[86] Calvin sustains this emphasis throughout his commentary. And yet Calvin adds a twist. For Calvin the eating of Christ does not specifically refer to believing. It is true that believers only become partakers of Christ through faith, but technically speaking, for Calvin faith is what brings them to Christ and the eating of Christ is the fruit of faith unto the life that comes from Christ. As Nicholls explains, "Consistent with this is Calvin's interpretation of the term 'eating Christ's flesh', which is *not* – and he is most insistent here – simply another way of saying 'believing on him'."[87]

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[84] Ibid., 157.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 159.
[87] John D. Nicholls, "Union with Christ: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper," in *Union and Communion* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1979), 37.

The Reformer says:

> Moreover, those who infer from this passage that *the eating of Christ is nothing but faith*, *do not reason carefully enough*. I certainly acknowledge that we *eat* Christ in no other way than by *believing*. *But the eating is the effect and fruit of faith rather than faith itself*…. [Faith] causes us to be united in His body, to have life in common with him and, in short, *to be one with him*. It is therefore true that we eat Christ by faith alone, so long as we grasp how faith unites us to Him (emphasis mine).[88]

Calvin's great consistency is on display here. Just like in his other works, here Calvin says that believers are united to Christ by faith so that they can receive the life that He can give them. But here Calvin emphasizes that for him faith unites, and the eating refers to the life Christ gives to the elect once that union has taken place. Up until now this work has not made note of this point in Calvin's thinking because it is only here in his commentary that he gives to it so much explicit attention. But this idea of faith not being the *exact* equivalent of eating of Christ's flesh is found in his other works as well.

The next question to be asked is what, according to Calvin, does Christ mean when He continually calls this food, drink, and/or bread His body or His flesh and blood? The answer to this question is of course that Christ is speaking of His vivifying flesh. Calvin explains:

> Since this secret power of bestowing life of which He is speaking might be referred to His divine essence, He now comes to the second step and tells them that *this life resides in His flesh so that it may be drawn from it*. It is a wonderful purpose of God that He has set life before us in that flesh, where before there had only been the material of death…. But it is objected that the flesh of Christ cannot give life, since it was liable to death and even now is not in itself immortal; and again, that it is not the property of flesh at all to give life to souls. *I reply, although this power comes from another source than the flesh, this is no reason why this office may not accord with it. 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,*

[88] Calvin, *St. John: 1-10*, 159

> *because it communicates to us a life that it borrows from elsewhere* (emphasis mine).[89]

This section may not be as systematically arranged as the most important passage that was examined from the *Institutes* (4.17.9), but it is every bit as explicit. Calvin says that Christ's flesh is life-giving and by this he means that the divine life of Christ's divine nature flows through Christ's flesh as a channel, and that it is drawn out of that flesh to be given to His people. Calvin even says that Christ's flesh *borrows* that life from His divine nature. It is also significant that Calvin does refer to the flesh of Christ as the channel and His divine nature as the source here whereas in the *Institutes* (4.17.9) he calls the flesh of Christ the source. Calvin is not contradicting himself; in one sense the divine nature is the source in that it is the source in an absolute sense and in another sense the flesh of Christ is the source in that the life from that flesh must be extracted and brought to believers.

If the reader is at all confused over the fact that Calvin refers to the flesh of Christ as the material of death when this work has been maintaining that Calvin believed the flesh of Christ was established as a channel for this divine life and that this divine life was actually deposited at the incarnation, rest assured there is an explanation. Calvin is simply referring to the fact that the flesh of Christ in and of itself does not possess life and that the life that did reside within it as a channel could not be bestowed on believers until He earned salvation for them on the cross. This explanation is established by examining all that has been quoted from Calvin throughout this work.

Before moving on, a brief discussion about Jesus' references to drinking His blood and the "true drink" and being "never thirsty" is in order. Is, according to Calvin,

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[89] Ibid., 167.

Jesus saying anything substantially different with this language than He is when using the language of eating bread? Calvin answers negatively. He says, "For the Hebrews, by synecdoche, took 'to eat bread' for 'to dine' or 'to sup'; and when we ask from God our daily bread we include drink and all other necessities of life."[90] This work has also abstained from this idea up until this chapter because, again, the notion of drinking Christ's blood becomes very prominent in John 6. But Calvin maintains the same thing in all of his other works. In the Eucharist the cup represents Christ's blood and the bread represents His body, but both symbolically refer to the *same act* of partaking of Christ's flesh.

So, does the "Bread of Life" discourse have any bearing on the Eucharist for Calvin? Indeed it does. "… *I confess that there is nothing said here that is not figured and actually presented to believers in the Lord's Supper*. Indeed, we might say that Christ intended the holy Supper to be a seal of this discourse (emphasis mine)."[91] At the same time Calvin is careful to say, "And indeed, it would have been inept and unseasonable to preach about the Lord's Supper before He had instituted it. *So it is certain that He is now treating of the perpetual eating of faith* (emphasis mine)."[92] In these two texts it is seen that the vivifying flesh of Christ first and foremost has reference to the gospel, and yet in the Lord's Supper believers partake of the flesh of Christ by faith in the same way that they do on a regular basis.

The final thing to be said here is that Calvin does not deny that Christ's flesh is the bread of life because of His life and work, especially what He did on the Cross.

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[90] Ibid., 160.
[91] Ibid., 170.
[92] Ibid.

Calvin simply goes further than this by also saying that the divine life the elect need for subjective salvation is channeled through His flesh. Calvin says:

> This will not be at all obscure if we consider what is the reason for life, namely, righteousness. Although righteousness flows from God alone, we shall not have the full manifestation of it anywhere else than in Christ's flesh. For in His flesh was accomplished man's redemption; in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sins, and an obedience yielded to God to reconcile Him to us; it was also filled with the sanctification of the Spirit; finally, having overcome death, it was received into the heavenly glory. Therefore it follows that in it are placed all the parts of life, so that none can rightly complain that He is deprived of life because it is hidden and far off.[93]

As Gerrish says, "[For Calvin] the flesh of Christ is life-giving because in it everything requisite to salvation was accomplished. But it does not actually save us unless we draw life from it. And no redemption could have been wrought in Christ's flesh if it were not the 'channel' of his own divine life."[94]

Summary

In this chapter three key strands from Calvin's voluminous writings, namely the *Institutes,* Calvin's other works besides the *Institutes* and Calvin's commentary on John 6, and finally Calvin's thoughts on the very important chapter six of the Gospel of John, have been examined in order to glean his vivifying flesh doctrine. It has been shown that Calvin did without question teach the vivifying flesh doctrine as the introduction to this work laid out, and even though the channel or conduit element to his thought on this point is largely obscured by the majority of scholars and theologians, it is an undeniable element to Calvin's teaching.

In the next chapter, the second half of the body of this work, it will be seen how Calvin's doctrine fits into the overall flow of Christian history, especially the history of

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[93] Ibid., 167-168.
[94] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 131.

Reformed thought. This chapter will pay particular attention to the very difficult question of the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Supper, how Calvin dealt with that question, and how his thought on that subject relates to his specific vivifying flesh teaching.

CHAPTER THREE

CALVIN'S TEACHING AND THE HISTORY OF DOCTRINE

Calvin's Doctrine and the Real Presence

A Real Presence or Not?

Ligon Duncan in a fine summary chapter on the disputed points about Calvin's understanding of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper explains that he sees that historically there have been five major views within Christ's Church on the presence of our Lord in this sacrament.[95] The first is the view of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. This view states that Christ is physically present in the sacrament because the elements are wholly changed into the substance of His body and blood. Duncan calls this view the *transubstantiation* position.[96] The second view is the Lutheran view that says essentially the same thing about the presence of Christ as the first, the only difference being in the mode of that physical presence. In the first view the elements are completely changed, whereas in this second view the elements remain and the physical body and blood of Christ are added to the elements so that they are with, in, and under the elements. This view has historically been denominated by the title *consubstantiation*.[97]

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[95] See Duncan, 2:429-435.

[96] It must be said here that Duncan's presentation could be argued with from a definitional perspective. This is because the Eastern Orthodox Church does not technically hold to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Duncan recognizes this but says that this church uses very similar language and that the two doctrines are almost identical. That may be so but I doubt Eastern Orthodox theologians would appreciate being categorized alongside of Catholics on that point. If it were argued that Duncan is simply including both positions within a very broad category it could be responded that he should then include the Lutheran view under such a category in that all three positions hold to a real, physical, corporeal presence of Christ's flesh in the Supper and that the differences between the three positions could be seen as sub-positions within this broader category. With all of that said though, I think the fact that the Orthodox and Catholic positions are so alike and the Lutheran is so fundamentally different from them that Duncan's method has merit. See Duncan, 2:431.

[97] See ibid.

The third position Duncan lays out is the *memorial view* which has traditionally been associated with Zwingli and certainly seems to be the majority report among American Evangelicals today.[98] This view says that Christ is spiritually present in the Supper in that His divine nature is omnipresent and His Holy Spirit is also always present with us as well. This position would qualify that proposition by saying that this is a rather moot point in that this is true at all times and not just of communion.

The fourth view, according to Duncan, is what he calls the *real presence view within Reformed circles*. In this view sacramental efficacy, strong "real presence" language, and the sealing aspects of the Eucharist, are all heavily emphasized. This position appeals to Calvin and says that a truly Reformed view of the sacrament is one that should completely adhere to the historic, classical, catholic adoption of some form of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.[99]

The fifth position is termed the *true communion with Christ view*. This view is not against the language of "real presence" so long as this is only understood in terms of the Spiritual presence of Christ via His divine nature and Holy Spirit. This view would be careful to say that this does not mean that we are severed from the humanity or flesh of Christ. There is a real communion with the person of Christ which of course includes his human nature and, therefore, in a sense even His flesh. This camp would strongly assert, though, that Christ's humanity taken in itself is not *present* other than to minds and hearts in the Supper because it ever remains in heaven, and that no amount of

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[98] This view was held by many prior to the Reformation, was a key doctrine among the Anabaptists, and has been held by many other Protestant/Evangelical groups as well. For all of this cf. Millard J. Erickson, "The Zwinglian View," in *Christian Theology,* 2d ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 1128. I am also aware of the heated debate over to what extent it is fair or not to associate Zwingli with this view. It is beyond the scope of this thesis however to enter my thoughts on this argument. Suffice it to say that historically, for good or for bad, the memorial view, or "symbolic memorialism" as it is termed by Gerrish, has been connected with Zwingli.

[99] See Duncan, 2:432-433.

theological wrangling or rhetoric can change that unless one is going to adopt a more Lutheran or Catholic view of things.[100]

Duncan points out that there is a great deal of nuance and variation within this camp. He sees three sub-camps within the umbrella of the *true communion with Christ view*. The first are those who would unreservedly affirm what was said above while still distancing themselves from the fourth overarching view enumerated by Duncan. The second sub-camp within the fifth position would be those who would affirm what was said about this view but would express their reservations about using the term "Real Presence" in any technical sense. The third sub-view within this position would be those who would reject the technical term "Real Presence" altogether because of its unfortunate associations, but would nonetheless essentially hold to the position above from an abstract doctrinal point of view. Another very important difference among those who would assert themselves to be within this camp would be over the question of whether in the Lord's Supper a mere strengthening of faith takes place or whether the Holy Spirit fills believers further in a literal objective sense.[101] This is not something Duncan focuses on, but it is at the heart of a great deal that will be discussed in this chapter. What would make those who do hold to an actual additional inflow of spiritual life in the Supper differ from those within the fourth camp on this point is that these theologians

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[100] See ibid., 2:433-434.

[101] Of those that Duncan lists it seems clear that men such as Warfield, Cunningham, and Dabney would only see a strengthening of faith. Others such as Sproul and Horton would more than likely assert more than a strengthening of faith. This latter point seems to be a sound conclusion based on the fact that both men endorsed Mathison's work on the subject. This of course does not mean that they adopt every element in Mathison's thought on the doctrine, rendering a conclusion about their stance on the specific vivifying flesh point inconclusive. However, the major emphasis on the objective inflow of life from Christ in the Supper found throughout Mathison's work would seem to suggest that these men would not disagree with that element since their endorsement was given to the substance of the book.

would not believe that this issue should be so important as to draw a major line in the sand within the Reformed world as did Nevin.[102]

Duncan points out that Calvin did not hold to an unqualified "Real Presence" view. Duncan says, "'Real Presence' is language that Calvin never uses to describe his own view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper."[103] He then adds, "It is imprudent in the extreme, then, to apply it as a title for his own teaching."[104] Duncan is making incisive points here because while it is clearly not wholly illegitimate to speak of "Real Presence" ideas within Calvin's thought so long as one properly qualifies this reality, most scholars completely ignore the need for this qualification based on the clear reasons Duncan gives above. Duncan chastises these scholars when he states, "… *realis corporis praesentia* is not language that Calvin endorsed as biblical or employed as the designation of his position. That nagging little fact is run over roughshod by those anxious to make Calvin a proponent of a real presence view, albeit one of a higher order."[105]

Calvin does however speak of the presence of Christ throughout his chapter on the Lord's Supper in the *Institutes* and he is clearly not just talking about the Spiritual presence of Christ through His divine nature and the Holy Spirit or only of the *communicatio idiomatum*.[106] On the contrary, Calvin *everywhere* makes it clear that this "presence" is to be thought of in some way as connected to the efficacy of the flesh of

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[102] See Duncan, 2:434.
[103] Ibid., 2:446.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid., 2:433.
[106] Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17. Also, I am using the term *communication idiomatum* here and throughout this work in its traditional Reformed sense and in no other. For more information on this see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, combined ed. with new preface (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 324.

Christ in the Supper and that this efficacy has reference to the vivifying flesh of Christ.[107] On this thought John D. Nicholls has these words to say, "It is not by mere divine omnipotence, not merely by the ubiquity of His divine nature, that he is present, but by the special work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is variously described by Calvin as the channel by which Christ's flesh comes down to us; as the One whose power bridges the vast distance between us and Christ's glorified body, and as the one whose special work it is to fill the vacuum of Christ's absence."[108]

Duncan attempts to make a case that Calvin's view is most in accord with the fifth position. Duncan states that Calvin believed that, "Christ is not elementally, spatially, or locally present in the Supper in any way."[109] Calvin would have been aghast at such a naked statement. To be fair to Duncan, there is some truth to what he is saying as far as it goes. However, he makes a major slip-up here in that Calvin was always careful to say that despite the fact that the humanity of Christ is in heaven alone, one can still say that Christ is present in the Supper, *because the efficacy of His flesh is given to believers in a positive, objective sense, and is therefore present in that sense*.[110] This crucial aspect to Calvin's thought is almost completely absent in Duncan's presentation and that is quite an omission indeed. As Gerrish says, "Calvin says, here and elsewhere, about feeding on the body, *which is not a purely mental or cognitive operation* (emphasis mine)."[111]

Calvin makes this clear when in his section entitled, "The Presence of Christ's Body in the Lord's Supper" he says, "But if it is true that a visible sign is given us to seal the gift of a thing invisible, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less

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[107] Cf. Ibid.
[108] Nicholls, 39.
[109] Duncan, 2:441.
[110] Calvin, *Institutes,* 4.17.18.
[111] Ibid.

surely trust that the *body itself is also given to us*."[112] If one wanted to argue that Duncan could essentially hold to the same thing because he also believes that Christians are fed by the body of Christ through the work that body did on their behalf and because that body authoritatively feeds them because it is ever united to the divine nature that gives to them direct spiritual life and is reminding them of this life through the sacrament, it must be said that this is not the position of Calvin. Calvin goes much further than this as has been shown with his vivifying flesh teaching, and Duncan would not say that because of such a feeding from Christ's flesh can one infer a *presence* of that flesh other than one to the minds and hearts of believers, which is precisely what Calvin does in the quote above. Of course Calvin does not conceive of this in any rigorously local or corporeal way, but a genuine, the word "real" is avoided here for obvious reasons, presence of Christ's flesh cannot be denied from his thinking especially in light of the title of the section just examined.

Duncan may respond that he would not disagree with Calvin here other than over the vivifying flesh doctrine if he found the case of this work compelling, and that perhaps this work has misunderstood Duncan and misrepresented him. The key for Calvin, though, is that the presence of Christ's flesh can be spoken of in the Lord's Supper in a manner of speaking, yes, but in a semi-literal manner of speaking because the believer really partakes of the flesh and it is this efficacy that makes Christ's presence an actual efficacious presence.[113] On that particular point Calvin is clearly more in line with the fourth position and this is why so many within that camp have appealed to him as an

[112] Ibid., 4.17.10.
[113] Cf. ibid., 4.17.9 and 18.

authority for their thinking, and with that established it is hard to see how Duncan did full justice to the Reformer.

Furthermore, while there are those within the fifth camp that would undoubtedly affirm a real influx of the filling of the Holy Spirit each time the Supper is worthily received, many would only assert a mere strengthening of faith. And within that camp the difference between those two positions would be seen as an intramural debate and not one that is of the utmost importance. In the fourth position the objective influx of spiritual life each time the Supper is received by believers is seen as extremely important. This is why Nevin, who does not completely adopt the vivifying flesh doctrine, but still holds to the notion that an objective force of life from Christ comes to Christians each time they partake of the Supper and that this does not simply refer to the strengthening or drawing out of the faith or life that they already possess, and that this point must be fought for intensely,[114] would fall firmly within the fourth camp. The key thing to remember about all this is that on this particular point Calvin had far more in common with Nevin in that he would have had little patience for those who would have only seen a mere strengthening or drawing out of faith in the Lord's Supper. While Calvin does recognize the confirming and thus strengthening of faith in the Supper, he also clearly teaches that in the act of this strengthening the Holy Spirit objectively infuses believers with the life from Christ's flesh.[115] That point is far more in line with the fourth position than the fifth.

The final thing to explore in this section is the double aspect to the presence of Christ in the Sacrament. According to Calvin Christ can be said to be present in the

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[114] See Nevin, *The Mystical Presence,* 51-61; 178-184.
[115] Cf. Calvin, *Institutes,* 4.17.8.

sacrament in two senses. The first is that through the Holy Spirit the worthy recipients of the Supper are in mind and heart brought up to heaven to contemplate Christ as He gives to them the life that is symbolized in the Sacrament. The second is that Christ can be said to be brought down to the Christian by the fact that the Spirit is bringing the flesh of Christ down to the believer in that He is bringing the life from Christ's flesh to Him. But in both cases the presence is not merely one that is to Christians minds and hearts, although that reality is present especially in the first sense discussed above. The presence in both aspects is also most true and unique because of the life from Christ's flesh that is being brought to the believer and by which the believer can truly be said to be eating Christ's flesh.[116]

Parallelism and Instrumentalism

Gerrish explains the fundamental difference between these two strands of thought with these words, "Whereas for Thomas a sacrament was an instrumental cause by which God, the principal cause or agent, imparted grace to the soul, Scotus could only understand a sacrament as a sure sign that, by a concomitant divine act, grace was simultaneously being imparted."[117]

Where Calvin fits here is greatly open to debate. Gerrish believes he belongs in the instrumentalist camp[118] while Mathison places him squarely in the parallelism understanding of things.[119] The difficulty here can be resolved by understanding that Calvin is clearly more of an instrumentalist in that for him the sacraments are the means by which God seals and confirms to believers what the sacraments symbolize and this in

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[116] Cf. ibid., 4.17.10; 18-19.
[117] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude,* 168.
[118] Ibid.
[119] See Mathison, *Given for You*, 271-272.

turn produces part of the efficacy of the sacraments, namely the confirming and strengthening of faith.[120] However, Calvin is far more of a parallelism proponent when it comes to his belief that when faith is strengthened, God at the same time infuses into Christians the life of Christ which is not directly produced by the sacramental elements but is only symbolized by them and is in fulfillment of the promises being made by the sacraments.[121] As Gerrish himself admits, "Calvin was able, in practice, to adapt either manner of speaking to the evangelical sacraments."[122]

All of this ties in with what was said about Calvin under the real presence discussion. For many within the fifth camp, those who would hold only to a strengthening of faith, an instrumentalist understanding would be adopted even if their instrumentalism is far removed from the *ex opere operato* instrumentalism of Thomism and later fully sanctioned by Roman Catholicism. On these grounds some may object that the term instrumentalist is being used here in a historically inaccurate manner. It is true that for those within the fifth position described above, the sacraments, strictly speaking, do not bring about what they symbolize, although the relationship between the efficacy of the sacraments and what they symbolize would be much tighter with the Lord's Supper than baptism. It is also true that instrumentalism was almost synonymous with an *ex opere operato* conception of the sacraments in the High Middle Ages. But it is also perfectly legitimate to use this term in a looser, historically developed sense to describe views that see the elements themselves as essentially bringing about the efficacy of the sacraments. This is clearly the way in which Gerrish and others use the term to define Calvin's position on this point.

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[120] Cf. Calvin, *Institutes,* 4.14.5.
[121] Cf. ibid., 4.17.4-5.
[122] Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude,* 168.

With all of that said, it can be seen that many within the fifth position given by Duncan, those that only see a strengthening of faith from the right use of the elements, are instrumentalist because for them the efficacy of the sacraments is effected by the elements themselves. They would not say that the elements have any power residing within them, or that the Holy Spirit is not working, all such things would be vehemently denied. But the elements explained by the word of God are the seals of the grace that they symbolize and in that sealing faith is strengthened. The Holy Spirit is behind all of this in that it is He that has given faith, He that sustains faith and brings believers to the Supper, He that illuminates and inspired the word that explains the sacraments, and in the Eucharist He raises the minds of believing recipients to contemplate Christ through the elements making His presence all the more real to them. In all of this though the Spirit does not give any direct additional spiritual life unless it is in His will to sovereignly do so at the moment of the sacrament and in which case such life is not intrinsically connected to the actual efficacy of the sacrament. The Spirit essentially strengthens and draws out the life that He has already implanted within the believer.[123]

Things are quite different for the Genevan reformer. In Calvin's understanding *an actual additional infusing of the life from Christ's flesh comes to the believing recipient of the sacrament*.[124] Calvin would also be most fervent in emphasizing his belief that this is an absolutely crucial factor in correctly understanding the Lord's Supper.[125] In those ways Calvin was clearly more in line with parallelism.

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[123] See Duncan, 429-475.
[124] Cf. ibid., *Institutes,* 4.17.5.
[125] It is impossible to avoid this conclusion in light of all that we have seen Calvin say thus far and if one reads Calvin's thoughts on the Sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, in his *Institutes* from start to finish it becomes very apparent just how passionate Calvin is to maintain that the sacraments do normatively impart to the worthy believing recipient what the sacrament symbolizes and we have seen again and again how Calvin believes that the elements in the second sacrament represent Christ's body and

Gerrish believes that both parallelism and instrumentalism are well represented within the Reformed camp historically, while Zwinglian memorialism has been universally abandoned officially but not altogether practically. These three positions he calls "symbolic memorialism", "symbolic instrumentalism", and "symbolic parallelism". He believes that Bullinger is the father of the parallelism side, while Calvin is the source of the instrumentalist side.[126]

None of this seems to do full justice to the facts. Calvin cannot be defined as a pure instrumentalist because of his clear insistence that life from the flesh of Christ is brought to believers each time they partake of the Supper. And within Reformed theology almost all confessions and theologians have used some instrumentalist language in line with Calvin. It seems better, then, to say that within the historic Reformed tradition there have been pure instrumentalists and there have been those who hold to a mediating view between the two positions. All of those within the fourth camp and many within the fifth would belong to the latter, while many within the fifth camp would belong to the former.

Calvin's Doctrine and the Reformed Tradition

The Reformed Confessions

The first thing that needs to be said about the Confessions is that a *prima facie* reading of them yields nothing by way of explicit assertion as to the vivifying flesh doctrine. Nothing is found in them that is ever as explicit as is Calvin. With that said,

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blood and the nourishment that comes from them, which is the divine life, and that cannot be harmonized with any notion of a mere strengthening of faith when Calvin so often talks about the life of Christ coming to the believer when he partakes of Christ's flesh. See Calvin, *Institutes,* 4.14-17.

[126] Gerrish, "John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," in *Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Richard C. Gamble, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism, vol. 10 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 238-239.

this does not necessarily mean that the Confessions do not endorse the teaching. As was said earlier regarding the Consensus Tigurinus, often confessions use certain words or terms that are historically and theologically pumped full of meaning so that the confession can remain succinct and to the point.

For example, in the Westminster Confession of Faith it says, "The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father: the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son."[127] The Confession gives little explicit information as to what exactly these terms mean. The term "eternally begotten" certainly on the face of it sounds contradictory, especially in English. These words could be taken in any number of ways. However, no one argues what the divines intended to convey here. The historical background to these words and terms goes back to Nicea[128] and it is clear both from the rest of the Confession itself as well as from the writings of the divines that they were orthodox in the Nicene sense. Hence, with that in mind one must be very careful when interpreting the Reformed Confessions as to the question of whether or not they embrace, deny, or remain neutral regarding Calvin's vivifying flesh doctrine even though no explicit statements are to be found in them regarding this question.

What is found in the Reformed Confessions before the Westminster Confession of Faith are consistent references in the sections on the Lord's Supper to eating Christ's flesh and that in doing so we become "bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh" and receive life or vivification. Those were key terms and phrases that Calvin uses again and

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[127] "Of God, and of the Holy Trinity," in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 27.

[128] For background to the Council of Nicea see Mark A Noll, "Realities of Empire: The Council of Nicaea (325)," in *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity,* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 47-65.

again to describe his vivifying flesh doctrine. Also striking about these confessions is that they use very strong language when speaking about the presence of Christ in the Supper and connect this to the eating of Christ's flesh and the efficacy that results from that action. All of that sounds very Calvinian.

The Gallican Confession states, "… Christ… feeds and nourishes us truly with his flesh and blood, so that we may be one in him, and that our life may be in common…. [W]e believe that by the secret and incomprehensible power of his Spirit he feeds and strengthens us with the substance of his body and of his blood."[129] The Scots Confession makes these assertions:

> This union and conjunction which we have with the body and blood of Christ Jesus… is wrought by means of the Holy Ghost, who… carries us above all things… and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus…. Notwithstanding the distance between his glorified body in heaven and mortal men on earth, yet we must assuredly believe that the bread which we break is the communion of Christ's body…. [Believers] are so made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone that as the eternal Godhood has given to the flesh of Christ… life and immortality… so the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Christ does the like for us.[130]

The Belgic Confession proclaims, "… we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ."[131]

The Heidelberg Catechism asks, "What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his shed blood?"[132] It answers, "… although [Christ] is in heaven and

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[129] "Article 36," in *The Gallican Confession,* in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* 3d ed. revised and enlarged (New York: Harper and Brothers, Franklin Square, 1877), 3:380.
[130] "Chapter 21," in *The Scots Confession*, in *The Book of Confessions (Presbyterian Church USA)* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA, 1999), 22.
[131] "Of the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ," in *The Belgic Confession*, in Schaff, 3:430.
[132] "Question 76," in *The Heidelberg Catechism*, taken from *The Book of Confessions*, 40

we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone."[133] Finally, one reads from the Second Helvetic Confession that:

> [Christ] now feeds us with his flesh, and gives us his blood to drink, which, being received spiritually by faith, nourish us to eternal life. And this so great a benefit is renewed as often as the Lord's Supper is celebrated…. Christ, although in his body he is absent from us in heaven, [is] present with us, not corporeally, but spiritually, by his vivifying operation….[134]

Many more passages could be added, but these more than suffice to show that given Calvin's influence on these Confessions a strong case could be made that it is very likely that his vivifying flesh doctrine is adopted within them. What is lacking from them by way of explicit assertions are clear statements about the life of the Godhead being channeled into the flesh of Christ and then channeled to us by the Holy Spirit. It is true that in some places some of the confessions come close, but they all leave open the door at least a crack for a more *communicatio idiomatum* reading of these statements from a purely *prima facie* perspective.

The Westminster Confession of Faith on an initial reading sounds far less Calvinian than the other Reformed Confessions, but, nonetheless, does use some language that could be used to argue that it nonetheless adopts Calvin's view. The Confession states:

> Worthy receivers outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed…, spiritually feed upon Christ crucified…. [T]he body and blood of Christ being… really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.[135]

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[133] Question 76: Answer," in *The Heidelberg Catechism*, in *The Book of Confessions,* 40.
[134] "Chapter 21," in *The Second Helvetic Confession*, in *The Book of Confessions,* 102 and 104.
[135] "Of the Lord's Supper," in *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

Gerrish in a fine article on the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper within the Confessions makes a strong case that both Calvin and Bullinger represented by "symbolic instrumentalism" and "symbolic parallelism" can be found in the various Reformed Confessions.[136] It is difficult to tell to what extent Gerrish is correct, but his article at the very least demonstrates how difficult it is to tell, both historically and from *prima facie* readings of the Confessions, to what extent Calvin's view was fully adopted by the Reformed Confessions in general.

Reformed Theologians

The fact that the Reformed community by and large has not taught the vivifying flesh doctrine is not denied by any quarter. Where contentions arise is whether or not an actual abandonment of Calvin's doctrine took place and whether or not the Reformed community's denial of the vivifying flesh doctrine is a good thing. That is, there are some who deny that Calvin actually taught this doctrine and would then say that no abandonment took place and that Calvin has been misunderstood and misrepresented. Then there are those who believe that Calvin was off and say that it is to the Reformed community's credit that it departed from Calvin here. Finally, there are those who admit that Calvin taught this (although one is hard pressed to find any modern writer as explicit as Mathison in regard to the conduit element of the vivifying flesh doctrine), and that either his entire doctrine or the spirit of his doctrine is correct and that it has been detrimental to the Reformed family that it has not retained Calvin's thought here and calls for a return to the great Reformer's belief. All of this will be detailed in the subsequent discussion.

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[136] Gerrish, "Sign and Reality: The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1982), 118-131.

In the early days of the Reformation it seems that most within the Reformed branch of Protestantism[137] either held to Calvin's doctrine or held to something close to it. Mathison and Nevin provide convincing statements from Bucer, Vermigli, Beza, and Hooker to support this.[138]

In the seventeenth century there is the beginning of a shift. The doctrine seems substantially to still be in Owen and within many strands of Puritanism.[139] It may also be in the Westminster Confession of Faith as has been seen. However, the doctrine seems to be waning among the Puritans as well as in the Continental communities,[140] and it is completely absent from such notable writers as Turretin and Witsius.[141] By the eighteenth century the doctrine had all but been discarded. It does not appear to be in the Continental Reformed, the English Calvinists, the Presbyterians, or the many Reformed communities in the American colonies in any significant degree.[142]

A resurgence took place in the nineteenth century. John Williamson Nevin and the Mercersberg theologians as well as many Southern Presbyterians passionately called the Reformed world back to Calvin.[143] Nevin did not technically adopt the specific

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[137] I am of course using this term in the broad theological sense; I am not limiting the term here only to the Continental Reformed churches.
[138] For the first four see Mathison, *Given for You*, 50-69; and for Hooker see Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 99-100.
[139] Cf. Mathison, *Given for You*, 98-101; Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 100-103; and Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004).
[140] Cf. Mathison, *Given for You*, 93-122; and Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 105-116.
[141] See Francis Turretin, "The Holy Supper" through "The Sacrifice of the Mass," in *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), 3:421-538 (19.11-29); see Herman Witsius, "Of the Lord's Supper," in *The Oeconomy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (Printed by George Forman for Lee and Stokes, 1798), 3:416-446.
[142] Cf. Mathison, *Given for You*, 122-128; Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 105-115. Cf. also Jonathan Edwards, *Sermons on the Lord's Supper*, ed. and comp. Don Kistler (Orlando: The Northampton Press, 2007); and Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004).
[143] Cf. Mathison, *Given for You*, 129-161; Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*; Adger, "Calvin Defended Against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge"; and E. Brooks Holifield, "Mercersberg, Princeton, and the South: The Sacramental Controversy in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 238-257. For Dr. Cunningham's work see William Cunningham,

vivifying flesh doctrine of Calvin and it is hard to tell if all of these Southern Presbyterians did not as well. They were far more concerned with sacramental efficacy and the presence of the humanity or flesh of Christ within the Supper.

The twentieth century also saw Calvin's doctrine fall out of use. It is not in Bavinck, Warfield, Vos, Berkhof, Berkouwer, Clark, or Packer.[144] Berkhof and Berkouwer are two examples of theologians who have their doubts about whether or not Calvin actually taught what has been ascribed to him in this work.[145] Berkhof says that Calvin is obscure here and that he may be speaking figuratively.

In the present century a small resurgence has taken place and only time will tell if it will become as powerful or as controversial as what transpired in the nineteenth century. This primarily started with the publication in 2002 of Keith A. Mathison's *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* wherein he lays out a powerful, passionate, and scholarly case for the full adoption of Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper including the vivifying flesh doctrine. His book was endorsed by R.C. Sproul, Michael S. Horton, and Frank A James III. These endorsements do not necessarily mean, though, that these men would agree with the specific vivifying flesh doctrine, they may have only

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"Zwingle, and the Doctrine of the Sacraments," in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 212-292. For Hodge's work see Hodge, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 20 (1848): 227-278.

[144] See Herman Bavinck, "The Spirit's Means of Grace: The Lord's Supper," in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4:540-589 (4.2.11); see B.B. Warfield, "The Fundamental Significance of the Lord's Supper," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1970), 1:332-339; see Johannes G. Vos, "Use of the Sacraments," in *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G.I. Williamson (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2002), 460-512; see Berkhof, "The Lord's Supper," 644-656; see G.C. Berkouwer, "The Real Presence," in *The Sacraments*, from the Studies in Dogmatics series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 219-244; see Gordon H. Clark, *First Corinthians: A Contemporary Commentary* (Jefferson: The Trinity Foundation, 1975), 158-163 and 178-188; see J.I. Packer, "The Lord's Supper: This Rite Exhibits Communion with Christ," in *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), 217-220.

[145] For the former see Berkouwer, 231-243. For the latter see Berkhof, 653-654.

been endorsing the general substance of the work. There has also been quite a resurgence within what is known as the "Federal Vision" movement as to sacramental efficacy and the "Real Presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. This is discussed in Ligon Duncan's summary of the views within the historic Christian Church on the presence of Christ in the second sacrament. It will be recalled that this view was represented by the fourth position; the position Duncan calls the "Real Presence View within Reformed Circles." However, it does not seem like most of these advocates give a clear articulation of any vivifying flesh doctrine as does Mathison.[146] And Mathison is not part of the Federal Vision party, thus showing that not all within the fourth position given by Duncan are a part of that movement as Duncan himself recognizes.

Other recent theologians that seem to have an affinity for Calvin's teaching are Morton H. Smith, Edmund P. Clowney, Robert L. Reymond, and Robert Letham. The first three do not appear to be clearly endorsing Calvin's teaching in its entirety. Letham comes the closest but even in him the flesh of Christ as a channel or conduit for the divine life of God is almost entirely absent.[147]

The Debate between John Williamson Nevin and Charles Hodge

No historical sketch on the way in which the Reformed community has reacted to Calvin's doctrine would be complete without a brief overview of the infamous debate between Nevin and Hodge during the nineteenth century. Nevin was a fiery proponent of returning to the spirit of Calvin's view while Hodge remained within the majority of the Reformed community that thought Calvin had erred in his conception of the Lord's Supper on a few points, one of which included the vivifying flesh doctrine. What is often

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[146] Cf. Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2006).
[147] See Mathison, *Given for You*, 173-175. See also Letham.

lost in this debate and which is very important for the purposes of this work is that Nevin himself corrected Calvin on the vivifying flesh. Even Mathison misses this when he represents Nevin as endorsing Calvin's teaching on the Lord's Supper *in toto*.[148]

Nevin

Nevin essentially holds to the overall view of Calvin on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper with a few minor exceptions, the most notable being the vivifying flesh of Christ. What Nevin is most zealous to maintain is the objective force of life that is given to believers each time they partake of the Supper and that this leads to a real presence of Christ in the sacrament which in a sense includes his humanity and thus His flesh. Nevin is very opposed to any notion of a mere subjective strengthening of faith or of a conception of the presence of Christ's body that is one only to minds and hearts.[149] For example, Nevin at one point has this to say:

> The power of [Christ's] life in this form is actually exhibited at the same time in the mystery of the sacrament. The one is as truly and really present in the institution, as the other. The elements are not simply significant of that which they represent, as serving to bring to mind by the help of previous knowledge. They are the pledge of its actual presence and power.[150]

Here Nevin does not just distance himself from a purely memorial view of the sacrament. In a purely memorial view the emphasis is on remembering and proclaiming what Christ has done on behalf of the believer. It is primarily a work the believer does by which he proclaims to the world what Christ has accomplished for him.[151] What Nevin is describing is a view where the sacrament is still a means of grace, the means are only

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[148] See Mathison, *Given for You,* 136-148.
[149] See Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*. In order to really understand how important and pervasive these ideas are to Nevin's thought one really must read the entire work.
[150] Ibid., 179.
[151] Cf. Duncan, 431-432.

accomplished by reminding the believer of what Christ did which will bring about a subjective benefit. Nevin though, says that this is not all that is done in the sacrament. Nevin makes it clear that the nourishing power that is symbolized by the elements is really exhibited and present when the sacrament is taken by the worthy recipient. In all of this Nevin was essentially one with Calvin, but he did disagree with the reformer on other related topics.

Nevin prefaces his departure from Calvin with these words:

> It has already been admitted that the Calvinistic theory of the Eucharistic Presence, as exhibited more or less distinctly in all the Reformed symbols of the sixteenth century, is embarrassed with some difficulties. These however concern at last not so much the fact itself, which may be said to constitute the true and proper substance of the doctrine, as the defective form in which it was attempted to bring it before the understanding. It was always held indeed that the fact was in its own nature a mystery, not to be reduced to any clear explanation in this way: but still it became necessary in the controversy with Romanism and Lutheranism on the one side and the Socianizing tendency on the other, not only to define and describe the limits of the fact itself at every point, but also to go a certain length at least, in endeavoring to beat down popular objections, and meet the demands of the common reason. The success of such an effort hung necessarily, to a greater or less extant, on the general theological and philosophical culture of the time. As this has been in some measure superseded by later intellectual advances, it ought not to be counted strange that the doctrine now before us, as well as the entire religious system of the same period, should be found to exhibit some vulnerable points as it regards form and outward representation. This we find to be the case in fact.[152]

Nevin is clear here that, while he does not reject what he sees as being the fundamental aspects of Calvin's doctrine on the Lord's Supper, he, nonetheless, sees problems with Calvin's doctrine. Nevin goes on to explain that he sees three subtle errors in what he calls the Calvinistic doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Supper.[153] The first is that he believes Calvin does not sufficiently distinguish between the organic law that constitutes a body a true body, and the mere matter of a physical body. For

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[152] Nevin, *The Mystical Presence,* 155.
[153] See ibid., 156-163.

Nevin the physical matter of a body is not a body; it is only matter. A body is only a body when it is animated by the organic law of that body. He sees Calvin as seeing the physical body of Christ as the actual body of Christ and life is then separately infused into that body which can then be transmitted to Christians. Nevin objects to this and says Calvin should have understood that one cannot even conceive of the body of Christ apart from its animating life.[154]

The second weakness Nevin sees in Calvin here is that he believes the great teacher fails to fully take into account the unity of the person of Christ regarding His divine and human natures as well as the unity that exists within mankind in general, namely the unity between man's body and soul. Nevin says that Calvin is so focused on the flesh of Christ that he understands it almost separately from His divine nature and that the life the elect receive from Christ only comes to our souls and has an effect on our bodies only in a secondary tangential manner. Nevin says that the flesh of Christ must be seen as animated at all points by the hypostatic union in an organic manner and not as almost being infused with life from without. Nevin also says that the life believers receive from Christ penetrates to their persons, both body and soul, and that the emphasis should not be almost exclusively on the soul.[155] Nevin explains:

> Not as though his humanity separately considered could be said to exercise the functions of divinity; for this is a false distinction in the case; and we have just as little reason to say that the divinity thus separately considered ever exercises the same functions. The are exercised by the theanthropic Person of the Mediator, as one and indivisible. If then Christ's life be conveyed over to the persons of his people at all, in a real and not simply figurative way, it *must* be so carried over under a human form, including both the constituents of humanity, body as well as soul; and the new bodily existence thus produced, must be considered,

[154] See ibid., 156-57.
[155] See ibid., 157-60.

> independently of all local connection, a continuation in the strictest sense of Christ's life under the same form.[156]

The third objection Nevin has with Calvin on this point is that he believes Calvin failed to understand the distinction between Christ's life in His own person and that life considered in a more generic sense. Nevin talks about how parents have life but that they also give life to their children by bringing them forth. Nevin says that the life Christ gives to His people is more of this nature in that Christ gives spiritual life through the Holy Spirit but that one does not need to conceive of the life from Christ as a force that is within His humanity that is then transfused into Christ's followers.[157]

In all of this Nevin denies the vivifying flesh doctrine of Calvin. Nevin says:

> … the representation [of Calvin] is confused…. If for the 'vivific virtue' of Christ's flesh Calvin had been led to substitute distinctly the idea of the organic law of Christ's human life, his theory would have assumed at once a much more consistent and intelligible form.[158]

Hodge

Charles Hodge, in his review of Nevin's famous book, shows that he had little patience for Nevin.[159] He accuses Nevin of Eutychianism, Socianism, Pantheism, Sabellianism, and of implicitly denying a full doctrine of justification by faith alone.[160]

All of these charges seem to be serious exaggerations, although Nevin is very abstract and relies heavily on Schleiermacher, making the task of interpreting him correctly rather difficult.

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[156] Ibid., 158.
[157] See ibid., 160-61.
[158] Ibid., 157.
[159] See Hodge, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper."
[160] See ibid., 259-78.

Hodge also seeks to build a strong case for the notion that a mediating view of the Lord's Supper, that is really the fifth view enunciated by Duncan, should be adopted because it is the view found in the Consensus Tigurinus, and Hodge argues, to a lesser degree, in the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession.[161] Hodge's reasoning is that this document best represents the overarching view of the Reformed Church because Calvin was seeking only to include that which all Reformed thinkers agreed on, and not to include the disagreements that existed between those who were closer to Calvin and those who were closer to Bullinger. The problem with Hodge's argument, is that this document was the result of compromise, and almost all of the other Reformed Confessions contain language that could be interpreted as either supporting Calvin's view, or of at the least being closer to his view, including, it must be said, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Second Helvetic Confession. Furthermore, it is very hard to tell if Bullinger was essentially removed from Calvin, or if he only strongly disliked some of the terminology that Calvin and many others in the Reformed community were utilizing, resulting in the Consensus Tigurinus sounding not as overtly Calvinian as most of the other Reformed Confessions.[162]

For the purposes of this work it is important to remember the fact that the absence of any vivifying flesh teaching in the document only serves to bolster the claim made by this work that Calvin's doctrine is not the historic Reformed teaching. If it is argued that there is historical precedence for not taking the document too seriously, this work can grant the point while arguing on other grounds in the conclusion that Calvin's doctrine is

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[161] See ibid., 237-54.
[162] Cf. Rorem. Also, cf. Timothy George, "John Calvin and the Agreement of Zurich (1549)," in *John Calvin and The Church: A Prism of Reform,* ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 42-59.

still not the historic Reformed position. Either way, Hodge's heavy reliance on the document is not needed to prove the thesis of this work.

Hodge also accuses Nevin of High Church tendencies, of lacking scriptural support for his very strong "Real Presence" language, and vehemently chastises Nevin for his abstract, psychological framework.[163] As far as Calvin himself is concerned, Hodge is far more patient towards the reformer, and contents himself with a strong disagreement with Calvin over the vivifying flesh doctrine. Hodge says of Calvin's view:

> [It] is an uncongenial foreign element derived partly from the influence of previous modes of thought, partly from the dominant influence of the Lutherans and the desire of getting as near to them as possible, and partly, no doubt, from a too literal interpretation of certain passages of scripture….[164]

For all of these things Hodge seems to have been on much stronger ground and in the end most within the Reformed community at large sided with him.

For the goals of this thesis, it is important to note that at the end of the day, despite their tremendous and important disagreements, neither Hodge nor Nevin fully adopted the specific vivifying flesh doctrine of Calvin. Hodge of course explicitly repudiated it.

Summary

In this chapter it has been shown that part and parcel to Calvin's vivifying flesh teaching is how that teaching connects to the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It has been demonstrated that of the five overarching positions Duncan presents Calvin fits best within the fourth despite the fact that Calvin avoided the explicit language of "Real Presence", a phenomena that should be attributed to different historical climates rather than genuine theological difference. It has also been seen that Calvin

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[163] See Hodge, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," 259-78.
[164] Ibid., 251.

should be considered to be somewhere in the middle on the issue of instrumentalism verses parallelism. Finally, it has been detailed that the Reformed community down through the centuries has not by and large adopted Calvin's specific vivifying flesh teaching even though in the early days of the Reformation the Reformed community seemed to be at the least much closer to Calvin.

In the final chapter of this work, the conclusion, some of the crucial shortcomings of Calvin's doctrine will be brought to light, the importance of this subject will be emphasized, and a pastoral course for the future will be paved out.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

To those like Berkhof who would say that Calvin may have been speaking figuratively I must respond that Calvin was just too clear a writer and his statements are just too plain and explicit for such a position to be tenable. If Calvin were speaking of the *communicatio idiomatum* or of the fact that the flesh of Christ is very much the grounds for our spiritual life then we would have expected him to make this much clearer in all of the statements we have examined. Would Calvin have not said that he simply meant that Christ's flesh in a sense earned us eternal life or spiritual life or the Holy Spirit or that the flesh of Christ is our food in a manner of speaking because it is included in all actions that are predicated of the person of Christ which includes the giving of spiritual life? We have seen that Calvin did not deny these elements, but at the same time, he makes himself very clear over his notion that the flesh of Christ is a channel of divine life in that the life from the Godhead is poured into it and is transferred to us by the Holy Spirit. Such explicit language cannot be swept under the rug.

As far as Calvin's doctrine itself is concerned there are in actuality a number of theological problems I have with it. However, many of the theological accusations that I would lay at the feet of Calvin over his vivifying flesh doctrine could take another thesis each, in order to fully detail my contentions. Since this thesis has primarily focused on Calvin's doctrine as it pertains to the Lord's Supper, and since this is where Calvin places it, I will focus on this aspect of his teaching alone. In regard to the Lord's Supper I have two primary problems with his doctrine. The first concerns the channel or conduit element to the vivifying flesh doctrine, and the second has to do with the way in which

Calvin tries to utilize this doctrine to prove his particular understanding of Christ's presence in the Supper.

The channel or conduit element to Calvin's thought on this point is simply completely absent from Scripture. Not a single passage ever talks about Christ's flesh in the manner in which Calvin does. Calvin tries to steer a middle ground between a literal interpretation and a figurative interpretation of the passages that speak of eating or partaking of Christ's flesh. The problem is that no middle ground exists. Either these passages are speaking literally or figuratively. This is not to say that we must adopt a purely symbolic approach to the Lord's Supper. As I will detail below I believe that such an approach falls far short of what the Bible teaches concerning this sacrament. However, when it comes to eating Christ's flesh itself, we must ask if we literally eat this flesh or if this language has symbolic reference to something else. And clearly the latter is the case, as the former leads to a doctrine that so violates our common sense that it cannot be true, and there is no need to conjure up any channel or conduit ideas in order to seem like we are doing greater justice to these texts. We do symbolically eat of Christ's flesh; the question is to what exactly does this symbolism refer? It is this question that will be answered next.

While we must be most thankful that Calvin avoids the use of the term "Real Presence" because of the way in which it was used in his day, he, nevertheless, believes in a genuine presence of Christ's flesh that goes beyond one that is simply to our minds and hearts. Firstly, we do not need to make any needless distinctions about the "eating" of Christ's flesh not referring to faith but simply to the fruit of faith. All of the biblical and theological arguments in this regard are most strained. We partake of Christ's

benefits by faith and through that He nourishes us unto eternal life. Even when we partake of the elements we believe what God is promising through the Sacrament which strengthens our faith and then God further fills us with His Spirit. Eating corresponds to faith, and nourishment corresponds to spiritual growth. As far as eating and drinking of the flesh and blood are concerned, we can be said to do so figuratively in that the Logos accomplished our redemption through the humanity that He joined to His person, and because now the humanity of Christ ever joins in all of the works and decisions of the divine nature which includes the imparting of spiritual life.

I agree with Calvin and Nevin as well as many others that in the Supper God each time grants us an objective influx of spiritual life. However, I strongly disagree with any notion that this means we feed upon the flesh of Christ in any way other than in a figurative manner. Despite Calvin's greatest efforts he simply cannot avoid the fact that even in his system the believer does not actually eat of the flesh and blood of Christ. Believers in his thought only receive the life that comes from Christ's flesh. If I drink soda from a cup through a straw one cannot say that I drink the cup itself unless they are going to do so in a figurative manner only. The same is true in regard to Calvin's vivifying flesh and the life that allegedly comes from it.

Even if we were to grant to Calvin all that I have just denied him this would still not lead to the conclusion that Christ's flesh is present to us in any manner other than to our minds and hearts in the Lord's Supper. Christ's humanity is in heaven and no amount of mental gymnastics can change that. This is not to say that we are not connected to Christ's humanity or that we cannot in any way speak of the presence of His humanity in the Lord's Supper, even a "Real Presence", so long as we are careful to

distinguish that we are not using that term in the way that it was used in Calvin's day or that by it we simply mean to teach what Calvin taught. Our union with Christ is a full union with His person as has been said. And in the Supper we are brought much closer to Christ and, therefore, He is present to us, His humanity included, in a very real and powerful way. But this presence is simply one to our minds and hearts. His humanity is in heaven and his divinity is always present with us and cannot in any ontological sense become more present to us. Thus, even when the benefits of Christ's flesh are brought to us in a real way each time we partake of the Supper, this still does not warrant us speaking of His flesh being present to us in any way other than to our minds and hearts.

Allow me to elaborate. When the sun's rays hit my body there is a sense in which I am much more aware of the sun and can even speak of the sun's presence to me in a manner of speaking. But, that presence is still one only to my mind and body as I feel its warmth upon my skin. The heat that the sun lets off which travels billions of miles to me is not the sun itself. The sun remains ever distant from me and that cannot change unless its location or my location is changed (and let's hope that doesn't happen!). The same would be true in Calvin's conception. The so-called vivifying life from Christ's flesh is not Christ's flesh itself and, therefore, even if that life were transferred to us in the manner in which Calvin describes, we could still only speak of a presence of Christ's flesh to our minds and hearts that has been made all the more real to us by the reception of this life.

It should be clear to the reader now that as far as Duncan's presentation that we examined carefully I plant myself firmly within the fourth camp, although in saying that, I wish to make it clear that I repudiate the Federal Vision movement. I have no problem

with the language of "Real Presence", in fact I think it is a theological term that should be retained and used with regard to the Reformed doctrine of the Supper, so long as such terminology is carefully qualified both theologically and historically. And I hold to an additional inflow of spiritual life each time the Supper is taken in a worthy manner, rather than a mere strengthening of faith, and I believe that this aspect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is extremely important.

It is also clear to me that Calvin would not have been comfortable within the fifth camp even though he was quite wary of the term "Real Presence" and called the sacraments appendages to the gospel. Duncan is quite correct to call attention to these things and those of us within the fourth camp would do well to heed his words and do a better job of clarifying the issues. With that said, Calvin did, nonetheless, believe in strong sacramental efficacy and in a very true and dynamic presence of Christ, although I would disagree with Calvin and others in the way in which this has been articulated as I discussed at length earlier. Hence, I appreciate a great deal of the criticism that has been leveled at Hodge and Dabney and the drift within the Reformed community over the centuries in regard to this element of the Sacrament. However, that to which I am very opposed is the way in which most of these criticisms almost completely evade the vivifying flesh issue, which is one part of the criticism from men like Hodge and Dabney that should have been better received, although I would agree with a great deal of the criticism that has been thrown the way of those two great men for reducing the efficacy of the Lord's Supper to a mere subjective strengthening of faith. I also understand that my stance on the "Real Presence" question may preclude some within the fourth camp from readily accepting me as one within their ranks, but I hope that I have shown that we

can still hold to a very real presence of Christ in the Supper while avoiding certain needless absurdities.

The reason all of this is so important is because there is a growing revival of Reformed thinking happening around the world and in our country today. It is largely happening among people in my age demographic, namely twenty five to thirty five years of age (I just turned thirty). It is a very exciting thing to be a part of and to be witnessing. I have seen many lay Reformed Christians very excited about the *Institutes* and other Reformed works. Mathison himself has arrived and is a well respected Reformed theologian. Therefore, if we do not point out this error many people may be led into a false understanding of the Lord's Supper. We want our fellow brothers and sisters to be consistent witnesses to this world and we also do not want people to have a false understanding of such a beautiful thing as the Eucharist. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to tell people that the traditional Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper is not identical to that of Calvin's despite the way so many, even Reformed scholars, speak. And we must tell them that Calvin was mistaken and God in His grace led His people within the Reformed community, for the most part, to leave behind Calvin's unfortunate error.

Mathison, I am sure, would take exception to the way in which I have been using the term "the traditional Reformed" position or understanding concerning the Lord's Supper throughout this work to denote the denial of Calvin's position. It must be said in this regard that even granting to Mathison that the bulk of the Reformed Confessions, even the Westminster Confession, and the early Reformers and Reformed theologians fully accepted Calvin's position, something that is far more difficult to prove than

Mathison realizes, this still does not warrant the conclusion that Calvin's position has the right to be called *the* Reformed position as Mathison believes.[165]

I would never want to downplay the importance, authority, and foundational role that Calvin, the Reformed Confessions, especially Westminster, and the early Reformed teachers had upon Reformed theology. And I understand in contradistinction to the liberals that a group cannot say that they hold to the fundamentals of any theological system or tradition simply because they have a historical or ecclesiastical connection to that system or tradition. If we as Reformed people drastically depart from Calvin, the Reformed Confessions, and the earliest Reformed doctors, then we are obligated to call ourselves something else, such as neo-Reformed or the like. At the same time, though, all systems and beliefs must be allowed to undergo development. No tradition is infallible. Creeds and Confessions are not Scripture.

Hence, if the Reformed community for the most part abandoned Calvin's teaching as Mathison himself admits and yet still holds to the fact that the sacraments are not naked signs but are effectual means of grace because they are also seals of God's promise, that we "feed" upon the flesh and blood of Christ because Christ, humanity and divinity together, is nourishing us by strengthening our faith or also further filling us with His Spirit, that all of this is possible because of what He did in His flesh, and that in the Lord's Supper Christ's *person* is present in a very real, special, and yet qualified way, then it seems to me that this position holds to the most important elements of the early Reformed teachings while bringing about correction and development that has been the

[165] See Mathison, 91.

mainstay of most of Reformed theology for centuries, and therefore it has the better claim to being called the traditional Reformed position.[166]

[166] It must be remembered though that within what I am calling the traditional Reformed position we would find two sub-parties that could be even further broken down than that. These would correspond to the fourth and fifth positions on the presence of Christ laid out by Duncan. One could also distinguish things by focusing on those that are instrumentalists and those that hold a more mediating view between instrumentalism and parallelism. I think the first path is the better one in that the fifth position could be sub-divided into those holding the mediating view and those holding to instrumentalism and thus maintaining the real differences of emphasis between the fourth and fifth camps from Duncan's presentation.

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