

JOHN CALVIN ON THEATRICAL TRIFLES IN WORSHIP

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The late Middle Ages held a raging ferment of opinion concerning one's search for the knowledge of God, the means of grace, and the experience of the holy.

This is evident in the growing movement of the so-called *Devotio Moderna* and the leadership of individuals such as Gerhard Groote. It has come down to us in the form of a widely read literary bequest, expressed in such documents as Thomas Á Kempis' *The Invitation of Christ*, Walter Hilton's *The Stairway of Perfection*, Richard Rolle's *The Fire of Love*, and the anonymous and equally enigmatic piece, *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

In the latter, the author repeatedly warns the reader that he should not interpret his spiritual counsel in material or physical ways. Even figures of speech concerning movements and gestures should not be taken literally.

So here we are in the centuries before Calvin, where a significant number of perceptive spiritual authors within the fold, if not the bosom of the Church, have begun to express serious warnings about the authority of the customary liturgical rites. Already we have mystical movements underway in all of the countries of Europe. With such momentum developing, how did John Calvin develop such a distinctive critique of worship? How did his statements reach the level of intensity in which he could roundly denounce the appearance of what he came to call "theatrical trifles" in communal worship?

Directly related to this discussion is the suspicion that Calvin would not be left totally unprovoked by the imaginative creativity of "liturgists" today who seem to be fascinated with the theatrical symbolism of the pouring of wine, the splashing of water, and the crumbling of bread—let alone the other many ceremonials in the life of the church today.

Consider the amount of water that is regarded as good form in upscale baptisms, the splashing and the pacing about. Consider the invitations of the more advanced clergy, particularly in upper middle class congregations, who on Pentecost call upon their parishioners to bedeck themselves with outfits decorated with red, as though they were at a football game wearing the official colors of their favorite team. It is as though red-garbed legs walking into church in Pentecostal colors and the sight of the stalwart American *gluteus maximus*, perched cheek by cheek on American pew cushions, would please the Lord and increase the fervor of the rushing wind. What would this waving of palm leaves, lighting of candles, wearing of trinkets and the official colors, the wearing of hand-woven, rainbow-colored stoles, and the increase in theatrical gestures now mean to Calvin?

John Calvin, was, of course, not the first to turn away from the dramatic displays of medieval Europe, as *The Cloud* illustrates. Calvin himself cites authors who led him more clearly into the Christological center which became the focal point in his understanding of the distinctive character of Christian worship. While Calvin's understanding of worship moves directly into this focus on the power of God's salvation in Christ, his perception of the sacraments and his understanding of prayer are equally critical.

They are important because Christ is the Word himself and because there is no other word regarding our salvation than the One which has spoken to us in Christ. In the relatively brief 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin gives 87 of the 226 pages of text to an exposition of the theology of the true sacraments and a screamingly adverse critique of the remaining five "false statements." Thus, over one third of the book by this signal Protestant is devoted to an analysis of the sacraments. This is provocative enough itself.

By the time Calvin produced the final edition of the *Institutes* in 1559, he had broadened his areas of concern considerably. Now the entire discussion of the means of grace which so drives the organization of the *Institutes* is brought to a rousing conclusion in a nearly final 208 pages. Now Calvin not only lambasts the five false sacraments but adds his scorching attack upon related ceremonies such as tonsure, anointing with oil, and the consecration of subdeacons. What we have to say about this in modern terms is that Calvin trashes everything which he believes to have been added through human invention to the Godly directions for worship.

The percentage of pages assigned to the task has been diminished but not the energy and the intensity with which Calvin focuses attention. This is surprising to many contemporary readers, who find more importance in subjectivity, privacy, psychological development, and inward spiritual experience—on the one hand—coupled with an experimental outlook on all religious experience, as though it were peculiar fruit of one's personal self-discovery.

The idea that truth is emerging, that it is always fluid and in process, and that the psychological dynamics of it are the most important has become a kind of epistemological *urgrund*.

Calvin is not merely suspicious of this outlook. He confronts it headlong and attacks it vigorously. It is far too easy a thing for us to say that Calvin lived four centuries ago and therefore was behind time when it comes to a phenomenological and existentialist understanding of reality. It is not only too easy, but it is not really true. Calvin does not call this philosophy by name. He does not know Husserl Heidegger, or Merlau-Ponty. What Calvin did know, however, was that the Word of God was a very penetrating source of insight. He sees it as entirely distinct from all other forms of knowledge and experience. It tells him what the church is supposed to believe and what it is supposed to do. Remarkably enough, he is not drawn into the vulnerable position of holding his theology to be formed in an inerrant manner from *sola scriptura*. His pages are thickets of reasoned argument, each one fortified against all attacks and rigorously shaped by the theologians who had been central to the early experience and life of the church. A running dialogue with people such as Augustine, Chrysostom, and Bernard is woven through the *Institutes*. From a different perspective, one can see his consistent defense against the perceived threat to the Word which he finds lying within the heart of the church's most popular theological compendium, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. From first to last it is for Calvin, however, the Word which enters our minds when the illumination of the Holy Spirit "makes entry for it" (III.II.34).

The heart of the sacramental controversy which leads to his denunciation of the "theatrical trifles" is the question of God's instruction to his people. These instructions are limited in detail but they are remarkably direct. While there is much that falls within the realm of that which is not objectionable, the *adiaphora*, it is an *adiaphora* that is hardly determined by private choice. It is to be guided by that which builds up the church and which leads the Christian directly to Christ. It is that which, in keeping with the Word of God, is appropriate for its witness to Christ in its particular time and place. It is, as Calvin says in IV.XIX.2 the Word of God which must precede to "make a sacrament." (See Thomas Watson Street's "John Calvin on *Adiaphora*: An Exposition and Appraisal of His Theology and Practice." Unpublished Th.D. dissertation. Union Theological Seminary, New York 1954.) James H. Nichols pointed out that Calvin could shrewdly advise patience and adaptability concerning certain local situations: "...he several times advised Reformed congregations in Lutheran communities to accommodate themselves to such things as bells and altars with candles and tapers." "The Liturgical Tradition of the Reformed Churches," *Theology Today*, volume XI (July 1954), p. 212.

This theme is elaborated in the most wonderful and perceptive ways. It is a decidedly positive approach, from a strong conviction that God speaks still in Scripture. It is, however, far from being a dead and inert conviction. Rather, it is as though Calvin were a great violinist, playing with a firmly stretched bow over a tightly strung instrument. Once the sense of discipline

in which Calvin is working becomes clear, you can see that vitality and fluidity are present everywhere.

The Word of God directs us to the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper because they were initiated by God to bear us forward as the reality of Christ becomes more powerful and determining in our lives. Calvin describes the mystery of the sacraments in various places but no more concisely than he does in IV.XIV.1 where he says simply that 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 before men."

The sacraments are limited to the ones selected by God. More than that, however, they are integrally related to the preceding promise which they confirm, seal, and make more evident. They are made effective by the testimony of the Word which precedes them by the Holy Spirit, who penetrates our hearts, moves over our affections, and opens our souls. As Calvin writes with remarkable eloquence: "If the Spirit be lacking the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our mind than the splendor of the sun shining upon blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears" (IV.XC.9). Heinrich Bullinger, in *The Second Helvetic Confession*, carries out this specifically spiritual intent when he says that "the principal thing which God promises in all sacraments...is Christ the Savior—that only sacrifice and that Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world..." (Chapter XIX).

The *Geneva Confession*, which reflects something of an early Reformed consensus, and which was presented to the magistracy on November 10, 1536, places all of this in a very explicit, brief sentence when it says that Christ and our regeneration through him is the crucial issue. The sufficiency of Christ is the key. On the other hand, the deplorable character of the Mass is that it subverts this unique, profound mystery of the Holy Supper.

In January 1537, Calvin presented his *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship* to the Council of Ministers. Here he urges, as he continues to do with the most impressive consistency, that Communion should be frequent, he hoped each week, because of the very realism of our relationship with Christ in it. He writes that "we are really made participants of the body and blood of Jesus." What is so important to grasp here is that this is an entirely different kind of epistemology than that which rose to the attention during the early years of empirical philosophy and that has remained in control since the Enlightenment. It is a very distinctive way of knowing the holy reality of God. Equally important for us in the history of the church, is the surmise that his perspective, as Calvin continues to develop it, moves beyond the categories in which the Eucharist debates of the Middle Ages were argued. It takes the entire discussion beyond the specific limitations of the debate at Corbie which occurred in Radbertus' *De corpore et sanguine Domini* and Ratramnus' *De corpore et sanguine Domini liber*. This entire discussion has been subverted by the proposal of an entirely different kind of realism which, at the same time, moves the way in which the issue is put beyond that of Luther as well. More Aristotelian than Platonic, more realist than nominalist, more Biblical than Lateran in direction, it conveys a divinely created metaphysical, ontological bonding with Christ at the most essential depth of life. This is important in penetrating the issue of the silly theatrical trifles because it is a theology which is far deeper than sheer human subjectivity can ever disclose. It is the metaphysics of Calvin which defeats, at the final place, the extremes of both the anabaptist and the libertines. This is a uniquely "spiritual discernment" which is wholly lost to us until we are regenerated (II.II.18). Thus, it is neither "implicit" nor "unformed" faith, but faith which is given by God and has come to rest upon the knowledge of God's Word (III.II.6). Thus, any attempt to supplement the sacraments with other ceremonies or to multiply them becomes not only an act of superstition and blasphemy but of idolatry.

By 1545 Calvin, in *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva That is a Plan for Instructing Christians in the Doctrine of Christ* cites Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5—crucial texts for dealing with the important issue of idolatry, an issue which he sees deeply embedded in the life of the

church itself. With regard to the question of the adoration of the host, he writes that God provides “the correct form of adoration by which He may recall us from all superstition and other visions and carnal fictions.” It is not a happy description of some of the valued practices in the life of the church.

Correct guidance in dealing with the question of adoration is important, for without it we are liable not only to be inflamed by a carnal, this worldly way of thinking, by “vicious desires which titillate and solicit the heart...,” but also to lapse into the very great sin of idolatry.

In his *Catechism* of 1545, Calvin explains that the power to move the heart in the right way is the exclusive property of the Spirit.

For to move and affect the heart, to illumine the mind and to render the conscience sure and tranquil is the business of the Spirit alone, so that it ought to be considered wholly his work and be ascribed to him, lest his praise be transferred to another.

Thus, the visible sign in the sacrament is not the focal point for us.

...We are not to cling to the visible signs and there seek our salvation, or imagine the virtue of conferring grace to be fixed and confined in them. Rather we are to regard the sign in light of an aid, by which we may be directed straight to Christ and from him seek salvation and real felicity.” (J.K.S. Reid. *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXII, *Calvin's Theological Treatises*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954. Page 131- 132.)

Thus baptism is primarily for our forgiveness and regeneration in Christ, with the result that God has so intended that Christ be perpetually active in it through all of our lives.

As Carlos M.N. Eire has said, the sixteenth century was an age of religious immanence. The predominance of Heaven was suffused through the varied agendas, practices, personages, ceremonies, and relics. “A pious glance at a statue of St. Christopher in the morning ensured protection from illness and death throughout the day.” (*War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Page 1). “Unless we look straight toward him,” Calvin writes with great emphasis in III.II.2, “we shall wander through endless labyrinth.” As Calvin said in his advice to Jean Paul Alciati, as quoted by Benjamin W. Farley,

In any event, whenever we think of God or want to speak of him, we ought never occupy ourselves merely with his infinite essence. For this form of thinking is dangerous, since human understanding becomes confused by it. Rather, we ought constantly to return to Jesus Christ, in whom the Father has revealed himself to us. (“Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice,” *Calvin Studies III*. John H. Leith, Editor, Richmond: Union Theological Seminary, Virginia 1986.)

If there is any brief text which could serve not only as a succinct statement of Calvin’s theology but also as a remarkably concise prolegomena to the Neo-orthodox theological program in the twentieth century, it would be this short paragraph.

The Reformation brought about a series of sharp critiques of the pervasive extremes of medieval piety. But the body of opinion was not all directed toward one point of view. In addition, while criticism was one thing, the abolition of the perceived idols everywhere was quite another thing altogether.

While some Protestants cast down the ‘idols’ of Rome, Luther cast out the image breakers from Wittenberg. The redefinition of the sacred, then, became the

watershed that separated not only Protestant from Catholic, but Lutheran from Reformed as well. (Eire p. 2).

Eire notes that the idolatry issue was central for the Reformation and that in this period, the Reformed approach was quite different from either the Lutheran or the Catholic understanding of spiritual authority. Eire argues that Calvin forged a new form of a scripturally based theological metaphysics in which the lines between the material and the spiritual were sharply demarked and the idea of a transcendent spiritual reality became the cutting edge. It is, indeed, this renewed interest in the transcendence of God which gives Calvin the high ground from which to attack not only the blatant idols but also the theatrical trifles in worship. This perspective had been part of Calvin's own conversion to the Protestant cause. Eire writes that,

Calvin underwent a conversion experience that focused on the rejection of Roman Catholic worship as a lifesaving moment....As the corruption of man's proper relationship with God, the problem of idolatry assumes a key position in the thought of Calvin. Indeed, Calvin's attack on idolatry is an attack on the corruption of all religion, it is an involved defense of the truth of the Gospel against its antithesis. The significance of this defense cannot be underestimated, since it lays bare many of the central points of Calvin's theology. (Eire, p. 196)

This sharp critique against the implosion of idolatrous practices and ceremonies, in the age of new religious immanence today, is just as important as it was for Calvin, even though the appearance of the issue seems to be quite different.

Calvin's understanding of prayer is deeply connected to his view of the sacraments and the problem of idolatry in the church. He felt that people should be taught to pray in the proper way. It was not something which just came naturally to the natural human being. In Book III, Chapter XX, Calvin began a seventy page description of prayer as "the chief exercise of faith." For Calvin, God has placed all that we need for our salvation in Christ. Thus, we must draw from this unique bounty which God has provided in Christ. Indeed, we "dig up by prayer" the treasures that our faith has only gazed upon in the gospel (III.XX.2). Calvin's conception of prayer is the opposite of the quiescent piety of Madam Guyon (1648-1717) and the mood of perfected resignation of Michael Molinos (1627-1687), in the following century—even though in their own way they were joined in a particular form of the combat against idolatry in the practices of the Church.

Calvin approaches prayer as a vigorous activity. It requires the highest detachment from alien and carnal cares. It is a disciplined, intentional pursuit that is guided by the Holy Spirit's teaching and involves honesty, true repentance, and a humble, contrite request for mercy. The request for forgiveness must prepare the way before anything else is asked of God (III.XX.9). Reconciliation with God must come first! Thus, the very spirit of Calvin's understanding of prayer involves a restored relationship with the living God as the requisite basis for all authentic worship. It is a bold endeavor. (See David Willis' *Daring Prayer*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977). It is an act of courage. No theatrical gestures, no matter how moving or compelling, will in themselves suffice.

In the 1545 *Catechism*, Calvin explains that true prayer is directed to God. It is wrong to invoke angels or saints through our prayers and to request that they come to our aid. This would be a blatant act of idolatry. It would contain the fallacy of a subtle power transfer. It would transfer to the angels or saints, the critical part of the act of faith itself that belongs only to God. Prayer to the saints would be sharing with them "what God claimed for himself alone." (Reid, p. 120). True prayer requires that we use our intelligence as well as our hearts, for God promises to be very near those who call upon him in truth. On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that Calvin adds that God "abominates and curses all who pray to him deceitfully and dishonestly!"

What God desires is that we approach him with the appropriate reverence, that we “burn with earnest and vehement desire to obtain grace from God.” The proper approach to God in prayer is not only dependent upon our longing for his aid, but also upon his direct involvement as he assists us in our prayers. God kindles within us the longing to pray, arouses within us the “groanings that cannot be uttered and shapes our minds to those desires that are required in prayer.” People should not wait before God in a lazy and passive way, attempt to produce an appropriate mindset within themselves, or attempt to follow the becalming, centering influence of certain spiritual directors today. They should, as Calvin puts it in no uncertain terms, “forthwith flee to God and demand that they be inflamed with the fiery darts of his spirit, so as to be rendered fit for prayer.”

The altogether distinctive moment which is both existentialist and transcendent is described by Calvin like this:

And as we tremble at his glorious majesty because we are like worms and possessed by the consciousness of our sins, he puts forth Christ as Mediator (I Tim. 2:5; Heb. 4:16; I John 2:1) who opens up a way for us so that we are not at all anxious about obtaining favour.

Calvin is describing something that really happens when we pray. The power in this event is rooted deeply within our involvement in the intercession of Christ himself: “...he who prays thus conceives his prayers as from the mouth of Christ himself, since he knows his own prayer to be so assisted and recommended by the intercession of Christ.” (Romans 8:34). This understanding of prayer as a dynamic participation in the prayer of Christ himself precludes any requests that indulge our own ideas and desires. For “we are too foolish to be able to judge what is expedient for us...” Calvin is pointing out that when we truly praise and hallow God’s name in this way, he causes our prayer then to bring sanctification to us. God places us within his kingdom as those who partake of it. Nevertheless, we must keep our priorities in order. We must pray primarily for God’s own glory and insofar as we can, “overlook our own advantage.” (See also *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q184—“For What Things Are We to Prayer?”)

When our prayers are directed in this way to God’s honor, we are praying that he push back the darkness and sin that comes from Satan by his own very righteousness. When this truly occurs, the Spirit imbues us with the love of righteousness and the hatred for sin. “For our victory,” writes Calvin, “lies in the virtue of his Spirit.” (Reid, p. 120ff.) (See Janos Pazor, “Calvin and the Renewal of the Worship of the Church,” for his emphasis that the glorification of God and the salvation of the human being are organically united in Calvin’s teaching. *Reformed Worship*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1988, p. 91).

Thus, the power in Christ’s relationship to us moves us beyond the limitations of either the empirical understanding or the place of theatrical trifles into an entirely unique, transcendent spiritual dimension. It is the place in which the power of the Holy Spirit leads us through faith and through personal sanctification into a new knowledge of Christ (III.II.8). Ford Lewis Battles relates this profound knowledge of faith to the piety of the believer and quotes Calvin’s *Commentary on Jeremiah* (10:25) where knowledge of God (*cogitio Dei*) as the beginning of piety (*The Piety of John Calvin*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978).

Not long ago I was seated in the chancel of our church, directly behind the baptismal font. As I listened to the choir, my eye fell upon a tall slender thread which dropped from somewhere up in the ceiling of the sanctuary. It was a silver, shimmering thread that had been spun by a spider sometime during the past week. Curiosity got me, and as I followed the slender web down through the air, I saw that it came to rest squarely on, of all places, the baptismal font. Is there a symbol in this? It is not that we do not baptize very often in the contemporary church, we baptize all the time. What this slender web from above might suggest, however, is that the essential significance of baptism has been lost behind the growing incursion of theatrical trifles in the practice of the church.

I am not talking about the charming, rapidly growing appearances of roses in bud vases, some even bedecked by ribbons, on the occasion of paedobaptism. Nor am I talking about the way in which some pastors encourage people to wear red articles of clothing on Pentecost Sunday, nor am I talking specifically about the new use of oil for the “renewal” of baptismal vows suggested in *Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 2*, produced in 1985 by the Office of Worship for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. I am talking about the fundamental issue that we have seen Calvin emphasize in the Christocentric understanding of baptism. Do the authors of the Supplemental Liturgical Resources have it as sharply put as it needs to be when they say that “the Reformed tradition insists on God’s gracious invitation to the unworthy and unqualified to receive the gift of the kingdom” (p. 20)? In the most general way, this surmise is true. However, Calvin would not have been content with this type of description. It is not sufficiently penetrating to talk about the gifts of the kingdom in this general way. Those could be any kind of gifts and they could be bestowed with or without any significantly qualifying conditions. What is missing is the profound grasp of the essential nature of forgiveness, mortification, and regeneration in which one is directly involved in the power of Christ. It is the Christological emphasis which defines the cutting edge to the kingdom. This is what remains missing.

In the “Order for Holy Baptism,” we are blessed by a flurry of gracious phrases which suggest the general significance of the service. Is there, however, a sufficient weight of emphasis placed on the spiritual significance of the sacrament? Moralistically, what we are connected with in the sacrament is Christ's outward ministry, which is described as “Christ’s ministry of love, peace and justice!” It is sweetened until we reach the point when the minister is led to say that:

Within that covenant we are given new life and are guarded from evil, nurtured by the love of God and God’s people. On our part, we are to turn from evil and turn to Jesus Christ. I ask you therefore to reject sin, to profess your faith in Jesus Christ, and to confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we baptize.

Is this kind of statement a needed accommodation to an inclusive church or is it a description of a baptism in which the exclusive authority of the absolute act of God in Christ has been subtly diminished and generalized into a nurturing moment among “God’s people?”

In the discussion of the prayer which follows the pouring of the water, nearly twice as much attention is given to the significance of water *per se* than it is to the significance of Christ himself. The minister then requests that God “bless the water.” The water! The following explanation of all of this which is suggested reads as follows:

Water is the primary and essential symbol in baptism. In early civilization, water was regarded as one of the four basic elements in the universe...the power of the symbolism of water is particularly dramatic where there is a baptismal pool or font which is kept full of flowing water...but in our day fonts have become so small they are no longer able to hold enough water to symbolize its meaning and power...the centrality of the water is heightened if the font is filled as part of the baptismal service. Water may be poured into the font from an ewer or a large pitcher, held high enough above the font so that the falling water may be seen by all and the sounds of its splashing may be heard...we lose impact when minimalism shapes liturgy. It is crucial to the integrity of baptism that water once again be used visibly and generously (pp. 53, 55).

Note the elaborate discussion of the primacy of water, including the concept of power which is associated not with the Holy Spirit or with the underlying word of promise, as Calvin would understand it, but with the inherent natural symbolism itself. The phrases “particularly dramatic” and the “centrality of water” certainly draw special attention. Is it significant that the authors instruct us to lift up the pitcher so that the “falling water” may be seen and the “sounds of its

splashing may be heard?" One does not need to wonder long whether the ceremonial dimension is over-balancing the intentional humility of the relatively austere word of promise.

The "minimalism" which seems to be the threat, would, from the perspective of Calvin, be more likely the displacement of the soteriological emphasis. Let us again recall Calvin's words in the 1545 *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* when he said that it is by the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts and so operating within us that we "feel the virtue of Christ." It is, accordingly, the "business" of the Spirit alone "to render the conscience sure and tranquil." Thus, we are warned not to become preoccupied with the visible sign, to cling to it, or to imagine that grace is significantly attached to it. "Rather, we are to recognize the sign in light of an aid, by which we may be directed straight to Christ and from him seek salvation and real felicity."

It is the operation of the Holy Spirit, "that inward teacher," who has the exclusive right and authority to do the unique work in which our "hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in." (IV.XIV.9).

In a more confessional form, the wording of the *Scots Confession* of 1560 comes to the same idea, holding that in baptism we are "engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness." See also the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXX, for the same basic position.

In the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin writes with great perception that in baptism "we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life...for Christ's purity has been offered us in it: His purity ever flourishes" (p. 95). The phrase, "his purity ever flourishes," is particularly apt. It is vital, dramatic, and powerful. However, it is decidedly not theatrical. The activity of the Holy Spirit moving within our hearts, secures us within this flourish of Christ. Calvin had no objection to dramatic imagery. He is concerned, however, lest our natural attraction by that imagery draw us into the imagery itself. Paztor quotes Calvin as saying, "let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above our senses..." (Loc. cit. p. 914) around the practice of baptism, and he contemptuously labels them and an "alien hodgepodge." This includes the lighting of a ceremonial candle and the murmuring of incantation-like words. "How much better it would be to omit from baptism all theatrical pomp which dazzles the eyes of the simple and deadens their minds..." "There is nothing holier or better or safer than to be content with the authority of Christ alone." If we adhere to this practice, then baptism, "not buried in outlandish pollutions, would shine in its full brightness."

With respect to the Lord's Supper, the same warning applies. We must avoid the superstitious additions which can easily beguile us into paying more attention to the sign than we do to God! Just the opposite should occur. In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, our minds should be lifted up into the heavenly, transcendent realm. It is necessary that we leave behind all human inventions in the service and all evidence of "carnal thinking" in order that we duly apprehend Christ himself. (IX.XVII.36 and 37).

If we can adapt a term, for the sake of placing this in the perspective of Kantian critical philosophy, we could easily describe Calvin's distinctive spiritual epistemology as a kind of transcendental *apriori* understanding which is entirely unique. It is unique because it is a gift and a creation by the holy will of the living Lord.

Therefore, as we cannot come to Christ unless we be drawn by the spirit of God, so when we are drawn we are lifted up in mind and heart above our understanding. For the soul illumined by him takes on a new keenness as it were to contemplate the heavenly mysteries, whose splendor had previously blinded it. And man's understanding, thus beamed by the light of the Holy Spirit, then at last truly begins to taste those things which belong to the kingdom of God (III.II.34).

The operative and all important phrase for this epistemological position is certainly “above our understanding!” So, in the words of the *Scots Confession*, Christ becomes the very nourishment and food of our souls. It is, without declaring itself explicitly to be so, a daring attack upon the trivialization of worship, the arrogant assumption that we must make things especially and alluringly attractive in our own terms. The *Scots Confession* developed this position this way:

This is wrought by means of the Holy Ghost who by true faith carries us above all things, visible, carnal and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, once broken and shed for us but now in heaven and appearing for us in the presence of his Father...This union is one that the natural man cannot apprehend.

If there is one thing that Calvin is compellingly firm in stating it is that we cannot outwit the Holy Spirit. It is fruitless and full of error to compete with the Holy Spirit in attempting to turn the sacraments into salesmanship or nurture. Old utilizes the time-honored distinction between the inward and outward worship to mark the essential nature of this difference. However, he goes on to expand this description in a more comprehensive way in “John Calvin and the Prophetic Criticism of Worship,” *Calvin Studies* III, p. 78.

This distinction leads Calvin into skepticism not only about the undue emphasis on material signs but also about the true depth and effect of religious revivals including even the Reformation (Commentary on Isaiah 65:26. Cited by Charles Hall, *With the Spirit's Sword. The Drama of Spiritual Warfare in the Theology of John Calvin*. Basel Studies in Theology. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968. p. 139.) This dialectal relation between physical realities and transcendent spiritual authority is portrayed clearly by Calvin in his sermon on “The Nativity of Jesus Christ.” Although the coming of Christ was under the conditions of a stable, a manger, and “wrapped with rags,” he was recognized by the poor shepherds. Then Calvin goes on immediately to point out that the symbolism of bread and wine in themselves assure us of nothing. On the contrary, we must draw near to Christ himself “though it seems that He is still, as it were, in the stable...” (*Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ*. Tr. Leroy Nixon, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980 (1950), p. 39f.)

What we must recognize is that for Calvin it is Christ himself who is the spiritual food for our souls. This distinctive metaphysical perception on Calvin's part would break down entirely if it were reduced to sheerly historical/physical or imaginative/nominalist or social/communal dimensions. It is, rather a penetratingly different product of the unique resurrection and ascension of the living Lord. Calvin knows that the validity and the historical integrity of the Christian confession depends squarely upon it. It is non-negotiable. It is certainly not, Calvin warns, “ignorance tempered by humility” (III.II.3). As John Leith says, “It is very difficult in our society to understand this sense of the holy that is vivid and alive with Calvin...the absence of this compelling sense of the presence of God may be the source of an attempt to compensate by an increasing proclivity to use the signs of the office, robes, vestments, titles, and even jewelry.” (“Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today in the Light of Recent Research.” *Review and Expositor*. Volume 86 (1989) pp. 30-31).

As Watson Street recognized some years ago in his study on the *adiaphra* in Calvin's theology, there is room for differences concerning the outward ceremony. What is entirely unacceptable, is the outlook in which one believes that certain practices have in themselves a spiritually compelling value. As Calvin says, this type of preoccupation tends to “draw the eyes of the common people to wonderment by a new spectacle.” The critical text in Calvin might be the one in which he cries out:

I ask all who are in the least affected by a zeal for piety whether they do not clearly see both how much brightly God's grace shines here and how much richer sweetness of spiritual consolation comes to believers that in these lifeless and theatrical trifles, which served no other purpose than to deceive the sense of the

people stupefied. They call this the holding of the people by religion when they lead them at will—dulled and befooled with superstition.

What is remarkably telling in IV.XVII.43 is the humility and simplicity of Calvin's rhetorical form when he describes the procedure of the eucharistic service, with its practical place for the reaffirmation of the promises of God. Not one to withhold any graphic expression, Calvin observes that "it is for us to hunger for, seek, look to, learn and study Christ alone, until that great day dawns when the Lord will fully manifest the glory of the Kingdom (I Cor. 15-24) and will show himself for us to see him as he is. (I John 3:2) (IV.XVIII.20). What we have been given is not the promise of a theatrical show, however entertaining it might be on the human level, but the hunger and search for Christ himself. With respect to some practices in our church today, Calvin might say that they have degenerated from their intended "pristine purity." Again, the *Scots Confession* develops this point in Chapter XXII in saying that when the sacraments are "adulterated" with personal additions, "no part of Christ's original act remains in its original simplicity." Let us compare with this theological statement the instructions given in *The Service for the Lord's Day: Supplemental Liturgical Resource I*:

When accompanying the manual acts, the words should be spoken slowly and in careful rhythm with the gestures. Gestures need to be expansive and smoothly paced...a loaf makes graphic what diced bread or wafers cannot, that in partaking of the one loaf, Jesus Christ, we become one body...the loaf should not be pre-cut, but actually broken...the wine should immediately follow the bread...the custom of first serving the bread to everyone, and then serving the wine needlessly prolongs the serving...the custom of holding the bread or cup until all are served so that all may eat or drink in unison is discouraged. (pp. 169-170).

Here again the words of the *Second Helvetic Confession* which assuredly express the spirit of Calvin's critique: "...our hearts are to be lifted up on high and not to be fixed on the bread...we think that the right, manner or form of the supper to be most simple and excellent when it comes nearest to the first intention of the Lord and to the Apostles doctrine (Chapter XXI). This is not to argue for the antiquity of diced bread. It is, however, to note that this decision should be held within the realm of the *adiaphora* and not to be confused with the essential description of the act. It is not intended to be a "vain spectacle." Far from being a matter of liturgical tradition or personal taste, it is a commitment to dignify the holiness of Christ and of his redemption for us. We recall Calvin's words in IV.X.29 that "...ceremonies, to be exercises of piety, ought to lead us straight to Christ."

James H. Nichols attributes the disintegration of the Reformed understanding of worship in general and the sacraments in particular to two historical movements. One was the seventeenth century Puritan Revolution and its anti-liturgical ideas. The second was the role of revivalistic evangelicalism "when the experience of conversion became the chief goal of worship and usurped the role of the sacraments, the structure of the whole and the character of each of the elements of worship was transformed. The dignity and objective character of Reformed worship was corroded by the effort to be emotionally stimulating" (Loc. cit. p. 214).

The most interesting thing about this study of theatrical trifles is that it illuminates the basic issue in all Christian worship. That is the power and significance of Christ, to whom Calvin says we must return again and again. It is Christ who flourishes still in the sacraments, who prays with us in our prayers, who becomes the living food for us, and who is spoken directly to us as the living Word. It is within Christ in a very direct and exclusive way that our entire regenerative process occurs. It is Christ who determines whether anything at all of lasting significance occurs in worship. The less we know of this, the more we are inclined to feel that we must nurture and stimulate the spiritual resources within people ourselves. What we have in Calvin is an eschatology of invisibility, a humility before the transcendence of God, and we must emphasize and preserve that in worship. Therefore, become very cautious whenever certain regulative principles are seen to prevail. (See Ralt Jackson Gore, Jr. *The Pursuit of Plainness: Rethinking*

the Puritan Regulative Principle of Worship. Unpublished Dissertation. Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988).

Calvin reminds us that “all human desires are evil...not in that they are natural, but because that they are inordinate...they are inordinate because nothing pure or sincere come forth from a corrupt and polluted nature” (III.III.12). Drawing deeply on Augustine’s writings, Calvin reminds us that even though spiritual regeneration occurs sin does not end. We cannot reach the point where we are free to engage in imaginative and creative trifling, as though we were involved in the laughter and the full hearted praise of the saints in heaven. Sin has not yet ended, and thus we must go directly to Christ in every instance. We are not in a premature paradise.

The criterion for authentic worship should be neither the way in which the traditional liturgical phrases are ordered in the procedure of worship—although the misordering can be calamitous—nor the inflection of the voice nor the theatrical gestures of the pastor. It should certainly not have to do with the number of decibels registered by the falling of water nor the manner in which the bread is broken. What it has everything to do with is the centrality of Christ and the way in which all attention is directed to him. We are not even bound by the form of the Lord’s Prayer itself. (See John Calvin. *The Christian Life*. Edited by John Leith, New York: Harper and Row, 1984, p. 75f.) Authentic Christian worship has to do with the content, character, and direction of the sermon that is preached and the prayers that are prayed. It has everything to do with the conviction that the grace of God in Christ is terribly unique for the human enigma and the end of history and that it will overcome all human corruption, even that which is both theatrical and minimal in its worship. It is the distinctive epistemology and metaphysics of the grace of God which is at stake in this matter of theatrical trifles.

Finally, Calvin never says it more clearly and with greater flourish himself than he does at III.II.41:

But how can the mind be aroused to taste the divine goodness without at the same time being wholly kindled to love God in return? But truly that abundant sweetness which God has stored up for those who fear him cannot be known without at the same time powerfully moving us. And once anyone has been moved by it, it utterly ravishes him and draws him to itself.

