

THE COVENANTAL DIMENSION OF CALVIN'S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years I have come more and more to the opinion that essential to Calvin's eucharistic theology is its covenantal dimension.¹ Recent studies have made this an increasingly interesting subject.² The purpose of this paper is not to solve the question of whether Calvin may be regarded as a covenant theologian. And, most assuredly, we do not have any intention of showing how Calvin's eucharistic theology fits into what is usually called federal theology. Our purpose is rather to look at several passages from the works of Calvin to get a picture of how Calvin used the biblical concept of covenant to understand the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

¹In previous papers delivered to the Calvin Colloquium I have treated other dimensions of Calvin's eucharistic theology, namely, the Wisdom dimension and the kerygmatic dimension. See Hughes Oliphant Old, "Biblical Wisdom Theology and Calvin's Understanding of the Lord's Supper," in *Calvin Studies VI*, ed. John H. Leith (Davidson, North Carolina: Calvin Colloquium, 1992) and Hughes Oliphant Old, "Calvin as Evangelist: A Study of the Reformer's Sermons in Preparation for the Christian Celebration of Passover," in *Calvin Studies VII*, ed. John H. Leith (Davidson, North Carolina: Calvin Colloquium, 1994).

²J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980); Lyle D. Bierma, *Doctrine of the Sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism: Melancthonian, Calvinist, or Zwinglian?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999); Jack Cottrell, *Covenant and Baptism in the Theology of Huldreich Zwingli*. (Princeton, NJ: unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1971); Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; Cambridge, Eng.: Paternoster, c. 2001); Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, c. 1991); James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51-76; and James B. Torrance, "The Covenant Concept in Politics and Its Legacy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1971): 225-243. Appreciation is expressed to my student, Eric Watkins, for bringing to my attention Lillback's work.

A major assumption of this study is that the Reformers are best understood as interpreters of Scripture. That is what they claimed to be and we should take them at their word. To try to interpret them in terms of Scholastic philosophy is just as foolhardy as trying to understand them from Marxist ideology. We will only get confused if we try to understand Calvin in terms of substance and accidents or form and matter. Calvin's eucharistic theology is understood much better in terms of a number of basic biblical concepts such as sign (σημεῖον), fellowship (κοινωνία), memorial (ἀνάμνησις), remembrance (רִכּוּז), thanksgiving (εὐχαριστία), profession (יְהוּדָה), blessing (בְּרָכָה), and covenant (בְּרִית).³

By a covenantal dimension in Calvin's eucharistic theology we mean an attempt to understand the Lord's Supper in terms of the covenant relation between God and his people.⁴ This approach to worship assumes worship to be one of the primary responsibilities of God's people. We have been called out of the world to serve God's glory (Ephesians 1:12). The first four of the Ten Commandments have to do with worship (Exodus 20:3-8). These four commandments were summed up by Jesus as the first and greatest commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37-38). It is primarily through worship that we obey this commandment. A covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper implies that it is an experience of love. To put it another way, to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is to have communion with God, and not only with God but with the people of God. It is an event in which we experience God's love toward us, in which we exercise our love toward one another, and in which we express our love toward God. It is in worship that we enter into the covenant and that the covenantal relationships are sustained, nourished, and renewed. Christian worship can be understood as the exercising of the covenantal relationships. It is to live the life of the household of faith, to exercise being children of God in our Father's house. It is to recover that blissful state of existence when in the cool of the evening Adam and Eve walked in the Garden of Eden with their Creator. A covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper particularly implies that this sacrament is to be understood as a sign of the covenant, that this sacrament signs and seals the covenantal promises. A covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper regards the sacrament above all as holy communion.

Calvin was not the originator of the covenantal theology of worship. In fact, a good number of scholars insist Calvin should not be thought of as a covenant theologian at all.⁵

³ This list could be elaborated at some length. Philological precision, however, is not our major concern.

⁴ For a more general treatment of a covenantal theology of worship, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), pp. 111-137.

⁵ For a detailed survey of scholarly opinion, see Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 13-27. Among those who most obviously deny Calvin a place among the covenant theologians are first of all Perry Miller and Charles McCoy. Among those who see Calvin as having certain limited elements of a covenant theology are Everett Emerson, George Marsden, David Weir, Lyle Bierma, John Murray, and Gerhardus Vos, but they feel that it is inappropriate to call him a covenant theologian.

There is no question but what Calvin's understanding of a covenantal theology should not be confused with the federal theology of Johannes Cocceius.⁶ The same must even be said about the covenant theology developed by Bullinger.⁷ A good number of these scholars will agree, however, that when it comes to sacramental theology it is a different matter.⁸ Calvin's covenantal understanding of the sacraments he inherited from the Rhenish Reformers who were busily working out this approach to worship sometime before Calvin arrived on the theological scene.

Even further back, it was Luther who suggested that the sacraments might be understood better in terms of a covenantal theology rather than in terms of Scholastic theology. Scholastic theology had built up a matrix of theological understanding that sought to interpret the Christian faith in terms of the philosophy of classical antiquity. As a matter of fact, by using the philosophical terminology of Plato and Aristotle the Schoolmen had produced an impressive Christian philosophy. By the end of the Middle Ages, however, this Scholastic theology began to lose its effectiveness, or at least so it seemed to many. The recovery of the Biblical languages had shifted the whole theological ground. It was in light of this that Luther very early in the Reformation suggested that in place of the Scholastic theology of the sacraments the Church begin to think out the sacraments in terms of the biblical concept of covenant. What led Luther to make this suggestion was the text of the words of institution, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Luther's suggestion certainly had a strong biblical taproot!

Luther launched his attack on the Scholastic understanding of the sacraments in his famous *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, published in 1520. It was in another work, published in the same year, that Luther made an attempt to present an alternative to the Scholastic understanding of the Lord's Supper.⁹ This intention is made clear in its title, "A Treatise on the New Testament, that is the Mass, New Testament being another translation for the term

⁶ Cf. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 26f., on conflicting definitions of covenant theology.

⁷ See Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant*, *op. cit.*

⁸ Lillback, *The Binding of God*, generally p. 21; with reference especially to John Murray and Lyle Bierma, p. 16; with reference to see W. VandenBerghe, pp. 23-24. With reference to Stephen Strehle, see *Calvinism, Federalism and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), pp. 21, and 24.

⁹ Martin Luther, "Eyn sermon von dem neuen Testament das ist von der heiligen Messe." The original text is found in Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. C. F. Knaakel, et. al., 67 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Bohlaus, 1883ff.), 6: 353-378. An English translation is found in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, series ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-76).

New Covenant.”¹⁰ In this work Luther outlines the basic points of a covenantal understanding of the Lord’s Supper. God leads his people by giving them promises for the future. When these promises are accepted by faith we begin to move toward them. The sacraments are the signs of these promises just as the rainbow was the sign of the covenant with Noah and circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham. Luther’s primary concern here was to show that we are saved by faith. The sacraments are significant because in them the promises of God are offered to us to be believed. As the discussion developed, Luther apparently changed his mind about the covenantal understanding of the sacraments. Luther simply never developed the idea further. We will have to leave to others the explanation of this.¹¹ Nevertheless, the work was widely distributed.

Zwingli had seen the possibility of understanding the sacraments as signs and seals of the covenant quite early in the discussion. In his treatise *On the Lord’s Supper*, written early in 1526, he turns his attention to the text, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” He figures this should make clear that the Lord’s Supper is a covenant meal like the Passover. To participate in it makes one a member of the covenant community. The Supper is a covenant sign like circumcision, as we find it in Genesis 17. It makes the recipient a part of the community.¹² For Zwingli, the Passover typology was always very important for explaining the Christian sacrament. But equally important was the story of the sealing of the covenant on Mt. Sinai found in Exodus 24. It was there that Moses sprinkled the blood on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant.” It was a sign of the covenantal bond between God and his people.

It was also just about this same time that the Anabaptists began to advance their views for the reform of the sacrament of baptism. The biblical concept of covenant became an important issue in this discussion. Both Zwingli and Oecolampadius relied heavily on the biblical concept of covenant to defend the baptism of infants. The Anabaptists were not to be outdone. They developed a covenantal theology of their own. This led Zwingli’s successor, the young Heinrich Bullinger, to elaborate covenantal theology more and more fully. Consequently it is usually Bullinger who is thought of as the architect of covenant theology.¹³ Bullinger made it an all-embracing approach to Christian theology, but originally it was much more specifically intended as the Reformed approach to sacramental theology.

¹⁰ Most of the time the words “covenant” and “testament” are synonymous. Sometimes, however, “covenant” is used for a bilateral agreement while on the other hand “testament” is used for a unilateral agreement, as in the phrase “last will and testament.” According to Lillback, as Luther left medieval nominalism behind he began to turn away from a bilateral idea of covenant and to put his emphasis on the unilateral idea of testament. Still, the words are often used interchangeably. Lillback, *The Binding of God*, pp. 66f.

¹¹ Cf. Lillback’s chapter on “The Covenant in Luther the Reformer” in *The Binding of God*, pp. 58-80.

¹² Zwingli, *On the Lord’s Supper*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 24 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 225-230.

¹³ As Charles McCoy has put it, Bullinger became the fountainhead of federalism. When we speak of Calvin’s covenantal theology we do not mean that Calvin understood the Lord’s Supper in terms of federal theology.

To what extent Bullinger depended on Zwingli is hard to say.¹⁴ Bullinger's first writing on baptism shows a strong dependence on Zwingli, but even at that Bullinger's work is much more developed. Cottrell has shown how Zwingli realized early in the discussion with the Anabaptists the value of a covenantal understanding of baptism.¹⁵ It was only a short time after that, namely, at the end of 1525, that Bullinger pointed out the value of a covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper. As Bullinger saw it, the use of circumcision as a sign and a seal of the covenant was a strong support for infant baptism. In the same way, understanding Passover as a sign of the covenant supported the eucharistic theology of Zwingli. The text of Exodus made it quite clear that the Passover was a memorial. It is the same way with the Lord's Supper, Bullinger argued. That is quite clear from the words of institution concerning the cup. The cup is the sign of the new covenant in Christ's blood.¹⁶

It was in 1527 that Bullinger began to move beyond the relation of the idea of covenant to the theology of the sacraments and his covenant theology became a system for explaining the whole of his thought. Here, of course, he went beyond Zwingli. But there was another way in which Bullinger went beyond Zwingli that is of great importance. Bullinger began to think in terms of a bilateral covenant, a covenant that was conditional. Both Zwingli and Calvin thought in terms of an Augustinian understanding of the covenant. It was a unilateral, unconditional covenant that they had in mind when they spoke of covenant.¹⁷

It was this rapidly developing approach to sacramental theology that Calvin adopted when he became involved with the Rhenish Reformation between 1536 and 1542. During this period Calvin lived and studied in Basel for well over a year and there he must have become thoroughly acquainted with the work of Oecolampadius who had been the city's leading Reformer and who had died in Basel five years or so before. Between 1538 and 1541 Calvin had lived in Strasbourg and there he had become familiar with the discussion of the Anabaptist claims that had been advanced so forcefully in that city. We have already treated Calvin's use of an early form of Rhenish covenantal theology in regard to baptism.¹⁸ Here we will concentrate on Calvin's use of the biblical concept of covenant to explain the Lord's Supper.

Let us look at several passages where Calvin's covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper comes to expression.

¹⁴ Wayne Baker has shown that the two were in close contact during the formative years of the discussion. Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant*, pp. 3f.

¹⁵ See Cottrell, *Covenant and Baptism in the Theology of Huldreich Zwingli*. (Princeton, NJ: unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1971);

¹⁶ Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant*, p. 9.

¹⁷ Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant*, p. 20.

¹⁸ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

1. CHAPTER ON THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL (*Institutes* 4.14)

We begin with the chapter of the *Institutes* in which Calvin discusses the sacraments in general.¹⁹ He makes the point that the sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant, "...the Lord calls his promises covenants and his sacraments tokens of the covenants."²⁰ Calvin obviously has in mind those passages in Genesis which speak of the rainbow as a sign of the covenant God made with Noah (Genesis 6:18 and 9:9) and which speak of circumcision as a sign of God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:9-17). Our theologian opens up his discussion with a definition of sacrament. 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 our Lord and his angels and before men.²¹

Surely, even though the word covenant does not appear, this definition makes abundantly clear the covenantal framework in which Calvin thinks out his theology of the Lord's Supper. In the first place the definition is a paraphrase of Augustine's definition, that a sacrament is an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

More importantly, however, one notices the emphasis on the promises of God. Here, the word "promises" is almost a synonym for covenant. What God promises are his good will and love toward us.²² These are, to be sure, the promises of the covenant of grace. Again, one notices that the relationship that the covenant people have to God is the relationship of faith and faithfulness. Finally, one notices that the celebration of the sacrament takes place in a solemn assembly gathered in the presence of the Lord and his angels.

Because for the Reformers the sacraments are best understood in terms of their function in the covenant relationship, Calvin goes on to speak of the way sacraments seal the promises that God gives us in his Word. For Calvin the fundamental reality behind the covenant is nothing less than the promises of God. The Word of God proclaims the covenant promises and delineates the terms of the covenant. This delineation is important because it makes clear how one lives within the bonds of the covenant. The promises or benefits of the covenant are in fact closely related to the quality of life demanded by the covenant. This must be understood if one is to live life in the covenantal community. Now to be sure, Calvin allows, there are many who speak of the sacrament in terms of Word and

¹⁹ This study is based on the English translation of Ford Lewis Battles: *John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20 and 21 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), hereinafter *Institutes*. English translations are taken from this version unless otherwise indicated. The Latin text used in this study is that of Otto Niesel: *Joannis Calvini, Opera Selecta*, ed. Otto Niesel, vols. 3-5 (Munich: Christoph Kaiser, 1957).

²⁰ *Institutes*, 4.14.6.

²¹ *Institutes*, 4.14.1.

²² *Institutes*, 4.14.1.

sign, but what they mean by Word is some magical formula or incantation. The Word, however, must be more than that. It must set forth the promises of the covenant of grace, so that we, believing them, might receive the sacraments as seals of the covenant. A true sacrament, then, must have both these moments, the setting forth of the promises and the sealing of the promises. This is of the essence of a covenantal understanding of worship, and that is what we have here in Calvin's definition of a sacrament.

To explain this Calvin picks up on the Apostle Paul's explanation of how the sacrament of circumcision sealed the promises of the covenant God had given to Abraham (Romans 4:11). Here the word covenant is used quite explicitly. Paul expressly argues that Abraham's circumcision was not for his justification but for the seal of that covenant by faith in which he had already been justified.²³ The Apostle explains this at length in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. There, as Calvin points out, it is quite explicitly stated that Abraham was justified by faith and that circumcision was given as a sign and a seal of the covenant that had already been granted in the word of promise and received by faith. It was this explanation of the function of sacramental signs which had commended a covenantal theology of the sacraments to the Reformers to begin with. If the Reformers had come to realize that one is not saved by simply going through the sacramental system, but rather by faith in the crucified and risen Christ, then they needed to find some way of understanding how the sacraments fit in. Paul's explanation of circumcision and how it sealed the Old Covenant became a paradigm for the Reformers of how both baptism and the Lord's Supper are related to the New Covenant. Salvation came by the grace of God through faith in Christ. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper seal to us the promises of the Gospel that we have received by faith.

2. CHAPTER ON THE LORD'S SUPPER (*Institutes* 4.17)

Let us turn now to another important chapter, namely, Calvin's chapter on the Lord's Supper, to see how our theologian used the concept of covenant as the framework for his eucharistic theology. Calvin, remembering the words of institution, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," wants to make the point that Christ "renews or rather continues the covenant whenever he proffers that sacred blood for us to taste."²⁴ Baptism initiates the covenant; the Supper renews or perpetuates the covenant. Calvin starts by speaking in terms of the persons of the Trinity.²⁵ The Lord's Supper eloquently reveals God as Father who in his concern for his children, whom he has received into his household by baptism, he now nourishes at his table.

God has received us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. And not content with this alone, he has willed, by giving his

²³ *Institutes*, 4.14.5.

²⁴ *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

²⁵ Most theologians emphasize the Lord's Supper in terms of our relation to Christ. The Supper expresses the presence of Christ.

pledge, to assure us of this continuing liberality. To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality [John 6:51].²⁶

The key words here are, “by giving his pledge.” The Lord’s Supper gives us God’s pledge, this covenant pledge containing all the promises of the gospel. God will be faithful, bringing us through the trials of this life well supplied by his grace until at last we enter his eternal presence. Furthermore, this spiritual banquet attests that Christ is indeed our Savior. It is his faithfulness that will bring us through.

When the God who has granted us the covenant is revealed to be our Father then we are revealed to be the children of God. With paternal love and generosity God the Father nourishes us, his beloved sons and daughters, to eternal life.²⁷

The prayer of Jesus, commonly called the Lord’s Prayer, in much the same way also reveals to us that God is our Father. It invokes God as our Father in heaven. This prayer is at the center of Christian worship. It defines the relationships in which Christian prayer takes place. Prayer, too, takes place in the covenantal relationships, and the prayer of Jesus makes this explicit. It is the same way with the Lord’s Supper. When we sit at his table, we discover God to be our Father, “Our Father who art in heaven.” Calvin often speaks of worship as an exercise of our faith. In the celebration of Communion we exercise our relation to the Father. We experience his paternal love as well as the fraternal love of fellow Christians. Calvin, as we have said, has a strong sense of the sacrament as communion, that is, fellowship with God and fellowship with the brethren. This is of the essence of a covenantal approach to the sacrament. It is an exercise of Christian fellowship.²⁸ Calvin often speaks of this and one gets the impression that for him the celebration of the Lord’s Supper was a profound experience. It must have been a time for him when he felt very near to God, and when the eternal realities of God’s kingdom deeply affected him. Surely that is what he means when he speaks of the Supper as the place where the richness of God’s grace is manifested. When one reads passages like this one wonders if Calvin’s religion was really as austere and abstract as we have been led to believe.

The essence of a covenantal understanding of the Lord’s Supper is that through the sacrament God establishes, sustains, and exercises the covenantal relationships between himself and his people. These relationships are the relationships of hope and fulfillment, faith and faithfulness, mercy and love. The relationships of the New Covenant were

²⁶ *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

²⁷ In very similar words Calvin makes the same point at the beginning of his *Petit traité de la sainte Cène*. It is obviously a central theme in his eucharistic piety.

²⁸ Physical exercise was a significant metaphor for worship. We find it used often in Calvin’s commentary on the Psalms. It is interesting to compare Calvin with Ignatius of Loyola and his famous work, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

established by the sacrifice of Christ. "This mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible."²⁹

Here we must carefully notice that our fellowship is not only with the Father, but with the Son as well. The broken bread and poured out wine assure us that the broken body and poured out blood of Christ nourish us to eternal life. They nourish us in the covenant relationship we have to our Savior, who has established this covenant as the eternal covenant. The relationships are both redemptive and eternal relationships. It is to this end that the words of promise are added to the sacrament, "'Take, this is my body which is given for you.' We are therefore bidden to take and eat the body which was once for all offered for our salvation, in order that when we see ourselves made partakers in it, we may assuredly conclude that the power of his life-giving death will be efficacious in us."³⁰ It is the same way with the words of promise that accompany the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." According to Calvin, in these words Christ, "renews, or rather continues, the covenant which he once for all ratified with his blood...whenever he proffers that sacred blood for us to taste."³¹ For Calvin, then, the Supper establishes us in the New Covenant, supports and sustains us in it, and fulfills its promises in us, giving us a foretaste of eternal blessedness.

What is most interesting about this first section of Calvin's chapter on the Lord's Supper in the *Institutes* is the way it shows the covenant to be essentially a relationship to the Father through the Son. This is something revealed in regard to the New Covenant which had been only foreshadowed by the Old Covenant. In the Old Covenant the promise is, I shall be your God and you shall be my people; in the New the promise becomes much more profound and infinitely more personal, I shall be your Father and you shall be my children.³²

3. COMMENTARY ON MARK 14:24

Let us turn now from the *Institutes* to several important passages in the commentaries. We begin with Calvin's interpretation of the Last Supper narrative as we find it in his *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*. Regarding the words, "This is my body broken for you," Calvin tells us that Jesus,

... had no other reason for calling the bread His body than to make a lasting Covenant with us; that offering the sacrifice once for all we should now feast spiritually. There are two points worthy of note. From the word Testament or Covenant we infer that a promise is included in the holy Supper. This refutes the error of those who say that faith is not aided, fostered, supported, and

²⁹ *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

³⁰ *Institutes*, 4.17.1

³¹ *Institutes*, 4.17.1.

³² *Institutes*, 4.14.13.

increased by the Sacraments, for between God's Covenant and men's faith there is always a mutual relation.³³

It is the covenantal promise in the rite that is central. Both the words that accompany the bread, "This is my body broken for you," and the words that accompany the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; all of you drink of it," are Christ's promise to make his disciples the beneficiaries of his atoning sacrifice. "He had no other reason for calling the bread His body than to make a lasting Covenant with us."³⁴ Here Calvin is quite explicit saying that by participating in the Supper we enter into the covenant. In giving us the bread and the cup God gives us a place in the covenant fellowship. The covenant was ratified by the sacrifice of Christ's body. We partake of the covenant by participating in the feast. It is by sharing in the covenant meal that we receive the benefits of the covenant sacrifice.

As strange as this may sound to us today, it all made perfect sense in the biblical thought world, a thought world which Calvin obviously understood. He tells us, "It is only through the appointed act of a spiritual drinking of blood that the Covenant may be firm and effective."³⁵

We notice here as fairly regularly that Calvin uses the words "testament" and "covenant" synonymously. Calvin does not seem to think of testament as a unilateral agreement while covenant is a bilateral agreement. Calvin, being much more sensitive to the biblical concept of covenant, insists that a covenant is a unilateral arrangement. The latest research would tend to show that Calvin did indeed have it right.³⁶

Already in these words of Jesus we sense a play on words. The body of Christ is the Church, the body of believers. The Supper is the sign of the new covenant but the new covenant is the fulfillment of the old covenant. In the end, of course, there is but one covenant, the eternal covenant.

As Calvin understands it, the key to understanding the covenant is that it is a promise that God confers on his elect. This is where faith comes in. Faith is the *manducatio spiritualis*, the spiritual eating and drinking of the bread and wine. The elect hear the promises and believe them. When the promises are proclaimed by means of the preaching of the Word or

³³ The emphasis is ours. Commentary on Mark 14:24 in John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke, vol. 3, and The Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 139.

³⁴ Calvin, *Harmony*, p. 139.

³⁵ Calvin, *Harmony*, p. 139.

³⁶ See George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Presbyterian Board of Colportage of Western Pennsylvania, 1955); Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963); and Lillback, *The Binding of God*. See also Peter A. Lillback, "Covenant," found in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson, David Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), pp. 173-176.

the observance of the Supper as the visible Word faith is both inspired and nourished in the hearts of believers. To be sure, Catholics found this quite inadequate as an explanation of the function of the Eucharist in the Christian life. For Calvin, however, the sign of the meal itself implies that faith is nourished by the observance of this sacred rite.

4. COMMENTARY ON I CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

Another passage in which we find mention of the covenantal framework of Calvin's eucharistic theology is his commentary on the Words of Institution as we find them in the eleventh chapter of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians.³⁷ This commentary is rather lengthy and treats a number of different eucharistic themes which are fundamental to a covenantal theology of the Lord's Supper.

Commenting on the text, "and when he had given thanks," Calvin tells us that this is far more than the usual table blessing.

Yet this thanksgiving goes deeper than that, for Christ is giving thanks to His Father for His mercy towards the human race, and His priceless gift of redemption; and He encourages us, by His example, so that, as often as we approach the Holy Table, we may lift up our hearts in acknowledgement of the boundless love of God towards us, and be inflamed with true gratitude to Him.³⁸

For Calvin the Supper speaks to us of God's love in sending his Son to atone for our sin. The breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine are a visible word that speaks to us of the Father's sacrifice of his Son, and of the suffering of the Son who willingly offered himself. Because we believers taste the broken bread and poured out wine the love of God is manifested to us very specifically and personally. When this manifestation occurs, then the covenantal relationships are nourished as hearts are kindled to respond to God's love by returning thanks to him. It is here that we experience communion. Here Calvin once more emphasizes the eucharistic nature of the Supper. This eucharistic nature is essential to the covenantal dimension of the Supper.

As we would expect Calvin's commentary on the text, "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood," makes especially clear our theologian's covenantal understanding of the Supper. Furthermore, this text implies that what is true of the cup is true of the loaf:

For we have it for this reason, that it may be a covenant in His body, i. e. a covenant which has been once for all ratified by the sacrifice of His body, and is now confirmed by eating, viz, when believers eat that sacrifice. And so, where Paul and Luke speak of the covenant in my blood Matthew and Mark speak of the blood of the covenant, which amounts to the same thing. For the blood was poured out to reconcile us to God, and now we drink it spiritually

³⁷ For the modern English translation, see: John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1989).

³⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 243.

in order to have a share in that reconciliation. Therefore, in the Supper we have both the covenant (*foedus*) and a reinforcing pledge of the covenant.³⁹

As Calvin apparently understands it, there are two moments in the sacramental meal. There is the word of promise and the sign that confirms the promise. The covenant is a testament, that is, it is a witness. It is both God's witness to us and our witness to each other. This is certainly an important aspect of covenant that has not yet been brought out. The concept of witness is surely a basic biblical concept and it is important that Calvin catches sight of it. The sacrament gives witness to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, but it is a witness that is sealed. It is a confirmed, sworn to witness. Calvin as a lawyer appreciates the importance of these two moments. There may be before a trial those who give their testimony and that is certainly helpful in ascertaining the truth, but when a witness enters the witness stand and confirms his testimony with an oath before the court, then the testimony is accepted as valid.⁴⁰

This should make it clear why the use of the Apostles' Creed at the celebration of the Lord's Supper was so important to Calvin. As we find it in the Genevan Psalter, the service of the Lord's Supper proper began with the reciting of the Creed as a vow of the faith in which we intend to live and die. In reciting the Creed we give our witness. It is a witness made before God and his angels, before the congregation and before the world. This certainly heightened the covenantal impact of the service. It is not surprising therefore that we find this passage in Calvin's commentary on I Corinthians 11:26 (RSV), "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Paul now adds a description of the way in which the memorial ought to be kept, viz. with thanksgiving. It is not that the memorial depends completely upon the confession of our lips, for the main point is that the power of the death of Christ should be sealed upon our consciences. But this knowledge ought to move us to praise Him openly, so as to let men know, when we are in their company, what we are aware of within ourselves in the presence of God. The Supper, is therefore, if I may say so, a kind of memorial (*quoddam memoriale*) which must always be maintained in the Church until the final coming of Christ; and which was instituted for this purpose, that Christ may remind us of the benefit of His death, and that we, on our part, may acknowledge it before men. That is why it is called the Eucharist. Therefore, in order that you may celebrate the Supper properly, you must bear in mind that you will have to make profession of your faith.⁴¹

One might put Calvin's thought this way. The Supper is a pledge of God's faithfulness, of his steadfast love. That is the very nature of God's love as we experience it in the bonds of the covenant. It is steadfast love. The Supper is also a pledge of our faith that responds to God in thanksgiving as we find it so often in the worship of the Temple. "O Give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever." In the covenant

³⁹ Emphasis is ours. Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 249.

⁴⁰ See Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 249.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 250.

relationship our love for God is expressed in thanksgiving. That is, it is expressed in the exercise of our thanksgiving. That exercising strengthens and nourishes the covenant relationship. It is in this way that thanksgiving is essential to a covenantal understanding of the Supper.

The Lord's Supper is a doxological proclamation before the world and a witness to the faithful that the mighty works of God in Christ do in fact bring us all the blessings of life and, in the end, eternal salvation. The Lord's Supper is the witness that God keeps his promises.

But there is another thing that needs to be pointed out here, and that is the importance of remembrance. We are to hold this service "in remembrance of me" (I Cor. 11:24-27). The thanksgiving is a memorial, a memorial that recounts the mighty acts of God in the death and resurrection of Christ for our salvation. That is clear from the most basic biblical texts. If it is not only a memorial it is a memorial with an emphasis on how these mighty acts of God for our salvation have brought us into a covenant relationship with God so that now he is our Father and we are his sons and daughters. Maintaining the memorial, however, is an essential stipulation of the covenant. "This do in remembrance of me."

By way of summary we might say, then, that Calvin's covenantal theology of the sacred supper understands it to be eucharist, witness, and memorial.

5. COMMENTARY ON 1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-18

- (i) Another place in Calvin's works where the general covenantal framework of his eucharistic theology comes clearly into view is his commentary on I Corinthians 10:16-18.⁴² It is in this passage that the Apostle Paul himself most clearly expresses his own covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?" (RSV). The idea behind this passage, which Calvin so obviously understands, is that just as in the covenant meals of ancient Israel those who shared in the feast were united into the religious body of God's people, so Christians by participation in the Lord's Supper become one body with Christ and members of the New Covenant people of God, that is, the Church. To share a meal with someone established a sacred bond with that person. This was especially the case with the Lord's Supper. Calvin says, "You are well aware of the power of the Holy Supper, for in it we are ingrafted into the body of the Lord."⁴³

⁴² Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, pp. 215-218.

⁴³ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 215.

Calvin comments on this passage by observing that believers are united together in the blood of Christ, so as to become one body. A union “of that kind is properly called a *κοινωνία*.”⁴⁴ This word, *κοινωνία*, is the word Calvin seems to prefer for the union that believers have with Christ and with each other in the Lord’s Supper. Calvin usually translates it with the Latin word “*communio*.” The Reformer apparently understood that this *κοινωνία*, or communion, was a sacred fellowship. The word spoke of the relationship appropriate to members of a covenant community. *Κοινωνία* is a uniquely biblical concept which speaks of the bond of the covenant community. It was a sacred bond that binds together the community of God’s people.

For Calvin the sharing of the cup of blessing is fundamental to the covenantal bond. The cup speaks to us of the blood of Christ. It promises us the salvation obtained by the pouring out of that sacred blood. The ultimate bond that unites the Church is the sharing of the sacred cup. “[B]elievers are bound together by the blood of Christ, so that they become one Body.”⁴⁵

The same thing, of course, is to be said about the bread. The Apostle Paul is quite explicit, “[W]e ‘are all made one body, because we share the same bread together.’”⁴⁶

The question of presence was vigorously disputed in Calvin’s day. How is it that Christ is with us when we come together on the Lord’s Day to observe the memorial he has commanded us to maintain? Where the Word is truly preached there is he surely to be found.⁴⁷ That is most surely part of it, and a major part of it. But what about the Lord’s Supper? How is Christ present in the sharing of this meal? He is present in that we are united to him in a sacred bond, which here the Apostle calls *κοινωνία*, or communion. It is in fact the covenant bond. It is this Greek word *κοινωνία* that sums it up for Calvin. The Apostle explains himself according to Calvin by saying, “As there is one bread so we who are many are one body.” Calvin goes on:

But, I would ask, what is the source of that *κοινωνία* or communion, which exists among us, but the fact that we are united to Christ so that “we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones”? For it is necessary for us to be incorporated, as it were, into Christ in order to be united to each other.⁴⁸

The covenant bond, this *κοινωνία*, is much more than what we usually mean by fellowship. “Paul is discussing here not a mere human fellowship (*non tantum de mutua inter homines*

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 216.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 216.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 216.

⁴⁷ This statement of the kerygmatic real presence as have called it is first found in the *Didache*. See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, vol. 1, The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), pp. 255-265.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 216.

communicatione), but the spiritual union between Christ and believers."⁴⁹ Here is where Calvin gets beyond the sacramental reductionism of which so many are guilty. "Κοινωνία or communion of the blood is the alliance (*societatem*) which we have with the blood of Christ when He ingrafts all of us into His body, so that He may live in us, and we in Him."⁵⁰ We have fellowship one with another because we are in Christ. The covenantal bond is a profoundly sacred bond. Christ is present in that he lives in us and we live in him.

CONCLUSION

The covenantal dimension of Calvin's eucharistic theology is perhaps made most clear from the communion liturgy of the Genevan Psalter of 1542. And, as is generally recognized by now, this was not the work of Calvin but rather the work of Bucer. Even if it was the work of Bucer, Calvin used it from 1542 throughout the rest of his ministry. As we saw in regard to Calvin's understanding of baptism, Calvin happily adopted the insights of the Rhenish Reformers who had gone before him, Bucer, Capito, Oecolampadius, Zwingli, and Bullinger.⁵¹ Gradually these Reformers were coming to a consensus in regard to the covenantal dimension of the Lord's Supper and Calvin shared in that consensus.⁵² There are three passages in which this covenantal dimension comes most clearly to expression.

It was forty years ago that I first carefully studied the Communion Invocation of the Genevan Psalter and discovered its strong covenantal tone. This prayer supplicates the Father that Christ might,

...live in us and lead us to the life that is holy, blessed, and everlasting: whereby we may truly become partakers of the new and eternal testament, the covenant of grace, assured that it is thy good pleasure to be our gracious Father forever...⁵³

We notice several things here. First, we see that the terms "testament" and "covenant" are used synonymously.⁵⁴ Second, the reason we celebrate the sacrament is that we might

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 216.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 216.

⁵¹ See Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).

⁵² On the pre-history of the communion service in the Genevan Psalter of 1542 see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, American edition (Black Mountain, NC: Worship Press, 2004).

⁵³ John Calvin, "The Form of Church Prayers," in Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 197-210, hereinafter, Calvin, "The Form of Prayers." This quotation is from p. 202.

⁵⁴ There is no hint here of a bilateral covenant as opposed to a unilateral covenant. Grace being unilateral is so radical that it gives us new hearts and puts a new spirit within us. Cf. Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant*.

participate in the covenant.⁵⁵ At its very heart, this service is covenantal. It prays that in our participating in the sacred meal we be joined to each other in the covenant, that God be our God and we be his people. Even more specifically, it prays that God be our Father and that we be his sons and daughters.

This is why it is appropriate that the communion service itself begin with the recitation of the Apostles' Creed. The Creed serves as the covenant vows. It is recited, as the Genevan Psalter specifically says, to testify that we all wish to live and die in the Christian faith.⁵⁶ Just as in the sealing of the covenant before Mt. Sinai included a vow to live by the Law, (Exodus 24:3 and 8), so the communion service of the Reformed Church of Geneva included a profession of faith. It would be hard to miss the point. The Supper is a covenantal rite.

Not quite so obviously, but just as truly, are the covenantal themes in the Communion Invitation with which the minister encouraged the faithful to participate. "Above all, therefore, let us believe those promises which Jesus Christ...has spoken with His own lips: He is truly willing to make us partakers of His body and blood, in order that we may possess Him wholly and in such wise that He may live in us and we in Him."⁵⁷ The matter of the eucharistic presence is in the end a matter of mutual indwelling, or, to use the theological term, perichoresis. It is a matter of our being in Christ and his being in us.

At the heart of a covenantal understanding of the Lord's Supper is that to participate truly is to believe the covenant promises. That is what this communion Invitation encourages us to do. The Invitation continues, "For in giving Himself to us, He makes a testimony to us that all that He has is ours. Therefore, let us receive this Sacrament as a pledge that the virtue of His death and passion is imputed to us for righteousness, even as though we had suffered them in our own persons."⁵⁸ That the sacrament is a pledge, a promise from God that we are received as his sons and daughters, is about as covenantal as one can get.

Finally the Prayer of Thanksgiving that concludes the communion service underlines the covenantal import of the whole service. It prays,

Heavenly Father, we offer thee eternal praise and thanks that thou hast granted so great a benefit to us poor sinners, having drawn us into the Communion of thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, whom thou hast delivered to death for us, and whom thou givest us as the meat and drink of life eternal. Now grant us this other benefit: that thou wilt never allow us to forget these things; but having them imprinted on our hearts, may we grow and increase daily in the faith which

⁵⁵ It is for this reason, of course, that historically, at least, membership in the Reformed Churches was understood as communicant membership. There was a baptismal role, but it was the communicant role which was crucial. It was at one's first communion that one joined the church.

⁵⁶ Calvin, "The Form of Prayers," p. 204. (This is not an exact quote from Thompson.)

⁵⁷ Calvin, "The Form of Prayers," p. 207.

⁵⁸ Calvin, "The Form of Prayers," p. 207.

is at work in every good deed. Thus may we order and pursue all our life to the exaltation of thy glory and the edification of our neighbor; through the same Jesus Christ, thy Son, who in the unity of the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth with thee, O God, forever. Amen.⁵⁹

“Having drawn us into the Communion of thy Son” is clearly a covenantal term. It simply means, having made us members of the covenant community. The petition that God write all this on the tablets of our hearts is an obvious allusion to Jeremiah’s famous prophecy of the New Covenant, the covenant written not on tablets of stone but on the tablets of the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-33). Again it is a matter of indwelling. The point is quite clear: the Lord’s Supper is celebrated that we might participate in the New Covenant, that God be our Father and that we be God’s children, that Christ dwell in our hearts by faith, and that we live in him for all eternity.

⁵⁹ Calvin, “The Form of Prayers,” p. 208.