

## Developing a Calvinist Sacramental Theology

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**Abstract:** In my work defending an Augustinian theology of beauty, I often find more support from Roman Catholic theologians than from my fellow Calvinists. In much contemporary Catholic theology, particularly in theological aesthetics, the doctrine of transubstantiation carries a lot of weight, serving as the basis of a sacramental understanding of reality within which created beauty is valued as a symbol of God's own Beauty. Yet it is my conviction that a Calvinist understanding of the real presence of Christ in the supper is at least as conducive to such a sacramental and symbolic metaphysics, and perhaps more so. My effort in this paper is therefore to go where many of my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have gone, but by a Calvinist route. I briefly set out Calvin's understanding of the real presence in the Lord's Supper, then attempt to draw out a sacramental and symbolic metaphysic that is still genuinely Calvinist. I realize that the conclusions I reach are not all Calvin's own conclusions, but I believe that they are coherent conclusions for someone who embraces a Calvinist/Reformed understanding of real presence.

My primary area of study is theological aesthetics, with a particular focus on the theology of beauty, a subject dominated by Roman Catholic theologians. In recent years, I have noticed a growing tendency among Catholic theologians to use the doctrine of transubstantiation as the basis of a sacramental metaphysic in which they then ground their affirmation of beauty as a Christian value. It is my conviction that a Calvinist can also affirm beauty as a Christian value and that a Calvinist understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper is at least as conducive to this affirmation as a Roman Catholic understanding. My effort in this paper is therefore to explore whether I can go where many of my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have gone, but by a Calvinist route. This is my first step in a project that I expect will occupy me for the next several years, so your input will be much appreciated.

Before we begin, let me make clear I recognize that John Calvin himself does not make the move that I am trying to make. I will start from Calvin's understanding of the

real spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but my primary concern is not the reconstruction of Calvin's thought. Although my conclusions are not Calvin's conclusions, I believe that they are genuinely Calvinist, that is, they are coherent conclusions for someone who embraces a Calvinist/Reformed understanding of the sacrament of communion. In support of that, I have drawn on several other Reformed theologians, most notably Jonathan Edwards, and John Nevin, though in the interest of time I won't be quoting extensively from either of them.

John Calvin's understanding of the sacrament of communion (or – as Calvin commonly names it – the Lord's Supper) differs sharply from Roman Catholic and Lutheran teaching on the one hand, in that he denies the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation, and from Zwinglian teaching on the other hand, in that he believes the supper is more than a memorial of a past event. Calvin believes that Jesus Christ is truly present in the sacrament of communion and that believers truly feed on his body and blood, but it is a spiritual presence and a spiritual feeding. Calvin's key points are these (and you'll find these on your handout).

1. Through the incarnation, the human body of Jesus Christ becomes a source of life for us.
2. Since Jesus Christ is fully human and truly embodied, his risen and ascended body is locally and spatially present in heaven, at the right hand of the Father.
3. The celebration of the sacrament must always be initiated by the proclamation of the Word.
4. The movement of the supper is not a downward movement, of Christ being drawn to us, but an upward movement, as we are lifted to him.

5. The body of Jesus Christ is present in the Lord's Supper through the power of the Holy Spirit.
6. The bread of the supper is really bread, not just the appearance of bread, and functions as a symbol, exhibiting Christ's true presence, not just as a sign or memorial.
7. The celebration of the supper must always involve the entire community.

We'll look at each of these in turn to see what sort of aesthetic might follow from a serious embrace of this doctrine.

First, *through the incarnation, the human body of Jesus Christ becomes a source of life for us*. Our understanding of the Lord's Supper must begin with an understanding of the incarnation of God in Christ. Calvin claims, "[W]e are taught from the Scriptures that Christ was from the beginning that life-giving Word of the Father [John 1:1], the spring and source of life, from which all things have always received their capacity to live."<sup>1</sup> Just as Christ has always been the source of life in his divine nature, so too his human body is life-giving. In commenting on John 6, where Jesus claims to be the bread of life come down from heaven, given for the world, Calvin notes, "By these words he teaches not only that he is life since he is the eternal Word of God, who came down from heaven to us, but also that by coming down he poured that power upon the flesh which he took in order that from it participation in life might flow unto us."<sup>2</sup> He further notes, "[T]he flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours into us the life springing forth from the Godhead into itself . . ."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.8

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.8.

<sup>3</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.9

Calvin is here standing in the long tradition of Augustinianism regarding the illuminating and vivifying power of the incarnation. By entering into our human flesh, Jesus Christ “charges,” as it were, his human body with life, knowledge, and power. When we come into contact with him, as we do through the work of the Holy Spirit, that charge is passed on to us. The ontological gap between Creator and creature, between holiness and sin, between boundless life and inevitable death, could only be bridged from above, and this is what the Son has done, by pouring divine life into a human body. Calvin says, “For it is not possible for the human mind, leaping the infinite spaces, to reach beyond heaven itself to Christ.”<sup>4</sup> It is possible for Christ to leap the infinite spaces, coming down to us and creating a way for us back to heaven, for he himself is the way, the truth, and the life.

Christ as the incarnate Word is therefore the solution to two ongoing epistemological problems. First, there is the problem of how finite humans are able to know an infinite God. Jesus bridges the gap between the supernatural, eternal, and incorporeal God and our temporal and corporeal nature, because in him “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” joined to human nature and incarnate within time. Second, there is the problem of how human mental faculties are able to interact with the physical, sensory world. This knowledge is also channeled to us through Christ, even for those of us who are unaware of his presence or his work. The Christian philosopher Stephen Clark affirms this same idea when he says: “If we wish to see things clearly and to see them whole we must believe that there is a divine *Logos* that is also human. Without that belief we may as well despair.”<sup>5</sup> It is only through the illuminating presence of the Word,

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<sup>4</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.15

<sup>5</sup> Clark, *God’s World*, p. 221.

or *Logos*, within us that any knowing is possible, and it is the incarnation that initiates the process leading to such union with Christ the Word. Our knowledge of God, of the world, and of ourselves is all mediated through the incarnate Christ, in whom all things hold together. Paradoxically, full humanity requires something beyond humanity; we receive that in Jesus Christ.

Turning now to the second point on your handout: *since Jesus Christ is fully human and truly embodied, his risen and ascended body is locally and spatially present in heaven, at the right hand of the Father*, though “locally” and “spatially” may have different meanings for resurrected bodies than for us.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of a Calvinist understanding of the Lord’s Supper are two events: the incarnation, in which God comes down to us, and the ascension, in which our human nature is lifted up to God. Calvin is absolutely opposed to the Catholic idea that the body of Christ could be ubiquitously present, precisely because he contends that this undermines the corporeality and full humanity of Christ. Whereas Roman Catholic theology emphasizes the mystery of the elements being transformed into the body and blood of Jesus, Calvin sees the great mystery first in the reception into heaven of the full, embodied humanity of Jesus and

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. John Nevin, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church,” p. 350, 351: “By the life-giving virtue or efficacy of Christ’s body, Calvin means always the very substance of Christ’s life itself under its divine *human* form . . . For him, the body of Christ, in that new order of existence to which it has been advanced by the resurrection, is no longer under law to nature as before; it has become all “spirit and life”; having its place indeed in heaven, but in such a way as to be capable of reaching forth at once, over all outward local limits, with its inmost substance and force, to the souls of his people (and *so* to their bodies also) in every part of the world. To express all this, he avoids carefully every word that might imply locality or matter, but insists, with only the more emphasis and stress on all that is included in the true conception of life in its invisible dynamic character. The human nature of Christ is made thus to be the reservoir of a life which flows into it from the divine nature (and what else is this than his own living constitution itself) for the use of the race; the vivific virtue which it thus comprehends, the true inward substance of his flesh and blood, is conveyed over to us by the *operation of the Holy Spirit*; and as the result of the whole process, we are so joined to him as to become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, and his life reaches into us precisely as the root lives *in* its branches and the head *in* its members, in the world of nature, only under a far more inward and vital form.” Nevin specifically says that Calvin does *not* mean “*local ascent* on the part of the soul to heaven.” Seems to me he’s wrong here.

second in our real union with him. Calvin says that this “intimate fellowship in which we are joined with his flesh” is a “thing greater than all words.”<sup>7</sup> Calvin insists, as do I, that the same body that was on the cross and in the tomb is now in heaven. When we see Jesus Christ face to face in the next life, that is the body we will see.

At the same time, Calvin does not care to speculate on the exact nature of the heaven in which Jesus now lives. We need to know that, wherever it is, Christ already now reigns over heaven and earth and so is already now protecting and caring for his church. We need to know that Jesus Christ, in the fullness of his human nature, is constantly interceding with the Father on our behalf, so that nothing can now separate us from the love of God. We do not need more detailed information about where heaven is or what it is like, especially since we almost certainly could not understand such information if it were offered. Being a man of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Calvin realizes that heaven is not simply above our heads somewhere in the clouds. He asserts that it “is neither bounded by location in space nor circumscribed by any limits,”<sup>8</sup> so that it is perfectly possible for Christ to exert influence on the earth. Beyond that, Calvin doesn’t try to solve the problem of where heaven is, insisting simply on two things: first, heaven is not here, in the world of our everyday experience, which means that we must in some way experience Christ as absent from us, but second, heaven *is* our final destination and being with Christ is our ultimate purpose.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps our resurrected bodies exist in more

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<sup>7</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.9

<sup>8</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.18

<sup>9</sup> Despite Calvin’s clarity on this subject, some contemporary Christian theologians remain uncomfortable with the language of ascent to heaven. In a discussion I had last January about an earlier draft of this paper, I discovered that many of my colleagues were resistant to such language and seemed to assume that I meant it literally, or perhaps just that Calvin meant it literally. He didn’t, and I don’t. However, almost every culture uses the metaphor of ascent to refer to approaching God, and almost every culture uses the metaphor of up and down to refer to hierarchies of value (indeed, the very word hierarchy includes that metaphor), probably because we humans grow vertically throughout our lives and very early on learn to

dimensions than our present bodies, so that time and space will not be limiting in the same way that it is for us now. Perhaps heaven is some sort of alternate dimension, intersecting this world in some ways. We don't know. The important thing to remember is that Jesus Christ rose in a human body, albeit a resurrected body that seemed less constrained by things like locked doors, but still a human, material body, capable of enjoying food, taking a walk, and being touched. That human body is in heaven, wherever that is, and in that body he intercedes for us before the Father. To suggest that his body is ubiquitously present is to make him something other than fully human.

So the heart of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is here in these first two points: the incarnation and the ascension of Christ, forming a circular movement of descent from God to humanity and return to him. If you like, you can label the center arrows on your diagram as "incarnation" – that's the centermost downward arrow – and "ascension" – that's the centermost upward arrow.

The turn between these two movements lies between the cross and the resurrection. The cross is the culmination of the downward movement; the resurrection is the beginning of the upward movement. In between those two events, Jesus Christ encountered the negation of death, and hell, and human sin, none of which have positive reality (according to the Augustinian tradition), all of which exist as nearly nothing, parasites on God's goodness. The supreme reality of Jesus Christ, the Logos in whom all reality holds together, flooded the unreality of evil. His nature in all its goodness, glory, beauty, and truth could not be contained by the shadows of death, sin, and hell.

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associate moving upward with progress. Excising such language from our theological conversation strikes me as profoundly unnatural. Furthermore, this is the metaphor the Bible uses, and for that reason I believe it is privileged and should continue to be part of our language, even though none of us believes that heaven is literally "up there."

The third point on your sheet: *the celebration of the sacrament must always be initiated by the proclamation of the Word* (and “the proclamation of the Word” is going to be the next downward arrow on your sheet, the middle downward arrow). The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper seals the promises of God contained in Scripture, and unless those promises are proclaimed the seal is meaningless. This proclamation of the Word is not just an inner reality, not just the Holy Spirit speaking to individual hearts, but is the authoritative preaching of the Scriptural Word to the gathered community. Calvin requires the Word to be proclaimed in conjunction with the supper, a speaking in conjunction with an acting. This speaking has been understood throughout the Reformed tradition to involve not only the words of institution but also the sermon, which must precede the sacrament.

The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation posits that the sacrament is a “downward” movement from God to us, in which the body of Christ is distributed to the world. Contemporary Catholic theologians wishing to affirm the value of beauty then reason that through transubstantiation the material world has been validated as worthy of God’s presence. Since Christ has been distributed throughout the entire world, it is reasonable to look for him there. When the sacrament is understood as a downward motion, responding to it with offerings of art and talent makes sense. Contemporary Catholic theologians also tend to speak about the sacramental quality of all of life: since the dispersed body of Christ touches all of life, all of life becomes potentially a point of contact with the presence of Christ.

In contrast, Calvin thinks that the dialogue between God and humanity is initiated by the revelation of God’s Word, both the incarnate Word (which is where we started)



but also by the inspired word of Scripture and its proclamation. The first downward movement from God to us is the movement of revelation, not of sacrament.

Which leads us to point four on your sheet, *the movement of the supper is not a downward movement, of Christ being drawn to us, but an upward movement, as we are lifted to him*. One section of Calvin's *Institutes* has this heading: *Christ not brought down to us; we are lifted up to him*. In that section, Calvin berates those who think that Christ is present in communion bread or wine, claiming:

To them Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence! The question is therefore only of the manner, for they place Christ in the bread, while we do not think it lawful for us to drag him from heaven.<sup>10</sup>

George Hunsinger has called this idea of Calvin's an "upward vector."<sup>11</sup> Whereas the doctrine of transubstantiation suggests the movement of dispersal, Calvin teaches that Christ is ascended in the body and, through the sacrament, draws all believers into union with him and thus into communion with the inner life of the Trinity, suggesting the movement of convergence. It is only because we have stood in God's presence through having been lifted into union with Christ that we are equipped to represent Christ to others. It is only when we are so equipped to represent Christ to others that the Church in turn becomes the body of Christ, a symbol exhibiting the ascended body of our sovereign Lord. Through our participation in the Lord's Supper, we as the Church become the body that is "lifted up" in order to draw all people to Christ.

So Calvin's perspective suggests an expansion of the body of Christ, but it is a different sort of expansion than that suggested by Roman Catholic theology. In Christ's

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<sup>10</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.31.

<sup>11</sup> George Hunsinger, "The Bread that we Break: Toward a Chalcedonian Resolution of the Eucharistic Controversies," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, vol. XXIV, no. 2 (2003), p. 251.

ascension, humanity is ushered into the presence of the Godhead. Through our union with him, the body of Christ that is the Church expands, not because the physical body of Christ is distributed throughout the world, but rather because we are lifted into heaven with him. We add nothing to Jesus Christ, who is already fully God, and already fills heaven and earth in his divine nature. Instead, *we* are expanded, adding a heavenly dimension to our lives already now, because we are united with Christ. Calvin calls this “the wonderful exchange” God has made with us:

that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with righteousness.<sup>12</sup>

This exchange happens particularly in the supper, because union with Christ is its fruit. This also gives Christian people a shared reality that is more important than all the things that divide us. Calvin’s vision privileges the unity of the Church as Christ’s body over the diversity of the Church as members of Christ’s body. I realize that may sound ironic to those who think of Calvin primarily as the instigator of a great schism. Still, in Calvin’s understanding of the supper, the throne-room of God is the place where Christians of every time and every place encounter one another and are joined to each other through Christ.

We now have a second circle to draw around the first, a circle which gains its logic and significance from being analogous to the first. [turn to diagram]. The second downward arrow is the revelation of Scripture, and the second upward arrow is the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Notice that the revelation of Scripture is analogous to

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<sup>12</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.2

the revelation of the incarnation, and in the same way the ascent we experience in communion is analogous to the event of Christ's ascension. Through the sacrament, we participate in the ascension of Christ. We are united to his ascended body and pulled upward to where he is. Both in the revelation of Scripture and in the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ himself is the connecting link, the ladder between heaven and earth, for he is the Word who is spoken, the content of revelation; he is also the Body with which we are united, by whom we are nourished. As the Belgic Confession puts it, the sacraments "are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing."<sup>13</sup>

The remaining three points look more closely at the nature of the sacrament. The fifth point is that *the body of Jesus Christ is present in the Lord's Supper through the power of the Holy Spirit*, and here we find the "turn" between the downward movement of revelation or proclamation and the upward movement of the sacrament. I would argue that this "turn" lies between the words of institution and the distribution of the elements, when the celebrant prays the prayer known as the *epiclesis*, asking the Holy Spirit to transform the gathered people and the elements, so that this event will be a true *communion* with our ascended Lord. In my denomination, the PC(USA) this prayer most typically goes like this:

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine, that the bread we break and the cup we bless may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, that we may be one with all who share this feast, united in ministry in every place. As this bread is Christ's body for us, send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Article 33

<sup>14</sup> *Book of Common Worship* p.72

The Holy Spirit is the agent uniting us to Christ, just as the Holy Spirit is the agent opening the Scriptures to us. In Reformed worship, the reading of Scripture is always preceded by a prayer of illumination, recognizing that both of the movements in this circle depend not on our work, but on the work of the Holy Spirit. Both sides of this dialogue are God-initiated, involving all three persons of the Trinity. It is God the Father who speaks, it is the Son who is spoken, and it is the Spirit who moves in our hearts so that we can hear and understand. It is the Spirit who transforms the elements, it is the Son with whom we are united, and it is the Father whose presence we enter through our union with Christ.

Calvin explains the role of the Spirit, using the image of the sun, which sends nurture to the earth through its beams, asking, “why should the radiance of Christ’s Spirit be less in order to impart to us the communion of his flesh and blood?”<sup>15</sup> Calvin is classically Augustinian in understanding the Holy Spirit as the bond of love, both within the Trinity and within the relationship each believer has with Jesus Christ.

In his first Catechism, Calvin says, “[F]aith is the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit by which our minds are illumined and our hearts confirmed in a sure persuasion within,” and the act of partaking in the supper is both an *act* of faith and a *source* of faith.

It is the Spirit who makes Christ truly present to us, and it is the Spirit who truly brings us

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<sup>15</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.12 John Nevin teaches the same thing, saying of the Lord’s Supper: It is not simply an occasion, by which the soul of the believer may be excited to pious feelings and desires; but it embodies the actual presence of the grace it represents in its own constitution; and this grace is not simply the promise of God on which we are encouraged to rely, but the very life of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. We communicate – in the Lord’s Supper – not with the divine promise merely, not with the thought of Christ only, not with the recollection simply of what he has done and suffered for us, not with the lively present sense alone of his all-sufficient, all-glorious salvation; but with the living Savior himself, in the fullness of his glorified person, made present to us for the purpose by the power of the Holy Spirit. (“The Mystical Presence,” *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, eds. Bard Thompson and George Bricker, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology, vol. 4 (Philadelphia / Boston: United Church Press, 1966), pp. 33, 34.)

into God's presence through uniting us with Christ. In his *Commentary on I Corinthians*, Calvin connects these two works of the Holy Spirit: the Holy Spirit unites us with Christ, so that we participate in his body, and the Holy Spirit does this by the faith that he gives to us, since it is by faith that we "rise heavenward."<sup>16</sup> For this reason, those who participate in the supper without faith receive only a sign and do not in fact participate in Christ, because the Holy Spirit is not present to them.<sup>17</sup> But faith itself is a gift, a result of God's electing grace. God is the initiator in our union with Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Sixth, *the bread of the supper is really bread, not just the appearance of bread, and functions as a symbol, exhibiting Christ's true presence, not just as a sign or memorial.* Calvin believes that the reality of the sign points to the reality of that which is signified. If the bread is an illusion, then so is the promise.

But the signification would have no fitness if the truth there represented had no living image in the outward sign. Christ's purpose was to witness by the outward symbol that his flesh is food; if he had put forward only the empty appearance of bread and not true bread, where would be the analogy or comparison needed to lead us from the visible thing to the invisible? . . . For instance, if in baptism the figure of water were to deceive our eyes, we would have no sure pledge of our washing; indeed that false show would give us occasion to hesitate. The nature of the Sacrament is therefore canceled, unless, in the mode of signifying, the earthly sign corresponds to the heavenly thing.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin embraces Augustine's understanding of signs and symbols, placing himself in a long tradition of Christian symbolic theology, an approach to theology that sees

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<sup>16</sup> *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

<sup>17</sup> *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:27

<sup>18</sup> As John Nevin says, "The virtue that [the sacrament] possesses is not put into it by the faith of the worshiper in the first place, to be taken out of it again by the same faith, in the same form. . . . [F]aith does not properly clothe the sacrament with its power. It is the condition of its efficacy for the communicant, but not the principle of the power itself." *Mystical Presence*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.14; He makes the same observation in his *Commentary on I Corinthians*: "Hence, if there must be a correspondence between the sign and its reality, it is necessary that the bread be real — not imaginary — to represent Christ's real body. Besides, Christ's body is here given us not simply, but *as food*. Now it is not by any means the color of the bread that nourishes us, but the substance. In fine, if we would have reality in the thing itself, there must be no deception in the sign." [11:24]

correspondences between this world and what he calls “heavenly things.” In his *Commentary on I Corinthians*, he gives the example of a statue of Hercules as a simple sign or representation of Hercules, something that certainly has no power to summon Hercules and is in no way connected to Hercules’ presence. In contrast, the dove that appeared at the baptism of Jesus was a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and as such a signal and a pledge that the Spirit was truly present. A symbol is something “by which the reality is presented to us,” and so the symbol genuinely mediates the presence of the thing symbolized.<sup>20</sup> Calvin considers the burning bush and the ark of the covenant to be Old Testament examples of symbols.<sup>21</sup> In the case of such symbols, there is “a sacramental form of expression, in which the Lord gives to the sign the name of the thing signified.”<sup>22</sup> So in thinking about the sentence, “This is my body,” Calvin observes, “[T]his expression is a metonymy, a figure of speech commonly used in Scripture when mysteries are under discussion.”<sup>23</sup> A metonymy is a symbol that “truly exhibits” the thing it represents, and when the symbol is God-ordained we may trust that he has joined reality and symbol to each other in such a way that the symbol leads easily to the truth it exhibits.

This is both a supremely analogical and a supremely eschatological understanding of the sacrament. The bread is genuinely exhibiting the body of Christ, without being univocal with the body; and the whole of the sacrament points forward to the wedding feast we will someday enjoy, giving us already now an actual foretaste both of the feast and (more importantly) of our union with Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

<sup>21</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.21

<sup>22</sup> *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii.21

In his book *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis explains the tradition of symbolic theology in contrast to allegory. He suggests that although allegory is connected to symbolism, in that both establish what he calls an “equivalence between the material and the immaterial,” the impulses are in other ways completely opposed. Allegory starts with the sensible world and invents something fictional, which is less real than the sensible. Symbolism, in contrast, tries to look past the sensible world to something more real beyond it to which it points. Lewis says, “The attempt to read something else through its sensible imitations, to see the archetype in the copy, is what I mean by symbolism or sacramentalism . . . . The allegorist leaves the given - his own passions - to talk of that which is confessedly less real, which is a fiction. The symbolist leaves the given to find that which is more real. To put the difference in another way, for the symbolist it is we who are the allegory.”<sup>24</sup> So to say that Calvin stands in the tradition of “symbolic theology” means more than that he had a way with words or liked to use metaphors. Rather, it means that he interpreted the world as a set of symbols that pointed to God. Calvin certainly stands in this tradition in his understanding of the Lord’s Supper, though as far as I can see he does not embrace this tradition consistently throughout his work. However, the fact that he uses it here does suggest that a Calvinist may also be a symbolic theologian.

Finally, *the celebration of the supper must always involve the entire community*. Calvin was adamant that all believers must be invited to the table, arguing that for one person to take communion alone was to misunderstand the nature of the sacrament. In his *Commentary on I Corinthians*, he argues:

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<sup>24</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 45.

Christ here distributes the bread among the Apostles, that all may partake of it in common, and thus every one may *receive* his portion, that there may be an equal participation among all. Accordingly, when there is not a table in common prepared for all the pious — where they are not invited to the *breaking of bread* in common, and where, in fine, believers do not mutually participate, it is to no purpose that the name of the *Lord's Supper* is laid claim to . . . . For the meaning of the words is: “By participating in the breaking of bread, according to the order and observance which I have prescribed, you shall be participants also in my body.” Hence, when an individual eats of it by himself, the promise in that case goes for nothing.<sup>25</sup>

In his *Commentary on Ephesians*, Calvin hears in Paul's teaching regarding marriage and the analogy there drawn between the relationship of husband and wife and the relationship of Christ and his church a reference to the Lord's Supper, for it is in the sacrament that we participate in Christ and are united with him. But the ones to be united are *the church*, not individual believers as individuals.<sup>26</sup> The community of the Church is the bride of Christ. This is why the prayer for the Holy Spirit, quoted earlier, asks not only for the transformation of the elements but also for the transformation of the community. John Nevin argues, “Christ's flesh and blood are at hand, not in the bread and wine as such, but in the transaction; not materially or by mechanical contact in space, but *dynamically* . . .”<sup>27</sup> This is why churches in the Reformed tradition typically insist on having both elders and a pastor present whenever the sacrament is celebrated, even if it is in a hospital room or at the home of a shut-in. The sacrament is found not in the elements, nor in some special clerical power, but in the faithful gathering of the community under the Holy Spirit's guidance.

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<sup>25</sup> *Commentary on I Corinthians*, 11:24

<sup>26</sup> *Commentary on Ephesians*, 5:28-33

<sup>27</sup> John W. Nevin, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper: Nevin's Reply to Charles Hodge,” *The Mystical Presence and Other Writings on the Eucharist*, p. 316.



So where might beauty fit in here? Do we find in this understanding of the sacrament the same grounding for world affirmation as in Roman Catholic theology? Not obviously. In fact, it is not surprising that this Calvinist understanding of the dialogue between God and humanity has sometimes given rise to iconoclasm, since there is no place in this dialogic circle of word and sacrament for a human creative response. We are swept up in God's action, rather than being actors ourselves. We are acted upon.

The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says that an aesthetic theology must have what he calls "a doctrine of *seeing*," such that there is some way to perceive or apprehend God's work in the world, and also what he calls "a doctrine of *rapture*, of *being brought out*," for without rapture it is impossible to get out of our own "metaphysical systems into the free system of God."<sup>28</sup>

In order to make space for such an aesthetic sacramental theology, we need a third circle, analogous to the movement of word and sacrament, but not identical to it, which provides both the doctrine of seeing and the doctrine of rapture. The downward side of that circle is not hard to find. Calvin taught that there was an additional line of revelation, the book of nature, the Creation. The work of creation is a gift of grace, since the Triune God has no need of anyone or anything outside himself. Jonathan Edwards thus speaks of the work of creation as an overflow of God's glory, beauty, and love. This revelatory act is parallel to the revelations of incarnation and Scripture. Just as Christ can be said to be the content of both the incarnation and the Scripture, so too in identifying Christ as Logos the gospel of John suggests that he is also in some way the content of the creation. As Colossians 1 puts it, "in him all things hold together." The Father speaks

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<sup>28</sup>von Balthasar, vol. IV., p. 24.

the Word in the animating power of the Spirit, and everything comes into being and is held in being, centered on the person of the Son.

Even though creation is (from our perspective) chronologically prior to incarnation, it is epistemologically tertiary. We must experience the justifying results of Christ's incarnation and ascension, and we must then be instructed and sanctified through word and sacrament before we can read the book of nature aright. The Holy Spirit's illuminating presence is necessary here too, just as it has been both in hearing the word and in receiving the sacrament. The primary revelation, to which all other revelation is analogous, is the revelation of the incarnation.

We have therefore almost arrived at an understanding of the dialogue between God and humanity as three concentric circles. [see your sheet] The inner circle is of Christ's descent via incarnation and his ascent via his triumphant ascension and session at the right hand of the Father. The second circle is of the Word of Scripture, proclaimed prior to the sacrament, and the act of the sacrament in response, in which the people of God participate in the ascension of Christ. This circle is controlled by the inner circle of incarnation and ascension, such that the Word and sacrament are pointers or symbols directing our attention to the central event of the coming of God to be with us as a human being.

The third circle is of the creation and ... what? What would be the upward movement parallel to the ascension and the sacrament? For the parallels to hold true, Christ must be the content of this upward arrow in some way, and the Holy Spirit must be the initiating power.

One obvious response to Creation would be creativity, or perhaps imagination, but of a symbolic sort, founded on a right seeing of the created world as related to the Creator. The human mind is designed to perceive the world. God's design for human beings is that we will understand, will *grasp* the things around us. In doing this, we reflect the image of Christ, who, as the Logos, contains, or *grasps* the essential forms of all that exists. When we grasp the world, we are being like Christ. We are also recognizing the essentially symbolic nature of our world, since everything we see reflects the deeper reality of God himself, the reality of his glory and his beauty. As Wordsworth says, "[W]ith an eye made quiet by the power/Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,/ We see into the life of things."<sup>29</sup> When we not only grasp the world, but love it, or – as Edwards would say – consent to it, we make the turn from reception of the creation to an imaginative offering of that creation back to God in gratitude.

This turn is analogous to the turn of the inner circle, in that through our loving attention to the "four-square independent reality" of the beautiful creation we exchange the shadows of our own ideas about reality for the truths of God's glory and beauty reflected around us. This turn is analogous to the *epiclesis*, the turn of the middle circle, in that it requires the help of the Holy Spirit, so that we come to see "no longer from a human point of view," but rather with eyes of faith.

I believe that this is where we may expand the symbolic theology of a Calvinist understanding of the sacrament. Just as the bread is really bread, but is also a symbol uniting us to heaven, so the created world is really physical, material, and good, but is also a symbol uniting us to the lasting kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth, and

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<sup>29</sup>William Wordsworth, Lines above Tintern Abbey.

ultimately to Christ himself. Calvin's understanding of the sacrament allows us to think analogically about the world and our knowledge of it. Just as the bread is not univocal with the body of Christ, but is genuinely connected to that body and genuinely makes that body available to us, so too our everyday experiences of the world around us are genuinely connected to the kingdom of light of which we are now citizens and genuinely make that kingdom available to us, without being univocal with that kingdom. Calvin's understanding of the sacrament allows us to understand all of reality as united in the person of Christ, who is the Logos in whom all things hold together. We as the church are constantly being expanded by the addition of a heavenly dimension to our lives. This expansion transcends the limits of time and space, uniting the church in a real, not simply theoretical way, before the face God.

I suggest that this entire diagram is a partial portrait of the priestly, mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ and the Church. Here we are thinking about the way in which Jesus Christ stands between God and humanity as our mediator, and the ways in which we participate in that mediatorial work. One way that we do this is by recognizing and lifting up the goodness and beauty of creation in a way that gives glory to God, a way that references God as the source of that goodness and beauty. So perhaps the right label for the arrow on the far right of the diagram is "the priesthood of all believers," our call to share in that mediatorial office as a community, with that priesthood being understood as a response of delight to creation in a way that is analogous to Christ's ascension and to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In our fallen world, such priesthood also involves a recognition that things are not the way they ought to be, coupled with a ministry of intercession for the restoration of the creation.

Colossians 1:12, 13 informs us, we have *already* been given an inheritance in the kingdom of light; our citizenship has *already* been transferred to the kingdom of the Son. The world of our everyday experience, including things like bread and wine, books and churches, bushes that burn without being consumed and birds that are symbols of the Holy Spirit, all that world directs our attention toward the more lasting kingdom, for this world is dependent on the next. We are called to be people who are seeking a city with firm foundations, and that city is not here and now. However, we already have access to that city through the sacrament, and the sacrament is a promise that someday we will be residents as well as citizens of that city. In the light of the sacrament, we can see our present experience as symbolic of the world to come, pointing beyond itself to something more lasting and more real.