

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER:
A BLOT UPON HIS LABORS AS A PUBLIC INSTRUCTOR?

RALPH CUNNINGTON

William Cunningham referred to the doctrine as “perhaps the greatest blot on the history of Calvin’s labors as a public instructor.”¹ Charles Hodge considered it to be an “uncongenial foreign element” in Reformed theology.² For Robert Dabney it was “not only incomprehensible but impossible.”³ This article will seek to evaluate their assessment of Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. In the first part, a brief overview of Calvin’s doctrine will be provided with the doctrine set within its historical and theological context. The second part will critically examine the main objections raised against the doctrine by Cunningham, Hodge, and Dabney. It will be shown that the criticisms lack persuasive merit and reveal a prior departure from Calvin’s central soteriological idea of union with Christ.

I. Calvin’s Doctrine: A Real Spiritual Presence

J. W. Nevin insisted that “any theory of the eucharist will be found to accord closely with the view that is taken, at the same time, of the nature of the union generally between Christ and his people.”⁴ This is certainly true of Calvin. The same concept of union lies at the heart of both his doctrine of redemption and his understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Book 3 of the *Institutes* begins: “[A]s long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us.”⁵ This emphasis is reflected again in Calvin’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper in Book 4: “Godly souls can

Ralph Cunnington is a Th.M. student at Westminster Theological Seminary in London and a Research Associate at the Wales Evangelical School of Theology in Bridgend.

¹ William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 240.

² Charles Hodge, “Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord’s Supper,” review of John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist*, *Princeton Review* 20 (April 1848): 251.

³ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 811.

⁴ John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: S. R. Fisher & Co., 1867; repr., La Vergne, Tenn.: Kessinger Publishing, 2009), 54.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.1.1.

gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament: in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours.”⁶ For Calvin, the work of Christ was undertaken not simply in his Spirit but in his humanity, and therefore to participate in its benefits the believer has to partake of Christ’s humanity.⁷ As we shall see, this conception of union colors Calvin’s entire doctrine. First, however, the doctrine must be set within its immediate historical context.

1. *Historical Context*

In the early sixteenth century, there were two conflicting schools of thought within Protestantism concerning the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. For Martin Luther and his followers, the body and blood of Christ were physically present “in, under and with” the bread and wine.⁸ They rejected the Roman dogma of transubstantiation but maintained that, by virtue of a communication of the divine attributes of Christ onto his humanity, Christ’s body had become ubiquitous and was therefore present wherever and whenever the Supper was celebrated.⁹ Huldrych Zwingli and his followers opposed this view, insisting that Christ is to be remembered in his “absence” in the Lord’s Supper not in his presence. Jesus’ words, “this is my body” (Matt 26:26) were to be taken figuratively and the Supper was no more than a sign of the thing signified.¹⁰

As Carl Trueman has observed, undergirding these two positions were fundamentally different understandings of salvation and the incarnation.¹¹ While Luther’s Christology lacked patristic support and veered towards Eutychianism, Zwingli’s memorialism revealed neo-Platonic presuppositions that marginalized the importance of the physical.¹² Into this clash of theological and philosophical

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.17.2.

⁷ In his commentary on John’s Gospel, Calvin writes: “For in his flesh was accomplished man’s redemption; in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sins, and an obedience yielded to God to reconcile Him to us; it was also filled with the sanctification of the Spirit; finally, having overcome death, it was received into heavenly glory” (*The Gospel According to John, Vol. 1: 1–10* [trans. T. H. L. Parker; Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries 4; ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959–1972], 167; hereafter Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries will be cited CNTC). This viewpoint was held in common with Luther and the Lutherans. See Thomas J. Davis, *This Is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 58–59.

⁸ See Article 7:35 of the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration.

⁹ *A Treatise on the New Testament, That is, the Holy Mass*, in *Luther’s Works* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman; 55 vols; Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986), 35:79–111); *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (*Luther’s Works*, 36:11–126). See also Davis, *This Is My Body*, 41–63.

¹⁰ Huldrych Zwingli, *On the Lord’s Supper*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 188–89. See also Robert Letham, *The Lord’s Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 25–28; W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 227–50.

¹¹ Carl Trueman, “The Incarnation and the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Word Became Flesh: Evangelicals and the Incarnation* (ed. David Peterson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 187.

¹² See *ibid.*, 187–89; Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1998), 196–99; Matthew W. Mason, “A Spiritual Banquet: John Calvin on the Lord’s Supper,” *Chm* 117 (2003): 333; Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.30; Letham, *The Lord’s Supper*, 26–27.

ideas stepped John Calvin with his doctrine of the real spiritual presence of Christ. While it is a mistake to understand Calvin's doctrine as a compromise between the two camps, it is true to say that Calvin sought to emphasize the importance of Christ's humanity in the work of redemption while preserving the integrity of Christ's two natures.¹³

2. *The Sacraments*

To understand why Calvin so vigorously opposed Zwinglianism we need to appreciate his theology of the sacraments generally.¹⁴ For Calvin a sacrament was an "outward sign by which the Lord seals on our conscience the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels before men."¹⁵

While Zwingli emphasized the sacraments as a pledge of allegiance towards God, for Calvin this was only their secondary purpose.¹⁶ Their primary function was a movement from God towards man whereby he signed and sealed the promises of his Word.¹⁷ Zwingli could not accept that the sacraments were a means of grace because, for him, that would seem to bind the Spirit to the use of outward means.¹⁸ No such problem arose for Calvin who insisted that "God uses means and instruments which he himself sees to be expedient."¹⁹ In Calvin's mind, Zwingli's sacramentology was dangerously flawed since it separated the sign from the reality, rendering the sign "bare": "[T]he sacraments of the Lord ought not and cannot at all be separated from their reality and substance. To distinguish them so that they be not confused is not only good and reasonable but wholly necessary. But to divide them so as to set them up the one without the other is absurd. . . . If God cannot deceive or lie, it follows that he performs all that it signifies."²⁰ Calvin used the christological maxim "distinct but not separate" to explain the relationship between the sign and the reality.²¹ Contrary to

¹³ As we shall see, Cunningham and Hodge's claims to the contrary are clearly flawed.

¹⁴ Cunningham rightly emphasized the importance of having a general doctrine of the sacraments (*Theology of the Reformation*, 239).

¹⁵ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.1. See Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953; repr., Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995), 133-58.

¹⁶ Stephens, *Zwingli*, 183-85; Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.13.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.3.

¹⁸ Stephens, *Zwingli*, 186.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.12. Later Calvin writes: "The only question here is whether God acts by his own intrinsic power (as they say) or resigns his office to outward symbols. But we contend that, whatever instruments he uses, these detract nothing from his original activity" (*Inst.*, 4.14.17).

²⁰ John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and only Saviour Jesus Christ," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (ed. J. K. S. Reid; LCC 22; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 147-48. See also John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and Thessalonians* (trans. Ross Mackenzie; CNTC 8), 123.

²¹ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (trans. John W. Fraser; CNTC 9), 203.

Rome the sign is not transformed into the reality to which it pointed, but contrary to Zwingli the reality is always present and available with the sign.²² That does not, however, mean that the power and efficacy of the sacrament resides in the external elements; instead it wholly emanates from the Spirit of God and is only received by faith.²³

3. *The Lord's Supper*

With this framework in place Calvin's teaching concerning the Lord's Supper can be examined. For Calvin, the Supper was a "spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality."²⁴ He used the analogy of a spring, reasoning that "the flesh of Christ is like a rich and inexhaustible fountain that pours forth from the Godhead into itself."²⁵ Union with Christ lies at the heart of the Supper, it being "a help whereby we may be engrafted into Christ's body or, engrafted, may grow more and more together with him, until he perfectly joins us with him in the heavenly life."²⁶ For this to be possible Christ must be present in the Supper offering "his body to be enjoyed by us, to nourish us unto eternal life."²⁷ John 6:26-65 was a key text for Calvin. In his commentary on John's Gospel, Calvin insisted that "eating of Christ" did not simply mean believing in Christ: "I certainly acknowledge that we eat Christ in no other way than by believing. But the eating is the effect and fruit of faith rather than faith itself."²⁸ It is also clear that participation in Christ is participation in him rather than simply in his benefits: "It is only after we obtain Christ Himself, that we come to share in the benefits of Christ."²⁹ For that reason, "the body of Christ is . . . truly given to us in the Supper, so that . . . our souls are fed by the substance of His body, so that we are truly made one with Him."³⁰

How is this possible? Calvin vociferously rejected the Lutheran notion of ubiquity because it failed to appreciate the significance of the ascension and

²² Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.16.

²³ See Calvin, "The Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in *Theological Treatises*, 131. See also I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 142.

²⁴ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.1. See Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 246.

²⁵ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.9. See also Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians* (trans. T. H. L. Parker; CNTC 11), 209.

²⁶ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.33. See also Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 216. On the centrality of union with Christ, see John D. Nicholls, "Union with Christ: John Calvin on the Lord's Supper," in *Union and Communion, 1529-1979* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1979), 36-38.

²⁷ Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, 209.

²⁸ Calvin, *John*, 1:159. See also Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.5; Calvin, "The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper," in *Theological Treatises*, 291. See also Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993; repr., Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 71-72, 130; Nicholls, "Union with Christ," 37.

²⁹ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 246. See also Bavinck's agreement: R. N. Gleason, "Calvin and Bavinck on the Lord's Supper," *WTJ* 45 (1983): 293.

³⁰ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 246.

the fact that the Son had “bore [true flesh] up to heaven,” flesh that was limited by the general characteristics of all human bodies.³¹ Ubiquity rendered Christ’s body “contrary to its nature,” appearing as “nothing but a phantom,” and in so doing caused serious soteriological problems since, “how weak and fragile our hope [in the general resurrection] would be, if this very flesh of ours had not been truly raised in Christ, and had not entered into the Kingdom of heaven!”³² The fundamental error of Luther and his followers was to assume that Christ could only be present in the Supper if he was dragged down from heaven. They had failed to understand “the manner of descent by which he lifts us up to himself.”³³

Calvin admitted that there was great mystery in this, observing that “it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such a great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food.”³⁴ It was a truth of which Calvin said, “I rather experience than understand it,” but he was sure that the union was possible and that it was achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit, a power that “towers above all our senses.”³⁵ Indeed the Holy Spirit is able “not only to bring together, but also to join together, things which are separated by distance, and by a great distance at that.”³⁶ It seemed quite unsurprising to Calvin that the Spirit had a central role in the Supper since, throughout Scripture, our participation with Christ is related wholly to the power of the Spirit (citing Rom 8:9).³⁷ In seeking to describe the role of the Spirit, Calvin used the analogy of the sun: “For if we see that the sun, shedding its beams upon the earth, casts its substance in some measure upon it in order to beget, nourish and give growth to its offspring—why should the radiance of Christ’s Spirit be less in order to impart to us the communion of his flesh and blood?”³⁸

Calvin was careful to guard against misunderstandings of the nature of the union that took place in the Supper. He distinguished himself from Joachim Westphal and his teaching on the mixture of Christ’s flesh with our soul. Christ’s flesh does not enter us in the Supper but instead breathes life into our souls.³⁹ Moreover, the language of “spiritual eating” was not to be taken to suggest that

³¹ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.29, 12.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.17.16, 29; Calvin, “Short Treatise,” 158. See also Calvin, “Clear Explanation,” 311-12.

³³ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.17.10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.17.32, 10. It seems that Calvin’s understanding of the role of the Spirit in the Lord’s Supper developed over time. In the *Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper* (1541) there is little mention of the Spirit’s role but Calvin’s thinking on this seemed to crystallize in his commentary on *1 Corinthians* (1546), the fruits of which are seen in the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559). See the discussion in Hesselink, *First Catechism*, 147-49.

³⁶ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 247.

³⁷ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.17.32. See also Calvin, “Second Defence of the Pious and Orthodox Faith Concerning the Sacraments in answer to the Calumnies of Joachim Westphal,” in *Tracts and Treatises* (trans. Henry Beveridge; 3 vols; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 2:245-345; Calvin, *John*, 1:148.

the eating was any less true or real. It is spiritual *in manner* because “the secret power of the Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ.”⁴⁰

Brian Gerrish has suggested that, within Reformed theology, there are three different conceptions of sacramental signs: “symbolic memorialism, symbolic parallelism, and symbolic instrumentalism.”⁴¹ Each position differs in terms of the relationship between the sign and the referent. Symbolic memorialism is typified by Zwingli’s sacramental theology and holds that the sign points to something that has happened in the past.⁴² As Melvin Tinker has shown, this approach is reductionist and fails to appreciate the illocutionary force of the sacraments.⁴³ Symbolic parallelism was typified by Bullinger and Bruce and considers the reality to be “a happening that occurs simultaneously in the present” as God works the reality alongside the sign.⁴⁴ In symbolic instrumentalism the emphasis is on “a present happening that is actually brought about through the signs.”⁴⁵

Gerrish notes that the three ways of looking at the Lord’s Supper are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, both symbolic memorialism and symbolic parallelism were evident in Calvin. He wrote of the Supper “exercising us in the remembrance of Christ’s death” (memorialism),⁴⁶ as well as concluding that “as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ’s body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul” (parallelism).⁴⁷ Moreover, it is hard to dispute that there was an instrumental emphasis in Calvin as well.⁴⁸ Of the bread and wine he wrote, “[T]he name and title of body and blood is attributed to them, because they are as *instruments* by which our Lord Jesus Christ distributes them to us”⁴⁹ (emphasis added). In the *Institutes* Calvin asserted that we can “duly infer that by the showing of the symbol the thing itself is shown.”⁵⁰

Calvin’s instrumentalism was no crude repackaging of the doctrine of *ex opere operato*. He insisted that grace resides in Christ, not in the elements, and that the

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.33.

⁴¹ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 167.

⁴² There is evidence that Zwingli may have moved away from a purely memorialist position later in his life (Zwingli, “An Exposition of the Faith,” in *Bromiley, Zwingli and Bullinger*, 257-58). See discussion in Mason, “A Spiritual Banquet,” 335.

⁴³ Melvin Tinker, “Language, Symbols and Sacraments: Was Calvin’s View of the Lord’s Supper Right?,” *Chm* 112 (1998): 145-47. See also J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 25.

⁴⁴ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 166-68. For symbolic parallelism in Bruce, see Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper: Sermons by Robert Bruce* (ed. Thomas F. Torrance; 2d ed.; Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1958; repr., Fearn, U.K.: Christian Heritage, 2005), 77-81, 90-92.

⁴⁵ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 167.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.37. See also Calvin, “Short Treatise,” 145.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.3.

⁴⁸ For an argument that Calvin’s doctrine is closer to parallelism, see François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (trans. Philip Mairet; London: Collins, 1963), cited in Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 168.

⁴⁹ Calvin, “Short Treatise,” 147.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.10. Bavinck’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is very similar to Calvin’s but he diverges on the relationship between sign and reality insisting that it is an ethical connection (Gleason, “Calvin and Bavinck,” 301).

efficacy and power emanates from the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ Moreover, grace is not received by all but only by those who come with faith and repentance, and no more is given in the Lord's Supper than is available by God's Word.⁵² Nevertheless, the Lord's Supper remains a crucial means of grace since by it our feeble faith is strengthened, and our union with Christ grows as he "feeds our souls from heaven with his flesh."⁵³

Much more could be written about Calvin's doctrine. Although not its primary function (contra Zwingli), Calvin agreed that "by using it, we profess our faith before men, and testify that we are in entire agreement with the Christian religion."⁵⁴ The preceding discussion has not touched upon the three main purposes of the Supper according to Calvin: its function as a sign and seal, an incitement to praise, and an exhortation to sanctity and brotherly charity.⁵⁵ Nor has it given any consideration to Calvin's polemic against the Roman Mass.⁵⁶ Instead the focus has been upon those aspects of Calvin's doctrine that have provoked objections from within the Reformed camp. It is to those objections that we now turn.

II. *Objections to Calvin's Doctrine*

The nineteenth-century polemic against Calvin's doctrine was led by Cunningham, Hodge, and Dabney. Cunningham's critique of Calvin's doctrine was presented in an essay on "Zwingli and the Doctrine of the Sacraments."⁵⁷ Although Cunningham was critical of Zwingli for failing to bring out fully what "God does, or is ready and willing to do through [the sacraments'] instrumentality," he was far more critical of Calvin.⁵⁸ Cunningham regarded the sacraments as having two aspects: (i) they were to be viewed as "symbols [that] signify or represent . . . spiritual blessings," and (ii) they were to be participated in.⁵⁹ This second aspect appears to be quite close to Calvin, particularly since Cunningham

⁵¹ Calvin, "Short Treatise," 149, 157; Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.5.

⁵² Calvin wrote: "He who separates faith from the sacraments does just as if he were to take the soul away from the body" ("Antidote to the Council of Trent," Canon 4, in *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* [ed. John Dillenberger; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971; repr., Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1975], 213). See also Calvin, "Short Treatise," 150; Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.33; Calvin, "Clear Explanation," 281; W. Robert Godfrey, "Calvin, Worship and the Sacraments: *Institutes* 4:13-19," in *Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes* (ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 375-84.

⁵³ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.3; 4.17.24. See also Calvin, "Geneva Catechism," 138; Wallace, *Word and Sacrament*, 137-40.

⁵⁴ Calvin, "Geneva Catechism," 138.

⁵⁵ Calvin, "Short Treatise," 144-49. See discussion in Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 32-33; Nicholls, "Union with Christ," 43.

⁵⁶ See Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.18.1-20; Calvin, "Short Treatise," 155-58.

⁵⁷ Cunningham, *Theology of the Reformation*, 212-91. See discussion in Malcolm Maclean, *The Lord's Supper* (Fearn, U.K.: Mentor, 2009), 114-17; Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 164-66.

⁵⁸ Cunningham, *Theology of the Reformation*, 230.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 254.

referred to the sacraments as a “means of grace.”⁶⁰ It is clear, however, that Cunningham had great difficulty in specifying what sort of grace is conferred in the sacraments. He concluded that it consists of “the forgiveness of sins which they continue to commit, a growing sense of God’s pardoning mercy, and grace and strength to resist temptation, to discharge duty, to improve privilege and to be ever advancing in holiness.”⁶¹ This falls a long way short of the grace conveyed in Calvin’s thinking. Moreover, in his attempt to ensure that no one assigns “greater dignity, value and efficacy to the sacraments,” nor “invest[s] them with a deeper shade of mystery,” Cunningham reduced even participation in the sacraments down to “an expression or profession of a state of mind.”⁶² As such, his doctrine was essentially Zwinglian despite his protestations to the contrary.⁶³

Hodge’s teaching on the Supper is to be found in his three-volume *Systematic Theology* and his review of Nevin’s book *The Mystical Presence*.⁶⁴ As we shall see, Hodge was heavily influenced by Scottish Common Sense Realism and this shaped his thinking on the Lord’s Supper.⁶⁵ Regarding the presence of Christ, Hodge reasoned that “anything is said to be present when it operates duly on our perceiving faculties.”⁶⁶ Moreover, “a thing . . . may be present as to efficacy and virtue, which is at great distance locally.”⁶⁷ For Hodge it was this “efficacy and virtue” that was present in the Supper: “What is affirmed to be present is not the body and blood of Christ absolutely, but his body as broken, and his blood as shed. It is the sacrifice which He offered.”⁶⁸ As William Evans has remarked: “Hodge seems to view the sacrament as nothing more than a mental exercise of remembrance and reflection that may be used by the Spirit from time to time to deepen the recipient’s faith and commitment.”⁶⁹ Such a view was bound to come into conflict with Calvin’s high view of the Lord’s Supper.

Dabney’s teaching on the Supper is to be found in *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. He was highly critical of Calvin’s doctrine, insisting that the Supper was “simple and free from mystery.”⁷⁰ For Dabney, it was “a commemorative seal” and he was convinced that, had it not been for the importation of superstition into the church, this view would have been accepted by every “dispassionate reader.”⁷¹ In his estimation, Zwingli had got closest to a correct understanding of the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶³ See Mathison, *Given for You*, 166.

⁶⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 3:611-92; Hodge, review of Nevin, 227-78.

⁶⁵ William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2008), 189-95.

⁶⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:637.

⁶⁷ Hodge, review of Nevin, 245.

⁶⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:641.

⁶⁹ Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 224.

⁷⁰ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 801.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Lord's Supper but he had unfortunately failed to "distinctly enough assert the sealing nature of the sacraments."⁷²

Cunningham, Hodge, and Dabney constituted a formidable body of opinion against Calvin's doctrine in the nineteenth century, and, despite the best efforts of Nevin and John Adger, the Zwinglian conception gained increasing influence. In the remainder of this article, the main objections raised by these three scholars will be critically examined.

1. *The doctrine was perverted by Roman and Lutheran influence.*

Cunningham averred that Zwingli's views were a reaction against those of the Church of Rome and argued that "the extent to which he went rather reacted upon the other Reformers, and made them again approximate somewhat in phraseology to the Romish position." Cunningham continues, "This appears more or less in Calvin, though in his case there was an additional perverting element—the desire to keep on friendly terms with Luther and his followers, and with that view to approximate as far as he could to their notions of the corporal presence of Christ in the Eucharist." Cunningham concludes, "The influence which seems to have been chiefly efficacious in leading him astray in the matter, was a quality for which he usually gets no credit . . . an earnest desire to preserve unity and harmony."⁷³ In a similar vein, Hodge argued that "to conciliate Luther was . . . a constant object and effort" for Calvin.⁷⁴

It is undeniable that Calvin sought unity and harmony between the magisterial reformers on this as well as on many other issues. He thought that his position achieved clarity, preserved mystery, avoided absurdities, was in conformity with the sense of Scripture, and maintained a true eschatological tension.⁷⁵ As such he considered that it could be adopted by those on both sides of the sacramental divide. But it is a great mistake to reason from this that Calvin formulated a mongrel doctrine that was perverted by the errors of both sides.

Firstly, it ignores the fact that, although Calvin was influenced by the work of others, he was a free thinker who was more than willing to dissent from his illustrious peers when he thought that it was necessary.⁷⁶ Secondly, Cunningham's claim that the doctrine was a reaction against Zwingli is exaggerated. While it is true that Calvin opposed the extremes of Zwinglianism, he was much more conciliatory with the more moderate Zwinglians (particularly Bullinger), entering into the *Consensus Tigurinus* with the church of Zurich in 1549.⁷⁷

⁷² Ibid., 809-10.

⁷³ Cunningham, *Theology of the Reformation*, 240.

⁷⁴ Hodge, review of Nevin, 230.

⁷⁵ Wallace, *Word and Sacrament*, 217-26.

⁷⁶ Mathison, *Given for You*, 6. On the relationship between Calvin, Martin Bucer, and Peter Martyr Vermigli, see Joseph C. McLelland, *The Visible Words of God: An Exposition of the Sacramental Theology of Peter Martyr Vermigli, A.D. 1500–1562* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 272-81.

⁷⁷ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Register of the Company of Pastors in Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 115-27.

Thirdly, the influence of Luther and his followers is grossly overstated by both Cunningham and Hodge. Although Calvin approved of the Augsburg Confession it was essentially a Reformed Catholic confession rather than a specifically Lutheran confession and later versions appear to have been influenced by Calvin himself.⁷⁸ Moreover, his general agreement with Melancthon needs to be read against Melancthon's more moderate views on the presence of Christ.⁷⁹ When it came to the doctrine of consubstantiation we can be left in no doubt about where Calvin stood. He referred to it as a "monstrous dogma" and a "damnable error," charging the Lutherans with "raising Marcion from hell" and making Christ's body a "phantasm or apparition."⁸⁰ In his "Short Treatise" he stringently criticized Luther for his attitude during the debate with Zwingli.⁸¹ His criticisms of Luther's followers Westphal and Heshusius were even more severe, and as Adger has remarked, "The man who could deal so sharply with Lutheran ideas after the death of their great author, cannot, without being a coward and a knave, have winked at them, whilst Luther was alive."⁸²

Fourthly, Cunningham's claim that the phraseology of Calvin's doctrine approximates somewhat to the Romish position lacks supporting evidence. Calvin's understanding of the real presence is based upon his exegesis of biblical texts, most notably John 6, not upon Roman dogma.⁸³ Moreover, his vehement and lengthy attacks upon transubstantiation and the doctrine of the mass confirm how far he distanced himself from Rome.⁸⁴

Calvin was a man of firm convictions who was not easily swayed. Merle d'Aubigne described his attitude during the sacramental debates in the following way: "His convictions were free and spontaneous. They did not proceed, as with others, from a desire for compromise, but from a perception of what is the essence of the faith. He would not at any price have sought some expedient for the union of minds by a sacrifice of the truth."⁸⁵

2. *The doctrine does not represent the true Reformed view.*

One of Hodge's central claims in his review of Nevin's book was that Calvin's doctrine did not represent the true Reformed view. He asserted that the historical authorities could be divided into three distinct categories: (i) those

⁷⁸ See Mathison, *Given for You*, 71.

⁷⁹ For Melancthon's views, see Clyde L. Manschreck, ed., *Melancthon on Christian Doctrine: Loci Communes 1555* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); John Williamson Nevin, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," *The Mercersburg Review* 2 (September 1850): 468-71. Calvin's affection for Melancthon is seen in Calvin, "Clear Explanation," 258-59.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.17, 30; Calvin, "Short Treatise," 159.

⁸¹ Calvin, "Short Treatise," 165.

⁸² John Adger, "Calvin Defended against Drs Cunningham and Hodge," *The Southern Presbyterian Review* 27 (January 1876): 152-53. For Calvin's criticisms of Luther's followers see, "Clear Explanation," 258-324.

⁸³ For reliance on John 6, see Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.1, 4-8; Calvin, *John*, 1:166-72.

⁸⁴ See Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.14-15; 4.18.1-20; Calvin, "Short Treatise," 155-58.

⁸⁵ Cited in Adger, "Calvin Defended," 153.

that represented the Swiss (Zwinglian) view; (ii) those that represented the views of Calvin; and (iii) those that represented an agreement between the two groups.⁸⁶ Into this latter category he placed the *Consensus Tigurinus*, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second Helvetic Confession. He claimed that these three documents most accurately represent the true Reformed view and that they supported his own position rather than Calvin's.⁸⁷ As we shall see, both of these claims are unsound.

Firstly, on Hodge's historical approach, Nevin accused Hodge of mixing and confounding the authorities with no regard for the historical development of doctrine.⁸⁸ This assessment was echoed a century later by James Hastings Nichols:

In effect what [Hodge] had done was to comb over *The Mystical Presence* in a fortnight or so, with no significant independent study, and to rearrange its historical evidence completely out of context in accordance with his own ideas of theological propriety. It was not that he was dishonest; he just lacked understanding of what history is. For him the past was an armory of theological tenets, and a man had a right to pick and choose as he would.⁸⁹

Indeed, Hodge's whole methodology was flawed. His claim to identify three distinct categories was a methodological sleight of hand. The three groups necessarily could not be distinct since the third group apparently contained a hybrid of the views expressed in the first two.⁹⁰ By establishing this third group, Hodge was able to interpret the small number of confessions found therein in a manner supportive of his own modified Zwinglian position. Moreover, his claim that the *Consensus Tigurinus* was "the most carefully considered and cautiously worded exposition of the doctrine of the Reformed" was deeply misleading.⁹¹ As Nevin noted, "It is arbitrary in the extreme to exalt the *Consensus Tigurinus* to the rank of a Supreme law."⁹² The *Consensus* was a compromise document in which concessions were made by both sides. As such, it is unwise to take it as representative of either Calvin's or Zurich's views.⁹³

Moving on to the question of whether the confessions included in Hodge's third category support his own position, it is fair to say that Hodge interpreted them to suit his own ends.⁹⁴ As Adger has demonstrated, Hodge's argument that §23 of the *Consensus Tigurinus*⁹⁵ showed that Calvin denied "supernatural

⁸⁶ Hodge, review of Nevin, 230.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 237-44.

⁸⁸ Nevin, "Lord's Supper," 457-58.

⁸⁹ James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961; repr., Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 90.

⁹⁰ Adger, "Calvin Defended," 159.

⁹¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:517. See Mathison, *Given for You*, 134.

⁹² Nevin, "Lord's Supper," 458.

⁹³ Mathison, *Given for You*, 68. See also the comments in Nevin, "Lord's Supper," 480.

⁹⁴ See Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 90.

⁹⁵ "When we say that by the eating of his flesh and blood, which are here figured, Christ feeds our souls through faith by the power of His Spirit, it must not be taken to mean that there is any

influence flowing from the glorified body of Christ” is manifestly unsound.⁹⁶ The section is directed against Westphal and provides no support for what Hodge claims to find in it.⁹⁷ A similar manipulation of the texts is evident in Hodge’s discussion of the Heidelberg Catechism. He quoted from its author, Ursinus:

These two, the sign and the thing signified, are united together in this sacrament, not by any copulation, or corporal and local existence of one in the other, much less by transubstantiation, or changing the one into the other; but by signifying, sealing and exhibiting the one by the other. That is, by a sacramental union, whose bond is the promise added to the bread, requiring the faith of the receivers. Whence it is clear, that these things in their lawful use, are always jointly exhibited and received, but not without faith of the promise, viewing and apprehending the thing promised, now present in the sacrament.⁹⁸

Despite the clearly Calvinistic emphasis of these words Hodge concluded, “There is, therefore, a presence of Christ’s body in the Lord’s Supper; not local but spiritual; not for the senses, but for the mind and to faith; and not of nearness but of efficacy.”⁹⁹ One is at a loss to discover where in Ursinus Hodge finds evidence for this conclusion. Moreover, Hodge omitted the passage that follows, a passage in which Ursinus unambiguously denies Hodge’s very point: “In the Supper we are made partakers not only of the Spirit of Christ and his satisfaction, justice, virtue and operation, but also *of the very essence and substance of his true body and blood*”¹⁰⁰ (emphasis added). Hodge also failed to appreciate the historical context of the Heidelberg Catechism. The catechism dealt not with the debate between Zwingli and Luther (which would make sense of Hodge’s use of it) but with the internal debate that was taking place within Lutheranism between the followers of Melancthon and of Westphal.¹⁰¹

Hodge’s use of the Second Helvetic Confession was also disingenuous. He reasoned from the fact that it was written by Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli, that it cannot be thought to contain anything which a Zwinglian could not “cordially adopt.”¹⁰² This overlooks two facts: firstly, that by this time Bullinger and the church in Zurich had moved towards a more Calvinistic sacramental theology;¹⁰³ secondly, that the confession was prepared in order to silence the Lutherans and therefore required a Calvinistic focus.¹⁰⁴ That is not to say that the confession did not contain Zwinglian emphases as well. It did, and in his review

commixture or transfusion of substance but that we draw life from the flesh once offered in sacrifice and from the blood poured out in expiation” (Hughes, *Register of the Company of Pastors*, 123).

⁹⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:647. See also Hodge, review of Nevin, 246.

⁹⁷ Adger, “Calvin Defended,” 161.

⁹⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Summe of Christian Religion* (London, 1645), 434, quoted in Hodge, review of Nevin, 246-47. Hodge takes the quote from Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 91.

⁹⁹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:643.

¹⁰⁰ Ursinus, *Summe of Christian Religion*, 480, quoted in Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 93.

¹⁰¹ Nevin, “Lord’s Supper,” 525-26.

¹⁰² Hodge, review of Nevin, 242.

¹⁰³ Mathison, *Given for You*, 68, 86; Adger, “Calvin Defended,” 163.

¹⁰⁴ Adger, “Calvin Defended,” 163.

of Nevin's book Hodge focused upon these. But his treatment of the confession was unbalanced and did not adequately acknowledge the Calvinistic expressions. For example, in Chapter 21, the confession declares that the Lord "feeds us with his flesh, and gives us his blood to drink: which things, being apprehended spiritually by a true faith, do nourish us up to life everlasting";¹⁰⁵ and that "he that outwardly does receive the sacrament with a true faith, the same does not only receive the sign, but also does enjoy the thing itself."¹⁰⁶

Hodge's argument that the Reformed confessions supported his own view rather than that of Calvin is unsustainable. In his reply to Hodge, Nevin demonstrated, in a manner that was sensitive to the movement of history (giving due weight to the French, Belgic, and Scots confessions), that the Reformed confessions affirmed Calvin's doctrine of a real spiritual presence.¹⁰⁷ The same can be seen in the Westminster Confession of Faith in the seventeenth century.¹⁰⁸ As Robert Letham has noted, "The verdict of history has been that Nevin was right and that Hodge had failed to grasp his own theological tradition."¹⁰⁹ Nichols caustically remarks: "Hodge's famous assertion that no new idea had ever come out of Princeton was thus shown to rest on a rank underestimate of his own originality in the face of the Reformed standards."¹¹⁰

3. *The doctrine conflicts with other doctrines of the Reformed faith.*

Hodge's second reason for preferring his "sacrificial efficacy" understanding of Christ's body and blood in the Supper was his conviction that Calvin's view conflicted with other doctrines of the Reformed faith. He put the argument as follows:

All the Reformed taught, Calvin perhaps more earnestly than most others, that our union with Christ since the incarnation is the same in nature as that enjoyed by the saints under the old dispensation. This is perfectly intelligible if the virtue of his flesh and blood, which we receive in the Lord's Supper, is its virtue as a sacrifice, because he was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. . . . But if the virtue in question is a mysterious power due to the hypostatical union, flowing from Christ's body in heaven, it must be a benefit peculiar to believers living since the incarnation. It is impossible

¹⁰⁵ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 3:891.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:894.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that the confessions do not with equal clarity adopt Calvin's instrumentalism. The Belgic and Second Helvetic confessions both equate more closely to symbolic parallelism.

¹⁰⁸ At WCF 29.1 we read that the Supper provides for true believers "their spiritual nourishment and growth in him." At WCF 29.7 believers "inwardly, by faith, really and indeed . . . receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being . . . present to the faith of believers in that ordinance." See Schaff, *Creeds*, 3:664, 666. See the commentary in Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 348, 354.

¹⁰⁹ Letham, *The Lord's Supper*, 2. Gerrish argues that, as a historical monograph, Nevin's work remains unrivalled to this day (Brian A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 66).

¹¹⁰ Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 91.

that those living before the advent could partake of Christ's body, in this sense, because it did not then exist; it had not as yet been assumed into union with the divine nature.¹¹¹

Dabney constructed a similar argument in his lectures on the Lord's Supper.¹¹² Although neither writer acknowledged it, Calvin anticipated just such a critique in his commentary on 1 Cor 10:4 and sought to provide an answer. He argued that, although the flesh did not yet exist, it was food for OT believers all the same. They received it by the secret power of the Holy Spirit, "who was active in such a way that the flesh of Christ, even if it was not yet created, might be efficacious in them."¹¹³ It seems that Calvin drew a distinction between the sacrament's inherent power and the application or actualization of that power.¹¹⁴ Calvin insisted that the reality of the sacrament was conveyed to believers under the old covenant just as much as it is today. The difference was that the "efficacy of the signs is at once richer and more abundant . . . since the incarnation of Christ."¹¹⁵ The difference is "only one of degree."¹¹⁶ We cannot be sure whether Hodge and Dabney would have found this reply convincing but it is equally unclear whether their solution is any more appealing. While it is true that Christ was the lamb slain from the foundation of the world, his work of redemption was achieved and could only have been achieved in the flesh.¹¹⁷ Thus, even on Hodge and Dabney's view, the sacraments were proleptic, looking forward to a work yet to be fulfilled. Surely Hodge and Dabney would have had to agree with Calvin that the efficacy of the sacraments has been more fully conveyed now that Christ has come in the flesh.

4. *The doctrine is unnecessarily shaded in mystery.*

As we have seen, Calvin emphasized the mysterious nature of the sacraments and the Lord's Supper in particular.¹¹⁸ Cunningham, consistent with his preference for Common Sense Realism, objected to this emphasis claiming that it is "not only unsanctioned by Scripture, but inconsistent with the fair and legitimate consequences of what it teaches."¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ Hodge, review of Nevin, 252. Evans has suggested that Hodge is more kind to Calvin in his later *Systematic Theology (Imputation and Impartation, 223)*. Regrettably this is not the case. Rather, in vol. 3 of his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge insists that Calvin must hold to sacrificial efficacy alone because this is the only view that is consistent with his teaching that the substance of the sacraments is the same in both the OT and the NT (647). Instead of attacking Calvin directly, Hodge resorts to arguing that Calvin cannot mean what he writes!

¹¹² Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 812

¹¹³ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 205.

¹¹⁴ Davis, *This Is My Body*, 145.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 203.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 204. Similar observations are made by Calvin in *Inst.*, 4.14.26.

¹¹⁷ As Gregory of Nazianzus famously claimed, "for what has not been assumed has not been healed" (*Epistle 101*, in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader* [3d ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007], 270).

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.2; 4.17.10, 32.

¹¹⁹ Cunningham, *Theology of the Reformation*, 288.

Calvin's understanding of the mysterious nature of the sacraments was rooted in the use of the Latin word *sacramentum* to render the Greek word μυστήριον (mystery) in translations of the NT.¹²⁰ He reasoned that "what the Latins call 'sacraments' the Greeks call 'mysteries'."¹²¹ The problem with this approach is that the word μυστήριον is never used in the NT to refer to the Lord's Supper or Baptism.¹²² Calvin relied upon Eph 5:32 where Paul refers to the union between Christ and the church as a μυστήριον. For Calvin this necessarily referred to the Lord's Supper because the sacrament is a "symbol and pledge" of the union described.¹²³ Hence, "those who refuse to admit anything on this subject [the Lord's Supper] beyond what their own capacity can reach, are very foolish."¹²⁴

There are a number of problems with this exegesis. Firstly, Calvin does not deal with the problem presented by the lack of explicit reference to the Supper in the passage. The point of comparison in Eph 5 is between union with Christ and marriage, not the Lord's Supper. Calvin's only response was that those who disagree "are very mistaken."¹²⁵ Moreover, in Eph 5, it is our union with Christ that is being described as a μυστήριον. Calvin recognized this and criticized the "laziness" of Rome in using this passage to support the inclusion of marriage in the list of sacraments.¹²⁶ But surely it is just as illegitimate to reason from the mystery of union to the mystery of the Lord's Supper as it is to reason from the mystery of union to the mystery/sacrament of marriage.

It is clear that Calvin's exegetical basis for viewing the Lord's Supper as a mystery was weak. Nevertheless, Cunningham's criticisms are overstated. As Maclean has helpfully observed, "What takes place at the Lord's Supper *is* mysterious, otherwise there would not be the diversity of understandings regarding what occurs at it" (emphasis added).¹²⁷

5. *The doctrine is unintelligible and incomprehensible.*

The objection of unintelligibility and incomprehensibility is clearly related to the previous one. Cunningham argued that Calvin's efforts to establish his doctrine were "altogether unsuccessful, and resulted only in what was about as unintelligible as Luther's consubstantiation."¹²⁸ Likewise, Dabney described the doctrine as "not only incomprehensible, but impossible."¹²⁹

¹²⁰ This thought seems to be based on Augustine; see his commentary on Ps 78:2 (*NPNF*¹ 8:366-67); and ch. 52 of *The Enchiridion* (*NPNF*¹ 3:254).

¹²¹ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.14.2.

¹²² For a discussion of the relationship between μυστήριον and *sacramentum*, see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1991), 281-82.

¹²³ Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, 208-9.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹²⁷ Maclean, *Lord's Supper*, 117.

¹²⁸ Cunningham, *Theology of the Reformation*, 240.

¹²⁹ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 811.

At the outset, it is important to recognize that Dabney and Cunningham appear to have adopted a different epistemology to that of Calvin. In Book 3 of his *Institutes* Calvin wrote: "When we call faith 'knowledge' we do not mean comprehension of the sort that is commonly concerned with those things which fall under human sense perception. . . . Even where the mind has attained, it does not comprehend what it feels."¹³⁰ Calvin appeared to follow Hilary of Poitiers' important distinction between the apprehension of God (true but non-exhaustive knowledge), which is possible for humans, and the comprehension of God (exhaustive knowledge), which is not.¹³¹ In light of this distinction, the objection of incomprehensibility is very weak indeed. Neither the Trinity nor the incarnation is susceptible to plain and straightforward explanations, yet they are central tenets of the Christian faith. As Adger has argued, "If we abandon all the mysterious revelations which are unintelligible to our weak comprehension, we must just abandon the whole faith."¹³² Of course, the objection of impossibility or self-contradiction is more problematic if, in fact, it can be established. We will consider two objections that claim to fall into this category.

Firstly, some argue that Calvin was inconsistent in speaking of both the descent of Christ in the Supper and our ascent to him in heaven.¹³³ We have already noted Calvin's reply to the Lutherans, arguing that they failed to understand "the manner of descent by which He lifts us up to himself."¹³⁴ It is certainly true that Calvin spoke of both an ascent and a descent in the Supper, but, as Hesselink has noted, the accent was on the former.¹³⁵ Calvin carefully guarded his language in speaking about the descent of Christ, insisting that there was no "substantial presence" (contra Wetsphal) nor "local presence" in the Supper.¹³⁶ While admitting that it is Christ who descends and not only the Holy Spirit, Calvin explained that Christ descends to us "by his virtue" not by his body.¹³⁷ In reply to Westphal's argument that Calvin is substituting Christ's virtue for his body, Calvin maintained, "I deny that I am substituting something different, which is to have the effect of abolishing the gift of the body, for I am simply explaining the mode in which it is given."¹³⁸ There is mystery in this but nothing that is either impossible or contradictory. Perhaps Calvin best explained the relationship between Christ's descent and our ascent in his commentary on Gen 28:12: "It is Christ alone who joins heaven to earth. He alone is Mediator. He it is through whom the fullness of all heavenly gifts flows down to us and through whom we on our part may ascend to God."¹³⁹

¹³⁰ Calvin, *Inst.*, 3.2.14.

¹³¹ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity* 2.7 (NPNF² 9:52-61).

¹³² Adger, "Calvin Defended," 149.

¹³³ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 175; Wallace, *Word and Sacrament*, 208; Davis, *This Is My Body*, 129. See also the more detailed discussion of this point in Christopher B. Kaiser, "Climbing Jacob's Ladder: John Calvin and the Early Church on Our Eucharistic Ascent to Heaven," *SJT* 56 (2003): 247-67.

¹³⁴ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.16.

¹³⁵ Hesselink, *First Catechism*, 149.

¹³⁶ Wallace, *Word and Sacrament*, 209.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Inst.*, 4.17.24.

¹³⁸ Calvin, "Second Defence," in *Tracts and Treatises*, 279.

¹³⁹ John Calvin, *Genesis* (ed. Alister E. McGrath and J. I. Packer; Crossway Classic Commentaries;

Secondly, Dabney claimed that Calvin's doctrine was impossible because it required "the literal (though spiritual) reception of Christ's corporeal part" while it remains in heaven and we on earth.¹⁴⁰ It seems that Dabney misunderstood Calvin here. According to Calvin, the location in which we partake of Christ's flesh is heaven.¹⁴¹ Thus, there is no sense in which Christ's flesh is rent asunder from his *ubi*.¹⁴² Perhaps the greater mystery is how we feast upon Christ while remaining corporeally upon earth. This is indeed a mystery but it underlies the whole doctrine of union with Christ. Unsurprisingly Dabney diverged from Calvin on this doctrine as well.

6. *The doctrine is unscriptural.*

Cunningham accused Calvin of making an effort to "bring out" his doctrine from Scripture,¹⁴³ and Dabney described it as "untenable and unscriptural."¹⁴⁴ Calvin's use of two texts in particular, John 6 and 1 Cor 10, has been subjected to close scrutiny.

John 6. Calvin acknowledged that John 6 "does not refer to the Lord's Supper, but to the continual communication which we have apart from the reception of the Lord's Supper."¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, for Calvin "there is nothing said [in John 6] that is not figured and actually presented to believers in the Lord's Supper."¹⁴⁶ For Calvin, the Supper was the seal of the John 6 discourse. In describing what it means to eat Christ, Calvin insisted that it did not simply mean "to believe." The eating is by faith, but it is the "effect and fruit of faith" rather than faith itself. Such eating "causes us to be united in His body, to have life in common with Him and, in short, to be one with Him."¹⁴⁷ In relation to v. 51, Calvin denied that the giving of Christ's flesh refers to the crucifixion alone. It refers both to the sacrifice of the cross and to the daily offering of Christ to us. The former would be of no use to us "if we did not now feed upon the sacred feast."¹⁴⁸ In seeking to

Leicester: InterVarsity, 2001), 249. Later in his comments on v. 17, Calvin stated that "the sacraments may be called the gates of heaven because they admit us to God's presence" (251).

¹⁴⁰ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 811.

¹⁴¹ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 247.

¹⁴² Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 812.

¹⁴³ Cunningham, *Theology of the Reformation*, 240. This is Adger's understanding of Cunningham's comment ("Calvin Defended," 135).

¹⁴⁴ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 811.

¹⁴⁵ Calvin, *John*, 1:169. If this were not so, infants would be lost and unbelievers would be admitted to eternal life by virtue of their partaking of the Supper.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:170. In his commentary on 5:53, the Baptist scholar Beasley-Murray concludes in a similar vein: "It is evident that neither the Evangelist nor the Christian readers could have written or read the saying without conscious reference to the Eucharist; to say the least, they would have acknowledged it as supremely fulfilled in the worship event" (George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* [WBC 36; Waco: Word, 1987; repr., Milton Keynes: Word Books, 1991], 95). See also Carson, *John*, 277-80.

¹⁴⁷ Calvin, *John*, 1:159.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

illustrate the life-giving nature of communion with Christ, Calvin used the metaphor of a fountain: “For as the eternal Word of God is the fountain of life, so His flesh is a channel to pour out to us the life which resides intrinsically, as they say, in His divinity. In this sense it is called life-giving, because it communicates to us a life that it borrows from elsewhere.”¹⁴⁹

Dabney objected to this exegesis, insisting that “eating” simply means believing, citing vv. 29, 35, 40, 47, and 50.¹⁵⁰ Hodge agreed, commenting, “It all depends upon the latitude given to the idea of faith. If you restrict it to knowledge and assent, there is room for the distinction between eating and believing. But if faith includes the real appropriation of Christ, it includes all Calvin seems to mean by both terms, eating and believing.”¹⁵¹ Hodge is correct, but the problem is that faith has rarely been given such a rich meaning and a lower view is evident in both Hodge and Dabney.¹⁵²

Dabney’s second criticism was unfair. He noted that, if the passage referred to the Lord’s Supper, then v. 53 would teach “the unscriptural doctrine that a soul cannot be saved without the sacraments.”¹⁵³ Calvin conceded this very point and indicated that this is one of the reasons why the discourse cannot refer to the Supper.¹⁵⁴

Thirdly, Dabney referred to v. 63 and argued that redemption is a “spiritual work” and “no material flesh can have any profitable agency to promote it, as it is a propagation of life in the soul; the agency must be spiritual; not physical.”¹⁵⁵ Such an understanding betrays Dabney’s neo-Platonic assumptions, a conceptual framework that was shared neither by Jesus nor his hearers.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, Dabney failed to deal with the strength of the language of vv. 52-59 and the fact that Jesus made no attempt to placate the hostility of his listeners.¹⁵⁷ Finally, Dabney’s exegesis paid no regard to the language of union and fellowship with the Triune God in vv. 56-57. This betrays a more fundamental flaw in his overall soteriology concerning union with Christ—an issue to which we will return.

First Corinthians 10. A number of commentators have recognized the tension that exists between the spiritual/ecclesial meaning of the body of Christ in 1 Cor 10 and 12 and Calvin’s emphasis upon the physical/natural meaning in 1 Cor 11.¹⁵⁸ In fact, it is 1 Cor 10:16 that constitutes the key verse for Calvin. Paul reasons that the Corinthians should flee from idolatry and participation with demons (vv. 18-22) because, as they share in the Lord’s Supper, they participate in the body and blood of Christ (v. 16). For Calvin, this participation (κοινωνία)

¹⁴⁹ Calvin, *John*, 1:167. See Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 129-33.

¹⁵⁰ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 813.

¹⁵¹ Hodge, review of Nevin, 247.

¹⁵² Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:42-53; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 602-7.

¹⁵³ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 813.

¹⁵⁴ Calvin, *John*, 1:170.

¹⁵⁵ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 813.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin argued that v. 63 describes the manner of eating (*John*, 1:175).

¹⁵⁷ See Letham, *The Lord’s Supper*, 12-13.

¹⁵⁸ See Davis, *This Is My Body*, 159-61; Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 185-90.

was not primarily a horizontal participation with other believers (the ecclesial body of Christ) but was rather “a spiritual union between Christ and believers.” Calvin maintained that “it is necessary for us to be incorporated, as it were, into Christ in order to be united to each other.”¹⁵⁹

Gordon Fee disputes this reading of the text, insisting that the spiritual/ecclesial meaning of “body” in v. 17 must govern its meaning in v. 16 as well. For Fee, the verse does not describe a “‘participation in the ‘broken body’ of Christ” but instead affirms that “through Christ’s death [the Corinthians] are ‘partners’ in the redeemed community.”¹⁶⁰ Fee’s understanding of the verse collapses the imagery into a single “church-oriented ecclesiology.”¹⁶¹ Moreover, as Matthew Mason has shown, it ignores the parallelism in v. 16 between participation in the blood of Christ (v. 16a) and participation in the body of Christ (v. 16b).¹⁶² Since the church is never referred to as the blood of Christ, v. 16a must refer to Christ’s physical blood shed on the cross. By virtue of the parallelism, it is most likely that v. 16b refers to Christ’s physical body broken on the cross. If this is correct, then v. 16 seems to refer to a participation in the physical/natural body of the crucified Christ.¹⁶³ Of course, the corporate context suggests that such vertical participation has horizontal consequences, but this is faithfully conveyed in Calvin’s exposition of the text.

7. The doctrine is based upon a flawed conception of union with Christ.

Dabney rightly recognized that “the Lord’s Supper represents and applies the vital, mystical union of the Lord with believers.”¹⁶⁴ As a result, how one comprehends our union with Christ necessarily dictates our understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Dabney considered that there were two main views of union with Christ. Firstly, some understand it to be “a secret relationship between Christ and the soul, instituted when faith is first exercised, and constituted by the indwelling and operation of the Holy Ghost.” Others hold it to be “a mysterious, yet substantial conjunction, of the spiritual substance, soul, to the whole substance of the mediatorial Person, including especially the humanity.”¹⁶⁵ Calvin adopted

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, 216.

¹⁶⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 469.

¹⁶¹ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 765. As J. Smit has shown, context (namely, that the verse is part of an exposition against idol offerings) strongly suggests that the vertical metaphors have priority over the horizontal (“Do Not Be Idolaters’: Paul’s Rhetoric in First Corinthians 10:1-22,” *NovT* 39 [1997]: 43).

¹⁶² Mason, “A Spiritual Banquet,” 339. The point was earlier advanced by John Murray (*Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977], 327-28).

¹⁶³ Mason notes, “This gives *body* a referent different in v. 16 from v. 17, where it clearly refers to the church, which is one body, although made up of many members. However, it is not impossible for a word to change its referent so quickly (cf., e.g., *all* in Romans 5:18)” (“A Spiritual Banquet,” 339).

¹⁶⁴ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 810.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the latter view while Dabney, Hodge, and Cunningham preferred the former.¹⁶⁶

Both Hodge and Dabney emphasized the importance of faith and the objective work of the Holy Spirit in union. In fact, for Hodge the three were synonymous. He maintained that union with Christ and believing in Christ “mean substantially the same thing . . . the same effects are attributed to faith as are attributed to union with Christ.”¹⁶⁷ Likewise Hodge insisted that, in Scripture, “the indwelling of the Spirit is the indwelling of Christ.”¹⁶⁸ Both Dabney and Hodge rejected a merely moral union of agreement and sympathy,¹⁶⁹ but equally opposed a union with the humanity of Christ. Dabney wrote, “[W]e see nothing in the Bible to warrant the belief of a literal conjunction of the substance of the Godhead in Christ, with the substance of the believer’s soul; much less of a literal, local conjunction of the whole mediatorial person, including the humanity, with the soul.”¹⁷⁰ Hodge insisted, “Believers are one body and members of one another, not in virtue of their common human nature, nor because they all partake of the humanity of Christ, but because they all have one Spirit.”¹⁷¹

To understand the reasons for their rejection of a realistic union with the humanity of Christ we need to appreciate the philosophical context of their work. Dabney, Hodge, and Cunningham were steeped in the principles of Scottish Common Sense Realism: reflexive dualism, an emphasis on particularity, a preference for induction, and reliance upon “common sense” and “intuitive principles.”¹⁷² As Evans has suggested, these principles provide the background to their opposition to Calvin.¹⁷³ Firstly, the concept of participation in a “generic humanity” of Adam or Christ conflicted with the nominalistic bent of Common Sense Realism. Secondly, the notion of a non-material and non-local presence of a material substance (the body and blood of Christ) offended the Scottish Common Sense metaphysic. Thirdly, a realistic union with Christ’s humanity was seen to be at odds with their dualistic anthropology. For Hodge, this was particularly problematic because he considered that orthodox Christology and theology were all dependent upon anthropological dualism. On this basis he accused Nevin of Socinianism, Pantheism, and Eutychianism.¹⁷⁴

In Hodge’s mind, the implications for soteriology were just as worrying. He rightly maintained that justification is *extra nos* and vehemently opposed Nevin’s claim that “the ground of our justification is a righteousness that was foreign to us before, but is now made to lodge itself in the inmost constitution of our

¹⁶⁶ For a detailed discussion of Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ see Mark Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin’s Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

¹⁶⁷ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:104. This echoes Hodge’s discussion of the equivalency of eating and believing in his review of Nevin, 247.

¹⁶⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:106.

¹⁶⁹ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 616; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:106.

¹⁷⁰ Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 616.

¹⁷¹ Hodge, review of Nevin, 246.

¹⁷² Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 191-93.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 205-8.

¹⁷⁴ Hodge, review of Nevin, 264-66.

being.”¹⁷⁵ For Hodge, this was nothing more than “subjective justification” and impugned “the vital doctrine of Protestantism.”¹⁷⁶ Hodge’s concerns at this point were undoubtedly justified since Nevin’s emphasis upon an organic life principle inevitably marginalized forensic justification.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Hodge and Dabney substituted for this view a bifurcated conception of union with a separate forensic and spiritual union,¹⁷⁸ and maintained the *ordo salutis* framework of federal theology whereby justification precedes sanctification in time as well as in logical sequence.¹⁷⁹ This resulted in a radically different soteriology from that of Calvin. As we observed at the beginning of this article, for Calvin, “as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”¹⁸⁰ In other words, all the benefits of salvation including forensic imputation are dependent upon personal union with Christ.¹⁸¹ Hodge (and Dabney) effectively reversed this principle arguing that, “it is only as Christ remains outside that what he has suffered for the race can avail for salvation.”¹⁸²

It is this radically different soteriology and conception of union with Christ that explains their divergence from Calvin in respect of the Lord’s Supper. As Evans and Gerrish suggest, Hodge’s *ordo salutis* gave rise to a radical occasionalism which denied any necessary connection between sign and reality thus denying Calvin’s symbolic instrumentalism.¹⁸³ The focus upon a bifurcated conception of union meant that there was no need, and indeed no place, for the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Supper. Moreover, their focus upon the forensic nature of union meant that it was only the “virtue and efficacy” of Christ’s work that needed to be present in the Supper and this was ultimately reduced to nothing more than “a mental exercise of remembrance.”¹⁸⁴

III. Conclusion

Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper has fallen out of favor in much of the Reformed church and has been replaced by a modified form of Zwinglianism. In large part this has been due to a concerted and sustained attack upon the

¹⁷⁵ Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 180. See Hodge, review of Nevin, 271.

¹⁷⁶ Hodge, review of Nevin, 272.

¹⁷⁷ Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 43. See Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 169-75.

¹⁷⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:105-6; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 613-14.

¹⁷⁹ Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 157; Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 663. For the view that this obscures the centrality of union with Christ, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 138-43; Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1996), 94-111.

¹⁸⁰ Calvin, *Inst.*, 3.1.1.

¹⁸¹ See Peter J. Leithart, “What’s Wrong with Transubstantiation? An Evaluation of Theological Models,” *WTJ* 53 (1991): 323; William B. Evans, “Déjà Vu All Over Again: The Contemporary Reformed Soteriological Controversy in Historical Perspective,” *WTJ* 72 (2010): 140.

¹⁸² Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 214.

¹⁸³ See *ibid.*, 220; Gerrish, *Tradition*, 62.

¹⁸⁴ Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 224.

doctrine in the nineteenth century. This article has shown that the main objections to Calvin's doctrine are unpersuasive. Moreover its decline in influence is to be regretted since, far from being a blot upon Calvin's labors, his doctrine was a crucial complement to his understanding of union with Christ and its soteriological significance. In jettisoning Calvin's doctrine many Reformed churches have concurrently neglected or rejected the centrality of union with Christ. This has inevitably de-stabilized their theology as a whole. There is hope that this trend may yet be reversed and if this happens it will be for the enduring benefit of the church and its understanding of union with Christ.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ See, e.g., Evans, "Contemporary Reformed Soteriological Controversy," 138-41; Tinker, "Language, Symbols and Sacraments," 131-49; Mason, "A Spiritual Banquet," 329-46; Nicholls, "Union with Christ," 35-54; Mathison, *Given for You*, 3-48; Maclean, *Lord's Supper*, 43-68.