

Calvin's Essay on the Lord's Supper from  
 "The Form of Prayers," 1542 and 1545  
 Translated by  
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(Calvin's inclusion of this essay in his liturgy indicates its importance as a brief introduction to the doctrine and practice of The Supper. A recent study, Elsie Anne McKee: John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving, has emphasized its significance for Calvin's views on almsgiving in public worship.)

The Eucharist is the communication of the body and blood of the Lord, which as St. Paul testifies, ought to be taken to the end that we might more amply abide and live in Christ, and that he might live and abide more amply in us. For this reason he reunites (or brings together) all things in the celebration of this holy Supper in order that more and more we might desire to live and abide in Christ (that is to say to eat the flesh and to drink the blood of the Lord) and to receive this meat and drink with greater fruit and religion. Hence, it is necessary to institute and to control this action in this manner in order that the people might be duly instructed and admonished how necessary it is for them to participate often in the flesh and blood of the Lord and how great are the benefits which we receive from this communication and mastication.

From this it follows, in the first place, that the Supper ought only be given to those who are capable and who greatly live in the Lord and who have him living in them, and who also desire that this life of Christ be increased and made greater in them (for this is the reason why the communication of the body and blood of Christ is given in this holy Supper in order that we might live entirely in him and that he might live in us). For this reason it is necessary for the good and faithful dispensers of the ministers of God to know (i.e. recognize) (insofar as Christian charity, religion, and holy administration require this) those to whom they wish to give the Supper of the Lord to be already incorporated by baptism into the Lord Christ and that they are his true and living members and that they hunger for this meat of eternal life and thirst for this holy drink. The others, because they cannot participate in the sacrament without condemning themselves, must be kept /literally "driven away"/ from the holy Supper (as the early Church commanded) by the deacon, as well as those who are not yet fully instructed in the Christian religion, plus the wicked and those who had to leave the church and who should be making penance but who have not yet been received in grace. For this reason our Lord himself gave the first Supper only to those more elect disciples. For it is not fitting to give what is holy to dogs nor to give the meat of eternal life to those who do not hunger for it.

Therefore the Lord's Supper should only be given to those who are known and approved (as already said) by the rule of charity and religion, [a rule] which one must have in this holy administration, which also requires the confession of the mouth and [the acknowledgement] that in our life there is nothing contrary to it. Ministers, therefore, act in a holy and correct manner, both by their ministry and its dignity,

when they only receive persons to the sacraments whom they first of all know to be approved and instructed. Moreover (insofar as this meat and this drink of eternal life ought only be administered to those who truly desire it) it follows that the people to whom one ought administer the Supper ought to be admonished in it so thoroughly as to understand and sense how necessary it is for them to profit from the communication of Christ and to obtain always a greater profit from it and what benefits are offered in it to them.

For this reason we begin, quite rightly, the mystery of the Supper by confessing our sins and adding to that the readings of the Law and the gospel with Psalms in order that by the confession of our sins and the explication of the divine Law (which ordains present and eternal pains for sins and gives only to the good present and future rewards) we might be drawn by a greater understanding and sentiment from our sins and realize that because of them we deserve eternal damnation.

For when we consider how opposed our entire life is to the law of God and that not a single work of ours is good and that sin has still such a great domination in our flesh that we do not do the good we want to do but the evil we hate, in doing so we recognize how necessary it is for the communication of the body and blood of the Lord to be increased in us. For only the flesh and blood of Christ have in them righteousness and life. For in our flesh and our blood there is nothing good by which we can inherit [possess or claim] the Kingdom of God. Hence, it is appropriate in the holy Supper that, beyond or in addition to the confession of sins, we pray for forgiveness of our sins, read and explicate the divine Law, and sing psalms magnifying the majesty of God and explicating the Law and asking God for forgiveness.

Now because by the preaching of the gospel we understand that Jesus Christ our Lord, [who] is true God and true man, has in the cross satisfied God his Father for our sins by the oblation of his body and his blood, and that by the communication of them it pleases him to give us [the opportunity] to live in him and he in us, also by this we realize what excellent benefits are offered to us by the communication of the body and blood of the Lord.

First of all, we are assured of the remission of our sins and are certain of the grace of the Father who has adopted us as his children and heirs and who by his son pardons all our iniquity, both original and present sin, and who pardons all our sins everytime we sin against him and humbly ask him for forgiveness, which he does by his great mercy. From this it follows that we may have confidence in the paternal benevolence and care of God in all adversity and call upon him all the more boldly, asking from him everything that is good [to us biens].

Next we are assured that as Jesus Christ is righteous and [has] life in himself, and lives for the Father who has sent him, and gives to his own the life of God, a life which indeed is happy and eternal, in order that they may live in him and he live in them; so learn that by the communication of the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ we have always more abundant life and righteousness from God, that is to say complete happiness. For in the same measure that he gives us more amply to live in him and he in us, who without hat have nothing good in ourselves, the

more amply do we participate in his life: which is the life of God, righteousness, and happiness.

Furthermore, we are [made] righteous in Jesus Christ and live in new life by this same Jesus Christ. Hence, in order that we might consider these things with greater diligence and that we might be rendered more ardent and desirous to receive this holy meat and drink of eternal life, we rightly have psalms and hymns of praise, the reading of the gospel, the confession of faith, and the holy oblations and offerings, which declare what has been given to us in Christ and how great are the benefits which we receive by the communication of his flesh and blood, or at least they admonish us to esteem correctly these things and to praise them with true praises and ardent actions of grace, and also to make them praise worthy and precious among others.

And it isn't without good reason that we add the oblations, to that which we have said above. For when we recall to mind (excited and moved by the reading and explication of the Gospel and the confession of our Faith, which we do next) that Jesus Christ is given to us from the infinite bounty of the celestial Father and with him all things: that is to say the remission of sins, the covenant of eternal salvation, the life and righteousness of God, and finally all those desirable things which are added to the children of God, that is to say to those who seek his Kingdom and his righteousness: it is with good and just cause that we offer ourselves and submit ourselves entirely to God the Father and to our Lord Jesus Christ acknowledging so many and so great benefits. And we testify to this by giving offerings and holy gifts (as Christian charity requires) which are given to Jesus Christ by giving them to the least, that is to say to those who are hungry, who are thirsty, who are naked, who are strangers, who are sick, and who are held in prison. For all those who live in Christ and have him abiding in them do voluntarily what the Law commands them. For the law commands that we do not come before God without an offering. We are also shown the same in that no one can be said to be subject to his carnal lord or to his benefactor without acknowledging him with a gift.

Thirdly, it follows that we ought to pray for the salvation of all men (because the life of Jesus Christ ought to be greatly aflame and vigorous in us). For the life of Christ consists in this, to seek and to save the lost. With good reason, therefore, we pray for all conditions [of men].

Now because we truly receive Jesus Christ in this Sacrament, with good cause we adore him in spirit and truth in this holy Supper, and we receive the eucharist with great reverence and finish this mystery with praises and actions of grace. Hence the entire order and reason for administering the Supper is plain to us from the nature and institution of the Supper, which is also in accord with the manner of administration in the early Church of the Apostles, the Martyrs, and the holy Fathers, with whom we are equally in accord by administering all the Sacraments in the common and popular tongue.

For everything that is said appertains to everyone there, and must confirm and arouse our Faith and inflame our desire for God in all things. For this reason, when we admonish the people to prepare them-

selves before coming to this sacred banquet, we teach and admonish them always these four things.

First, that we are so lost because of Adam's sin and our own that there is no one who is good in himself, neither in all our nature nor in all our flesh. For this reason neither our flesh nor our blood can inherit the kingdom of God; from which follows that we ought to be moved to acknowledge our sins and to break away from our evil life, in order that we might confess with a true heart our offenses and ask forgiveness for them.

Second, [we teach] that Jesus Christ is alone the one who has won for us the remission of our sins and obtained our pardon from the Father by his Death and the pouring out of his precious blood. He also quickens his righteousness in us when he makes us live in him and when he lives in us.

Third, that Christ himself is present [literally, "takes part himself"] in this sacrament of the Supper, for in giving the bread and the wine, he said, "Take and eat, this is my body, etc." Hence, he truly gives his body with the bread and his blood with the cup. Why? For the remission of sins and the confirmation of the new testament. For he says, "This is given for you." And later, "This is poured out for you for the remission of sins." And still again, "This is the new testament and the covenant of eternal grace," in order that God might be our true father through Jesus Christ and we his children. Hence, Jesus Christ gives himself in this sacrament in order that he might live in us and we in him; and thereby we are assured of the remission of our sins because of his love, of the confirmation of the new covenant in order that we might be the children of God, and that he is our father. Thus we become one same race, one same mind, and one same nature. And anyone who refuses to acknowledge this the Lord Jesus Christ will pray for him. For we ought not concern ourselves with the word of Jesus Christ, with his actions, and with his power, in order that we might not doubt that by this sacrament Jesus gives us his body and his blood, to the end that we might live in him and that he might live in us, assuring us that through him we have the complete abolition of our sins, the confirmation of our heavenly Father's grace and of the eternal covenant, that we are the children of God, that he is our father, and that he gives us all good things.

Now two things are herein given to us. The first is terrestrial, being the bread and wine. The second is celestial, which is the communion of Christ, that is to say, his body and his blood. And these two things are given to us for two reasons: for the remission of our sins, and for augmenting Christ's life in us, which is to say, the confirmation of the new covenant.

Finally, we teach that it is necessary to give thanks to the Lord Jesus for these great benefits with our hearts, with our words, and with our actions, and that we ought greatly to praise and exalt the memory of Jesus Christ and all his benefits, that is to say, of his Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, of the sending of the Holy Spirit, of his coming to judge the world, and finally of all those things he has done for us and ordained us to do.

Hence in leaving behind all frivolous disputations and debates, we attempt to do and seek principally in the Supper what we have said above, in order that we might come to understand how necessary it is for Christ to live in us and we in him, and also to the end that we might believe that he gives us himself in this sacrament in order that we might live in him and he in us, for the purpose of obtaining the remission of our sins and fulfilling the life of God in us, and also for pardoning our absence of good which we do not have. In sum, therefore, the principal thing about this mystery of the Supper is that we might live in Christ and that he might live in us. This the heavenly Father grants us through Christ. Amen.

One should note that the Sunday before the Supper is celebrated, one announces it to the people, first: in order that each might prepare himself and dispose himself to receive it correctly, and with such reverence as belongs to it. Second, that one should not present their children unless they have been instructed and have made their profession of faith in the Church. Third, in case there might be foreigners, who are still uninstructed [in the faith], in order that they might present themselves for instruction in the particulars. On the day that it is celebrated, the minister touches on it toward the end of his sermon, or still better makes it the subject of his entire sermon, in order to explain to the people what our Lord wishes to say and to signify by this mystery and in what way he wants them to receive it.

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