

The Sacraments: A Reformed Perspective

Chapter 8: The Lord's Supper

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The other sacrament instituted by Jesus Christ is the Lord's supper. By the distributing and reception of broken bread and poured out wine the person and work of Christ is declared, remembered and sealed to believers. While baptism is the initiatory rite that begins discipleship in the visible church and points primarily to the work of the Spirit in regeneration and cleansing, the Lord's supper is the continuing rite; that is, a means of continuing sanctification in the body of Christ.

The Institution of the Sacrament

The institution of the holy supper is described in the synoptic gospels (Mk. 14:22-25; Mt. 26:26-29; Lk. 22:17-20) as well as 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. At a certain point in the Passover meal with His disciples (probably near the end of the meal) our Lord replaced the old bloody symbol which was fitting for the old economy with the bloodless symbol of bread and wine. Both Mark and Matthew say "as they were eating." All four accounts of the first supper say that Jesus "took bread." (The word bread [*artos*] refers to a loaf of leavened or unleavened bread. At the Passover meal a thin sheet of unleavened bread was used.) After the Lord picked up the bread He gave thanks. ("Like 1 Corinthians 11:24 Luke used 'thanks' [*eucharistēsas*], from which we get *Eucharist*, rather than 'thanks' [*eulogēsas*] or 'bless' as in Mark 14:22 and Matt. 26:26. There is little difference in meaning between these two Greek terms"¹). Then, He began breaking the bread into pieces. "The *breaking* of the bread to which reference is made in all four accounts, must be considered as belonging to the very essence of the sacrament."² According to the Jewish Paschal tradition, the family-head "broke for each person present a piece and gave it to him, the bread passing from hand to hand until it reached all the guests. The distribution normally took place in silence."³

After our Lord broke the bread and gave it to the disciples he said "take, eat; this is my body" (Mk. 14:22; Mt. 26:26; Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24) "which is given for you" (Lk. 22:19). The verb "is" (*estin*) mean "it signifies" rather than "it is identical with." The bread is a symbol of Jesus' body (*soma*) which was about to be sacrificed on the cross. After the bread was distributed Christ said "do this in remembrance of Me" (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). The verb (*poieite*, present active imperative) indicates that this sacrament was to *continually* be celebrated. It is a perpetual New Testament ordinance. "This do, i.e., 'Do what I have just done; take bread, consecrate it, break it, distribute and eat it.'"⁴ The phrase "in remembrance of Me" indicates that one of the main purposes of the Lord's supper is to remember what Jesus has done in our behalf. When we

¹ Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 542.

² William Hendriken, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 909.

³ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 505-506.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2nd Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 59] 1958, 59), 1:226.

participate in the holy supper we meditate on what the Mediator has accomplished and profess our faith in Him as the sacrifice for our sins.

Then the Savior took a cup (This cup contained “the fruit of the vine” [Mt. 26:29] which according to Jewish tradition would have been red wine), gave thanks (in the same manner as He had done over the bread) and passed the cup to His disciples saying: “This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many” (Mk. 14:24), “unto remission of sins” (Mt. 26:28); “This cup is the new covenant in my blood (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), which is shed for you” (Lk. 22:20). “The language ‘blood of the covenant’ is an allusion to Exod. 24:8, where blood, designated by this exact term, was sprinkled over the people to ratify the covenant. To this phrase Jesus added a direct allusion to Isa. 53:12, where the Lord’s Servant ‘poured out his soul to death’ and thereby ‘bore sin for many.’”⁵ Luke and Paul make it very clear that Christ’s shed blood or sacrificial death inaugurates, ratifies, and secures all the blessings of the new covenant. “This covenant is called *new* in reference to the Mosaic covenant. The latter was ratified by the blood of animals; the new, by the blood of the eternal Son of God.”⁶ Only Paul’s account adds the sentence, “This do [present active imperative], as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me” (1 Cor. 11:25). Before the words of explanation, Matthew’s account reads, “Drink from it, all of you” (26:27) while Mark notes, “they all drank from it.” Apparently one cup was passed from apostle to apostle. One cup per table (a real cup, not a plastic thimble; a cup of real red wine not Welch’s grape juice) was the practice of the original Presbyterians.

The institution of the holy supper sets forth an ordinance which is very simple, yet which has over time resulted in a number of different theories regarding this rite. While everyone except for a few radical modernists would acknowledge that Jesus Himself established the holy supper and that communion is a perpetual ordinance in the church; there is wide divergence over the meaning of the Lord’s supper, in particular the nature of the presence of Christ at or in the meal. Therefore, as our study proceeds we need to carefully study and understand the meaning of this sacrament.

The Names of the Holy Supper

There are various names attached to this special meal by Scripture and the post-apostolic church. These names shed light on the nature of the rite. (1) Paul refers to this ordinance as the “Lord’s supper” in 1 Corinthians 11:20. It is called a *supper* because it was first instituted immediately after the evening Passover meal. It replaced the paschal supper. Because the ordinance was established in the evening after supper and thus became “the Lord’s supper,” some Christians have argued that communion must only be celebrated in the evening at or around the time a supper would take place. Although the holy supper was established in the evening, both the post-apostolic and Reformed churches did not regard the time of the rite as essential to the meaning or practice of the ordinance. Some churches have communion at an evening service, while most have it in the morning. The exact time of this ordinance is circumstantial to its practice.

(2) Luke refers to communion as “the breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42, 20:7, 46; cf. 1 Cor. 10:16). There has been some debate over whether or not the phrase “the breaking of bread” always refers to communion or simply refers to a common meal and not communion at all. This

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 554-555.

⁶ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 1:227.

discussion has arisen because ancient Greeks and Jews would often describe getting together with people to eat a meal as a coming together “to break bread.” Even though this phrase “the breaking of bread” was a common designation for a regular meal, it is likely that Luke was referring to communion and not simply a meal or love feast. Turretin writes, “That not common but sacred and eucharistical bread is thus denoted appears both from the Syrian interpreter (who translates it in ‘the breaking of the Eucharist’) and from a comparison with Acts 20:7, where the disciples are said to have come together ‘to break bread’ (*tous klasai arton*) (i.e., to the celebration of the Lord’s supper). It is so called from the rite of Christ, who ‘broke bread...’”⁷

(3) Paul refers to the Lord’s supper as the “table of the Lord” in 1 Corinthians 10:21, “you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and the table of demons.” It is referred to as the table of the Lord because the bread and wine were placed on a table; and, it “is the table at which the Lord presides, and at which his people are guests.”⁸ Paul’s point in this passage is that it is totally immoral and inconsistent for believers to commune with Christ the Savior and Lord and His holy people at communion and then commune with the devil’s followers at their special feasts. “The basis of Paul’s prohibition is twofold: (1.) His understanding of the sacred meal as ‘fellowship,’ as the unique sharing of believers in the worship of the deity, who was also considered to be present. (2.) His understanding, based on the OT, of idolatry as a locus of the demonic.”⁹

(4) The church fathers called the holy supper “communion” (*koinonia*) from Paul’s explanation of the supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the *communion* of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the *communion* of the body of Christ?” This is a common designation in our own day. The word communion is fitting, for the supper signifies and seals our union with Jesus in His death and resurrection and our communion with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. At the table God’s people have an intimate spiritual fellowship with each other that does not belong to the world—to those outside the wedding feast of the Lamb.

(5) The early church also called the holy supper “the Eucharist,” from the Greek word *eucharistesa* in 1 Corinthians 11:24, “when he *had given thanks*.” The holy supper is a time when we bless God (1 Cor. 10:16) and give Him thanks for the communion we have with our Lord’s sacrificial death and all the spiritual graces that flow from that redemptive work. It is also a time that we thank God for the sweet fellowship that we have with the people of God.

(f) Some of the early fathers referred to the holy supper as a “love feast” because in the apostolic church the Lord’s supper was connected with or immediately followed a fellowship meal of believers. This assertion can be deduced to a certain extent by 1 Corinthians 11:20 ff., in which Paul rebukes certain abuses which were connected to the Lord’s supper. The Apostle’s description of these abuses is very brief. Some were eating their meals ahead of others, some were getting drunk and some were left without adequate food. Apparently some rich believers were eating abundant amounts of food in the presence of poor believers (possibly slaves and poor freemen) and were not sharing with their needy brethren. This lack of charity, compassion and unity the apostle condemns with a stinging rebuke. Paul says that those people who are guilty of this infraction are despising the church—the body of Christ. Such people are not discerning the body. His solution is: “When you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home” (1 Cor. 11:33). Some commentators (e.g., Charles Hodge, Leon Morris) believe that Paul is eliminating the love feast (e.g., “satisfy your hunger at

⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:423.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 1:195.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 463.

home”) and exhorting the Corinthians to come together *only* to celebrate the Lord’s supper. Other scholars (e.g., Godet, Gordon Clark) believe that the Corinthians are exhorted to wait for each other to celebrate the love feast and the holy supper together in unison. “The apostle wished, that all seating themselves to eat together, the supper of each may become that of his neighbours; thereby it is [by] that the feast becomes a true agape.”¹⁰ If one holds this interpretation the exhortation to eat at home if one is hungry would have the sense of, “If you are so hungry that you can’t wait to eat with your brothers then eat some food at home before hand so that you can wait.” “Paul wishes all to eat in common, so that the rich may assist the poor with their abundance.”¹¹

Turretin notes that the love feast eventually was discontinued. The Council of Carthage (A.D. 417 or 418) decreed that “the sacraments of the altar should be celebrated only by fasting men” (Canon 29).¹² The Council of Laodicea declares; “It is not right to hold love feasts so-called in the basilicas or churches, nor to eat in the house of God.”¹³ These prohibitions are very likely rooted in unbiblical superstitious views regarding the Lord’s supper and the church building as a sacred site common at that time. The biblical connection of a love-feast that is apparently closely connected with the holy supper raises a few important questions. Should the Reformed churches of today have a love feast in connection with the Lord’s supper? Does Scripture require the love feast during public worship? While it is likely that at one time fellowship meals preceeded the Lord’s supper, there is no indication in the Bible that the love feast is necessary or required. This conclusion is based on the following observations. The Lord’s supper is a means of grace that is commanded by Christ while the love feast is not. Times of fellowship and mutual love are required by Scripture. However, fellowship in the sense of a meal, feast, picnic, party or whatever can take many forms and can occur at many different times or places.

The Meaning and Purpose of the Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s supper was instituted by Christ to serve a number of purposes. These purposes are intimately connected to the holy supper’s meaning. The important aspects of communion are as follows.

(1) There is a commemoration of the sacrificial death of Jesus. This commemoration involves a number of things. First, there is a remembrance of what our Savior did: “Do this in remembrance of Me” (Lk. 22:19b; 1 Cor. 11:24, 25). The observation of the elements, the breaking of the bread, the cup of wine, the words of explanation, and the consumption of the elements focus our attention upon Christ crucified. “In this Ordinance, the Bread broken represents the *covenant sacrifice* of the Lamb of God; the Cup represents the covenant itself sealed.”¹⁴ The wine is separate from the bread indicating that our Lord’s blood was poured out by sacrifice. The Lord’s supper serves a similar purpose to the Passover where the children of Israel were to commemorate and remember their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt by God (Ex. 12:11-14; 24-27; 13:8-10; Dt. 16:1-8). Both the Passover and the holy supper involve a *corporate* remembrance. Both look back to real redemptive historical events. The

¹⁰ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1877] 1977), 599.

¹¹ Francis Turretin, 3:425.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ W. R. Gordon, *The Church of God and Her Sacraments*, 106.

Passover, however, is a type while Jesus is the antitype, the fulfillment of all sacrificial and redemptive types. In the Lord's supper we "celebrate with grateful minds the immense love of Christ, who did not refuse to suffer a dreadful death for us and to pour out his blood.... He wished to give the most appropriate symbol of this in the broken bread and the poured out wine; and not only broken and poured out, but distributed to us that even from this it might be evident that all this was designed and obtained for us."¹⁵ The Lord's supper reminds us of the personal nature of Jesus' redemptive work. Christ died for my own sins in particular. He personally loves me and cares for me so much that He invites me to come to His feast, to dine with Him and His people. This reality ought to strengthen our faith and encourage our hearts.

Second, this supper involves a proclamation. By this celebration the saints proclaim (*katangellete*, 1 Cor. 11:26) Jesus' sacrificial death until he returns, "that is, they declare the good news of their salvation that makes them all one."¹⁶ "The Lord's death is preached in the celebration of the Eucharist."¹⁷ "[T]he Lord's supper is, and was designed to be, a proclamation of the death of Christ to continue until his second advent. Those who come to it, therefore, should come, not to satisfy hunger, nor for the gratification of social feelings, but for the definite purpose of bearing their testimony to the great fact of redemption, and to contribute their portion of influence to the preservation and propagation of that fact."¹⁸ "Paul...understands by the *katangellein announes*, the individual and collective proclamation of Christ's love in His sacrifice, and of the glorious efficacy of this act. Each one confesses that he owes his salvation to this bloody death."¹⁹ Matthew Henry writes, "We declare his death to be our life, the spring of all our comforts and hopes. And we glory in such a declaration; we show forth his death, and spread it before God, as our accepted sacrifice and ransom. We set it in view of our own faith, for our comfort and quickening: and we own before the world, by this very service, that we are the disciples of Christ, who trust in him alone for salvation and acceptance with God."²⁰ Thus, we can see that neglecting this ordinance by the church or by individuals for whatever reason (whether a faulty interpretation of Scripture, a refusal to repent of sin, a purposeful neglect of the ordinance, a refusal to join the local church, etc.) is a serious violation of Scripture.

(2) The consumption of the bread and wine symbolizes our union with Christ and our participation in all the redemptive benefits of that union. Paul writes, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 10:16)? The word communion (*koinonia*) (from the verb *koinoneo*, "to partake of") in this context refers to our participation in the body and blood of Christ by faith during the holy supper. This does not mean we literally eat or share in Jesus' real flesh and blood but that by the Holy Spirit we are mystically united to the Savior in His suffering, death, burial and resurrection. A person who truly believes in Jesus, who has the Spirit of Christ within him (Jn. 6:56), who worthily partakes of the holy supper, communes with the Lord and His redemptive work by faith in a special way. The Lord's supper is a true means of grace. It really gives spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. This point is stated beautifully in the Westminster Larger Catechism which reads: "As the body and blood of Christ are not corporally or carnally present in, with, or under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, and yet

¹⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Eclectic Theology*,

¹⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The Epistle to the Corinthians*, 554.

¹⁷ Martin R. Vincent, *Word Studies In The New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1887] 1946), 3:252.

¹⁸ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians*, 1:229.

¹⁹ Frederic Louis Godet, *Community on First Corinthians*, 590.

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary in the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: McDonald, n. d.), 6:564.

are spiritually present to the faith of the receiver, no less truly and really than the elements themselves are to their outward senses; so they that worthily communicate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, do therein feed upon the body and blood of Christ, not after a corporal and carnal, but in a spiritual manner; yet truly and really, while by faith they receive and apply unto themselves Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death" (Answer to Question 170).

"[T]he virtues and effects of the sacrifice of the body of the Redeemer on the cross are made present and are actually conveyed in the sacrament to the worthy receiver by the power of the Holy Ghost, who uses the sacrament as his instrument according to his sovereign will."²¹ The spiritual nourishment that we need is both symbolized and truly received during our participation in the holy supper.

(3) The coming together as a body to eat the bread and drink the wine also symbolizes our unity, love and fellowship with other believers in the kingdom of Christ. "For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). "The design of the apostle is to show that everyone who comes to the Lord's supper enters into communion with all other communicants. They form one body in virtue of their joint participation of Christ."²² Paul is not teaching that Christians become that body when they partake of the holy supper, for earlier (1 Cor. 12:13) he says that all believers were baptized into one body by their baptism with the Holy Spirit. Rather, the Lord's supper symbolizes and affirms what the Holy Spirit has already done as a consequence of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. Our union with Christ in His suffering, death, burial and resurrection is what brings us together under a common Head and makes us members of the same body. The Lord's supper symbolizes salvation and its effects both individually and corporately. Our growth in grace helps us live consistently with our unity in the Spirit. That is why not discerning the body (the local church and its members) during the love feast immediately prior to the holy supper was such a hypocritical farce in Paul's eyes. The apostle's strong rebuke (1 Cor. 11:22) presupposes this aspect of communion.

How is Christ Present in the Lord's Supper?

Although the scriptural account and meaning of the Lord's supper are somewhat simple, there are major differences of opinion between branches of professing Christendom regarding its nature; in particular the presence of Christ in the rite. During the history of the church, four major views have developed regarding the relation of Jesus' presence to the bread and the wine of communion.

(1) As we noted earlier in our discussion of efficacy the Roman Catholic Church holds to transubstantiation, that is, the bread and wine *actually become* the body and blood of the Savior. When the priest utters the words "*hoc est enim corpus meum*" ("this is my body") while elevating the host (the round white wafer) during the Mass, a miracle occurs and the bread and wine are transformed into the real flesh and blood of God's Son. This unbiblical and absurd doctrine has roots that go all the way back to some of the early church fathers. Berkhof writes,

While some of the early Church Fathers (Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nazianze) retained the symbolic or spiritual conception of the sacrament, others (Cyril, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom) held that the flesh and blood of Christ were in some way combined with the bread and wine in the

²¹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1958), 363.

²² Charles Hodge, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 1:190.

sacrament. Augustine retarded the realistic development of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper for a long time. While he did speak of the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ, he distinguished between the sign and the thing signified, and did not believe in a change of substance. He denied that the wicked, though receiving the elements, also received the body, and stressed the commemorative aspect of the Lord's Supper. During the Middle Ages the Augustinian view was gradually transplanted by the doctrine of transubstantiation. As early as 818 A.D. Paschasius Radbertus already formally proposed this doctrine, but met with strong opposition on the part of Rabanus Maurus and Ratramnus. In the eleventh century a furious controversy again broke out on the subject between Berenger of Tours and Lafranc. The latter made the crass statement that "the very body of Christ was truly held in the priest's hands, broken and chewed by the teeth of the faithful." This view was finally defined by Hildebert of Tours (1134), and designated as the doctrine of transubstantiation. It was formally adopted by the fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Many questions connected with this doctrine were debated by the Scholastics, such as those respecting the duration of the change of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the manner of Christ's presence in both elements, the relation of substance and accidents, the adoration of the host, and so on. The final formulation of the doctrine was given by the Council of Trent, and is recorded in *Session XIII* of its *Decrees and Canons*. Eight Chapters and eleven Canons are devoted to it.²³

The Romanist doctrine of transubstantiation must be rejected as unscriptural for the following reasons.

a) When Jesus instituted the Lord's supper and said to the disciples "This is My body," He was still standing right there in front of them. How (we ask) could His human body which was a real, finite, flesh, blood and bones body be in two separate places at the same time? Keep in mind that Romanists are not saying that the host is *part* of the Savior but that "Christ is whole and entire under each species."²⁴ Obviously, our Lord's reference to His body and blood was symbolic. Examples of Christ using figurative and symbolic speech are numerous: He referred to Himself as a door (Jn. 10:4), a temple (Jn. 2:19), a vine (Jn. 15:5), a shepherd (Jn. 10:4), and bread (Jn. 6:35). He referred to the Holy Spirit as water (Jn. 4:14). When He instituted the Lord's supper he called the cup the new covenant (1 Cor. 11:25).

b) The doctrine of transubstantiation is dependent upon a repudiation of the teaching of Scripture regarding the true humanity of Jesus. Every week the Roman Catholic Mass is conducted in hundreds of thousands of different locations all over the earth. Is the human body of our Lord at the right hand of God in one location as Scripture teaches, or is it in hundreds of thousands of different church services at the same time? Further, the hosts consumed all over the earth would fill a cargo ship. With relation to space and expanse this is beyond the limits of a real human body.

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ was (and forever remains) fully God and fully man, two distinct natures in one person; yet these two natures are not mixed or confused in any way. In other words the human nature of our Lord does not take upon itself any divine attributes such as omnipresence or omnipotence. This view, set forth by the church at the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451, is accepted by Protestants and Roman Catholics alike. Yet transubstantiation attributes divine attributes to Christ's human nature.²⁵ His human body, His flesh and blood cannot be all over the world in the Eucharist at the same time without having the divine attribute of

²³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 41), 645.

²⁴ Ludwig Orr, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 397; as quoted in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 992.

²⁵ The mixture of the divine and human natures of Christ into one nature (Apollinarianism) was condemned by Pope Damasus. A church council at Rome (377), synods at Alexandria (378) and Antioch (379), and a council at Constantinople (381), as well as decrees issued in 383, 384 and 388, all condemned Apollinarianism as a heresy. See J. N. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 289-297.

omnipresence. Therefore, the Bible teaches that Jesus is spiritually present—not physically present—in the holy supper.

c) The doctrine of transubstantiation ignores the role of faith in appropriating Christ and His benefits. Nowhere does the Bible teach that we are sanctified by cannibalism. In fact God’s law forbids the consumption of blood (see Lev. 3:17; 7:26; 17:10, 12; Ac. 15:20). Eating literal flesh and drinking literal blood accomplishes nothing other than physical nourishment. What Christians need is a spiritual union with the Savior, spiritual nourishment. Believers are sanctified by the Holy Spirit as He applies the outward means to the heart, which receives what the sensible signs signify by faith. Transubstantiation is mystical, magical, pagan nonsense.

d) Transubstantiation is disproved by parallel passages regarding the holy supper that can only have a figurative sense. Note how Paul describes the sacrament in 1 Corinthians 10:16, “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?” Turretin writes, “Here Paul (explaining Christ’s words) for the body and blood of Christ substitutes the communion (*koinonian*) of both. This evidently cannot be understood properly and literally (*kata to rheton*), but only figuratively and sacramentally. Then by parity (as the victims are called the communion of the altar, v. 18), they who eat of the sacrifices are said to be communicants (*koinonoi*) or partakers of the altar; and the sacrifices to idols are called the communion of devils, and those who eat things sacrificed to idols are said to have fellowship (*koinonoi*) with devils (vv. 20, 21), not otherwise than tropically and sacramentally, to signify the mystical fellowship of those eating the victims and idol sacrifices with the altar and devils. Therefore in no other sense is the bread and cup called the communion of the body and blood of Christ.”²⁶

e) Transubstantiation is disproved by the analogy of Scripture which explicitly refutes the concept of the mass wherein Jesus is sacrificed again and again. According to the Roman Catholic Church, in the mass a true, proper, and propitiatory sacrifice to God is offered.²⁷ That sacrifice is identical with the cross inasmuch as Christ is both priest and victim. The only difference lies in the manner of offering, which is bloody upon the cross and bloodless on the altar.²⁸

The Bible teaches that Christ’s sacrifice was perfect, complete, final—a one-time event never to be repeated. The Savior “does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this *He did once for all* when He offered up Himself” (Heb. 7:27). “He entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*, having obtained eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12); “not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another. He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, *once* at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself...so Christ was offered *once* to bear the sins of many” (Heb. 9:25-28). “But this Man, after He had offered *one sacrifice for sins forever*, sat down at the right hand of God.... For *by one offering* He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Heb. 10:12, 14). “Christ, having been raised from the dead, *dies no more*.... He died to sin *once for all*” (Rom. 6:9, 10).

²⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:474.

²⁷ A propitiatory sacrifice satisfies the justice of God and removes the penalty for sin.

²⁸ “If anyone says that in the mass a true real sacrifice is not offered to God...let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, 22nd sess. can. 1). “If anyone says that...Christ...did not ordain that...other priests should offer His own body and blood, let him be anathema” (can. 2). “If anyone says that the sacrifice of the mass is not a propitiatory [sacrifice]...let him be anathema” (can. 3). Cf. the New York Catechism and the Creed of the Pope Pius IV.

The Romanist doctrine of transubstantiation is an attack at the very heart of biblical Christianity, the sufficiency of the atoning death of Jesus. The Papal church denies this crucial doctrine by supposedly re-sacrificing Christ every day in the ritual of the mass. The Roman Catholic mass (which is the central pillar of their system of salvation) is totally unbiblical and sinful for it is a denial of the efficacy of the Savior's suffering on the cross and death. Further, the Romanist practice of worshipping the host as God even though it is nothing more than a cracker is rank idolatry.

(2) The Lutheran view of the Lord's supper is called consubstantiation. "Luther rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation and substituted for it the related doctrine of consubstantiation. According to him the bread and wine remain what they are, but there is in the Lord's supper nevertheless a mysterious and miraculous real presence of the whole person of Christ, body and blood, in, under, and along with, the elements."²⁹ With Romanists, Lutherans teach a real local presence of Jesus in communion. Therefore, when a believer eats the bread and drinks the wine he is not merely appropriating Christ by faith but is eating the Lord's body and blood "with the bodily mouth."³⁰ Although the Lutheran view avoids the Romanist idea that the bread and wine appear as bread and wine even though they have been magically changed in every molecule, it nevertheless is absurd and unbiblical for the following reasons.

a) The most serious theological charge against it is that it destroys the doctrine of the incarnation. The Lutheran view is dependent on the idea that Jesus' human nature is present everywhere ("ubiquitous"). But according to Scripture, our Lord's human nature was, and remains, a true human nature and thus is finite; and (as noted above) Christ ascended to heaven and sits at God's right hand (Jn. 16:28; 17:11; Ac. 1:0-11). "In all things He had to be made like His brethren...to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17).

b) It is a doctrine made up to support a human theory with absolutely no support from Scripture whatsoever. "[T]heologians ever since Luther's time have suspected that he taught the ubiquity of Christ's human nature, not because it is found anywhere in Scripture, but because he needed it to explain how the view of consubstantiation could be true."³¹

c) It contradicts the words of institution. Jesus said, "This is My body" (Lk. 22:19). Grammatically this statement can only mean two things: This *signifies or represents* My body; or, this is My literal body. The meaning is determined by the context and other related portions of Scripture. It cannot mean "this accompanies my body." The Romanist position (while thoroughly unbiblical) is more consistent exegetically.

d) Like the Romanist doctrine, it views the holy supper as a means of sanctification in a physical, carnal manner which is totally inconsistent with the testimony of Scripture. The efficacy derived from our union with Christ is spiritual. It is effected by the Holy Spirit and appropriated by faith not by the physical teeth, stomach and intestines.

(3) Another view of the holy supper, which has been attributed to the reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), is that the elements are symbolic representations of Christ's redemptive work and nothing more. In other words they are bare representations by which believers remember Jesus' death and commemorate His work. They are memorials, and not a true means of grace. Mathison writes, "Zwingli completely rejected the idea of the sacraments as means of grace. For Zwingli, 'the sacraments merely testify in public that grace *has been* received.' In other words, a sacrament is a sign of *past* grace, not of *present* grace. The supper is a memorial,

²⁹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 652.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 994.

not a means. Zwingli's view of the presence of Christ in the Supper is also important. Zwingli's idea, as Gerrish explains it, 'that the true Body of Christ is present to faith (*fidei contemplatione*) means that while the worshipers thank God for His benefits in His Son, everything Christ did in the flesh becomes as *if* present to them.' Zwingli also put heavy emphasis on the idea that the Supper is 'a public confession which identifies a man with the Christian community.'³² There is evidence that Zwingli to a certain degree changed his views on the holy supper to accept a spiritual presence. Bromley writes, "Zwingli had no intention of denying a spiritual presence [of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper].... This presence certainly means that the communion is more than a 'bare' sign, at any rate to the believing recipient... For in the sacrament we have to do not merely with the elements but with the spiritual presence of Christ himself and the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit.... Zwingli does not dispute that Christ is truly present in the Supper. What he disputes is that he is substantially present, present in the substance of his flesh and blood, present after his human nature...he had no wish to deny the presence of Christ altogether, and the reality of the spiritual presence of Christ involves something far more than a bare memorialism. The Supper cannot be merely a commemorative rite when the one commemorated is himself present and active amongst those who keep the feast."³³

The idea that the Lord's supper is a bare symbol, a memorial only, is common among evangelicals and Baptists. The memorial view is likely an overreaction to the abuses of Romanism and Lutheranism. Erickson writes, "We need to be particularly careful to avoid the negativism which has sometimes characterized this view that the Lord's Supper is essentially a memorial. Out of a zeal to avoid the conception that Jesus is present in some sort of magical way, certain Baptists among others have sometimes gone to extremes as to give the impression that the one place where Jesus most assuredly is not to be found is the Lord's Supper. This is what one Baptist leader termed 'the doctrine of the real absence' of Jesus Christ."³⁴

(4) As we examine the Reformed position on the holy supper it is important to acknowledge and understand that the doctrine of the Lord's supper held by John Calvin (1509-1564), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500-1562), Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and the early sixteenth century confessions (First Base, 1534; First Helvetic 1536, The Gallican, 1559; The Scots, 1560; The Belgic, 1561) was modified by later Reformed theologians and confessions to a position somewhere between Calvin and the mature Zwingli. Therefore, in order to fully understand the Reformed teaching on this topic and our own creed (the Westminster Standards) we must examine the different Reformed positions and attempt to faithfully ascertain why certain changes were made.

The earlier Reformed view is best and most completely represented by the French reformer John Calvin. What separates Calvin from later Reformed positions is his concept of the spiritual presence. Although Calvin rejected transubstantiation and consubstantiation he did teach that the whole Christ, including His human flesh and blood is given in the holy supper. Calvin did *not* believe in a local or corporeal presence in the bread and wine. He did *not* believe that Jesus' body had to leave heaven to be present in the Eucharist. But, rather, the Holy Spirit

³² Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 63.

³³ Geoffrey W. Bromley, "Zwingli and Bullinger" in *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 24:179, 183; as quoted in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 921, footnote 23.

³⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1122-1123.

brings our own souls up to heaven, to Christ's real presence to spiritually feast upon His whole person. Calvin scholar Ronald S. Wallace summarizes Calvin's doctrine of the Eucharist. He writes,

(i) *The body of Christ*, in which he wrought our redemption and apart from which we cannot be saved, in being communicated to us in the sacrament *remains*, throughout the participation, *in heaven*, beyond this world, *and retains all its human properties...*

(ii) *Communion with the body of Christ is effected through the descent of the Holy Spirit, by whom our souls are lifted up to heaven*, there to partake of the life transfused into us from the flesh of Christ...

(iii) Partaking of the flesh of Christ in the supper is thus a *heavenly action*, in which the flesh is *eaten in a spiritual manner...*

(iv) The presence of the body of Christ in the Supper, though it may be called a *real presence* and a *descent of Christ* by the Spirit, is nevertheless also a "*celestial mode of presence*" and leads to no localization of the body of Christ on earth, no inclusion of it in the elements, no attachment of it to the elements...³⁵

Gerish summarizes Calvin's view of the holy supper as follows:

1. The Lord's Supper is a divine gift. It is not merely the reminder of a gift.
2. The gift that is given is Christ himself. In addition, it is the whole Christ that is given.
3. The gift is given through signs, which are intimately connected with the reality that is signified and which guarantee the presence of the reality that is signified.
4. The gift is given by the Holy Spirit. When Calvin says that Christ is "spiritually present," he means that the body and blood of Christ are made present by the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit.
5. The gift is given to all who communicate, but those who receive the Supper without faith receive it to their condemnation.
6. The gift evokes gratitude, and this is the eucharist sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.³⁶

Calvin's view of the Lord's supper is very difficult to understand and perhaps even incomprehensible. Many one-volume systematic theologies do not adequately convey his teaching on the eucharist because of over simplification and even misunderstanding. Some of the distinctives of his theory are as follows. a) When Calvin asserts a spiritual presence of Christ he does not merely mean that the Savior is present according to His divine nature or present in His Spirit but truly present according to both natures (human and divine). b) When Calvin speaks about eating the Messiah's body and drinking His blood, he is not simply saying that we are to look at His person and work by faith. He taught "that eating is a result of faith, not faith itself. In other words, faith is the instrument by which we truly eat and partake of the body and blood of Christ."³⁷ Calvin says we are partakers of His humanity, His flesh and blood. c) Calvin asserts that in the holy supper our souls or hearts are ascended or lifted up to Jesus in heaven. He also says that we partake of His flesh by the agency of the Holy Spirit. d) He teaches that we "are made partakers of the [real] substance of the flesh and blood of Christ,"³⁸ "that by the gift of the Spirit he transfuses into us the vivifying influence of his flesh,"³⁹ the "ascended Christ becomes

³⁵ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), 203-210. As quoted in Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You*, 29.

³⁶ B. A. Gerrish, "John Calvin and the Reformed Doctrine of the Last Supper," in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, Vol. 10, *Calvin's Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons*, ed. Gamble, 232 as quoted in Keith A. Mathison, 47.

³⁷ Keith A. Mathison, 31.

³⁸ Calvin's Institutes, 4: 17; 7.

³⁹ John Calvin, *Second Defense of the Pious and Orthodox Faith*, 282. As quoted in Mathison, 33.

one with us in the Supper.”⁴⁰ What exactly Calvin means by these statements is difficult to understand. One thing is sure—he does not mean that the Savior’s flesh and blood is infused or literally merged into the believer in some way.

What then does Calvin mean? Is he saying that by faith and the work of the Spirit our union with Christ in His death and resurrection is strengthened in the holy supper? Is he saying this is necessary to assert a real physical presence (i.e., a metaphysical presence) in order to increase the sanctification we have through the mystical union? Of the major theologians, Dabney more clearly explains and critiques Calvin’s view. He writes, “His view seems to be, that not only the mediatorial Person, but especially the corporeal part thereof, has been established by the incarnation, as a sort of duct through which the inherent spiritual life of God, the fountain is transmitted to believers, through the mystical union. His arguments are, that the body of Christ is asserted to be our life, in places so numerous and emphatic (Jn. i:1, 14; vi:27, 33, 51-59; Eph. v:30; 1 Cor. vi:15; Eph. iv:16); that exegetical fidelity requires of us to understand by it more than a participation in spiritual indwelling and influences purchased for believers by His death; that the incomprehensibility of a spiritual, though true and literal, substantial conjunction of our souls with Christ’s flesh in heaven, should not lead us to reject the word of our God; and that faith cannot be the whole amount of the vital union of believers to Christ, inasmuch as it is said to be by faith. The union must be more than the means which constitutes it.”⁴¹

Although it is important for Christians to understand the importance of the incarnation and the fact that our initial and progressive sanctification does indeed come from our union with Jesus in His life, death and resurrection; does the holy supper, as Calvin appears to assert, take us mystically beyond where the Word and faith can take us? Is there any biblical evidence that the eucharist gives a soul contact with the corporeal substance of His slain body and shed blood in heaven? There are a number of reasons why we must reject certain aspects of Calvin’s view of the supper. As we criticize certain of the views of the great reformer, keep in mind that we do so not because we are rationalists; or because our thought is rooted in enlightenment thinking but because we believe the reformer has gone beyond the teaching of Scripture.

(1) Our first criticism regards Calvin’s distinction between faith and eating as a result of faith. Calvin rejected the idea that eating and drinking were believing, that we feast on the Savior by faith and asserted that we really do partake of the body and blood of Christ. Yet although

⁴⁰ Ibid. 148 (33).

⁴¹ R. L Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 810. Robert L. Reymond succinctly notes the Reformed opposition to Calvin’s view. He writes, “While Reformed churches generally follow Calvin’s lead in his insistence that Christ is ‘really, but spiritually present’ to believers in the Lord’s Supper, not every Reformed theologian follows Calvin’s exposition in its every detail. For example, Charles Hodge refers to Calvin’s view as ‘peculiar,’ William Cunningham with less restraint charges that Calvin’s doctrine is ‘unsuccessful,’ ‘about as unintelligible as Luther’s consubstantiation’ and ‘perhaps the greatest blot in the history of Calvin’s labours as a public instructor,’ and Robert Lewis Dabney declares that it is ‘strange’ and ‘not only incomprehensible, but impossible.’

Cunningham makes his comments because of what he perceives to be Calvin’s ‘effort to bring out something like a real influence exerted by Christ’s human nature upon the souls of believers...an effort which, of course, was altogether unsuccessful and resulted only in what was about as unintelligible as Luther’s consubstantiation.’

Dabney writes that Calvin, in his desire to heal the rift between Lutherans and Zwinglians, taught that ‘the humanity, as well as the divinity of Christ, in a word, his whole person, is spiritually, yet really present, not to the bodily mouth, but to the souls of believers.’ He goes on to state that the Westminster Assembly, while not repudiating Calvin’s phraseology in a marked manner, did ‘modify all that was untenable and unscriptural about it.’” (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 961-962). Other notable theologians who modified Calvin’s peculiar view are Francis Turretin and John Dick.

Calvin asserted this, he also insisted “that faith is the instrument by which we partake of the flesh and blood of Christ.... There is no ‘oral manducation’ of the body of Christ.”⁴² Calvin seems to be saying that the supper is objective, that the true or real body and blood is received while at the same time asserting that it is only received by faith. How we ask is faith needed if Jesus is objectively and actually present? This doesn’t make a lot of sense. How can the Savior be carnally present and spiritually present at the same time? It appears that Calvin’s attempts at finding an agreement between the Reformed and the Lutheran positions of the holy supper have led him into incomprehensible paradox. If we feast on Christ by faith spiritually we do not need physical proximity. Commenting on the Westminster Standards Dabney writes, “Note first: that they say believers receive and feed spiritually upon Christ crucified and the benefits of His death; not with Calvin, on His literal flesh and blood. Next, the presence which grounds this receiving, is only a presence to our faith, of Christ’s body and blood! Hence we construe the Confession we think fairly, to mean by the receiving and feeding, precisely the spiritual actings of faith in Christ as our Redeemer, and on His body slain, and blood poured out, as the steps of His atoning work; so that the thing which the soul actually embraces, is not the corporeal substance of His slain body and shed blood, but their Redeeming virtue.”⁴³

(2) Our second major objection regards the nature of our union with Christ and sanctification as it relates to Calvin’s insistence on a real physical presence (albeit in heaven). When Calvin teaches a real physical presence in his definition of a spiritual presence and argues that this real physical presence is necessary for sanctifying efficacy, he contradicts the teaching of Scripture on the union of Christ and places the Lord’s supper above the Word as a means of grace.

When a person is regenerated by the Holy Spirit and saved, he or she is united to Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, all true believers continue in a living organic relationship with the Savior (cf. Jn. 15:5). This mystical union “enables us to appropriate on our part what is given unto us in Christ, and to enter ever-increasingly into conscious enjoyment of the blessed union with Christ, which is the source of all our spiritual riches.”⁴⁴ Because of this union, Jesus is the source of our life, our sanctification and salvation in the broadest sense of the term. The union is organic (Jn. 15:5; 1 Cor. 6:15-19; Eph. 1:22, 23; 4:15, 16; 5:29, 30), vital (Gal. 4:19, 20; Rom. 8:10, 2 Cor. 13:50), personal (There is a true yet mystical bond with Christ, Jn. 14:20; 15:1-7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 3:17, 18) and mediated by the special work of the Holy Spirit. As part of His reward for His redemptive obedience the divine-human Mediator receives and pours out the Holy Spirit on His church, His people. “Through the Holy Spirit Christ now dwells in believers, unites them to Himself, and knits them together in a holy unity, 1 Cor. 6:17; 12:13; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18; Gal. 3:2, 3.”⁴⁵

The doctrine of the mystical union raises a number of questions. If believers are united to Christ at the very moment of the start of their spiritual life and this vital union continues throughout the Christian life, is this union dependent upon or based on the human soul being in actual contact with the flesh and blood of Christ? If not, then according to Calvin (if we understand him correctly) communion achieves a vital union unique and superior to that achieved through the Word. If Calvin is just emphasizing the fact that our communion or union with all the redemptive aspects of His ministry (life, death, and resurrection) cannot be separated

⁴² Keith A. Mathison, 281.

⁴³ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 816.

⁴⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 449.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 450.

from communion with the glorified Lord Himself, then we heartily agree. The work of Christ is not something that should be viewed abstractly apart from the person of Christ. Indeed, Reformed believers can speak of the real presence of the Savior in the holy supper precisely because His person and work cannot be detached from each other. It is the glorified Redeemer who through His Spirit applies redemption to the elect.

Therefore when we speak of the special presence of the Mediator during communion it should be understood that the eucharist is a strengthening of the communion that we already have. The special presence is not something qualitatively unique and different. Berkouwer writes, “The New Testament makes it clear that believers do not stand in true communion with Christ only in the Lord’s Supper. We hear of his promise to be with us until the end of the world, and of his being in the midst of us even though only two or three are gathered together in his name. Furthermore, many references are made to our communion with Christ. To be sure, it is a communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit, but this does not at all minimize the reality of our communion with Christ of which we read that Christ dwells in the hearts of men through faith (Eph. 3:17) and that nothing can separate the believers from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35).”⁴⁶ Therefore the Lord’s supper should not be viewed as some completely special mystical channel of grace (a view that dominates high church views of the sacrament) but rather, as one means of grace among others that strengthens our faith because it focuses our attention on our communion with the resurrected Messiah; who as a result of His crucifixion, death, and resurrection gives us His victory and all its fruits.

The holy supper, as defined and conducted according to the Word, is used by the Holy Spirit in the same way as the Word itself. The eucharist sets forth the central truths of redemption in a sensuous, vivid manner and emphasizes that the benefits of redemption are applied by a living glorified Savior who in the very present communes with us. Once again, our communion with Jesus is not something new, but it is signified, confirmed and strengthened in the holy supper. The problem with Calvin’s view is his focus on Christ’s heavenly corporeal presence. His idea, that our souls are transported to heaven to commune directly with the Savior’s corporeal presence, goes beyond the doctrine of the mystical union into an unprovable (i.e., exegetically) speculation. Further, the idea that our souls go up to be with the Mediator in His physical presence while we are still in our physical bodies and are completely unaware of a virtual change of location is untenable and absurd. “This communion is not a communion with Christ’s glorified ‘body’ and ‘blood’ as a substantial, isolated reality, but a communion with him in his offering and his true body and blood, with him ‘who has become flesh and was crucified in history and whose flesh is now in heaven.’”⁴⁷

(3) There is also the question regarding the Old Testament saints who were united to Christ, regenerated, saved and sanctified before the Son assumed a human nature. Dabney writes, “While the Old Testament believers had not the identical sacraments which we have, they had the same kind of spiritual life, nourished in the same way. (See Rom. iv: 5; Heb. xi, and especially 1 Cor. x: 1-4). Here the same figure is employed—that of eating and drinking. How could this be an eating of His flesh, when that flesh was not yet in existence?”⁴⁸ While it is true that our union with the Savior in a mysterious sense transcends time and space because the Bible teaches that we were united to Jesus in His life, death and resurrection and these historical events occurred two thousand years ago; still, the Old Testament saints could not feed upon a *literal*

⁴⁶ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 240-241.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 235.

⁴⁸ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 812.

flesh and blood in their time when that flesh and blood did not yet exist. Our union with Christ is indeed a mysterious and mystical doctrine. *Speculation* as to the exact nature of how this union operates (e.g., soul transportation) is not an adequate, theological platform to form a confessional doctrine of the Lord's supper.

(4) The central exegetical argument for a real corporeal presence, the bread of life discourse (Jn. 6:22-58), actually proves the opposite. Although Calvin teaches that John 6 is not a direct statement about the holy supper, he does tie this section of Scripture to the eucharist in a figurative manner. He writes, "I acknowledge that there is nothing said here that is not figuratively represented, and actually bestowed on believers, in the Lord's Supper; and Christ even intended that the holy Supper should be, as it were, a seal and confirmation of this sermon."⁴⁹

That John 6 is not a dissertation on the meaning of communion, either directly or indirectly, is indicated by the following considerations. First, the Lord is not discussing a means of continuing sanctification but of salvation itself. The immediate context indicates that He was preaching to unbelievers who were seeking a sign and were looking for a provider of physical needs (vs. 26-27). The thrust of the Savior's message is not the need to partake of the holy supper but "that you believe in Him whom He sent" (v. 29). The people need to come to Christ (v. 35) to satisfy all their spiritual needs. Our Lord rebukes them because they have seen Him "and yet do not believe" (v. 36). Everyone who comes to Him will certainly be saved (v. 37). They will be raised on the last day (v. 39); "that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up on the last day" (v. 40). In verse 44 Jesus discusses the need to be drawn to Himself by the Father (effectual calling). Then in verse 47 He emphatically emphasizes the gospel: "Most assuredly I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life." In verse 51 the bread that He gives is His body given over to a sacrificial death. His atoning vicarious death (not the Lord's supper) is "the life of the world" (v. 51).

With the focus on the gospel, the unbelief of the audience and the repeated emphasis on the necessity of believing in Christ for salvation, the eating and drinking of His blood in verses 53 to 55 refers not to eating the holy supper but the appropriating of Christ and His redemption *by faith*. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that people who consume the Savior have eternal life and will be raised [unto life] on the last day (v. 54). Those who do not consume the Savior have "no life" (v. 53). They are spiritually dead and damned. The Lord holds out two options: salvation by faith in Christ or unbelief and eternal damnation. If one wants this section of Scripture to be a proof text for a corporeal presence of Jesus in the eucharist in any way (in earth or in heaven) then one must be consistent and argue that the holy supper is absolutely essential and necessary for salvation.

Even if one finds a secondary allusion of some kind in this discourse to the holy supper, this section would teach not a literal eating but a spiritual consumption by faith. The eucharist sanctifies not because there is a literal presence or an actual eating of flesh and blood but because our faith in Jesus and the union and communion we do have with the Savior is strengthened. "It set forth the central truths of redemption, in a manner admirably adapted to our nature sanctified; and these truths, applied by the Holy Ghost, are the instruments of sanctification and spiritual

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 266.

life, in a manner generically the same with, though in a degree more energetic, than the written and spoken word.”⁵⁰

Second, in verse 63 Jesus makes sure His disciples do not misunderstand His words in a literal fashion. He says, “It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh profits nothing.” The term flesh in this passage does not refer to the Savior’s body but rather human flesh in general. Our Lord is *not* saying that His incarnation, His assumption of a human nature is not important or necessary for the accomplishment of our redemption. It of course is absolutely necessary. But, what He is saying is that salvation does not come through physical eating, through nourishment of the physical flesh but through a work of the Spirit. This indirectly supports the contention that Christ is spiritually present in communion not physically present.

If Calvin is wrong and we (i.e., our souls) are not somehow brought into the corporeal presence of the Mediator in heaven during the supper, then what exactly do we mean when we say that the Savior is spiritually present in the holy supper? We mean that Jesus is present by and with His Spirit. The very presence of the Lord is a reality for us through the Holy Spirit. But, doesn’t this mean that Christ is replaced by the Spirit and is not truly present? No, not at all! We can only understand the Savior’s presence in a Trinitarian manner. The ascended theanthropic King who sits at the right hand of God, now works upon the earth and in His church by means of the Spirit. “Thus Christ’s promise to send another ‘comforter’ does not mean a ‘replacement,’ but must be understood in the light of the progress of Christ’s work (John 14:16). Just as the pneumatological never functions as a threat to Christology in the confession of the church, so the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit is no threat to the confession of his real presence.”⁵¹

This view of the presence avoids the idea that the holy supper is a *mere* memorial, that the Savior is only present in our minds; and, it avoids bizarre speculative attempts to place us in a literal presence with the corporeal body and blood. Because the Mediator is truly present through the Holy Spirit and it is the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ, we can honestly say that Jesus is truly yet spiritually present in the holy supper in a special way. This view of the spiritual presence is the only view which steers clear of a mere memorialism and a literal presence which is impossible and not provable from Scripture.

Having observed the unique and exceedingly difficult high-church, Reformed view of Calvin, let us turn our attention to the modified but biblical position of the Westminster Standards. The Shorter Catechism reads: “The Lord’s supper is a sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ’s appointment his death is showed forth; and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace” (Answer to Question 96).

In this statement we have all the good elements of Calvin’s position without the speculation. Believers by faith are made partakers of His body and blood with all His benefits. The sacrament is a true means of grace. But we do not partake of the Savior in a corporal and carnal manner. This is no literal sense in which we “feed upon his body and blood” (L.C. 168). Thomas Ridgeley writes,

⁵⁰ R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 814. Calvin even [inconsistently] argues with the main thrust of our interpretation of this discourse. He writes, “And indeed it would have been foolish and unreasonable to discourse about the Lord’s Supper, before he had instituted it. It is certain, then, that he now speaks of the perpetual and ordinary manner of eating the flesh of Christ, which is done by faith only” (*Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, 266).

⁵¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Sacraments*, 239.

We are not to suppose that Christ is present in a corporal way, so that we should be said to partake of his body in a literal sense. But he being a divine person, and consequently omnipresent; and having promised his presence with his church in all ages and places, when met together in his name; in this respect he is present with them, just as he is in other ordinances, to supply their wants, hear their prayers, strengthen them against corruption and temptation, and remove their guilt by the application of his blood, which is present as an object for their contemplation in a more peculiar manner in this ordinance. As for our feeding on or being nourished by the body and blood of Christ, these are metaphorical expressions, taken from and adapted to the nature and quality of the bread and wine by which Christ's body and blood are signified. What we are to understand by them is, our graces being further strengthened and established, and our being enabled to exercise them with greater vigour and delight, and our deriving these blessings from Christ, particularly as founded on his death. Our being said to feed upon him, in particular, denotes the application of what he has done and suffered, to ourselves.⁵²

By faith believers in a spiritual manner feed upon the whole Christ and all His benefits. When Christians partake of the holy supper and exercise their faith when beholding and partaking of the elements, the Holy Spirit strengthens the worthy participants and increases their sanctification. The connection with the Savior is not a local or corporeal one but a spiritual one.

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⁵² Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival, [1855] 1993), 2:523-524.