

WAS CALVIN A CRYPTO-ZWINGLIAN?

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INTRODUCTION

My aim in this paper¹ is to draw attention to a much neglected aspect of Calvin's doctrine which casts doubt on some well-known interpretations.²

1. CALVIN'S *VIA MEDIA*

(a) Luther and Zwingli

It has been claimed that Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is basically Zwinglian teaching wrapped up in Lutheran language, a charge that we shall examine today. One sure fact is that this runs totally counter to Calvin's own perception of his doctrine. In 1539 he described Zwingli's view as 'falsa et perniciosa'.³ While his opinion of Zwingli steadily improved over the years, Calvin continued to feel closer to Luther on this issue.⁴

¹ This paper is also being published in a forthcoming festschrift for Brian G. Armstrong: Mack P. Holt, ed., *Adaptations of Calvinism in Reformation Europe: Essays in Honour of Brian G. Armstrong*. (London: Ashgate, 2007).

² The following abbreviations are used: LCC 22 = J. K. S. Reid (ed.), *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Library of Christian Classics vol. 22) (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954); SWJC = H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (eds.), *Selected Works of John Calvin. Tracts and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 reprint of nineteenth-century editions); OS = P. Barth *et al.* (edd.), *Johannis Calvini Opera Selecta* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-68 - 1st - 3rd editions); CO = G. Baum, E. Cunitz & E. Reuss (edd.), *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* (Braunschweig and Berlin: Schwetschke, 1863-1900); Battles = F. L. Battles (tr.), *Institutes of the Christian Religion. 1536 Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

³ F. Blanke, 'Calvins Urteile über Zwingli,' *Zwingliana* 11 (1959) 66.

⁴ Blanke, 'Calvins Urteile,' 66-92. Ironically, the modest development in Calvin's eucharistic thought discerned by T. J. Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God* (New York: AMS Press, 1995) is in the opposite direction, away from Zwingli.

In his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* (1541) Calvin carefully portrays his teaching as a middle way between that of Luther and Zwingli.⁵ Zwingli and Oecolampadius are praised for opposing the idea of a carnal presence of Christ (as had been held for over 600 years) and of an idolatrous worship of the elements. But so preoccupied were they with this that 'they forgot to define what presence of Christ one ought to believe in the Supper, and what communication of his body and blood one there receives'. Again, they are commended for their opposition to 'the local presence of the body of Jesus Christ ... and the adoration which followed from it'. But in stressing that the bread and wine are signs, they failed to add that 'they are such signs that the reality is joined to them'. They thus failed to safeguard 'the true communion which our Lord gives us in his body and blood by the sacrament'.⁶ In the *Institutio* Calvin similarly presents his teaching as a *via media* between Lutheran and Zwinglian errors. There are two faults to be avoided: showing too little regard for the signs and thus divorcing them from the reality and, on the other hand, extolling the signs immoderately and thus obscuring the reality.⁷ Zwingli and Luther are not named but are clearly intended.

While Luther rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation he continued all of his life to believe in the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. He believed that the bread remained bread but that the body of Christ was present 'in, with and under' the bread. A crude analogy would be the way in which water fills a sponge in the bath. Luther was inconsistent about whether this presence of Christ's body (and blood) was to be seen as a localized presence, in a place, but his later followers decided that it was not. Luther's fundamental concern was to avoid the reduction of communion to a subjective experience. For him, there is a sacramental union between the bread and Christ's body so what happens to the one happens to the other. In particular, if we eat the bread we eat Christ's body. This means that Christ's body is received orally, through the mouth, and that *all* who receive the bread (including unbelievers and the unworthy) receive Christ's body.

Zwingli's teaching was much simpler. He rejected the doctrine of the real presence. Christ's body and blood are present only by faith in the mind of the believer, not in any physical, material, bodily or corporeal manner. Jesus has ascended into heaven and his body is now contained there. Being a human body, it cannot at the same time also be on earth. The bread and the wine are materially unchanged, though in the context of the service the bread becomes sacred bread and acquires a dignity. This is not because it has been changed but because of what it signifies: Christ's body. Essentially the bread and wine are just symbols, superb visual aids. Christ is of course present at the Lord's Supper — through his

⁵ *Short Treatise* §§53-59 (LCC 22:163-66; SWJC 2:194-97; OS 1:526-29; CO 5:457-60).

⁶ *Short Treatise* §§56, 58 (LCC 22:164-66 with minor changes. Cf. SWJC 2:195-97; OS 1:527-29; CO 5:458f.). For Zwingli's doctrine of the Eucharist, cf. W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: OUP, 1986) ch. 11; H Zwingli, *On the Lord's Supper and An Exposition of the Faith* (G. W. Bromiley (ed.), *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Library of Christian Classics vol. 24) (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) [hereafter LCC 24] 185-238, 245-79).

⁷ *Inst.* 4:17:5. (Latin/English citations from the 1539-1559 editions of the *Institutio* are taken from OS 3-5/J. T. McNeill & F. L. Battles (eds.), *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Library of Christian Classics vols 20-21) (London: SCM and Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). Page numbers are not given as book, chapter and section numbers suffice.) Calvin already opposed these two positions in the 1536 *Institutio*.

Holy Spirit just as he is present wherever two or three gather in his name. But his body and blood are not present, except in our memories. Zwingli's doctrine has been described as 'the doctrine of the real absence'. Modern scholarship has pointed to other sides of Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper that are more positive, but these do not in any way alter his unambiguous and total rejection of any presence of Christ's body and blood in the service except in the memories of the participants. Bromiley perceptively notes that 'Zwingli does the negative work of criticism far better than he does the positive work of reconstruction.'⁸

(b) Calvin's Rejection of Zwingli

Calvin sets out his *via media* by showing where he disagrees with both Luther and Zwingli. In the present context it is the latter that especially interests us. His objections to Zwingli can conveniently be summarized under three headings. *First*, Calvin agrees with Zwingli that the bread and wine are signs and symbols but denies that they are empty, deceitful or lying signs. In particular, the reality signified by the elements (Christ's body and blood) is in the Supper truly exhibited and offered to us. 'Our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life ... If the Lord truly represents the participation in his body through the breaking of bread, there ought not to be the least doubt that he truly presents and shows his body.'⁹ The elements, as seen by Calvin, can be compared to a cheque — which is only paper but which effectively offers to us the sum signified. For Zwingli, by contrast, they can better be compared to Monopoly money — which symbolizes real money but has no actual value. For Calvin the bread and wine do not merely symbolize Christ's body and blood, they hold out to us the promise of feeding on them. They do not merely *represent* Christ's body and blood, but they also *present* them to us.

Here is the *second* point of difference from Zwingli. What does it mean to say that we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood? For Zwingli eating Christ's flesh means no more than believing in Christ; it is simply a picturesque way of saying the same thing. For Calvin, by contrast, it is *through* believing in Christ that we actually feed on his flesh and blood, we enter into a real communion with them. Calvin expresses it as follows:

For them [the Zwinglians] to eat is only to believe; I say that we eat Christ's flesh in believing, because it is made ours by faith, and that this eating is the result and effect of faith. Or if you want it said more clearly, for them eating *is* faith; for me it seems rather to *follow* from faith. This is a small difference indeed in words, but no slight one in the matter itself.¹⁰

Underlying these differences is the *third* point of difference, concerning the nature of a sacrament. Zwingli saw the sacraments as signs or symbols only. Their role is to remind us of God's grace. By means of them we profess our faith and pledge our loyalty to Christ (as in the pre-Christian meaning of the word *sacramentum*). The emphasis lies on what we do. For Calvin, however, the emphasis is on what we receive. In the sacrament, God's Word (the promise of the Gospel) is made visible and the benefit that is promised is received by faith. There is a strict parallel here with preaching. In the audible word, preaching, Christ is offered

⁸ LCC 24:181.

⁹ *Inst.* 4:17:10 (1559 & 1539).

¹⁰ *Inst.* 4:17:5 (1539). All emphases in quotations from Calvin are my own.

to people and received by faith. In the visible word, the sacrament, Christ is again offered to people and received by faith.

Calvin objects to those [Zwinglians] who, in explaining the communion that we have with Christ, 'make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood'.¹¹ He vigorously rejects the idea that the bread and wine are vain or empty symbols. Thus, in the Lord's Supper, through faith, by the power of the Spirit, we truly eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood. His anti-Zwinglian teaching is clear and consistent. When Calvin, like Bucer before him, goes to such pains to stake out a third, mediating, position how can it be suggested that he was just a Zwinglian in disguise? Must not Brian Gerrish be right to maintain that 'only the most perverse misreading of the sources could conclude that the sacraments have for Calvin a purely symbolic and pedagogical function'?¹²

2. CALVIN THE CUNNING SACRAMENTARIAN?

(a) The Charge

And yet the sharp contrast between Calvin and Zwingli was denied by (some) sixteenth-century Lutherans. The *Formula of Concord* (1577) puts it like this:

There are two kinds of sacramentarians. There are the crude sacramentarians, who state in plain language what they believe in their hearts: that in the Holy Supper there is nothing more than bread and wine present, nothing more distributed and received with the mouth. Then there are the cunning sacramentarians, the most dangerous kind, who in part appear to use our language and who pretend that they also believe in a true presence of the true, essential, living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, but that this takes place spiritually, through faith. Yet, under the guise of such plausible words, they retain the former, crude opinion, that nothing more than bread and wine is present in the Holy Supper and received there by mouth.

For "spiritually" means to them nothing other than "the spirit of Christ" that is present, or "the power of the absent body of Christ and his merit." The body of Christ, according to this opinion, is, however, in no way or form present, but it is only up there in the highest heaven; to this body we lift ourselves into heaven through the thoughts of our faith. There we should seek his body and blood, but never in the bread and wine of the Supper.¹³

Is this also to be dismissed as a 'most perverse misreading of the sources' or should it be taken seriously as a critique of Calvin's theology? Support for the Lutheran claim comes from Calvin's own career. In 1549 he reached doctrinal agreement (the *Consensus Tigurinus*)

¹¹ *Inst.* 4:17:7 (1539).

¹² B Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982) 111.

¹³ R. Kolb & T. J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 504.

with Bullinger, Zwingli's successor.¹⁴ Calvin even claimed that Zwingli and Oecolampadius, were they still alive, would not change one word in 'our doctrine' (i.e. the *Consensus*) — though it should in fairness be pointed out that Calvin made a similar (and unconvincing) claim for Luther.¹⁵ It should, however, be acknowledged that 'the consensus did not say all Calvin liked to say about the sacraments, only what he was not prepared to omit.'¹⁶ Or, as Paul Rorem put it, 'the most coherent assessment of the overall process is that they achieved a consensus statement principally because Calvin agreed to omit a crucial component of his position.'¹⁷ In particular, Calvin saw the sacraments as instrumental means of grace, where Bullinger saw them primarily as testimonies to God's grace.¹⁸ Thomas Davis has shown how Calvin needed to reinterpret the *Consensus* and read his own ideas into it in order to align it with his teaching.¹⁹

As an outcome of the *Consensus Tigurinus*, Calvin became, against his wishes, embroiled in a bitter controversy with two Lutherans, Westphal and Heshusius.²⁰ Does not the history of his relations with his contemporaries therefore suggest that Calvin was at heart a Zwinglian? A critical examination of Calvin's teaching reveals some facts which also point the same way.

(b) Calvin's Positive Teaching

Before turning to these we should perhaps briefly outline Calvin's positive teaching. For Calvin in the Lord's Supper the body and blood of Christ are offered to all, but are received only inwardly and by faith. This is strictly in parallel with the preaching of the Gospel. There too Christ is offered to all but received only by faith. Perhaps the best short summary of Calvin's view is found in the words of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. "Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with

¹⁴ To be more precise, the *Consensio mutua in re sacramentaria ministrorum Tigurinae ecclesiae et D. Ioannis Calvini ministri Genevensis ecclesiae*. Text in SWJC 2:212-20; OS 2:241-58; CO 7:733-48. Cf. E. Bizer, *Studien zur Geschichte des Abendmahlsstreits im 16. Jahrhundert* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1940) 234-74; J. C. McLelland, 'Meta-Zwingli or Anti-Zwingli? Bullinger and Calvin in Eucharistic Concord' in E. J. Furcha (ed.), *Huldrych Zwingli, 1484-1531* (Montreal: McGill University, 1985) 179-95; P. E. Rorem, 'Calvin and Bullinger on the Lord's Supper,' *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1988) 155-84, 357-89; T. George, 'John Calvin and the Agreement of Zurich (1549)' in T. George (ed.), *John Calvin and the Church* (Louisville (KY): Westminster John Knox Press, 1990) 42-58; Davis, *Clearest Promises of God*, 29-68.

¹⁵ *Mutual Consent in regard to the Sacrament* (SWJC 2.211; OS 2:267, CO 9:11).

¹⁶ Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 124. Rorem, 'Calvin and Bullinger,' 379, quotes from a letter to Bucer in which Calvin regrets the omissions.

¹⁷ Rorem, 'Calvin and Bullinger,' 383.

¹⁸ Rorem, 'Calvin and Bullinger,' 360-64, 371-76, 379-83.

¹⁹ Davis, *Clearest Promises of God*, 29-68.

²⁰ For the background, cf. J. N. Tylenda, 'The Calvin-Westphal Exchange,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974) 182-209; idem, 'Calvin and Westphal: Two Eucharistic Theologies in Conflict' in W. H. Neuser, H. J. Selderhuis and W. van 't Spijker (eds.), *Calvin's Books: Festschrift for Peter De Klerk* (Heerenveen: J. J. Groen, 1997) 9-21.

thanksgiving.' Calvin's great achievement was (with Luther) to affirm that we eat Christ's flesh and drink his blood while (with Zwingli) affirming that Christ's body is confined to heaven.

How does he manage this? The body and blood of Christ are offered to us in the symbols of bread and wine and are received by faith. This happens through the Holy Spirit, who unites us with them. British Telecom some years ago ran an advertising campaign in which a bird called Busby brought together people separated by great distances. Through the telephone company I am able here in South Carolina to talk to my wife in London. We are neither of us physically or locally present in the other place but we have a real communion. We don't just sit and examine photos of each other, remembering each other, but we really communicate. I cannot remember whether Busby was a dove, but he effectively illustrates the role of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's doctrine at this point.

Calvin did not, of course, use the telephone analogy but he did use another which very effectively illustrates the point that the Spirit brings us communion with Christ's flesh and blood. He compares this to the way in which the sun, by its rays, 'casts its substance in some measure' upon the earth to nourish it.²¹ Some years ago I spent the summer at the Meeter Center in Grand Rapids and one day we verified Calvin's analogy for ourselves. We all went down to Lake Michigan for the afternoon. The water was cold and there was a strong wind so we spent most of the time standing around talking. The wind distracted us from the power of the sun and we paid the price. For the next week there was a competition in the Meeter Center to see who could peel off the longest piece of skin in one go. We had remained firmly on earth. The sun had maintained its distance of some 93 million miles. But thanks to its rays we had enjoyed a real communion with the sun. We had truly participated in the sun's heat, as we were reminded for some days to come. This was no symbolic memorialism. Likewise, for Calvin Christ does not literally descend to the bread and wine and we do not literally ascend to heaven but the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ's body and blood in heaven, feeds us with them and gives us communion with them. 'In order to be present with us, [Christ] does not change His place, but from heaven He sends down the efficacy of His flesh to be present in us.'²²

Despite the very un-Zwinglian tone of this teaching there are those who maintain that Calvin differs from Zwingli more in rhetoric than in substance.²³ The grounds for this can be seen by examining three areas of his teaching: on the real presence, on the substance of Christ's body and on perpetual feeding.

²¹ *Inst.* 4:17:12 (1539).

²² *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24* (J. W. Fraser (tr.), *Calvin's Commentaries. The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960) 248). Cf. CO 49:489.

²³ C. Hodge, in his review of Nevin's *The Mystical Presence*, argues that the Reformed (including Calvin) wished to assert no more than that we receive the virtue or efficacy of Christ's body and blood but bent over backwards to express this in terms as Lutheran-sounding as possible, in the interests of unity (*Princeton Review* 20 (1848) 229f., cf. 227-59). H. Grass, *Die Abendmahlslehre bei Luther und Calvin* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1954) 249 refers to the escalation of realistic terminology in Calvin's controversy with the Lutherans.

(c) Real Presence

When it comes to the issue of the presence of the human body and blood of Christ, a number of scholars speak as if Calvin were an unequivocal supporter of the ‘real presence’.²⁴ Nijenhuis and Cadier have been criticized for this.²⁵ Bavinck speaks of being struck by Calvin’s emphasis on the real presence.²⁶ Max Thurian claims that Calvin’s ‘devotion demanded the most positive affirmations concerning the real presence’²⁷ and in another work assimilates Calvin’s doctrine to Luther’s doctrine of the real presence in a manner that is at best highly misleading.²⁸ Killian McDonnell expounds Calvin’s position accurately, but unhelpfully uses the term ‘real presence’ to describe this, claiming that none of the Reformers defended it more forcibly than Calvin.²⁹ Later we shall encounter some better known Calvin scholars who make similar claims. But is it in fact accurate to portray Calvin as a supporter of the ‘real presence’?

At first sight Calvin seems here to be at one with Zwingli, in opposition to Luther. He agrees that Christ’s body is ascended into heaven and remains there, seated at the right hand of the Father. Being human it cannot be in more than one place at once. Calvin rejects Lutheran ideas that Christ’s body can be omnipresent or present wherever he wills. Since Christ’s body is in heaven, it follows that there cannot be a local, bodily or physical presence on earth. In particular, it cannot be in, with or under the bread. It follows from this that we do not feed on Christ orally, through the mouth. I.e. Calvin rejects the Lutheran *manducatio oralis*. Since Christ’s body is not received through the mouth it also follows that unbelievers who partake do not in fact receive Christ’s body. I.e. Calvin rejects the Lutheran *manducatio impiorum*. Thus on four crucial points he lines up solidly with Zwingli against the Lutheran idea of the presence of Christ’s body and blood ‘in, with and under’ the bread and wine.

On this issue of Christ’s presence in the Supper, Calvin’s language varies (as does Zwingli’s).³⁰ He never himself affirms the term ‘real presence’. Tylenda comments that ‘the Reformer’s non-use of the expression “real presence” seems to indicate that he not only

²⁴ P. Jacobs, ‘Pneumatische Realpräsenz bei Calvin’ in *Regards Contemporains sur Jean Calvin. Actes du Colloque Calvin Strasbourg 1964* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965) 127, notes this trend.

²⁵ By J. N. Tylenda ‘Calvin and Christ’s Presence in the Supper — True or Real,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974) 74f.

²⁶ As cited by G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 225f.

²⁷ M. Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, Part II (London: Lutterworth, 1961) 110-19 (e.g. 118).

²⁸ M. Thurian, *The Mystery of the Eucharist* (London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1983) 44-46.

²⁹ K. McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 223-27. He inserts the term (within square brackets) into a key quotation from *Inst.* 4:17:32 (p. 255, cf. p.206).

³⁰ For this paragraph, cf. J. N. Tylenda, ‘Calvin on Christ’s True Presence in the Lord’s Supper,’ *American Ecclesiastical Review* 155 (1966) 321-33; idem, ‘Calvin and Christ’s Presence in the Supper,’ 65-75.

shied away from it, but perhaps even deliberately refrained from using it because of its evident verbal affinity to the teaching of his opponents.³¹ But Calvin also stated that he rejected 'the sentiments of all who deny the presence of Christ in the Supper,' noting that the debate hinges on the kind of presence that is held.³² In his four works written in response to Westphal and Heshusius, Calvin repeatedly states that the controversy concerns only the *mode* of our communion with and feeding upon Christ's flesh and blood.³³

As early as the 1536 *Institutio* Calvin rejects the idea that Christ is present '*realiter ac substantialiter*'.³⁴ Against Westphal he reaffirms this position, setting against such a presence a '*vera et reali*' communion with Christ's flesh and blood. In that sense Christ is present, but not 'in a corporeal manner'.³⁵ 'We must establish such a presence of Christ in the Supper as may neither fasten him to the element of bread, nor enclose him in bread, nor circumscribe him in any way.'³⁶ As regards the term 'real presence', Calvin considered it barbarous. But if it was taken to mean a true as opposed to fallacious or imaginary presence, Calvin could go along with it.³⁷ Calvin can, thus, speak of Christ's *presence*, but by this he means the *communion* that we have with his body and blood through the agency of the Spirit.³⁸ Against the idea of a local presence Calvin affirms: 'I hold that Christ is not present in the Supper in any other way than this — because the minds of believers (this being an heavenly act) are raised by faith above the world, and Christ, by the agency of his Spirit, removing the obstacle which distance of space might occasion, conjoins us with his members.'³⁹ It is true that Calvin affirms a 'true' presence of Christ's body, but by this he means *only* that we have communion with it by the Spirit. 'Thus I teach that Christ, though *absent* in body, is nevertheless not only present with us by his divine energy, which is everywhere diffused, but also makes his flesh give life to us.'⁴⁰ So does the true presence of Christ reduce to 'the power of the absent body of Christ and his merit', the accusation of the *Formula of Concord*?⁴¹ Calvin argues that the

³¹ Tylenda, 'Calvin on Christ's True Presence,' 323.

³² *True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ* (LCC 22:277f.; SWJC 2:517f. Cf. CO 9:478).

³³ *Mutual Consent* (SWJC 2:239f.; OS 2:283; CO 9:31f.); *Last Admonition to Joachim Westphal* (SWJC 2:366, 401, 481, 493; CO 9:157, 182, 241, 249f.); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:270; SWJC 2:510; CO 9: 472).

³⁴ Ch. 4:27 (OS 1:139; OC 1:120. Cf. Battles, 104).

³⁵ *Second Defence of the Sacraments* (SWJC 2:281; CO 9:73).

³⁶ *Inst.* 4:17:19 (1543/1559).

³⁷ *Mutual Consent* (SWJC 2:239f.; OS 2:283; CO 9:32). Cf. Tylenda 'Calvin and Christ's Presence,' 72 for the background of this passage.

³⁸ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:249, 285f.; CO 9:48, 76).

³⁹ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:280. Cf. CO 9:72). Local presence is already rejected in the 1537 *Confession of Faith concerning the Eucharist* (LCC 22:168; OS 1:435; CO 9:711).

⁴⁰ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:285. Cf. CO 9:76).

⁴¹ As at n. 12, above.

Spirit brings us communion with Christ's flesh and blood, and compares this to the sun and its rays. The implications of this analogy seem to support the Lutheran charge. Wendel puts his finger on the difference when he says that for the Lutherans 'there was a direct relation between the Christ and the elements', whereas Calvin, by contrast, 'put the Christ and the elements separately into direct contact with the believer'.⁴²

(d) The substance of Christ's body

In his talk about the substance of Christ's body and blood, Calvin has been accused of ambiguity at best, inconsistency at worst.⁴³ In the 1536 *Institutio* Calvin states that, 'the very substance of his body or the true and natural body of Christ is not given there; but all those benefits which Christ has supplied us with in his body.'⁴⁴ But in his 1546 commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24 he appears to say the opposite:

Christ does not offer us only the benefit of His death and resurrection, but the self-same body in which he suffered and rose again. ... The body of Christ is really (*realiter*), to use the usual word, i.e. truly (*vere*) given to us in the Supper, so that it may be health-giving food for our souls. ... Our souls are fed by the substance of His body, so that we are truly (*vere*) made one with Him.

He continues, however, to state 'what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving power from the flesh of Christ (*vim ex Christi carne vivificam*) is poured into us through the medium of the Spirit, even though it is at a great distance from us'. It is not surprising, therefore, that he had shortly before expressed his tolerance of the view that it is when come to share in Christ's benefits that his body is given to us, in the sense that the former explains what is meant by the latter. He himself maintains that it is only after we obtain Christ that we share his benefits — i.e. that the two are distinct.⁴⁵

⁴² F. Wendel, *Calvin* (London: Collins, 1963) 344.

⁴³ Wendel, *Calvin*, 340-43 takes the more charitable view. Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 106 reckons Calvin to be 'ambiguous, perhaps obscure'. D. Willis, 'Calvin's Use of Substantia' in W. H. Neuser (hrsg.), *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos* (Frankfurt, etc.: Peter Lang, 1984) 289-302 sees Calvin as teaching a 'real presence'. Cf. n. 92, below. McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist*, 232-48, discusses Calvin's use of substance language. Davis, *Clearest Promises of God*, sees development rather than inconsistency. Grass, *Die Abendmahlslehre*, 253f., 258, argues that Calvin's introduction of substance language serves to obscure rather than clarify his thought.

⁴⁴ Ch. 4:30 (Battles, 107. Cf. OS 1:142f.; CO 1:123), a passage that is omitted from later editions. Davis, *Clearest Promises of God*, 72f. points out that Calvin's later teaching about substantial feeding on Christ is not only absent from the 1536 *Institutio* but is here denied. In the context however, it could be argued that it is the substantial presence of Christ *in the elements* that Calvin is denying.

⁴⁵ *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24* (Fraser (tr.), *Calvin's Commentaries. The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 246. Cf. CO 49:487)

Calvin's mature position is found in his four works written in response to the Lutherans Westphal and Heshusius. There he repeatedly affirms that we have communion with⁴⁶ and are fed from⁴⁷ the substance of Christ's flesh and blood, which is the source of the benefits that we receive.⁴⁸ At the same time he denies any transfusion or transference of the substance into the bread and wine,⁴⁹ or any substantial presence in the bread and wine.⁵⁰ In particular, the substance of Christ's flesh and blood is not swallowed or digested.⁵¹

Much of this is found in a passage from his 1556 *Second Defence of the Sacraments* against Westphal, which refers four times to substance, twice positively and twice negatively:

Though I confess that our souls are truly fed by the *substance* of Christ's flesh, I certainly do this day, not less than formerly, repudiate the *substantial* presence which Westphal imagines: for though the flesh of Christ gives us life, it does not follow that his *substance* must be transferred into us. ... Nor will I ever hesitate to acknowledge that, by the secret virtue of the Holy Spirit, life is infused into us from the *substance* of his flesh.⁵²

The key to Calvin's thought is his affirmation that the body and blood of Christ are in heaven and cannot be in more than one place at a time. Given that, there is no question of any substantial presence in, with or under the bread and wine and no question of any oral, physical partaking of the substance of Christ's flesh and blood. But through the work of the Holy Spirit the believer is enabled to have a spiritual communion with Christ's flesh and blood, to feed upon them and to receive from them the benefits won by Christ. Davis helpfully remarks that for the Lutherans the metaphor of feeding on Christ in the Eucharist refers primarily to the action of eating, while for Calvin it refers primarily to the nourishment that follows from eating. 'Calvin believes that the Eucharist shows forth Christ

⁴⁶ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:285; CO 9:76); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:278, 287, 290, 328f.; SWJC 2:518, 529, 533, 577; CO 9:478, 486, 489, 521 ; OS 2:294).

⁴⁷ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:277f., 293; CO 9:70f., 82); *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2:486, 493; CO 9:244, 250); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:264, 270, 278, 308, 314, 329; SWJC 2:502, 510, 518, 553, 560, 577; CO 9:467, 472, 478, 504, 509, 521; OS 2:294).

⁴⁸ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:248, 277, 285, 293, 329; CO 9:47, 70, 76, 82, 109); *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2:401, 416, 445; CO 9:182, 193, 215); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:263f., 328f.; SWJC 2:501f., 577f.; CO 9:466f., 521f.; OS 2:294f.).

⁴⁹ *Mutual Consent* (SWJC 2:239; OS 2:283; CO 9:31); *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:248, 277f., 283; CO 9:47, 70, 74); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:329; SWJC 2:578; OS 2:294; CO 9:522) Cf. *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2: 401; CO 9:182).

⁵⁰ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:249, 277f., 280, 298; CO 9:48, 70, 72, 86).

⁵¹ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:298; CO 9:85); *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2:402; CO 9:183); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:268, 329; SWJC 2:507, 577; CO 9:470, 521; OS 2:294).

⁵² *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:277. Cf. CO 9:70).

as food because food is nourishing, not because it can be eaten.⁵³ This can be seen, for example, in the following passage from Calvin's 1561 response to Heshusius:

When this absurdity [corporeal eating] is out of the way, there is no reason why we should deny that we are substantially fed by the flesh of Christ, because we are truly united into one body with him by faith, and so are made one with him. Hence it follows that we are joined with him by a substantial fellowship, just as substantial vigour flows down from the head to the limbs. ... Substantially we become partakers of the flesh of Christ — not that any carnal mixture takes place, or that the flesh of Christ brought down from heaven penetrates into us or is swallowed by the mouth, but because the flesh of Christ, in virtue of its power and efficacy, vivifies our souls just as the substance of bread and wine nourishes our bodies.⁵⁴

But what does all of this mean? In 1937 Helmut Gollwitzer distinguished three possible senses of substance in Calvin.⁵⁵ These are very widely cited in the literature, mostly via François Wendel who quoted them in his magisterial *Calvin*.⁵⁶ The first sense is 'the substance or nature of a thing, thus the substance of the body (subjective genitive), i.e. the real and natural body of Christ'. For Calvin we do not actually receive the bodily substance of Christ's flesh and blood, although this remains the *source* of the life that we receive from him and it is this sense that we feed substantially on him. The second sense is 'Christ himself as the substance of the sacrament'. Calvin affirms that Christ is the substance of the sacrament and that he is received by faith. The third sense is 'the substance of what we gain when we receive Christ, i.e. life, benefits, strength, etc. from his body'. This is the spiritual substance of the body of Christ and this substance flows into our souls from his body.

It is helpful to recognize that Calvin's use of the word substance varies in meaning, but Gollwitzer's division is not without problems. Calvin denies not that we receive the real and natural body of Christ⁵⁷ but rather that we receive it orally. He speaks not so much of a spiritual substance but rather of feeding spiritually upon the substance of the body of

⁵³ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 168, 173. He argues this from Calvin's commentary on John 6 in particular.

⁵⁴ *True Partaking* (LCC 22:328f. Cf. SWJC 2:577; OS 2:294; CO 9:521).

⁵⁵ H. Gollwitzer, *Coena Domini* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1937) 120f. I am expounding Gollwitzer from the original, not via his many expositors. Another threefold division is found in the *Institutio*. The *significatio* of the Supper is contained in the promises; the *materia* or *substantia* is Christ with his death and resurrection; the *effectus* is redemption and other benefits that Christ gives to us (*Inst.* 4:17:11 (1543)).

⁵⁶ Wendel, *Calvin*, 341f.

⁵⁷ Indeed he insists that the body given is 'the true and natural body which was offered on the cross' (*Second Defence* (SWJC 2:279f.; CO 9:72)). Cf. *True Partaking* (SWJC 2:509, 529; CO 9:472, 486).

Christ.⁵⁸ Gollwitzer makes the distinctions in the adjectives where they might more usefully be placed in the adverbs.

So is Calvin guilty of the Lutheran charge of reducing our benefits to “the spirit of Christ” that is present, or “the power of the absent body of Christ and his merit”?⁵⁹ Does Calvin’s Lutheran-sounding ‘substance language’ reduce to our receiving spiritual life and benefits which have their *origin* in Christ’s flesh and blood? Calvin says that we ascend to heaven to enjoy the presence of Christ,⁶⁰ and that Christ descends to quicken our souls.⁶¹ But of course neither statement is to be taken literally. Both refer to the work of the Spirit in uniting us with Christ’s ascended human body. So is the ‘substance language’ equally metaphorical, referring just to the spiritual benefits that we receive? If this were so, Calvin’s Lutheran language would turn out to have a largely Zwinglian content. Calvin seeks to refute this charge in his *Institutio*. He states that Christ, from the substance of his flesh breathes life into our souls, though his flesh does not enter into us.⁶² He is aware that this lays him open to the Lutheran objection ‘that we touch only upon the benefit or effect which believers receive from eating Christ’s flesh’. Calvin responds to this accusation, but his manner of doing so is significant. He points out that ‘Christ himself is the matter of the Supper’. The benefits which we receive flow from him and what he has done.⁶³

How adequately does this answer the Lutheran charge? It confirms the impression that feeding upon Christ’s flesh and blood means, for Calvin, enjoying through the ministry of the Spirit the benefits which Christ won for us in the flesh. But for Calvin we can receive Christ’s benefits only by being united with him. We cannot have the benefits without Christ.⁶⁴ The passages just quoted from the *Institutio* are from the 1559 edition and build upon his responses to Westphal and Heshusius. In these he repeatedly affirms that we do not merely receive the benefits won for us by Christ on the cross and the power that flows from his body and blood but that we receive these only after, as the fruit of, a real communion with his flesh and blood⁶⁵ — ‘after’ in the sense of a logical consequence, not in

⁵⁸ A rare exception is found in his letter of 23 July 1563 to Frederick III (Elector of the Palatinate) (CO 20:73). Cf. J. Rogge, *Virtus und Res: Um die Abendmahlswirklichkeit bei Calvin* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1965) 51f. on this.

⁵⁹ See at n. 12, above. Grass, *Die Abendmahlslehre*, 251, makes a similar charge.

⁶⁰ *Inst.* 4:17:31 (1559). Cf. C. B. Kaiser, ‘Climbing Jacob’s Ladder: John Calvin and the Early Church on our Eucharistic Ascent to Heaven,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56 (2003) 247-67.

⁶¹ *Inst.* 4:17:24 (1559).

⁶² *Inst.* 4:17:32 (1559).

⁶³ *Inst.* 4:17:33 (1559, changed from 1536).

⁶⁴ *Inst.* 3:1:1 (1559, changed from 1536).

⁶⁵ *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:281, 285, 292; CO 9:73, 76, 81); *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2:399, 440; CO 9:181, 211); *True Partaking* (LCC 22:263, 276, 287, 329; SWJC 2:501f., 516f., 529, 578; CO 9: 466, 477, 486, 522; OS 2:295).

the sense of a chronological delay.⁶⁶ This is a spiritual communion, effected by the Holy Spirit, but the role of the Spirit is to effect communion with the flesh and blood of Christ, not to replace it.⁶⁷

There is an important distinction here. The *Formula of Concord* attacks those who reduce the benefit of the Supper to receiving the benefits won for us by Christ. This might suggest that our relation to Christ is comparable to that of a motorist to an oil refinery, from which he receives the petrol (or gas!) to run his car. But a more accurate portrayal of Calvin's view, building on his own analogy, would be that the relation of the driver of a solar powered car to the sun. The sun is not itself present and the car runs on power that has its origin in the sun, but is able to do so only because of a real communion with the sun through its rays. Calvin claims that the Holy Spirit brings to us not just the benefits of Christ (the Lutheran accusation) but a real communion with and partaking of the body and blood of Christ. But then we are driven back to asking what this communion actually means.

(e) Perpetual Feeding

For Zwingli, feeding on Christ is continual and the Supper is but the outward representation of this ongoing inward reality.⁶⁸ But it isn't always realized that Calvin is no more keen than Zwingli to restrict feeding upon Christ's flesh and blood to the Supper alone. He repeatedly cites John 6 for his interpretation of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood. But in his commentary on John 6:54 he states that this feeding is not confined to the sacrament but refers to 'the *perpetual* eating of faith', which is 'figured and actually presented to believers in the Lord's Supper'.⁶⁹ This had already been stated in the *Institutio*:

The sacrament 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.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Cf. *Commentary on Matthew 26:26-28* (A. W. Morrison (tr.), *Calvin's Commentaries. A Harmony of the Gospels volume 3* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1972) 136; CO 45:708) where he states that there is no other eating than that by which the Spirit vivifies us and that we eat Christ's flesh *when* we receive life from it.

⁶⁷ A point made by G. P. Hartvelt, *Verum Corpus* (Delft: W. D. Meinema, 1960) 191.

⁶⁸ H. Zwingli, *An Exposition of the Faith* (LCC 24:258f.).

⁶⁹ *Commentary on John 6:54* (T. H. L. Parker (tr.), *Calvin's Commentaries. The Gospel according to St John 1-10* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1959) 170). Cf. *Ioannis Calvini Opera Exegetica volumen XI/1: In Evangelium secundum Johannem Commentarius Pars Prior*, H. Feld (ed.) (Geneva: Droz, 1997) 217; CO 47:155. Shortly before (on 6:53, p. 169. Cf. Feld (ed.), 217; CO 47:154) he states that John 6 refers not to the Lord's Supper but to 'the continual communication which we have apart from the reception of the Lord's Supper'.

⁷⁰ *Inst.* 4:17:5 (1536, as modified in 1543).

The point that Calvin is making is not just that feeding upon Christ's flesh and blood can take place even outside the Supper (*etiam extra coenam*) but that it is something that happens to us all the time. This appears to reduce the Supper to a mere reminder of what is continuously true, but elsewhere in this section Calvin portrays it as a means of grace, albeit the same grace as comes through the gospel. Our feeding on Christ 'is done through the gospel but more clearly through the Sacred Supper, where he offers himself with all his benefits to us, and we receive him by faith'. Thus *daily* he gives his body through the preaching of the gospel, while the 'sacred mystery of the Supper' seals this giving of himself.⁷¹ Thus the Supper (like the preaching of the gospel) both reminds us of what is already and continuously true and also provides us with an opportunity by faith to renew and strengthen the communion with Christ that we have. It is true that Calvin opposes those who 'make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood'. But while he stresses our partaking of Christ's flesh and blood, this comes about by faith and whether or not that faith takes place in the context of the Supper is incidental.⁷²

Similarly in the *Short Treatise*: 'This same grace is offered us by the gospel; yet as in the Supper we have more ample certainty and fuller enjoyment of it, it is with good reason that we recognize such a fruit as coming from it.'⁷³ The reason for this is apparent in the next section. There are two things which are presented to us in the Supper. The substance of the sacrament is Jesus Christ as the source of all good. Its efficacy is the grace and blessing which flows from his passion. The same is clearly true of the Word. Calvin goes on to add that 'we can only attain to the enjoyment of such fruit by participating in his body and blood,'⁷⁴ but for him this is not particularly tied to the Supper.

This issue arose in the negotiations between Calvin and Bullinger that gave birth to the *Consensus Tigurinus*.⁷⁵ Calvin wrote a letter to Bullinger in June or July 1548, in which he made a number of statements about the Lord's Supper.⁷⁶ In November Bullinger responded, numbering Calvin's statements or 'propositiones' and adding brief comments.⁷⁷ In January Calvin wrote a brief *Responsio ad Annotationes Bullingeri*⁷⁸ and in March Bullinger responded with his *Annotata ad Calvini Animadversiones*.⁷⁹ In the thirteenth of his *propositiones* Calvin stated that in the Supper we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ. Bullinger objected that the faithful do this always and everywhere. They do so in the Supper by the same faith that unites them to Christ, not as if they did not previously enjoy communion with Christ. In

⁷¹ Ibid. (1543). Cf. *Inst.* 4:14:17 (1536 & 1539) on the sacraments in general.

⁷² *Inst.* 4:17:7 (1539).

⁷³ *Short Treatise* §10 (LCC 22:145; cf. SWJC 2:169; CO 5:437; OS 1:507).

⁷⁴ *Short Treatise* §11 (LCC 22:146; cf. SWJC 2:169f.; CO 5:437f.; OS 1:507).

⁷⁵ These are helpfully expounded in Rorem, 'Calvin and Bullinger,' 357-65.

⁷⁶ CO 12: 726-31; SWJC 5:168-73.

⁷⁷ CO 7:693-700.

⁷⁸ CO 7:701-708.

⁷⁹ CO 7:709-16.

his *Responsio* Calvin repudiated the idea that the faithful have communion with Christ only in the Supper. He had always taught that only they receive Christ in the Supper who already have him. Those who are already members of Christ progress in communion with Christ through the use of the sacrament. Bullinger pronounced himself satisfied and apologized for having misunderstood Calvin through failure to read all of his writings.⁸⁰ This agreement is reflected in article 19 of the *Consensus Tigurinus*: ‘So in the Supper Christ communicates himself to us, though he had previously imparted himself, and perpetually remains in us.’⁸¹ The same teaching is found in his treatises against Westphal and Heshusius. The communion which we enjoy in the Supper is perpetual and is also given independently of the Supper.⁸²

In short, *while the Supper is a special means of grace, it is not a means of special grace* — what is given there is also found elsewhere. As Joseph McLelland says of the *Consensus Tigurinus*, ‘the eating of faith never quite seems to need sacramental action.’⁸³ Wendel states the problem clearly:

Prior to the Supper, and surviving it, union with Christ subsists therefore beyond the Supper itself and is always independent of it; since, according to Calvin, we may attain to it by other means, such as preaching, the reading of the Bible, or prayer. But here we are obliged to ask ourselves, what exactly does the Supper give us that we cannot obtain otherwise? Under these conditions, is there still good reason for the existence of the Supper alongside the preaching of the Word? This problem touches the very nerve of the notion of the sacrament as it was elaborated by the reformers; and the mere fact that it can present itself shows that they did not manage to integrate the sacrament organically into their theological system.⁸⁴

Killian McDonnell refers to this passage and observes that ‘a theology which deprives the Eucharist of a specific gift will make it slightly superfluous and will make its worth within a theological system somewhat dubious.’⁸⁵

⁸⁰ CO 7:697, 705, 714.

⁸¹ SWJC 2:218. Cf. OS 2:251; CO 7:741.

⁸² *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2:470; CO 9:232f. Cf. SWJC 2:374, 409; CO 9:162, 188). *True Partaking* (LCC 22:295f.; SWJC 2:538, 540; CO 9:493f. Cf. LCC 22:291; SWJC 2:534; CO 9:489).

⁸³ McLelland, ‘Meta-Zwingli or Anti-Zwingli?’, 191, referring to art. 19.

⁸⁴ Wendel, *Calvin*, 353.

⁸⁵ McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist*, 381.

In both the *Institutio* and the *Short Treatise* Calvin maintains that the Supper offers this grace 'more clearly', with 'more ample certainty'.⁸⁶ Why is this? Presumably because the bread and wine clearly portray and exhibit Christ's flesh and blood. Thus while the Supper is for Calvin an instrumental means of grace, its *distinctive* contribution and the contribution of the *elements* is 'purely symbolic and pedagogical'.⁸⁷ Their purpose is to teach us truth — *in vino veritas*, one might say! Calvin sees a clear parallel between the Supper and the preaching of the gospel. The benefits are the same and so are the dynamics — Christ is freely offered and received by faith.⁸⁸ We are brought into no closer relationship to the flesh and blood of Christ in the Supper than in the preaching of gospel. If this is so, is not the Lutheran interpretation correct?

(f) Calvin Scholarship

The argument so far points in a direction very different. The Body Text seems to be unavoidably implied.⁸⁹ But Calvin here is doing no more than reaffirming his standard anti-Zwinglian line that 'we should not, by too little regard for the signs, divorce them from their mysteries'.⁹⁰ Gerrish, in an article on 'Gospel and Eucharist', also refers repeatedly to Calvin's doctrine of 'real presence', though he confesses to be using his own language rather than Calvin's.⁹¹ He himself argues that Calvin comes closer to Luther than to Zwingli, though he understands how Lutherans have thought otherwise.⁹² David Willis throws all

⁸⁶ Cf. nn. 70, 72, above. Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 114, 128, 212, 214f., affirms a specific eucharistic gift, but is clear that this consists in a fuller understanding and knowledge of the communion that we have with Christ. This is in agreement with the position argued here and does not undermine the criticisms made by Wendel and McDonnell. Davis also (*ibid.*, 216f.) claims that the Eucharist brings a special degree of substantial partaking of Christ's flesh and blood not found elsewhere, something that I do not see in Calvin.

⁸⁷ Cf. Gerrish, at n. 11, above. In his *Grace and Gratitude. The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) 133, Gerrish acknowledges that the Supper brings no benefits that are not available elsewhere, 'but rather that it graphically represents and presents to believers a communion they enjoy, or can enjoy, all the time'.

⁸⁸ This is the thrust of *Inst.* 4:14. The sacraments represent more vividly to us the same promises as the gospel (4:14:5 (1539)).

⁸⁹ H. A. Oberman, 'The "Extra" Dimension in the Theology of Calvin' in *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1986) 241f., with reference to Calvin's sermon on II Samuel 6:2 (J. Calvin, *Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis*, hrsg. H. Rückert (Supplementa Calviniana 1) (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961) 137; John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel Chapters 1-13*, tr. D. Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992) 236).

⁹⁰ *Inst.* 4:17:5 (1539). Cf. *Short Treatise* §15 (LCC 22:147f.; SWJC 2:171f.; OS 1:509; CO 5:439).

⁹¹ Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 109, 111, 114.

⁹² Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 116.

caution to the winds, claiming that Calvin believed that Christ is present ‘really’ and ‘substantially’.⁹³

Gerrish subsequently devoted a whole book, *Grace and Gratitude*, to Calvin’s eucharistic theology. Here he incorporates ‘Six Calvinistic Propositions’ taken from the article cited above. In that article he argued for a ‘Lutheran’ interpretation of Calvin and the same tendency is found here, though more muted. For example, his fifth proposition is that ‘the gift is given to all who communicate, pious and impious, believers and unbelievers,’ and this is supported by a quotation from the *Institutio* (4:17:33). Now it is true that Calvin says this. But it should have been made clearer that by this Calvin means, and indeed states in the previous sentence (which Gerrish replaces with ‘...’), that the body and blood of Christ are *freely offered* to all. As it stands, the reader is left with the impression that unbelievers *receive* the body and blood of Christ, but to their condemnation, i.e. the Lutheran view.⁹⁴ In the article the next proposition was that ‘the *benefit* of the gift is received by faith,’ which could imply that the gift itself can be received without faith. But in the book this becomes ‘the gift is to be received by faith’, which lessens the danger of confusion.⁹⁵ Finally, the claim is also made that, for Calvin, in the sacraments ‘sign and reality are inseparable’.⁹⁶ Calvin does indeed affirm this in opposition to a Zwinglian divorce between the sacraments and their reality,⁹⁷ but is equally clear in his anti-Lutheran claim that they must be distinguished and that receipt of the sign does not guarantee receipt of the reality. Fundamental to his doctrine of the sacraments is the belief that figure and truth ‘are not so linked that they cannot be separated’.⁹⁸ Here again, Gerrish has blurred the distinction between Calvin and Luther.

3. CALVIN THE CALVINIST

The case for making Calvin a Zwinglian is stronger than is often realized, especially by those who rely too heavily upon Calvin’s own propaganda on the subject! But while the parallels are greater than at first sight appears, the differences between Calvin and Zwingli are real (or should I say true?).

For Zwinglians and Lutherans alike, the key issue is whether or not Christ’s body and blood are present in the Supper. The claim in the *Formula of Concord* that Calvin is a cunning sacramentarian is in response to the question whether the body and blood of Christ are

⁹³ D. Willis, ‘A Reformed Doctrine of the Eucharist and Ministry and its Implications for Roman Catholic Dialogues,’ *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984) 297. Calvin plainly denies this, e.g. at n. 33, above.

⁹⁴ Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 114 (cf. 130); *Grace and Gratitude*, 138. Calvin also in response to Westphal talks of Christ’s body being ‘given’ to unbelievers, while making it clear that ‘given’ means ‘offered’ and that unbelievers do not receive it: *Second Defence* (SWJC 2:306; CO 9:90); *Last Admonition* (SWJC 2:367; CO 9:157).

⁹⁵ Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 114; *Grace and Gratitude*, 138f.

⁹⁶ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 174.

⁹⁷ Cf. at nn. 88f., above.

⁹⁸ *Inst.* 4:14:15 (1543).

'truly and essentially present, distributed with the bread and wine, and received by mouth by all who avail themselves of the sacrament'.⁹⁹ If *this* is the key issue, then there is no real doubt that Calvin stands solidly with Zwingli. But for Calvin this is not the important question. For Calvin the key issue is that we all agree that 'we are truly made partakers of the real substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ'. *How* this happens is (for him) a secondary issue.¹⁰⁰ For Calvin it is feeding on Christ, partaking of his flesh and blood, that is the central point — which is why he felt closer to Luther than to Zwingli. But Lutherans and Zwinglians alike were (and are?) more interested in the question of the 'real presence'.

Perhaps the clearest contrast between Calvin and Zwingli lies in their conception of the sacraments.¹⁰¹ For Calvin the sacraments confer what they symbolize. The body of Christ is offered, not just signified. The sacrament is a means of grace, not just a visual aid. Gerrish identifies three different strands in Reformed thinking on this subject: symbolic memorialism (Zwingli), symbolic parallelism (Bullinger) and symbolic instrumentalism (Calvin).¹⁰² Calvin and Zwingli are clearly contrasted here. On this interpretation, the *Consensus Tigurinus* is a compromise between the second and third views.¹⁰³ How clearly these two views are actually distinguished is open to debate, since for Calvin the benefits of the Supper are received through faith and not just at the Supper. How accurate is it, therefore, to see the *eating of the elements* as for Calvin the instrument by which we feed on Christ? Calvin argues that the elements offer and show to us the reality signified.¹⁰⁴ It is the *sacraments*, rather than the elements, that are 'instruments [*organā*] by which God acts effectually in his elect'.¹⁰⁵ In that case, is there any significant difference between instrumentalism and parallelism, except in the rhetoric?

The different concepts of a sacrament have a profound effect on the actual communion service. Zwingli saw it primarily in terms of what we *do*. He may have spoken of feeding upon Christ, but the overwhelming emphasis for him and his successors is on what we do — remember Christ, give thanks, commit ourselves to him, etc. Calvin acknowledges a role for all of these, but his primary emphasis is on what we *receive*, on feeding on Christ etc. The title of the relevant chapter of the *Institutio* is 'The sacred Supper of Christ, and *what it brings to us*'.¹⁰⁶ Zwingli defines a sacrament as our confession of faith while Calvin defines it as a means of grace. This is not just an abstract theoretical matter. It makes a profound

⁹⁹ Kolb & Wengert (eds.), *Book of Concord*, 504.

¹⁰⁰ *Short Treatise* §60 (LCC 22:166. Cf. SWJC 2:197; OS 1:529; CO 5:460). What Calvin's substance language here actually means is, of course, open to question.

¹⁰¹ For Zwingli's teaching on the sacraments, cf. Stephens, *Theology of Zwingli*, ch.9.

¹⁰² Gerrish, *Old Protestantism*, 118-30, esp. 128.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 124. Cf. at n. 17, above.

¹⁰⁴ *Inst.* 4:17:10 (1539 & 1559).

¹⁰⁵ *Mutual Consent* (SWJC 2:224. Cf. OS 2:271; CO 9:18). Cf. M. Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments: Was Calvin's View of the Lord's Supper Right?', *Churchman* 112 (1998) 139.

¹⁰⁶ *Inst.* 4:17 (1559).

difference to what happens at the service. Do people come just to *do* something (remember thankfully) or have they come also to *receive* something? This is a 'real' difference which manifests itself even without a word being spoken about the theology of the service.

There is also a striking difference in tone between Zwingli and Calvin, as can be seen by a brief comparison of Zwingli's *On the Lord's Supper*¹⁰⁷ with chapter 17 of the fourth book of the *Institutio*. Zwingli is negative and rationalistic where Calvin is positive and sees an element of mystery. This comes especially clearly in one section. Calvin describes the mode of our feeding on Christ as a mystery too high for words: 'I rather experience than understand it'. This is most un-Zwinglian. He then goes on to reject 'absurdities' (Lutheranism).¹⁰⁸ The tone then becomes more Zwinglian, but set in the context of the acceptance of mystery. It should be noted, however, that Calvin does not say that the Lord's Supper is a complete mystery — it is purely the question of *how* we feed upon Christ that Calvin cannot explain.

CONCLUSION

Was Calvin a Crypto-Zwinglian? There is no doubt that he did not wish to be one and did not see himself as one. Two other facts are certain. Calvin denied that Christ's body and blood were present in the Supper except inasmuch as we have communion with them by the Spirit. He also affirmed that we feed on them. For him the Supper was an instrumental means of grace. Through it 'we are truly made partakers of the proper substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ'. But, stripped of the 'Lutheran rhetoric', what does Calvin mean by our feeding on Christ? Does it mean more than receiving spiritual benefits from Christ's absent body? The answer to this question will depend on how we assess his teaching that we are united with the flesh and blood of Christ and have communion with them. Does this mean that we do *more* than receive the benefits that they have won for us or is it just a rhetorical way of saying the same thing? Again, in what sense is the Supper an instrumental means of grace? Since the communion that it brings is 'perpetual', does its essential function not become 'symbolic and pedagogical'? Is it any more a means of grace than the privilege of prayer which we enjoy moment by moment?

How these questions are answered may to some extent depend on the hermeneutic employed. Those employing a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' are likely to decide against Calvin; those sympathetic to him are more likely to take his side. But some points can be agreed by all. Calvin clearly wished to go beyond Zwinglianism and thought he had. But he was pulled in two directions. His heart was more Lutheran, which explains why he made such use of 'Lutheran rhetoric'. But his head was more Zwinglian and thus the content of his theology came closer to Zwingli than he wished or was prepared to admit. Wendel acknowledges this tension:

Whatever may be the value of the arguments that Calvin adduces to justify his particular interpretation of the Eucharist, we must acknowledge that his doctrine leaves one with many obscurities, only imperfectly masked by an exegesis that is often peculiar, and by the appeal to mystery. In spite of the function he assigns to the Holy Spirit in establishing contact between the Christ

¹⁰⁷ LCC 24:185-238.

¹⁰⁸ *Inst.* 4:17:32 (1543). Cf. also *Inst.* 4:17:7 (1539), 10 (1559), 24 (1559).

and the believer, it is not easy to see how he could maintain that the faithful 'really' receive the body and blood of Christ in the communion. It may be that the decisive reason is not to be sought for in his doctrinal preoccupations but in his piety, which demanded very positive affirmations with regard to the presence of the Christ in the Supper.¹⁰⁹

Was Calvin a 'cunning sacramentarian'? Is the difference between Calvin and Zwingli merely 'oral'? Perhaps Calvin's doctrine can be seen in terms of his Lutheran piety seeking to transcend the Zwinglian limitations of *some* of his theological presuppositions. Perhaps the Lutherans were not totally wide of the mark when they feared that he made the Supper too subjective.

¹⁰⁹ Wendel, *Calvin*, 354.