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The Sacramental Theology of John Owen and John Calvin

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Graduate Program in Theology
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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The Sacramental Theology
of
John Owen and John Calvin
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By
David van Eyk

Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis compares the theology of the Lord's Supper in the Reformed theologians John Owen (1616-1683) and John Calvin (1509-1564), and addresses the differences discerned between the two. The argument is that the Federal theology which undergirded Owen's theology led him to develop a problematic sacramental theology. Owen's theology of the Lord's Supper focuses attention on the atonement and on covenant obligations, whereas John Calvin, who was not encumbered by the assumptions of Federal theology, draws attention instead in his theology of the Lord's Supper to the believer's union with Christ, and to its wider soteriological implications. The thesis concludes that those elements of the Reformed tradition which have followed the innovations of the seventeenth century would do well to rediscover the sacramental theology of the "father" of Reformed theology, John Calvin.

Keywords: John Owen, John Calvin, Calvinism, Eucharist, Lord's Supper, Federal theology, union with God, participation in Christ

Dedication

In loving appreciation to

Barbara

And to the memory of

Abigail Ann

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of people who have contributed significantly to the publication of the thesis. If I were to begin listing all that Dr. Gary Badcock has taught me over the years beginning in my second year undergraduate course, the list would be immense. So with deep respect and undisguised humility, I simply thank him for the whole lot of it. Drs. Bill Acres and Darren Marks are also to be thanked for the self-giving they have extended to me, in the numerous conversations and through their lectures and scholarship; they have shaped my reading and understanding of Christianity in decisive ways. I would also like to thank Roman Boulinski, for his unusual kindness and help at the D.B. Weldon Library. I want to thank Mr. Jeffery Timmermans, who, as an invaluable friend and indispensable conversation partner helped develop and shape this thesis to what it is today.

The best part of my life is living with my wife, Barb, and our children Micah, Tamar, and Nathanael. For keeping me happy and in touch with life outside of the academy I thank them. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others a better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3-4). Barb embodies this attitude more fully and more sincerely than anyone else I know. In respect and appreciation of her love and faithfulness, I dedicate this thesis to her and the memory we both hold dear and share of Abigail Ann van Eyk, whom we long to see again at the resurrection.

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Introduction

Many words have been written on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.¹ And this thesis will add to the volumes written, either read or left unread. When I began working on this thesis I had every intention to write on the Christian idea of union and communion with God and open that extraordinary theology up through the vision of John Calvin and John Owen. The plan was only to examine the Lord's Supper as a means rather than as an end in itself, to help identify some of the finer details of that union and communion. I had come to this idea through earlier study of John Calvin, who placed great importance on the theme of being "in Christ," to use the Pauline phrase, and his doctrine of the Lord's Supper flows from this foundation of being united with Christ, which is broadly described in his doctrine of baptism. This same theme I thought could then be traced and further clarified in the tradition that followed.

At the early stages of my research I had naïvely thought that John Calvin and the English "Puritan"² John Owen could readily be treated not only as two rather closely connected Reformed theologians, albeit from different centuries, but also as two theolo-

¹ Throughout this thesis the term "Lord's Supper" will be used, as it is the usual Reformed terminology. That this is being noted raises the issue that a problem in terminology exists. Therefore, unless quoting material, in what follows the Reformed term of "Lord's Supper" and "elements" will be employed. It might be noted that John Owen most often referred to the Lord's Supper as the "ordinance."

² The term "Puritan" will be generally employed in this thesis, though it is not the term that Owen and his circle typically used to describe themselves; "Puritan" was initially a derogatory term used by critics, whereas typically referred to themselves merely as "godly." Francis J. Bremer, *Congregational Communion* (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 1994 writes that the Puritans "felt themselves to be members of a special community—a communion of saints, a fellowships of the elect, a godly people" The term "Puritan," however, has long since become commonplace, and it will accordingly be used in this thesis. See for clarification Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker's Revenge: 'Orthodoxy', 'Heterodoxy', and the politics of the parish in Early Stuart London* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 11.

gians who could readily be used to develop the theme in view. I was, of course, aware of the debates which existed between the schools concerning the discontinuity and continuity between the magisterial reformers and the Reformed tradition which followed. These various schools of thought revolved generally around the issue of predestination which, it was argued, became more foundational for the later scholastic reformers than it was for John Calvin.

It was partly because of the emphasis in the literature on predestination³ that, from the beginning, I wanted to skirt that issue and look at the topic of union and communion, undertaking an analysis of the two theologians in order to grasp the similarity between Owen and Calvin. What I discovered through my research, however, is that quite apart from the issue of predestination, there are other significant differences to be discerned between Owen and Calvin on a range of key points. Much of the literature, by contrast, argues that there are only minor differences which are more about emphasis than concrete divergence of theology.⁴ I shall argue instead that there are deeper differences which separate Calvin and his later disciple.

The history of Calvinism, of course, is such that the materials available amount to far more than can possibly be discussed within the limits of this thesis, so I have found it necessary to limit the scope of my research in certain respects. In concrete terms, this en-

³ For a representative treatment, see: R.T. Kendal, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford Press, 1981); William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 83ff; Nicolas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

⁴ Keith Mathison, for example, argues in his book, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 101 that although there is a question about the subjective nature of the sacrament, "there is still a strong Calvinistic emphasis in Owen's writings on the believer's union with Christ, the true exhibition in the sacrament of the things signified therein, and the sacrament as an instrumental means of effecting participation in the body and blood of Christ." Similarly, Jon Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 75 maintains that "Owen's rich theology of the sacraments, in the tradition of Calvin, presents the church with a treasure of God-centred, Christ-exalting, Spirit-dependent teaching."

tails that the focus of what follows will be restricted so far as possible to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, which had been going to play only a minor role in the original plan. In particular, the idea of the real presence became the quest, because for Calvin this has to be both critiqued and maintained for there to be an authentic participation in the Lord's Supper. For John Owen, by contrast, the Lord's Supper is primarily about sealing the covenant, and thus the focus of Owen's theology of the Lord's Supper builds on the foundation of covenant theology. The question then to be asked of Owen is very simple: Is Christ really present in the sacrament at all? On this question, very different answers are given by the two theologians.

Method and Goals

A number of assumptions will be made in what follows which must be clearly noted at the outset. It will be assumed, for instance, that the reader has at least a general knowledge of the history of Lord's Supper and sacramental theology.⁵ That assumption is made necessary because, clearly, the biblical origins and its development in the teaching of the Church Fathers, and so on, are outside the scope of this thesis. It will also be assumed that the reader is broadly familiar with John Calvin, and is aware of some of the issues that made him so important and influential in his own age and in subsequent centuries. Many of the surrounding factors which influenced Calvin's theology and historical context are left unexamined also, as lying outside the scope of the thesis. When it comes to Owen, however, somewhat more background information may be required, but like-

⁵ A. Heron, *Table and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) provides a useful overview. See also a useful article by William Cavanaugh, "Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Social Imagination in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31 (2001): 585-605.

wise, the thesis attempts to focus attention on what Owen himself claims at the level of dogmatic theology, and thus has left much of the historical question aside, to be answered by others.

This thesis is thus an attempt to trace or to sketch the contours of the Reformed understanding of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as developed in the theologies of Owen and Calvin. This study attempts to address theological questions arising as precisely as possible through a careful examination of Owen's sacramental discourses in particular, though also using the wider corpus of his published works as need arises to elaborate on the assumptions which are often to be found in his discourses. Likewise, when we treat the theology of John Calvin, we will focus our attention on his discussion of the Lord's Supper *per se*, and particularly on the main point of interest, which is Calvin's adaptation of the theology of the real presence.

Thus, this study has two main goals. First, it will elucidate and analyze Owen's understanding of, and his treatment of, the Lord's Supper as it unfolds in his sacramental discourses. Second, it will examine and tease out Calvin's understanding of, and his treatment of, the sacrament as it unfolds in his voluminous works. What will be shown is that there are two divergent understandings of the Lord's Supper in view, and what will be suggested is that one of the primary understandings of the Lord's Supper found in Reformed settings today clearly follow the seventeenth century version developed by Owen, based on a covenant theology of obligation, rather than the position of Calvin.

The sheer volume of works written by Calvin and Owen, not to mention the volume of material written about them, necessarily implies certain constraints in the treat-

ment that follows. Two points can be made concerning this. First, both Owen and Calvin wrote more than most people can ever read and fully integrate into a systematic whole, so the potential for alternative perspectives or emphases than the one developed in this thesis has to be acknowledged from the beginning. The limitations of the project, in other words, are clear. Second, and in view of the first point, it has been the goal of the thesis to restrict discussion so far as possible to questions of doctrine, and in this arena, the goal could be said to be simple and straightforward: faithfully to hear and understand what Owen and Calvin were saying.

In the sphere of doctrine, however, the theologian encounters another problem: it is too often the case that we hear what we want to hear, or what we think we *should* hear. Doctrinal expectations, in short, can have a certain distorting influence on the analysis of theological texts, and so it has been necessary to attempt to bracket out doctrinal expectations so far as possible as the analysis has proceeded. In trying to deal faithfully with the material in view, then, identification of leading themes which can be said to shape the development of the two sacramental theologies has been a priority. Thus, in the case of Owen, a point which is regularly mentioned concerns the distinctive approach to the idea of covenant that is developed in his theology. Likewise in Calvin, attention is constantly directed to the ascent of the believer to Christ in the sacrament. Although further themes will need to be mentioned along the way, we will find that these two in particular define the two approaches to the theology of the Lord's Supper with which we are concerned.

Overview of the Study

In what follows, these claims will be fleshed out more fully. In Chapter 1, a brief review of a selection of issues raised in some of the scholarly literature on the history of the seventeenth century, and particularly on theological interpretation of sixteenth and seventeenth Reformed theology, will be offered. Special attention will be paid to Owen for two main reasons: first, because he is a relatively unknown figure outside of a small group of conservative Reformed scholars, he requires particular attention; and second, because it will be argued in what follows that he transformed most influentially the subsequent understanding of the Lord's Supper in much English-speaking Calvinist theology. Although he did not write a treatise on the sacrament as such, his considerable influence on subsequent interpretation of many of the surrounding issues such as covenant and the nature of faith place him in a very important position in the development of Reformed theology in the English context.

The first Chapter also identifies a range of the theological issues which Calvin addressed in his time in relation to the sacrament. The discussion highlights the unique and important place that Calvin's theology has in the Reformed tradition, and draws attention particularly to how he was able to defend a version of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper while at the same time standing opposed to alternative definitions of the real presence in other theologies.

Chapter 2 moves into a more direct investigation of Owen's sacramental theology. As has been mentioned, the defining idea which regulates his sacramental theology is argued to be covenant theology. With this in view, Owen's theology of the covenant will be explored, with the goal of providing a lens through which to understand his theology of

the Lord's Supper. What will be shown is that covenant theology, as defined in the "covenant of works," guides Owen's approach to sacramental theology towards a remembrance of the atonement, in which the focus of the Lord's Supper is on the event of the cross and the obligations which the atonement places upon the communicant within the framework of covenant theology.

Chapter 3, finally, turns to the interpretation of Calvin's theology of Lord's Supper. The argument will be that the regulating idea that guides Calvin in his treatment of the question of sacramental theology is rather different than in Owen. In Calvin, the thesis will argue, the central ideas are "union" and "participation," and in particular the question how the believer becomes united with Christ, or "participates" in Christ. Particular attention will be given in the account to the role of faith and to the work of the Holy Spirit, each of which has a defining part to play in Calvin's approach. In this connection, mention is made of Calvin's repeated references to engrafting into Christ and Christ's indwelling the believer. This focus on participation and engrafting leads Calvin to define the Lord's Supper as the very food and drink which gives life. In short, the sacrament is described in terms of the way a believer ascends into the presence of Jesus Christ, there to be nourished by Christ's flesh and blood.

Lastly, and in the context of Chapter 3, a brief discussion ensues comparing and contrasting the sacramental theologies of Owen and Calvin. The purpose of this discussion is not, as it were, to resolve the tensions between the two theologians, or to arrive at some concrete plan of action for the Churches they inspired. It is, rather, to highlight the fact that these two very distinct theologies are presented within the Reformed theological tradition. The final question to be asked, therefore, addresses why this divergence in theo-

logical emphasis existed. An answer is presented in very broad brush strokes, with the intention of presenting opportunity for further discussion of the topic.

Chapter 1: Historical and Theological Background

Owen in his context

The principal aim of this chapter is twofold. In the first place, the goal is to shed some light on the person of John Owen and to try to gain a contextual background for his theological development.⁶ Secondly, the goal is to examine the theological context in which John Calvin developed his theology, particularly his theology of the Lord's Supper.

There is a noticeable increase of scholarship on the theology of John Owen, particularly in conservative Calvinism in the United States. It is noteworthy, for example, that Westminster Seminary has consistently produced Ph.D. dissertations in recent years on John Owen and his place in the Reformed tradition, which present Owen as following John Calvin.⁷ One could argue that this has, in fact, been the main focus of the works written out of Westminster Seminary under the direction of Sinclair Ferguson. It is telling that much of this work seems to assume that Richard Muller⁸ is correct in suggesting that

⁶ For Biographical material on Owen, see Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen; Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), which is by far the best treatment and remains the most accessible to understand the life and times of John Owen. There are other biographies but these tend to be tinged by popular or patronizing tendencies. See, for example, Peter Barraclough, *John Owen, 1616-1683* (London: Independent Press, 1961); R. Glynne Lloyd, *John Owen—Commonwealth Puritan* (Liverpool: Modern Welsh Publications, 1972). Other aspects of John Owen's work such as his political thought are treated by Lloyd G. Williams, "'Digitus Dei': God and Nation in the Thought of John Owen; A Study in English Puritanism and Nonconformity, 1653-1683" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1981).

⁷ Recently, Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) has under the direction of Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson produced a considerable range of dissertations on all things Puritan. The reason for this might well be that Ferguson himself did his dissertation on John Owen. Another distinct feature of Westminster dissertations is their tendency to argue that John Owen and the Puritans at large were faithful followers of John Calvin. This might be understood when it is considered that the President of Westminster Theological Seminary is Peter A. Lillback, who argues in his book *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) that Calvin was a covenant theologian. It is not difficult to understand how these tendencies in the dissertations coming from an institution such as Westminster Theological Seminary have this consistent focus. I shall maintain, however, that they are broadly mistaken.

⁸ Richard A. Muller's research and writing has centred on Protestant orthodoxy or Protestant Scholasticism in the 17th century. He has been one of the leading voices in the debate on the continuity and discontinuity in the post-reformation

the later Reformed Scholastic tradition which followed Calvin merely modified and enlarged on Calvin's work, but largely kept in step with what Calvin was teaching. Beyond the narrow confines of Westminster Seminary, furthermore, much conservative Reformed theology in the English speaking world has worked with this same assumption.⁹ In what follows, we will need to challenge this reading on a number of levels.

One of the people most influential in recent Owen scholarship is Kelly M. Kopic¹⁰. Kopic, who has written extensively on Owen, argues as follows in his book, *Communion with God*:

...the theologian we encounter here is somewhat different from the one commonly associated with the name John Owen: he is not a rationalist, nor a theologian simply interested in abstract speculations, nor is he easily labeled anthropocentric—since that term gives humanity a position that Owen consistently believes is reserved for God. Instead, throughout our study we will observe Owen as an *anthroposensitive* theologian.¹¹

Kelly is addressing some of the misunderstanding which for a long time has been characteristic of Owen scholarship. However, in claiming a new name for Owen as anthro-

Reformed theology. Muller argues that the later Reformed theologians did not develop a predestinarian theology but rather, developed and understood theology in a biblical or topical fashion. He suggests that, although Calvin was influential in Reformed theology, he was not the only voice and therefore when the scholastic tradition differs from Calvin the differences could be attributed to the different voices within the Reformed tradition. He is best known for his 4 volume work entitled: *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003). To my knowledge, Muller does not assess the differences in Eucharistic theology in the scholastic period and therefore his arguments will not play a role in this thesis. See further, Martin I. Klauber, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Post-Reformed Theology: an evaluation of the Muller thesis in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 33 (1990): 467-475.

⁹ For further examples see: Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Protestantism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Michael W. Bobick, "Owen's Razor: The Role of Ramist Logic in the Covenant Theology of John Owen" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1996); Carl R Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance man* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007). For examples of those who argue the contrary see, James Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 23 (1970); Wayne J. Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980); and Holmes Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).

¹⁰ Kelly has done extensive work on the theology of John Owen and the Puritans. He is probably best known for his contribution with Randal Gleason in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004). He also wrote *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

¹¹ Kopic, *Communion with God*, 33.

posensitive, he does not dispel the issue that Owen's theology is different from the Reformed tradition. That Owen is different to the Reformers is clear, the question is how? Kelly does not address this issue except by suggesting that he is not to be thought of as anthropocentric and rationalist.

However, there are also those who find that the later Reformed period took a decidedly different approach. Some have argued that the scholastic tradition majored on some of the minor theological tendencies of Calvin; for example, R.T. Kendall argues that the later tradition emphasised the doctrine of predestination—a doctrine which was certainly found in Calvin, but was really established as a principal doctrine by Calvin's successor in the Genevan school, Theodore Beza.¹² The result was a realigning of principal doctrines which Kendall argues changed the Reformed tradition; Kendall, therefore, suggests that Calvin himself stands against the later "Calvinists." To this extent, he does not dispel the issue that Owen's theology is different from the Reformed tradition. In a similar vein is a study by Alan Clifford, who goes so far as to dedicate his work in part to '...the memory of the "Authentic" JOHN CALVIN.'¹³ In contrast to Kapic who claimed that Owen was not rationalistic. Clifford contends that Owen is rationalistic and cannot allow any amount of ambiguity or paradox in his theology, which Calvin was very happy to accept.¹⁴

Most educated people are at least somewhat familiar with John Calvin, but when it comes to John Owen, outside of a relatively narrow range of historical and theological scholarship, there is a wall of uncertainty. Even most theologians, who might easily place

¹² Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism*, 29-41.

¹³ Alan C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790 An Evaluation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

him in the seventeenth century, would likely be hard-pressed to specify what his place is in the seventeenth century. Owen, then, is often a figure who is more dubious than Calvin. Thus, allow me a short introduction to John Owen, who is named by one prominent scholar as, “the greatest British theologian of all time.”¹⁵

Though the scope of this thesis allows only for the most rudimentary of biographical introductions, we may observe at the beginning that John Owen (1616-1683) was indeed one of the greatest representatives of English Puritanism and of English Reformed theology generally, as the growing interest in Owen’s work that can be seen in some circles indicates. For everything that has been said about Puritans and Puritanism, of course, the difficulty of coming to an accurate definition is still a point of contention. One characteristic that accurately can be said of Puritanism in general, however, and of Owen with it, concerns the desire for the reformation or further reformation of religion in England.¹⁶ Born in 1616 to a nonconforming minister, he was sent to Oxford where he studied from 1628 to 1637. He took a stand for religious principle early in life, deciding to end his studies prematurely because of what he perceived as the growing influence of the High-Church party, and of William Laud particularly (Chancellor of Oxford from 1630, and Archbishop of Canterbury 1633-1645), an influence which was making life difficult for those, like Owen, with Puritan ideas. As we know, however, the political tide then turned with the English Civil War (1642-1651), the success of the Parliamentary party, and the creation of the Commonwealth of England (1649-1660) under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell.

¹⁵ Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 173.

¹⁶ Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 4.

It was during this time that Owen became a very influential figure, both because of his preaching duties before Parliament as well as his service as chaplain to Cromwell on his expeditions in Ireland and Scotland (1649-1651), and because of his appointment as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford (1652-1657).¹⁷ However, after a falling-out with Cromwell in 1657, followed very soon afterward by the restoration of the monarchy and of the older “established” Church of England, Owen retreated from public life and attended as a pastor to small gathered congregations, most notably Leadenhall Street, London, until his death in 1683. He wrote most of his works after 1660, which was after his peak period of political influence.

A great number of Owen’s works are developed against this background, which Owen interpreted in the light of two theological threats which he felt would undermine the church and which he thus opposed vehemently. These two threats are represented for Owen under the headings of Arminianism and of Socinianism.¹⁸ The particular history of these different theological threats is not our concern, but what is important to note is that the Arminians, according to Owen, effectively assumed that the greatest part in our salvation is played by ourselves rather than God,¹⁹ whereas the Socinians caused great threat to the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ, first by denying that he is God by nature, and second by denying the theological claim that satisfaction for sin is accomplished by his

¹⁷ Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 80, notes that “Owen was often called upon to take an active part in the affairs of the Commonwealth and Protectorate. On many occasions he travelled by coach from Oxford to London to preach to Parliament, to sit on committees, to meet Cromwell.”

¹⁸ See for further clarity see Robert Benedetto and Donald K. McKim, *Historical Dictionary of the Reformed Churches* 2nd ed. (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), 20 and 427 respectively. For a detailed understanding of Socinianism in Owen’s context, see: H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in the Seventeenth Century England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951).

¹⁹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), X, 6; hereafter referenced as *Works* X, 6; *The Works of John Owen* edited by Goold were originally published by Johnstone & Hunter in 24 vols. Including Owen’s Latin writings in vols. 16 and 17. The *Works* were photographically reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust. The reprinted edition omitted the Latin writings and was rearranged to 23 vols. The first 16 vols. were reprinted in 1965-68, and the remaining 7 vols. of Owen’s *Commentary on Hebrews*, in 1991. This thesis will follow in volume and page numbers the reprinted works.

death.²⁰ Owen himself, by contrast, was committed to the classical version of Calvinist orthodoxy set out (in large measure against precisely these threats) by the Synod of Dordt (1616-1618).²¹

It is significant that Owen's first published work, *A Display of Arminianism* (1642), was a work which directly attacked what it presented as the resurgent Arminianism of Laudian Anglicanism.²² Owen's commitment to the teaching of Dordt is equally evident in both, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647), and *The Doctrine of Perseverance* (1674), each of which challenged the Arminian denial of limited or particular atonement and perseverance of the saints, respectively.²³ His sustained attack on Socinianism appeared in, among other works, his *Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1669), and his *Vindiciae Evangelicae, or the Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated* (1655).²⁴ As might be expected, Owen also wrote polemical treatises on another front, also: against the Roman Catholic threat. Thus Volume 14 of *The Works of John Owen*, for instance, is a collection of a number of his treatises against Roman theology and practice. But his interest in the religious life of England *per se* continued, and his concerns about the perceived errors of the religion established after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 are evident in a key work such as *Pneumatologia* (1674), in which Owen insisted on the need for and the reality of regeneration as opposed to what he perceived as the laxity of Angli-

²⁰ *Works* XII, 8

²¹ For a brief overview of the Synod of Dordt and its influence on the English Church see, Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*; Nicholas Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism c. 1530-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); for an in depth study see Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg, *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619)* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

²² *Works* X, 11-137. It is, of course, highly questionable that Laudian Anglicanism, for its part, had any great interest in these intra-Reformed theological debates.

²³ *Works* X, 139-421 and *Works* XI.

²⁴ *Works* II, 365-454 and *Works* XII, 1-581.

can moralists.²⁵ It is easy to grasp from all this that Owen was interested in theological themes such as limited atonement, satisfaction, effectual calling, regeneration, the intercession of Christ, and the relationship between justification and sanctification. These are all important themes in his works.

In the context of this general overview of John Owen, it might be of use to comment briefly on scholarship on the Puritan movement of the seventeenth century in which he lived. So much has been written in this general area, however, that it is difficult to limit discussion. What we can say is that nothing appears to have been written concerning John Owen's view of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, although we do certainly know that Archbishop Laud was strongly advocating a more traditional, Catholic view of this very idea during his most active years.²⁶ Despite the plethora of sources, a quick overview is in order, particularly as it relates to broad academic trends, and the sea-change in the perspectives of much modern thought concerning this time period.

Much of the very early discussion concerning this time period tends to focus on the doctrine of predestination as the hallmark of Puritan thought. Christopher Hill, for example, in his work, *The World Turned Upside Down*, sees the Puritans and their experiential approach to predestination as a function of a hyper-disciplinary society bent on social control; he therefore views the radical Puritans as plebeian.²⁷ Hill was investigating the political aspects of the English Revolution or Civil War, and this with a particularly Marxist bent. In the same general vein of political analysis stands the work by the modern

²⁵ *Works* III-IV.

²⁶ Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

²⁷ Peter Lake, "The Historiography of Puritanism" *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* ed. Paul C.H. Lim and John Coffey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964); Christopher Hill, *The World turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972).

scholar Quentin Skinner. Skinner speaks of how the linguistic turn has “redirected the history of political thought to the history of discourse,”²⁸ and proceeds to represent the origin of liberal political theory in the linguistic turn which he discovers in the period under discussion. Both these scholars focus much of their work on political developments in the period, and thus their work has little to contribute to the more obviously doctrinal issues under discussion in this thesis.

Mention might also be made of the work of Geoffrey Nuttall, though again his relevance to the present argument is extremely limited—not because he has nothing to say, but because he too is concerned with only a very small aspect of Puritanism.²⁹ His main work on the subject, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience*, concerns itself with the development of Quakerism. What Nuttall has in common with Hill, however, is that they both attempt to explain the development of modernity by finding in the seventeenth century Puritans an important impetus for modernity. While such work might have scholarly value in other areas, it has limited application to the theology of the Lord’s Supper in Owen.

One of the seminal scholars in this area, and one who really changed the approach to the study of Puritanism, has been Patrick Collinson with his ground-breaking book, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*.³⁰ One of the distinguishing marks of modern scholarship on Puritanism has been its inability to define or to pin down the movement. This can be explained in terms of modern scholarship’s understanding of the organic nature of Puritanism. This question of the difficulty of definition is, however, precisely a point that

²⁸ Kevin Sharpe, *Remapping Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

²⁹ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

³⁰ Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

Collinson tackles; Puritanism as a movement was organic, he argues, being deeply ingrained within society through patronage and through wider links with European Protestantism. Collinson argues that, as a movement, Puritanism had peaks of aggressive activity, and valleys where there was no apparent Puritan activity, it having seemingly disappeared from prominence. This, perhaps, is only to be expected. But what is revolutionary about Collinson's analysis is its presentation of Puritanism as having developed out of the established structure of English society, lay as well as clerical, and of its links with Continental Protestantism. It cannot therefore be described as something "radically other," or alien from the rest of society. Though often treated as an aberration in subsequent historical and theological scholarship alike, in other words, Puritanism was in its day part of the mainstream. Nevertheless, it became radicalized, and because of certain of its ambitions—conflicting as they did with the broader religious policy of the Stuart and Jacobean periods—a binary opposition between the established church and the Puritans developed.

Such a view helps to explain the religious conflicts of the Civil War era in England, which could scarcely have occurred without the backing of powerful people in English society, and can scarcely be explained except against the background of the radicalization of that society, one illustration of which can be seen in the history of the Puritans. Building on Collinson's work, Nicholas Tyacke has argued that the English church at the beginning of the seventeenth century felt itself part of the Protestant establishment, and that something outside the establishment caused the Puritan movement to become radicalized. This he identified as Arminianism.

Tyacke grounds his argument on the understanding that Calvinism was in fact the basic theological bond operative in the Jacobean church, and more particularly that the

Calvinist doctrine of predestination was more or less uniformly endorsed. One does not, in short, find the grounds for the radicalization of the Puritans in the doctrine of predestination. He writes:

Calvinist predestination teaching was, as we have indicated, a crucial common assumption, shared by a majority of the hierarchy and virtually all its nonconformist opponents, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Indeed it is not too much to say that for many people in the seventeenth century the basic issue as between Protestants and Catholicism was that of divine determinism versus free will.³¹

What Tyacke does here, essentially, is to exchange for the term “Puritan” the term “Calvinist,” but to keep the binary opposition of Collinson intact. The Puritan label is used to classify the radicals, those who sought the reform of the church against what they perceived as imminent peril, and who thereby generated instability within church and society alike. Not only does Tyacke introduce the notion that the perceived threat of Arminism was responsible for unrest in the English church, but he highlights a consequence of this in a distinctive emphasis on the doctrine of grace in the period. This is an important discovery.

The Arminian controversy centred, in fact, on the doctrine of grace. For seventeenth century Calvinism, the vehicle for God’s saving grace to come to people is through the preaching of the gospel, while its application is restricted to those only who are the elect. This cluster of ideas can easily be found in Owen, and this is significant because, for Owen, it entails that God’s grace does *not*, therefore, come through the sacraments, as we will discover.³² The Arminian movement, as Owen understood the matter, wanted to shift the means of grace from the preaching of the Word to the sacraments, and, as

³¹ Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism*, 140.

³² *Works* III, 248.

Tyacke argues, in its application through the sacraments, grace was thought to be indiscriminately dispensed.³³ This error is also sometimes associated in the Puritan mind with Laudianism.

Davies disagrees with Tyacke on this point. He acknowledges that Laud was attempting to “redress the balance in favour of the liturgy over preaching.”³⁴ This was reflective of his understanding of the sacraments, and also of the fact that, for Laud, preaching was a means of grace but not the primary means of grace. Laud thought that sermons were meant principally to teach and that they were not therefore properly to be considered under the rubric of worship. Davies writes: “Such views did not emanate from the rise of Arminianism, although they provided evidence of growing disenchantment with reformed divinity. Rather they are corollaries to the patristic and catholic reinvestment of the Anglican Church. There is, after all, no necessary connection between Arminianism and an attack on preaching.”³⁵

Davies also identifies another important point in Laud’s policy which has a connection with Owen’s idea of a “gathered church.” The Jacobean church had tolerated Puritan conventicles, and a considerable amount of extra-parochial activity as well. Laud had no patience for this type of activity; Davies writes that he held the same attitude toward the gathered church as Abbot³⁶, who wrote that “separatists [were] contemptible [and] fit to be punished.”³⁷ Peter Lake notes in *Calvinism and the English Church* that two views of the role of ministers are also in view here: in the one, the minister is an

³³ Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism*, 135 .

³⁴ Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church*, 68.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ George Abbot (1562-1633) was an English divine and Archbishop of Canterbury. He was predecessor to Archbishop William Laud.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ Ibid.

agent of the delivery of the sacraments, and in the other, the minister is an agent of the delivery of sermons; the Puritans were charged with holding an idolatrous overvaluation of the sermon, and by reaction, there developed over against their position a piety which was centred much more exclusively on the sacrament and public prayer.³⁸ It was, we might say, not only seventeenth century Puritans who developed their theology reactively.

What is now being argued, against even Tyacke's modest statement of the Puritan case, is that the version of Arminianism represented by the name of Laud amounted to no more than a series of liturgical preferences organized around a common place, rather than any kind of theological revolution. Some have argued that highly positive aspects of Laud's polity can be identified in the emphasis on sacramental grace and the visible church (which was scarcely controversial, since Calvinism also had argued for a visible church) as a sacred and holy institution. Peter Lake, in particular, urges us to consider the changes proposed by Laud less as a theological imposition, or even as a novel programme, and more as a "distinctive style."³⁹ Christian piety in Laud's view revolved around the observances of the institution rather than around a personal piety, as advocated by the Puritans. This leads, however, to one last point which must be noted before we leave this phase of the discussion.

This personal piety which was advocated by the Calvinists was the fruit of their doctrine of predestination and of their experiential religion. Experiential religion, the Laudian party argued, undermined the role of the institutional church and entailed a dis-

³⁸ Peter Lake, "Calvinism and the English Church," *Past & Present* (1987): 44.

³⁹ Peter Lake, "The Laudian Style: Order, Uniformity and the Pursuit of the Beauty of Holiness in the 1630's" in *The Early Stuart Church, 1603-1642*, ed. Kenneth Fincham (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 163.

torted vision of the Christian community as a divided community of the “godly,” as the Puritans called themselves, and the “ungodly.” Tom Webster makes a very important point about the emphasis which Calvinism made between the godly and the ungodly, and underscores the importance of a careful understanding of this point. He writes:

This is an area where the terminology is most delicate. The self-image of the godly was a matter of loyal, reforming piety, simply taking the required practice to a higher level of commitment, adding to but not subverting the status quo. This is the most affirmative understanding of the voluntary religion taken alongside legal expectations. This is the familiar social round of gadding to sermons, conferences after services to drive home the preacher’s message, the fasting and prayer, the spiritual household and the support for more self-examination. This presentation was not, as we shall see, entirely honest as an innocent fervour merely displaying extra enthusiasm. Indeed, in the most peaceful circumstances, it expresses a *contingent* approval of the established church, drawing on the lectures and household chaplains implicitly indicating the insufficiencies of the established church. The line between addition and alternative was mutable, in both observation and perception. What is central here is the ambiguity of ‘voluntary’: it can mean simply taken on in addition to the norm but it also indicates a choice, presumably a good choice and one that is available to everyone but not taken by everyone, in itself a criticism and a source of identity by difference.⁴⁰

This voluntary element, indeed, became a stumbling block even within the Calvinist segment of the church. Peter Lake, in a revealing article on a leading Calvinist, Robert Sanderson, observes how the voluntarism of the movement could, at times, be something of a two-way street:

Robert Sanderson was a Calvinist; indeed, he was an evangelical Calvinist anxious to impart, through pulpit and press, the central tenets of Calvinism to the laity. He also hated Puritanism and said so loud and often. During the 1630s Sanderson cooperated enthusiastically with the Laudian regime. As a Royalist during the Civil War, he was one of the divines taken by Charles I to the Isle of Wight to provide spiritual counsel as the king struggled to save the church from its Puritan enemies.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Tom Webster, “Early Stuart Puritanism” *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* ed. Paul C.H. Lim and John Coffey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 53.

⁴¹ Lake, *Serving God and the Times*, 81.

To sum up, then, John Owen must be understood as a leading Puritan and minister who practiced his religion outside the institutional church. One might conclude that he held a very low (“Independent” as opposed to strictly “Calvinist”) view of the church, and his writings on the subject bear this out.⁴² Furthermore, Owen is also clearly hostile to the policy of Laud concerning the sacraments. Although we will not in this thesis deal more explicitly with Owen’s differences with Laud, it is important to remember what has been argued: that the substantial difference between the two was a question pertaining to the doctrine of grace, and that, as we will discover more fully in what follows, Owen does not consider grace to flow from the sacraments. Lastly, it will be important to remember the fact that, as we look at a cross-section of Owen’s discourses relevant to the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, he speaks these to a gathered church, to a community of those, as he puts it, who demonstrate “*the outward privileges of a regenerate state.*”⁴³

Calvin and the Sacramental Controversy of the 16th Century

Before we can really begin looking at Calvin and Owen explicitly in connection with their particular sacramental views, we need to establish something of the theological and historical background to their theologies of the Lord’s Supper. What is not always acknowledged is the historical perplexity concerning this sacrament in the Reformed tradition. Calvin himself could not negotiate a consensus in the sixteenth century within the Reformed churches, and we find that again in the seventeenth century, the issue of the

⁴² *Works* XVI, 1-208.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13; One of the distinguishing marks of English Congregationalism was the limitation of church membership to the godly and the corresponding restrictions on the sacraments. See Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 171.

Lord's Supper is a topic of great discussion in Owen's England. We will first briefly examine certain of the issues surrounding Calvin's relation to the views prevailing in the Roman Catholic Church, then proceed to Calvin's approach to the wider sacramental controversies of the Reformation movement itself, and following that conclude with a discussion of some aspects of the controversy in England.

Kilian McDonnell states that Calvin's real problem with the Roman Catholic Church's sacramental theology and with its understanding of the church as a whole is that he sees in it a divinization of the church and the sacraments.⁴⁴ He explains it this way:

The Roman ecclesiological interpretation of Christology placed large emphasis on Union, so that identity between Christ and church issued in divinization of the church. Instead of an experience of God, Rome offered an experience of the church. Calvin, like many reformation figures, thought that there was too much church and too little Christ.⁴⁵ What effect did this have? Calvin contends that the people were "taught to seek God's gifts where they cannot be found".⁴⁶ The Roman church had thus transferred the grace and power of God to outward symbols. The effect was that the symbols had taken on the role of the divine, and so, Calvin argues that the people "think that a hidden power is joined and fastened to the sacraments by which that of themselves confer the graces of the Holy Spirit upon us, as wine is given in a cup."⁴⁷ It is not only in the Eucharist that this theory of divinization happens but also in the waters of baptism and in the oil of confirmation—indeed, implicitly in the sacramental system of the church and in a certain sense in the church as a whole, particularly in its hierarchical, sacerdotal aspects.

⁴⁴ At the very outset, we must be clear that Kilian McDonnell is building a case against Calvin's sacramental theology in his book, *John Calvin, the Church and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). He concludes that Calvin tried to bring "divinity" back to God, by separating the idea of real presence from a local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. He claims that Calvin built a Christology which "hesitated to unite too closely divinity and humanity" and also build a division between "ecclesiology which was careful not to identify ecclesiological structure too readily with the Christ who sanctifies" (363). He argues that Plato could be understood even better with Calvin's help particularly in "Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments" (35). McDonnell is however helpful in identifying some of the problems Calvin had with the Roman Catholic Church, and it is for this reason that we will examine what he says.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 4.14.14. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the *Institutes* are from this edition.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.17.

Calvin contended that the sacraments as practised by the Roman Catholic Church were tools of social dominance, although under God, such that through them the church achieved a sort of power that was a destructive temptation and a fatal snare. It was, after all, through the sacraments that sanctification and justification were said to be given. In this way the grace of God was too much controlled by the sacraments dispensed by the church. This helps to explain why it is that, in his sacramental theology, Calvin wants to preserve the sovereignty of God, and to protect God's freedom from human manipulation. Calvin accordingly writes that the sacraments have no secret virtue in themselves, except that virtue which comes to them by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ So, Calvin concludes, the sacraments are not causes of grace in their own right. Therefore he makes a clear distinction between the sacramental sign and the grace which flows from the sign. Because the sacraments have no power in themselves and because they are not the cause of God's grace being dispensed, the flow of God's grace through the sacraments is placed firmly in the freedom of God and in the action of the Holy Spirit working faith in the hearts of those who receive the sacraments also to receive the grace of God.

McDonnell is correct when he writes of Calvin:

He felt that the compulsive concern of the Romans for the sacraments as a means of salvation, especially as seen in their doctrine of transubstantiation, ended in the sign dominating the reality, and ultimately in the sign obscuring the reality. Transubstantiation objectivized God and made him palpable and man could dispose of him at will, so that the whole faith experience—God's sovereignty and man's utter subjection—had no meaning.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.9.

⁴⁹ McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 116.

On this view, the doctrine of transubstantiation makes God into a thing, and into bread in particular, and this Calvin would not allow, considering it blasphemy.⁵⁰ In Calvin's theology, the occasion for superstition which the doctrine generated in practice is among its chief flaws. Calvin argues against such views that when the bread becomes the body of Christ, or when Christ is said somehow to be hidden in the bread, there is no longer any role for the Holy Spirit. Thus, without true faith, which is the Spirit's work, there can be no fellowship with Christ.⁵¹ So for the Roman Catholic Church to suggest that the bread becomes the body of Christ and for the people to imagine that it is the body of Christ is idolatrous. "What is idolatry if not this:" says Calvin, "to worship the gifts in place of the Giver himself?"⁵² To that he adds, "Now let them go and deny that it is idolatry when they display bread in their masses to be worshiped in place of Christ."⁵³

When we examine Calvin's sacramental thought in more detail, some of these issues will come up again, but suffice it to say that central issue is taken in Calvin with the doctrine of transubstantiation, for which Calvin finds no basis in Scripture. Calvin wants to uphold the integrity of Scripture and in this context he laments that, for the Roman Catholics, "What is their pretext for the boast that they worship Christ in that bread, when they have no promise of such a thing?"⁵⁴ What Calvin claims is that Christ is ascended into heaven and that this is the direction our adoration should take. The ascension into heaven is a central point in Calvin's sacramental theology. The *sursum corda* is the rule by which we must adore Christ in heavenly exaltation, an adoration which is done

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.20.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.13.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.36.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.18.8.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.38.

through the Spirit. Thus, Calvin finds any adoration dangerous and crass which seeks out any other means or locus of adoration.⁵⁵

There are other things which could be said about Calvin's differences with the Roman Catholic Church, but these issues overlap with the clerical and the ecclesial and therefore need not detain us, particularly as we have a sufficient idea of the groundwork already. We turn now to Calvin's difference with the Reformers during his own time, and begin with the most notable Reformer, Martin Luther.

Luther addressed the issue of the sacraments in his *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. Among other things, he raised the issue of the sacraments and come to the conclusion that there are only two sacraments, based on his criteria that the two essentials in any sacrament were the word of God and the outward sign. Thus, the word of God was one of the most important elements in defining a sacrament, and this comes from Augustine who wrote that "the word is added to the element, and it becomes a sacrament, indeed, a kind of visible word itself."⁵⁶ For Luther, the word was the force that made the sacrament, and therefore, it was not the eating and drinking of the elements which are as important as the words of God "for the forgiveness of sins."⁵⁷ Holifield points out that Luther felt that the corporeality was necessary for the spiritual grace of the forgiveness of sins, though he writes, "the central sacramental reality was the Word offering for-

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.36.

⁵⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 179.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 180. It is important for Luther that the sacrament contained a real bodily presence of Christ because of, or for the purpose of, the objective forgiveness of sins. In *The Small Catechism* Luther writes, "it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and drink...the eating and drinking do not in themselves produce them, but the words "for you" and "for the forgiveness of sins." These words, when accompanied by the bodily eating and drinking, are the chief thing in the sacrament, and he who believes these words has what they say and declare: the forgiveness of sins." Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 489.

giveness, and not the mere bodily presence.”⁵⁸ Ultimately, however, the source of Calvin’s contention with Luther’s sacramental theology comes from the latter’s underlying notion of the Christological communication of properties.

The communication of properties was Luther’s way to ascribe the omnipresence of the divine nature of Christ to his entire *glorified person*, both divine and human. What this meant for the Lord’s Supper was that Christ was present in the bread and wine because Christ was everywhere present by virtue of being God. Though risen and ascended to the right hand of God, therefore, Christ can still be present in his flesh and blood in the sacramental meal. The phrase “the right hand of God” meant for Luther the power and majesty of God, and this was something not only communicated to the human nature of Christ at the moment of his incarnation, but that continues to be communicated to it in his exaltation to heaven. Furthermore, Luther insists that since the words, “This is my body,” are the words of God for the forgiveness of sins, they must be read in as realist a sense as possible. Thus, McGrath is correct in stating that Luther held to the “simultaneous presences of both bread and the body of Christ at one and the same time.”⁵⁹ This notion generated what later Lutherans would call consubstantiation.⁶⁰

There are a number of issues which can be raised with this teaching, but our primary focus at this point is Calvin’s theology, and his relation to Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Calvin suggests two problems with Luther’s teaching. The first

⁵⁸ E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in the Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 9.

⁵⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 441.

⁶⁰ McGrath in *Christianity: An Introduction* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 162, explains it this way, “consubstantiation ... holds that the bread remains bread, but is additionally the body of Christ. Luther illustrated this idea by pointing to how a piece of iron when placed in a hot fire, becomes red hot. Although remaining iron, it has heat added to it. In the same way, the bread of the Lord’s Supper remains bread, but additionally contains or conveys the body of Christ.”

thing that Calvin addresses is the necessity of having Christ in the physical element as the only means of communicating with him. That is, Calvin thinks that Luther in some sense falls into the same trap as the Roman Catholic Church in that there is only one way of communicating with Christ and that is in the physical eating and drinking of his body in the elements of bread and wine. Calvin says, “They disguise it with every possible color, but when they have said everything, it is clear enough that they insist on the local presence of Christ. Why so? Because they cannot bear to conceive any other partaking of flesh and blood except that which consists in either local conjunction and contact or some gross form of enclosing.”⁶¹

The second problem that Calvin identifies in Luther’s view concerns the true corporeality of Christ. The issue that Calvin points out is really about two bodies of Christ. Maintaining the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, in short, forced Luther, and even more scholastic Lutheranism, to teach that the body of Christ is exceptional and supernatural, and thus, different from ordinary flesh and blood. Calvin thinks that this is effectively Marcionitism, exclaiming: “What is this but to raise Marcion from hell? For no one will doubt that if Christ’s body existed in this state, it was a phantom or apparition.”⁶² At this point, Calvin considers the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation more tolerable than Luther’s consubstantiation because consubstantiation created an intermediate being of Christ which was neither God nor man.⁶³ By contrast, Calvin contends that Christ is in his flesh contained in heaven.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.16.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.17.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

There was, of course, another position which Calvin needed to engage with and that is the one represented by the name and exemplified by the theology of his predecessor in the Swiss Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli had taught that the Lord's Supper is a memorial or a pledge of allegiance to Christ and the church.⁶⁵ What undergirds Zwingli's thought is the idea that a Christian lives in the realm of the Spirit and is, therefore, in a manner of speaking, to be considered as exalted above the material and the fleshy. For Zwingli, it is the Spirit which sustains the soul's vitality because Christ himself had said, "to eat the flesh profiteth nothing."⁶⁶ What is really at stake in Zwingli's teaching is this emphasis on the spiritual aspect and a consequent denial of the physical, so that there cannot be a transfer of grace to the believer from the material elements of bread and wine as such. Zwingli is best known for likening the sacramental elements to a wedding ring; he writes, "[We speak of the bread and the wine as a] representation and memorial of his body and blood, just as a faithful wife, whose husband has left her a ring as a keepsake, frequently refers to the ring as her husband, saying: This is my late husband, although what she means is that it recalls her husband."⁶⁷

Contrary to Zwingli, Calvin taught communication rather than commemoration. He in fact affirmed a substantial presence in the Lord's Supper of the whole Christ, both his divine and human natures, and he accented the objective sacramental activity of the Holy Spirit as the medium for communion. Moreover, Calvin also attached a genuine efficacy to the use of the sacrament. Zwingli, Calvin contends, failed to understand that the

⁶⁵ It should be noted that Zwinglian scholar, W. Peter Stephens argues that Zwingli's Eucharistic theology is similar to Calvin's. This, however, is assumes that Calvin held a faith-presence—a view which Stephens argues. This thesis argues that Calvin holds to a real presence, although not a local presence and that a faith-presence understanding does not represent an accurate reading of Calvin. See Peter W. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 256.

⁶⁶ Ulrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, *Zwingli and Bullinger: selected translations with introductions and notes*, trans. Geoffery W. Bromiley. Vol. 24 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 206, 210.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 226, 234.

sacramental elements were “such signs that the reality is joined to them.”⁶⁸ For Calvin the physical was as important as the spiritual, and therefore he put great stress on the humanity of Christ. He replies to Zwingli’s spiritualism when he writes: “I do not restrict this union to the divine essence, but affirm that it belongs to the flesh and blood, inasmuch as it was not simply said: My Spirit, but: My flesh is meat indeed; nor was it simply said: My Divinity, but: My blood is drink indeed.”⁶⁹ For Calvin it was not enough to receive the benefits of Christ simply by faith, or simply in the spiritual realm.

In sum, we have discovered in very broad brush strokes the significant issue the Lord’s Supper played in the Reformation and for our purposes in the theology of Calvin. Calvin was surrounded by opposition to his sacramental theology and this is the real benefit in closely examining this theology. He was building a theology which could be defended against the Roman Church, Luther’s consubstantiation and Zwingli’s memorialism. What he created was a theology which consisted of a dynamic real presence of Christ in the sacrament which he believed could be defended from scripture against both the Roman Catholic Church and Luther, while at the same time he was able to massively augment Zwingli’s concern for a spiritual understanding of the sacrament.

Owen’s Historical Context

One might have thought that the controversy concerning the Lord’s Supper would have been solved by the seventeenth century, but in fact it was not. Over in England, the sacrament was still a matter of great controversy. Contrary to what Bremer suggests, the

⁶⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid vol. 22, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 166.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

controversy was not simply about how the sacrament was to be received but concerned the very nature of the sacrament.⁷⁰ It could plausibly be suggested that there was no other group among those engaged in the controversy so committed to distinguish the proper use and meaning of the sacraments as the Puritans, for they collectively published many hundreds of sermons, tracts, and treatises on the issue of baptism and the Lord's Supper. A characteristic effect of paying such great attention to any one subject is, of course, apathy toward it in short order; this is what happened in the case of the Quakers, who as Geoffrey Nuttall maintains, discarded the use of both baptism and the Lord's Supper in their worship. But the current question which we must answer is this: "Why this controversy in seventeenth century England?"

England, of course, had had an extraordinarily prolonged Reformation experience which included violence, the threat of invasion by foreign powers, a revolution in the relations between church and Crown, and so on. Although King Henry VIII reformed the church to the extent of such actions of severing ties with Rome, sponsoring the publication of an English Bible, and dissolving the monasteries, there existed in England an uneasy, unsettled relationship between the Reformation ideals known from English and Continental theological sources, and (as some saw matters) a continuing version of the Roman church under Henry's policy, albeit an English version of that church. In particular, the Henrician church still held the view and taught that the bread and wine "by the strength and efficacy of Christ's mighty word ... after the consecration there remaineth

⁷⁰ Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 85, writes, "One of the focal points of the deepening quarrel was the manner in which believers received the eucharist. Puritans wished to receive the bread and wine sitting, preferably while gathered around a table, because this emphasised their view of the sacrament as a collective meal commemorating the Last Supper, which united believers in communion and symbolized their union with Christ and with each other. Recognizing this, the authorities worked harder to restore alter rails and to insist on reception while kneeling."

no substance of bread or wine, nor any other substance, but the substance of Christ, God and man.”⁷¹

Protestant misgivings concerning Henry’s reforms continued into the period after his death, when the reign of Edward VI (1537-1553) prepared the way for a steady influx of Protestant ideas into the Church of England. Of particular significance for our study is the fact that at this point, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer famously shifted the course of the English Reformation by declaring that the bread and the wine were just signs of Christ, since the ascended Christ is present bodily in heaven, at the right hand of God, and not on the altar.⁷² The significant issue that we have encountered even on the continent with Calvin is the relation of Christ to the bread and wine. E. Brooks Holifield summarizes the development during Edward’s reign well when he writes:

The increasingly Reformed tenor of Anglican sacramental doctrine was visible also in the Forty-two Articles of Faith published in 1553. Cranmer inserted a clause denying that sacraments conveyed grace *ex opera operato*, and in the twenty-ninth article he spoke out against “the real and bodily presence (as they term it) of Christ’s flesh and blood in the sacrament,” on the ground that Christ’s body had been taken up into heaven. In true Reformed fashion, the Articles limited effective communion to worthy receivers and repeated earlier admonitions against adoration of the Host and reservation of the elements.⁷³

On the early death of Edward VI, his fervently Roman Catholic half-sister Mary Tudor (1516-1558) came to the throne, and with the Act of Repeal (1553), put an end to

⁷¹ Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford Press, 1959), 328.

⁷² Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 31. The Black Rubric is the name given to the declaration found at the end of the *Order for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper* in the Prayer Book of the Church of England. This document explains why the communicant kneels to receive the elements. Edward VI had already approved the Second Prayer Book, before John Knox and others could petition the Privy Council that the communicant receive the elements of the Lord’s Supper sitting rather than kneeling. This however was refused by Archbishop Cranmer. On account of the fact that the first copies had already been published, a corrective slip was pasted into the Prayer Book explaining that kneeling was an expression of “humble and grateful acknowledgement of the benefits of Christ,” and did not imply the adoration of the bread and wine as the real and essential presence of Christ’s body and blood.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 32.

the second Prayer Book, the reform of the English Church, and to the hope of many of the Protestants. Much Protestant sympathy survived underground, of course, and some Protestants left the country during her short reign, returning when her half-sister Elizabeth I (1533-1603) came to the throne in 1558. When the Marian exiles returned, however, they brought with them forms of Reformed theology which were being newly developed on the Continent. These seemed strange to the Puritan conformists who stayed behind,⁷⁴ but the new theology was destined to have a massive impact on subsequent English Puritanism. The new ideas can be summed up under the heading of covenant theology. Covenant theology, the claims of which will be developed in the argument a little later, is a system of doctrine which maintains that God and the elect are bound together into mutual obligations. Precisely this theology was to be a defining ingredient of the sacramental theology which John Owen would develop.

It is with Elizabeth I that the reformation of the Church of England took a significant turn which propelled matters towards the controversies leading up to the English Civil War. Many of the reforms begun under Edward VI were not revived, and three major changes were made, which are important to enumerate for the further development of our theme. Holifield outlines these changes, pointing out that, “none [of the three changes] was designed to please the advocates of further reform. The ornaments rubric made mandatory the sacramental vestments prescribed by the Prayer Book of 1549; the Black Rubric disappeared; and the words of institution underwent a dramatic change.”⁷⁵ So, although the Church of England was again Protestant under Elizabeth I, many of the Puri-

⁷⁴ A “Puritan Conformist” could be explained as someone who doctrinally was a Calvinist, but who did not have a qualm of conscience about wearing the surplice and conforming to the hierarchy of the church among other things. See further: Tyacke, *Aspects of English Protestantism*, 61ff.

⁷⁵ Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 32.

tans who had hoped for more radical change, and who had anticipated this in the context of the reforms of Edward VI, were greatly disappointed. Despite Tyacke's claim that, "it is not an exaggeration to say that by the end of the sixteenth century the Church of England was largely Calvinist in doctrine,"⁷⁶ as is evidenced by the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, the truth of the matter is that Puritan hopes and ambitions for reform were frustrated. For the Articles of Religion could be variously interpreted, then as now, and even Calvinism could be styled to some extent a broad church, depending on who glosses the term, and to whom. This of course begs the question: Why was there so much controversy over the Lord's Supper in the seventeenth century and what was at the root of the controversy?

The second part of the question is much easier to answer than the first part. Many volumes have been written concerning the why of the controversy. The perceived threat of Arminianism—the "threat" it represented being a threat to the doctrine of predestination along with covenant theology—has been considered the cause by many notable scholars,⁷⁷ but that is by no means the only reason that can be given. Julian Davies in his book *The Caroline Captivity of the Church*, argues that the more generic problem was Carolinism, "the policy of Charles I to realize his highly personal notion of sacramental kingship by exploiting his prerogative as Supreme Governor of the Church. Thus the established Church under Charles I became more highly politicized than it had under any of his predecessors."⁷⁸ A highly politicized church was something to which the Puritan element was largely averse, in principle and quite apart from the details of Charles' actual

⁷⁶ Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, 3.

⁷⁷ Most notable among them is Nicholas Tyacke.

⁷⁸ Davies, *The Caroline Captivity*, 3.

policy. To this must be added, furthermore, the religious strategy of Archbishop Laud himself, who attempted to consolidate the “catholic” principle in the Church of England in an aggressive and openly anti-Puritan way. Both of these acted as a pincer movement on the Puritan element, and naturally generated controversy.

Returning to the second part of the question, that which pertains more directly to the subject-matter of this thesis, we may well ask what the root of the sacramental controversy was. I suggest that once again, the issue concerned the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. For the Church of England once again could be seen to be reaffirming a version of the real presence that the Puritans saw as problematic. When Laud called for the communion table to be termed an altar, and insisted that these “altars” were to be fenced by railings, the Puritans perceived a threatened return, if not to the Roman Church, then to the half-way house of the earlier, incomplete Henrician reforms.⁷⁹ There is no question that such dangers were on the mind of John Owen when he sought to teach his congregation the fundamentals of the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. So to this extent, what John Calvin addressed in the sixteenth century, John Owen also addressed in the seventeenth century. The conclusions to which they came were strikingly different, however, as we will have occasion to see.

But there is also another aspect of the controversy in the English Church which had to do with the efficacy of the sacrament. This was a two-pronged debate which revolved around the subjective and objective reality of the sacrament. The question here, framed in Puritan theological terms, is whether the sacrament is capable of converting the unregenerate, or whether the sacrament is intended simply to increase the faith of the al-

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 205ff.

ready-regenerate participant. This issue became of particular interest to John Owen, and his answer to the question posed is seen in the fact that he only celebrated the ordinance for the visible saints as members of his “gathered” congregation. This is a leading indicator of Owen’s intentions, and needs to be understood and remembered when reading the discourses that Owen gave to his congregation. To put the matter in a nutshell, these discourses were not for the “unregenerate,” and thus Owen falls into the category of those defending the subjective reality of the sacrament. As we shall see, Owen believed that the Lord’s Supper was instituted to confirm faith, and that it should therefore be accessible only to the faithful, since it acts as a covenant seal.

In sum, there are two very important ideas which we must not forget when we come to examine John Owen’s sacramental theology. The first is that though there are many authors, as we have seen, who claim that John Owen followed John Calvin and that only minor differences existed between the two in their sacramental thought, in fact this is not the case.⁸⁰ Secondly, we have discovered that considerable tension existed in England surrounding the issue of real presence and surrounding the efficacy of the sacrament. There was a growing concern, culminating with the rise of Laud, that the church was slipping into papist faults and clearly this would have been reflected in some, at least, of Owen’s thought.⁸¹ However, we only have his published discourses to rely upon, and thereby we cannot conjecture what might have been his theology in other circumstances. What we do know is that this collection of discourses was addressed to a “gathered”

⁸⁰ See further: Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*; Mathison, *Given for You*; John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence and other Writings on the Eucharist* (Boston: United Church Press, 1966); Payne, *John Owen on the Lord’s Supper*; Jonathan Jong-Chun Won, “Communion with Christ: An Exposition and Comparison of the Doctrine of Union and Communion with Christ in Calvin and the English Puritans” (PhD diss. Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989); David Wong, “The Covenant Theology of John Owen” (PhD diss. Westminster Theological Seminary, 1998).

⁸¹ Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed*, 110; Bremer, *Congregational Communion*, 85.

church of visible saints,⁸² and that this points us to a subjective understanding of the sacraments, which also has a bearing on what he really understood concerning real presence. Such issues will be examined in the next Chapter.

Conclusion

It has been the aim of this Chapter to sketch the historical background surrounding disputes concerning the doctrine of the Lord's Supper in both the Continental context of the sixteenth century and the context of England beginning in the sixteenth century and leading into the seventeenth century. What has become clear is that the issue of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament is one of the major issues of the time. It is also an issue that does not easily come to any resolution. In the seventeenth century, furthermore, there is another factor which influences sacramental theology, namely covenant theology. It is this covenantal approach, I shall argue, which dramatically separates Owen from Calvin. This is reflected not only in the theological foundations of their respective systems, but even in the different audiences to whom the two men address their sacramental theologies. Owen addresses a "gathered" church, while Calvin addresses a church that, in theory at least, encompasses the entire community or society. Thus, whereas what each says might be the same or very similar as flat statements, when taken in the context of their audiences, the message conveyed can be seen to be quite different.

⁸² Owen C. Watkins in his book, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 29, relates what would be involved in becoming a member of a gathered church. He writes, "gathered churches required some evidence of effectual calling from those who wished to enter into communion with them. Applicants usually met this requirement by publicly relating the manner of their conversion or by handing in a written account of it.... If the church meeting was then satisfied that the applicant was sincere in his profession and sober in his life they accepted him into fellowship. It was emphasized that only God could really know the truth about a man's regeneration; the task of the church meeting was simply to assess 'its evidences and fruit in their outward demonstration'."

It is this question of what they say and how they approach the question of the real presence which will provide much of the focus in the Chapter to which we will now turn.

Chapter 2: John Owen's Sacramental Theology

Introduction

At the beginning of our examination of the sacramental theology of John Owen, the question might legitimately be asked: “Why John Owen?” From what was indicated in the brief introduction in the first chapter, one can see minimally that he was a very influential man in the seventeenth century. A second reason for wishing to examine John Owen's sacramental theology is because, in examinations of the history of sacramental theology in England, Owen — as prominent as he was in his own day — is almost universally excluded from consideration.⁸³ Thus, scholarly treatment of the whole shape of English sacramental theology in the period is missing an account of his views. This also constitutes an impediment to understanding the development of Reformed theology in the wider English-speaking world, much of which was heavily influenced by Owen's “dissenting” theology.

Thirdly, even in the recent work that has been done on Owen's thought, there has been little in the way of analysis of his sacramental theology. There is, however, a body of material in Owen relating to the question. Owen's vibrant and lively collection of posthumously published sermons entitled, *Twenty Five Discourses Suitable to the Lord's Supper* (1760), together with a collection of three discourses entitled, *Three Discourses*

⁸³ This is the case for example in Bryan D. Spinks, *Sacrament, Ceremonies, and the Stuart Divines: Sacramental theology and liturgy in England and Scotland, 1603-1662* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002). Considering Owen's considerable influence, it is difficult to understand this omission.

Suitable to the Lord's Supper (1798), makes for a worthwhile investigation into his thought.⁸⁴ In other words, although there is not a treatise which deals with this weighty subject specifically, there are these collections, in combination with which one can find buried in his writings countless references to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which provide ample material to reconstruct an authentic "Owenist" sacramental theology. Until now, however, there has been very little work done on this topic and what has been done is of questionable scholarly worth.⁸⁵

In 1645, while still a parish minister in Fordham in Essex, Owen wrote two catechisms for his congregation which include definitions of the sacraments. In *The Lesser Catechism*, Owen writes that the sacraments are "visible seals of God's spiritual promises, made to us in the blood of Jesus Christ."⁸⁶ In his *Greater Catechism*, he says that they are "instituted of Christ to be visible seals and pledges whereby God in him confirmeth the promises of the covenant to all believers, re-stipulating of them growth in faith and obedience."

From very early on, Owen had an understanding of the sacraments which would have been consistent with Puritan understanding and the influence of Federal theology.

Three related themes accordingly become immediately visible to us in just these two cat-

⁸⁴ In a prefatory note editor William H. Goold writes: "In 1798 a volume was published in Edinburgh under the title, 'The Lord's Supper fully Considered, in a Review of the History of its Institution; with Meditations and Ejaculations suited to the several parts of the ordinance; to which are prefixed Three Discourses delivered at the Lord's Table; by the late Rev. John Owen, D.D.'" It needs but a glance at the three discourses in order to be assured, from internal evidence, that they belong to Owen."

⁸⁵ Besides a thoughtful introductory essay in a recent reprint of Owen's "Discourses" on the Lord's Supper by Jon D. Payne, *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), there has been very little written. To my knowledge, the only scholarship which has been devoted to Owen's sacramental theology contains a general look and a nod to his conforming to Calvin's thought. See Stephen Mayor, "The Teaching of John Owen concerning the Lord's Supper", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 18 (1965): 170-181; Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 87-89; Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 211-31; Mathison, *Given for You*, 98-101; Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen," 324-32; Changlok Oh, "Beholding the Glory of God in Christ: Communion with God in the theology of John Owen (1616-83)" (Phd diss. Westminster Theological Seminary, 2006), 243-49; Won, "Communion with Christ," 286-91.

⁸⁶ *Works* I, 469.

echetical answers. First, the sacraments are “seals and pledges” confirming God’s spiritual promises. Owen says that it is not the symbols which must be the focus of the participant, but the spiritual realities to which they point. Second, in his *Greater Catechism*, he says that the sacrament are seals and pledges confirming the “promises of the covenant.” Becoming familiar with Federal Theology will reveal what this entails and why this definition is important for Owen’s sacramental theology. Third, the sacraments “re-stipulate” the obligations of the covenant and thereby re-bind God and the believer together, but primarily the obligations are on the part of the believer.

Before we delve into Owen’s sacramental theology, therefore, we must first examine Federal theology, or what is otherwise called “covenant theology.” It has been argued that “the theme of covenant theology is pervasive in Owen’s whole theological exposition ... [and that] ... his whole theological exposition is in a threefold structure: *God* and His decree, *Christ* and His atonement, *man* and his justification, perseverance and sanctification.”⁸⁷ This observation is correct, and it is also true of his sacramental theology.

Federal Theology

The basis of Federal theology is the “covenant of works.” Behind the covenant of works is a covenant between God the Father and God the Son which secures the redemption of the elect, called the “covenant of the Mediator.” Lastly, there is the “covenant of grace,” which extends the redemption of Christ to the elect through the preaching of the

⁸⁷ Wong, “The Covenant Theology of John Owen,” 9.

gospel. The covenant of works was established with Adam, who represented the entire human race as covenant head.⁸⁸ This covenant sets the pattern and is the foundation in Federal theology from which the covenant of grace and the particular emphasis on the person of Christ as the second Adam or last Adam is developed. The covenant of grace is the covenant by which God restores his relationship with fallen humanity. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are joined together eternally, however, in the covenant between the trinitarian persons known as the covenant of the Mediator.⁸⁹

The covenant of works is the covenant established with Adam at his creation and which was binding on all humanity, so that breach of this covenant brought the curse of death upon humanity. By the covenant of grace, however, the elect are united with Christ by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit. The covenant of the Mediator has to do with the way in which the Son of God was to be incarnate, being made the atonement for sin and by so doing, making salvation possible. The elect would become the possession of Christ by fulfilling this covenant. Although the benefits of the completion of the covenant of the Mediator are immediately accepted by the Father, its concrete benefits, as the possession of the elect, are realized in time only through the covenant of grace. Owen writes:

Being thus acquitted in the covenant of the Mediator, and it being righteous that they should be acquitted personally in the covenant of grace, it was determined by Father, Son and Holy Ghost, that that the way of their actual personal deliverance

⁸⁸ Owen does not deal with the covenant of works apart from the other covenants and does not offer a separate doctrine of creation. That his teaching on the covenant of works is always only in relation to the other covenants is a strong indication that his primary focus is in the redemption of Jesus Christ as the one who fulfills the obligations of the covenant of works. But even so, it is the covenant of works which undergirds everything including Christ, and the sacraments.

⁸⁹ For a general overview of the relationship between the union with Christ and the covenant as understood by the Puritans, see Tudor R. Jones, "Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 no. 2 (1990): 194-208; see also Hans Burger, *Being in Christ* (Wipf and Stock, 2009). On the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, see Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 22, 25; Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: the theological methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 167-177.

from the sentence and curse of the law should be in and by such a way and dispensation as might lead to praise of the glorious grace of God.⁹⁰

It will prove helpful if the covenant of works and the covenant of grace are examined not only in Owen's theology, but also through the lens of the *Savoy Declaration*, to which he was committed.⁹¹ Federal theology needs to be understood as founded on the idea that God, immediately after creating Adam, made a covenant with Adam, and that this covenant was made before his fall into sin. This covenant is closely related to, if not the same as, the Mosaic covenant made at Mount Sinai, which is a covenant of conditions: God says that if the creature will obey his commandments, then God will bless and the creature will be given life.⁹² However, in Adam, humanity did not obey, and thus the curse of God comes and humanity was condemned to die. This test of obedience is found in Genesis 2:16-17: "And the Lord God commanded man saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'"

Not only is the covenant of works a covenant of conditions, but it is argued in it that the Decalogue was inscribed on the heart of Adam, so that in his perfect estate Adam knew the law perfectly and indeed obeyed it perfectly. Owen writes:

This law, as unto the substance of it, was the only law of creation, the rule of the first covenant of works; for it contained the sum and substance of that obedience which is due unto God from all rational creatures made in his image, and nothing

⁹⁰ *Works* II, 179.

⁹¹ The Savoy Assembly met at the Savoy Palace, London for 11 or 12 days from Oct. 12th, 1658. This assembly produced the *Savoy Declaration* which is a modified version of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The full title of the declaration is: *A Declaration of the Faith and Order owned and practiced in the Congregational Churches in England*. About 200 men, mostly elders attended the assembly representing over one hundred churches. No minute book of the conference has come to light. Toon writes that the *Savoy Declaration* is in general agreement with orthodox Calvinism and in general agreement with the *Confession of Faith* produced by the Westminster Assembly, with the exception of a stronger emphasis on Federal theology. Toon, *God's Statesman*, 104.

⁹² A.G. Matthews, ed., *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658* (London: Independent Press, 1959), VII, II.

else. It was the whole of what God designed in our creation unto his own glory and our everlasting blessedness. What was written in the tablets of stone was nothing but a transcript of what was written in the heart of man originally; and which is returned thither again by the grace of the new covenant, Jeremiah 31:33; 2 Corinthians 3:3.⁹³

He continues:

Although this law as a covenant was broken and disannulled by the entrance of sin, and became insufficient as unto its first ends, of the justification and salvation of the church thereby, Romans 8:3; yet as a law and rule of obedience it was never disannulled, nor would God suffer it to be... For to reject this law, or to abrogate it, had been for God to have laid aside that glory of his holiness and righteousness which in his infinite wisdom he designed therein.⁹⁴

Lest the force of this “never disannulled” be lost, the claim is that this covenant is binding upon all humanity even after the Fall and even after the establishment of the covenant of grace. The *Savoy Declaration*, in chapter 19 paragraph five, declares:

The Moral Law doth forever bind[e] all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not on[e]ly in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God, the Creator who gave it: neither doth Christ in the gospel anyway dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.”⁹⁵

The *Savoy Declaration* describes the covenant of grace as one that “freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ.”⁹⁶ Under the Gospel the covenant of grace is only offered through the preaching of the gospel. The *Savoy Declaration* says that because the covenant of works was broken, “God was pleased to give unto the Elect

⁹³*Works* XXII, 215.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Matthews, *The Savoy Declaration*, XIX, V.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, VII, III. There is a large variation from the *Westminster Confession* at this point. The *Westminster Confession* has one additional point under article 7 which speaks about the New Testament. However, the *Savoy Declaration* excludes this point and adds Article XX which is headed by, “Of the Gospel, and the extent of the Grace thereof.”

the promise of Christ,”⁹⁷ “[a]lthough the Gospel be the on[e]ly outward means of revealing Christ and saving Grace, and is as such abundantly sufficient thereunto.”⁹⁸

What is clear from the *Savoy Declaration* is the fact that a distinction is made between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works is binding on all humanity, whereas the covenant of grace is offered only to the elect. In Federal theology, the covenant of grace is now about Jesus Christ, the Covenant-Keeper. Jesus Christ in keeping and fulfilling the covenant of works as the Second Adam is thereby able to offer grace to those elected by God’s sovereign choice.⁹⁹ What can be seen from this is that, to a surprising extent, the covenant of grace is really only the covenant of works in disguise, for in it, a new Adam was found so that the covenant established at creation with humanity could be upheld. Owen writes:

A surety, *sponsor, vas, praes, fidejussor*, for us, the Lord Christ was, by his *voluntary undertaking*, out of his rich grace and love, to do, answer, and perform all that is required on our part, that we may enjoy the benefits of the covenant, the grace and glory prepared, proposed, and promised in it, in the way and manner determined on divine wisdom. And this may be reduced unto two heads:—first, His answering for our transgressions against the first covenant; secondly, His purchase and procurement of the grace of the new: “He was made a curse for us . . . that the blessing of Abraham might come on us.” Galatians 3:13-15.¹⁰⁰

The idea of covenant involved in Federal theology, as the theological principle ordering Owen’s theology, is important to understand because, as we shall see, it is foundational in the subsequent theology of the Lord’s Supper. Owen will constantly bring his congregation to the point of recognizing that in the sacrament we are confirming precisely this covenant transaction. Although some argue that Owen insists on the complete ab-

⁹⁷ Ibid., XX.

⁹⁸ Ibid., XX, IV.

⁹⁹ Ibid., VIII, I.

¹⁰⁰ *Works* V, 187.

rogation of the covenant of works, especially as developed by his contemporary Baxter,¹⁰¹ this cannot be easily accepted on the basis of a close reading either of Owen or of the *Savoy Declaration*.¹⁰² Christ accomplishes the obligations that are found in the covenant of works, and those outside the covenant of grace are still bound by the covenant of works: this the *Savoy Declaration* makes clear. The second point that must be borne in mind is that the means of grace, whereby those under the covenant of works are brought into the covenant of grace, is the preaching of the Word. This underscores the idea that the nature of the sacraments is such that they are not means of grace in the primary sense. It is largely for this reason, I will suggest, that the idea of the real presence of Christ (a version of which can be found in Calvin) does not feature in the sacramental aspects of Owen's theology.

Federal Theology and Sacramental Theology

It is from such foundations in Federal theology, I wish to argue, that Owen builds his sacramental theology. As we discovered in the answer cited from the *Greater Catechism*, Owen relates the "ordinance," as he often terms it, to the idea of covenant obligations both for God and for the believer. Owen calls this the "mutual sealing" whereby God not only seals the covenant promise to the believer but the believer also seals and confirms the covenant by his faith and obedience.¹⁰³ Owen teaches that without the re-

¹⁰¹ Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was an English Puritan church leader best known for his ministry at Kidderminster. Baxter held to a moderate form of Calvinism and rejected the idea of limited atonement in favour of a form of universal atonement.

¹⁰² Wong, "The Covenant Theology of John Owen", 393.

¹⁰³ *Works IX*, 528.

ceiving of the promises that the Lord's Supper points to or promises, the sacrament is inherently useless. He writes in this connection:

This is that which ruins the world,—the hearing that God hath made a covenant of grace and mercy; it is preached to them, and declared unto them, and they think to be saved by this covenant, though they themselves do not perform what the covenant requires on their part.¹⁰⁴

The claim that Christian proclamation of grace and mercy can be something that “ruins the world” may be an alien one to many minds, but it is central to Owen's account, and indeed, to the Federal theology that underlies it. In the background at this point is something that must also be remembered, which is that Owen insists that the atonement itself must be appropriated and re-appropriated by faith in time by the believer, as a matter of practical necessity. Thus the importance of the sacrament is to be seen in connection with the way that this need for constant re-appropriation becomes visible to us. This is an idea which will be expanded a little later under the heading of Obsignation.¹⁰⁵ For the present, it will suffice to note that Owen writes:

What great and glorious words do we speak in the covenant,—that God gives himself over to us, to be our God! Brethren, there is *our giving ourselves unto God* (to answer this) universally and absolutely. If we give ourselves unto the world, and to our lusts, and to the self, we are not to expect any benefit by God's covenant of grace. If it be not made up by our *sealing* of the covenant of grace, or by a universal resignation of ourselves, in all that we are and do, unto him, we do not meet Jesus Christ; we disappoint him when he comes to seal the covenant. ‘Where are my people,’ saith Christ, ‘that would enter into covenant with me?’ Let it be in our hearts to see him seal the covenant of grace as represented in this

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., IX, 575.

¹⁰⁵ This might seem confusing at this stage, however, it must be remembered that because humanity is under the covenant of works, they are odious to God. The sacrament is an ordinance which is designed by Christ's command to bring to memory the suffering and death of Christ. It is in the remembrance of this event for the individual person that the covenant of grace is mutually contracted between God and the elect person. This is needed to be continually reconfirmed because the believer continually breaks the obligations of the covenant. This will be again taken up under the heading of obsignation below.

ordinance; and take upon ourselves the performance of what is required of us, by a universal giving up of ourselves unto God.¹⁰⁶

God's promises are not sealed by the ordinance unless they are received by faith. We need to note, however, that it is not only by receiving *in faith* that the covenant is sealed, for the covenant must also be expressed *by obedience* in a godly life. This is one of the first indications that the doctrine of the real presence is really alien to Owen's sacramental theology. When God comes to the believer, in short, and does not see the fruits of the covenant of grace in action, there is no "sealing" on God's part; since there is no sealing, there is then no sacramental divine self-giving because God has been disappointed by the lives of the people concerned. Attention is thus focused on the religious quality of the life of the communicant rather than on what is, in theologies of the real presence, objectively communicated in the sacrament. We shall have opportunity to develop this idea more fully in what follows.

It is not the real presence of Christ, but the benefits of the covenant of grace, namely, justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification, that are "obsignated," as Owen puts it, and sealed in the ordinance to those (and those only) who are worthy partakers. This is what it means, in Owen's theology, for a person to receive what the sacrament signifies. Owen says in this respect that those who are to meet Christ in the Lord's Supper must come with a lively and active faith.¹⁰⁷ The great act on believers' part, indeed, is the receiving of Christ. It is not enough, however, that God has exhibited him as the answer to sin and judgment, or as the substance of the gospel's promises. If the communicant does not receive Christ by faith and obedience, then that person comes short of

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Works XVI*, 530.

the mercy and grace that is designed to be communicated in the sacrament, and the offer of grace by God is of no value or profit. Owen thus says that the sacrament is otherwise only a bare representation.¹⁰⁸ Faith, however, accepts the genuine offer of Jesus from God the Father.

On one level, Owen's theology appears to be highly subjective; over against theologies emphasizing the objectivity of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, on the grounds that underlying it is the Word and promise of God, Owen emphasizes the human response of faith and obedience. However, in fairness, it must not be assumed that Owen supposes that believers must conjure up within themselves this lively and active faith. We must go to his Hebrews commentary to find his response to this particular misperception. We know already that Owen is hostile to anything that smacks of the "Arminian" error, but in his commentary on Hebrews, he writes explicitly that, "there is nothing that can be thought or supposed to be such a condition, but it is comprehended in the promise of the covenant itself; for all that God requireth in us is proposed as that which himself will effect by virtue of this covenant."¹⁰⁹ What Owen means is simply that when God calls the elect, they must respond by the very faith that he has given them as a gift. He adds further, "...it is certain, that in the *outward dispensation of the* covenant, wherein the grace, mercy, and the terms proposed unto us, many things are required of us in order unto a participation of the benefits of it."¹¹⁰ By the death of Jesus Christ, undoubtedly, Owen's view is that all the grace and mercy that are in the heart of God and in the covenant are available for the elect, and to receive him is to receive the benefits of the covenant. How-

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 531.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., XXII, 136.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

ever, as he also puts it, there are “many things required of us in order unto a participation of the benefits of it.” I have suggested already that this is evidence that the covenant of grace is only the covenant of works in disguise. The obligations of this covenant, indeed, are so stringent that unless the believer fulfils the “terms proposed,” then the person concerned cannot be the elect and therefore, receives nothing from the sacrament. The most important feature of the sacrament, indeed, in Owen’s theology is its use as a constant goad to keep the elect within the terms of the covenant.

In Federal theology, God aimed at glorifying himself in establishing the covenant. God received glory first by confirming the covenant, and because every covenant is confirmed by blood, the promises made to Abraham needed the shedding of blood for confirmation; this was done in the death of Jesus Christ as represented in the ordinance.¹¹¹ Thus the covenant of grace was promised to Abraham, but only ratified in the death of Christ. The ordinance of the Lord’s Supper is, for Owen, precisely the re-enactment of this covenant ratification, and thus the covenant is the foundation for Owen’s sacramental theology.

The Ordinance of the Lord’s Supper

That the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was important for Owen is, of course, not in any way questionable. Throughout his *Discourses*, Owen leaves no doubt that the Lord’s Supper is vitally important, that it has a unique significance, and that this uniqueness is related to the sacramental elements and our actions in relation to them. On more

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, IX, 526.

than a few occasions, Owen points out that the uniqueness of the ordinance is the result of Christ's "tender" (itself a contractual term) to the believer, and that this particular tender of Jesus is not exactly the same as what happens in the preaching of the gospel. He writes in discourse VII that the Father is tendering his Son in the gospel, but that in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, Christ tenders himself to every believer. Again, in discourse XIV, Owen sets out to explain what is exhibited in the sacrament, but he begins by suggesting that because our faith is in constant need of direction and guidance, it would be to our advantage to "consider Jesus Christ present among us, *by his Spirit and by his word*, making this tender or this exhibition unto us."¹¹²

In discourse XIII, Owen outlines basic instructions to his congregation concerning the Lord's Supper. First he observes that the Lord's Supper is an ordinance appointed by Christ, and that as such, it rests upon the authority of God. As coming by command from the King and Head of the church, therefore, there is a duty attached to the Lord's Supper, and that is obedience in attending. He writes: "If you would have your performance of it an act of obedience, acceptable to God, you must get your conscience influenced with the authority of Christ, that we can give this reason in the presence of God ... it is part of our reasonable service."¹¹³

Furthermore, Owen highlights the love of Christ in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, reminding his hearers that it was "in the night in which he was betrayed" that Jesus instituted the sacrament. Owen suggests that there were probably many other things on his mind, but that he gave the particular command to observe this ordinance out of his

¹¹² *Ibid.*, IX, 589.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 584.

love for the elect. So he invites his congregation to stir up their love for Christ because of Christ's love to them, in order that in this way there can be true communion with Christ in the ordinance, according to Christ's own purpose. He writes:

O let us labour for this in particular, if possible, that through the power of the Spirit of God, we may have some impressions of the love of Christ on our hearts! Brethren, if we have not brought it with us, if we do not yet find it in us, I pray let us be careful to endeavour that we do not go away without it.¹¹⁴

The importance Owen attaches to the Lord's Supper, then, should not be doubted—even if scholarship on Owen's theology, on the whole, has not given the theme the attention it merits. In order to better understand Owen's sacramental theology, therefore, it will be best to discuss it at greater length under five main headings taken from his theology: first, preparation; second, representation; third, exhibition; fourth, oblation; and fifth, faith.

(i) Preparation

“Preparation” in Owen's treatment of the Lord's Supper is a duty which the participant must attend to in order to benefit from or to have any advantage in receiving the sacramental elements of bread and wine.¹¹⁵ Owen argues that the need to prepare for the Lord's Supper in this way is clear from 1 Cor. 11:28: “Let every man examine himself, and so let him eat...” Preparation is necessary, indeed, even for the celebration of solemn worship, and so not only for the Lord's Supper but also to meet with God in general.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Tom Webster argues that one of the distinguishing marks of Puritan Eucharistic theology is their emphasis on preparation. See Tom Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement c. 1620-1643* (Edinburgh: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 122ff.

Owen finds grounds for this in Gen. 35:1-5, where Jacob tells his family to get rid of their idols and clean their clothes before moving to Bethel and sacrificing to God there; similar actions are said to be taken before the giving of the Ten Commandments.¹¹⁶ Preparation for worship is, in short, a mark of respect for God.¹¹⁷

On account of the idea that this same God is the author of the sacramental ordinance by which believers can come close to him, there must for Owen be a real sense of the authority of God surrounding the sacrament—a sense that there is a command of God to worship and to show forth the death of Christ in this way. God the author, furthermore, has also promised to attach his presence to the ordinance. Thus, we are to acknowledge the presence of God, not only in the sense of his omnipresence, but as Owen argues, in the sense of a special presence of God in his ordinances and institutions, that is, in the church and sacraments. Based on the biblical precedent of God displaying his presence in the Temple and in the burning bush, Owen argues that when God establishes a divine ordinance or practice, his presence can be attached to it.¹¹⁸ In addition to his presence, Owen underscores the idea that it is the holiness of God, the purity of his divine nature which can bear no corruption or defiled thing, which requires the elect to prepare themselves for worship and celebration of the ordinances. Because God is the end of the ordinances, everything is designed to give glory to him. Glorifying God is expressed as complete dependence upon him as Father and a submission to him as Master and Lord.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ It is noteworthy that both of these occasions noted are examples of the people fulfilling the obligation to a covenant. Jacob had promised (covenanted with God for protection) to come back to Bethel if God would keep him safe in his journey. Likewise, the Israelites were worshipping God at the Holy Mountain to receive the covenant obligations for their escape and release from slavery.

¹¹⁷ *Works IX*, 547.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 549.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 550.

There is also a personal preparation which the believer must exercise in coming to the ordinance. In particular, the hearts of believers must be free from iniquity. What Owen means by this is that they must not be harbouring any “idols” in their hearts, anything that can come between themselves and obedience to the one true God; this kind of preparation comes about through a sense of self-abasement.¹²⁰ Preparation acknowledges the horrible guilt and provocation that sin is, while the guilt of sin is represented in the price paid for it in the cross of Christ. The death of Christ ought to impress upon the believer the grossness of sin, and this is something to which the ordinance points. But it also highlights the purity, holiness and the severity of God. For this reason, Owen says that a believer must develop an habitual mourning in his or her frame of mind. By this he suggests that worldly security and carnal joys are the opposite of the mourning frame of spirit that ought to be the consistent character of a Christian.¹²¹ Furthermore, there must be repentance over actual, individual sins, in addition to this habitual frame of mind. If we intend any communion with God in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, therefore, then we must call ourselves to strict account about our sins. Owen writes: “Let us not be afraid to look into the book of conscience and conversation, to look over our surprisals, our neglects, our sinful failings and miscarriages.”¹²² There must be an understanding of the transcendence of God, the infinite distance between God and humanity. And preparation includes a heart filled with love for the ordinances. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts. My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Ibid., 551.

¹²¹ Ibid., 561.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Psalm 84.

The importance of preparation is thus a matter of great concern to Owen. He writes: “I am greatly afraid of customariness in this matter.”¹²⁴ In this regard, people often complain that they are not refreshed by God in observing the ordinances, in response to which he suggests that it is because they have come without what he calls the “wedding garment” of preparation.¹²⁵ The extent to which Owen is preoccupied with the matter can be seen in the fact that it is not only required of believers to wear the garment that has been given to them, but they must be “decked” with it. In other words, Owen says that we have to add to that which has been given, we are to stir up all the graces God has bestowed upon us, that we may be decked for Christ.

(ii) Representation

“Representation” is, I wish to suggest, one of the two ideas which Owen promotes as an effective solution to the vexing problem of the real presence of Christ in his time. The other is exhibition, which we will examine shortly. Representation, for its part, is an acknowledgement that the sacrament does figure the body and blood of Christ, and as such it cannot be disregarded. In the ordinance, Christ himself comes to the believer to offer himself in the figure of bread and wine, and so in it, Owen writes, Jesus gently offers himself as the one who has made an end of sin in his sacrifice and death.¹²⁶

However, it is not only that Jesus is represented as the one who made an end of sin. The ordinance presents Jesus as the legal substitute for the judgment that sin incurs.

¹²⁴ *Works IX*, 554.

¹²⁵ Reference is made here to Matthew 22, where Jesus tells the parable about the wedding feast, where the invited guests did not come because of other engagements. Finally the servants went into the streets and alleys to find people to come. The hall was filled and the King notices someone without a wedding garment. Owen takes this to mean that in addition to the invitation of God—his gift of faith—the person must add to and fulfill the terms of the covenant. This includes, primarily, living the godly life for Owen.

¹²⁶ *Works XVI*, 530.

This theme connects with Owen's covenant theology very obviously. The demand of perfect obedience established in the covenant of works with the punishment of death for failure, in short, is explicitly represented in the ordinance. Owen makes use of Romans 3:25-26, where St. Paul says that God set forth Jesus as the propitiation through faith in his blood. In the broken bread, Jesus is displayed before our eyes as the one on whom the curse of God was placed.¹²⁷ In this representation, then, we are for Owen made aware of the justice of God. God the Father imputed all the sins of the elect to Jesus, making him the sin offering. Thus, the righteousness of the Father could be maintained in spite of the sins of the elect.

Although Owen says that Christ is displayed in the ordinance, however, this is not to be confused with an endorsement of the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The *Savoy Declaration* makes it very clear that the grace of God comes only through the preaching of the Gospel. God offers Christ to the elect by the Word, which means by the ministry of the Word.¹²⁸ Preaching is seen as the most important of the means appointed by God to bring humanity out of bondage to sin, and it further calls together those who are to be the people of God. The essential elements of the sermon are law and gospel; the law is used to bring the sinner to conviction of their guilt before God, and the gospel is used to bring comfort those who believe in the promises of God.¹²⁹ That being said, however, there is a special representation of this same message in the sacrament of the Lord's

¹²⁷ *Works IX*, 594.

¹²⁸ In discourse XIII, Owen says that, "We have no image of Christ but *the word*." *Works XIII*, 585.

¹²⁹ Watkins, *The Puritan Experience*, 5-9. See further David Zaret, *The Heavenly Contract* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 61ff; Tom Webster quotes William Perkins, "a sacrament is not absolutely necessary [to salvation], but only as it is a prope and stay for faith to leane on." Webster, *Godly Clergy*, 113. Perkins is a little earlier than Owen but stands in the same tradition.

Supper, and Owen acknowledges this.¹³⁰ But Owen says that here, God represents Christ to our faith. The sinful human tendency is to attempt to by-pass the offer of grace by God in Christ. Owen argues that this is why the church from time to time came to represent Christ in artistic images of the cross, of the resurrection, or of the ascension, all of which are attempts to represent Christ to the fancy or the affections and are, therefore, not (as we might put it) theologically “real.” How does God, then, for Owen, represent Christ to the faith of the elect?

Owen argues, of course, that God represents Christ to the soul or faith of the elect.¹³¹ As the sacramental elements are blessed, broken and received, God displays his Son to faith as propitiation for the sins of the elect.¹³² In the visual breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine, God represents the passion of Christ to believers. Through these means, indeed, God reminds his people that the nature of Christ's death was violent. Because of this violence, the representation of Christ is not to their fancy, and precisely thus, it is food for their faith and soul. These elements are fitting to express the invitation of Christ's offer of salvation, but unless there is an acceptance of the tender of Christ there is no benefit by them. So in the ordinance God prepares the feast and the believer is asked to receive Christ, and in this way he is represented to their souls.¹³³

¹³⁰ *Works IX*, 595.

¹³¹ “The leading, conducting faculty of the soul is the *mind* or understanding.” *Works III*, 330.

¹³² Romans 3:25.

¹³³ Owen mentions that there is also a representation by eating of the elements. He says that as food becomes part of our body so the elements also become part of our body. He does not elaborate on this point and there is good reason for this. Because there is no real presence it is difficult to really understand what he means by this, “... the allusion whereto, from the nature of the elements' incorporation with us, and being the strength of our lives, might easily be pursued.” *Works IX*, 541; In Discourse X Owen writes: “We receive our food that it may incorporate and turn into blood and spirits,—that it may become one with us; and when we have so done—our end and design is, that we may be nourished, nature strengthened, comforted, and supported, and we enabled for the duties of life.” *Works IX*, 574.

There is one other idea which is important in understanding Owen's thinking on representation, and that is the active work of Christ that continues in the present within and among the elect. One of the reasons for the repetition of the sacrament is to bring to mind that Jesus continues to carry out the work of atonement. He is constantly presenting himself to the Father as the one who mediates between the covenants. So the sacrament as a reoccurring ordinance is designed by God to represent this double work of mediation, first on the cross and then also presently before the Father.¹³⁴ This work of mediation before the Father presently gives believers assurance and makes them confident in the mercy, peace and love of God toward them.

(iii) Exhibition

God also "exhibits" Jesus Christ in the promises of the gospel. Already in the Old Testament the nature of the promises was expressed through the imagery of eating and drinking.¹³⁵ So also in the New Testament, God exhibits in the sacrament the fact that he has provided Jesus Christ as spiritual food and drink for the souls of the elect. In relation to all the promises made in the gospel, God exhibits Jesus here as the answer to, or as the fulfilment of, those promises. This claim, however, does not lead Owen to a realist view of the presence of Christ in the elements. He acknowledges that the bread and wine are not *naked figures*, and stresses that the broken bread and the outpoured wine are representations of the broken body and the pouring out of Christ's soul unto death for the elect. But, Owen contends, a real exhibition of Christ does not consist in any sense in transforming the bread and wine in any sense into the literal body and blood of Christ.

¹³⁴ *Works* XVI, 528.

¹³⁵ Isaiah 55:1-3.

Because the soul is spiritual and mental, there is no need in Owen's thought for any local presence in the elements. Instead, Christ is exhibited to our faith.¹³⁶

The exhibition and “tender” of Christ in this ordinance is different from the tender of the gospel. It is the offer of Christ, as it were, “newly sacrificed.” Owen writes that here, “he [Christ] is a new and fresh sacrifice in the great work of reconciling, making peace with God, making an end of sin, doing all that was to be done between God and sinners, that they might be at peace.”¹³⁷

In discourse XIV, Owen presents his most definite explanation of the sense in which Christ is present in the ordinance. There he instructs his congregation and reader that Christ is present by his Word and Spirit. This, of course, is rather standard understanding, so that the question becomes, how does Owen understand this presence by Word and Spirit? First, he insists that Christ does *not* give the elect his flesh and blood, and so that in the exhibition of Christ in the meal, there is no real eating of his flesh and blood. What he suggests is that Jesus really does exhibit himself in his office as priest, with the implication that the elect receive the benefits of his sacrificial death. The benefits of his atoning death, in fact, rather than the body and blood as such, are what Owen claims to be exhibited and offered to the believer. Jesus Christ is, of course, exhibited to the believer in many different ways in the scriptures, as wisdom, righteousness, sanctifi-

¹³⁶ *Works IX*, 573.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 564; This point could also be mentioned under the heading of oblation. Oblation is the confirming of the covenant by the shedding of blood. Here, Owen suggests that the covenant is sealed with his blood each time the sacrament is administered. In his work on the Holy Spirit, Owen writes something important that should be noted in its entirety, “the blood of Christ in his sacrifice is still always and continually in the same *condition*, of the same force and efficacy, as it was in that hour wherein it was shed. The blood of other sacrifices was always to be used immediately upon its effusion; for if it were cold and congealed it was of no use to be offered or to be sprinkled. Blood was appointed to make atonement, as the life or animal spirits were in it, Lev. xvii. 11. But the blood of the sacrifice of Christ is always hot and warm, having the same spirits of life and sanctification still moving in it ... always living, and yet always as newly slain.” *Works III*, 440.

cation, and so on. However, in relation to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Owen writes:

Christ in this ordinance makes such a representation of himself, as bleeding for us, making atonement for our sins, and sealing the everlasting covenant: and he proposes himself unto us with all the benefits of his death, of that redemption he wrought out for us, – peace with God, making an end of sin, bringing in everlasting righteousness, and the like.¹³⁸

It is not the flesh and blood of Christ that are given, therefore, so much as it is that Christ is exhibited as the one who actually accomplished the great work of propitiation. He does not offer himself as the one who *can or will* propitiate, but as the one who *has* done so by his death. By submitting in faith to his authority in the ordinance, Owen says, the believer is made a partaker of him in the sacramental exhibition.¹³⁹

(iv) Obsignation

Christ is present in the ordinance also by way of “obsignation,” according to Owen, by which he means that Christ comes to seal the covenant to the elect.¹⁴⁰ No covenant was ever made that was not sealed by blood, and so, Owen says, Christ in this ordinance confirms the covenant with his blood.¹⁴¹ In this way, believers can be confident that the mercy and grace of God are extended to them. It was God's act to place their sin on Christ by imputation, and it is also his act of imputation which places his righteousness on

¹³⁸ *Works IX*, 590.

¹³⁹ That there is an exhibition of Christ in the sacrament as Owen contends is difficult to support if there is no real presence. To offer to his congregation some sense of the “realness” of the exhibition of Christ he writes that faith takes the elements and changes them into spiritual habits. So the elect know for certain that they have received the real exhibition of Christ when they see in their lives “an increase and quickening of vital principles, there is growth, and there is satisfaction, in receiving suitable food and nourishment.” *Works XIV*, 592.

¹⁴⁰ David Zaret underscores this point and marks it out as one of the unique characteristics of the Puritan ministry.

“Puritan covenant theology described the Lord's Supper as a visible sign and seal of the heavenly contract,” and this “precluded any conception of Christ's corporeal presence in the Lord's Supper.” Zaret, *The Heavenly Contract*, 143.

¹⁴¹ *Works IX*, 574.

them.¹⁴² The ordinance is an opportunity, and even a duty, whereby the elect are called to understand and embrace this act of God on their behalf. They are thus to apply the benefits and advantages of this great “commutation” to their souls. How are they to do so? Through contemplation and by acts of faith, they mutually seal the covenant in this ordinance. In the ordinance, the elect are called upon to embrace the work of God. As they think about and contemplate these acts of God on their behalf, they are sealing the covenant on their part; in effect they are accepting the verdict of God. Owen says in this regard that, “if we were able to say Amen to this great truth, we should have the comfort of it in our souls, – to acquiesce in it, to find power and reality in it.”¹⁴³

There is also another act of God which happens in this ordinance. This was alluded to earlier in connection with receiving the bread and wine as requiring and as reinforcing virtuous habits in the life of the believer; that is, the Lord’s Supper has the effect of planting righteousness in the elect. The sealing of the covenant, in short, implies that there is a covenantal agreement that the believer must walk in a manner worthy of God. It also involves the idea that the believer must be “made conformable unto his death.” Owen says that the believer is to be conformable in two ways: in an internal (moral) way and in an external (observable) way. Taking his cue from Christ, Owen says that the conforming must be from the cause of the death of Christ which was sin; the means of dealing

¹⁴² Owen writes that the believers response to this great exchange should be “to stir up our hearts from under their deadness—to gather them in from their wanderings, to make us sensible of our concern, to give us the acting of faith in this matter, that truly and really the holy God has laid all our iniquities upon Christ, and tenders to us life, righteousness, justification, and mercy by him—we shall then have the fruit of this administration.” *Ibid.*, 599.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

with sin was suffering, and therefore the elect's conforming must exhibit these two characteristics of death to sin and suffering.¹⁴⁴ We can explore each of these briefly.

The cause of Christ's death, as Owen sees things, was our sin, or more strictly, the sins of the elect. The question, however, is how it can be that the elect be conformed to his death. Owen maintains that this can only be done by their no longer living in the lust of the flesh or in the will of men.¹⁴⁵ Owen actually maintains that the seeming believer who does not conform to the death of Christ, by not surrendering the will to the will of God, is to be compared to the murderer of Christ (presumably Judas Iscariot) at the Supper. He writes:

...to harbour with us, and bring along with us the to the death of Christ, unmortified lusts and corruptions, such as we do not continually and sincerely endeavour to kill and mortify, is to come and upbraid Christ with his murderer, instead of obtaining any spiritual advantage.¹⁴⁶

To be truly conformed to his death, furthermore, the elect must show evidence of conformity externally, or by godly living. It is interesting that Owen stresses here, not the stereotypical Puritan talk of worldly success by hard work and thrift, but the fact that Christ has left us an example, an example which entails in particular that the believer must suffer when called to do so. He writes that, "Our unwillingness to suffer like unto Christ arises from some unmortified corruption in our hearts, which we have not endeavoured to subdue, that we may be like unto Christ in the mortification and death of sin."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 579.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 580.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

There are, according to Owen, four ways that the elect can be conformed to Christ in his suffering that can briefly be enumerated. First, to suffer as a Christian is to suffer for Christ specifically, rather than to embrace suffering in general. Second, the elect must suffer in the strength of Christ. As all other graces are derived from Christ, who is their head and root, stock and foundation, so also, that grace which enables them to suffer for Christ must be from him. Third, they are to suffer in imitation of Christ, and this means, cheerfully and willingly. Fourth, they are to suffer for the sake of the glory of Christ. Owen warns that if these things are not in evidence in the lives of the elect, then they do not remember Christ's death in a right manner, and therefore, they are not "sealed" by the ordinance.¹⁴⁸

According to Owen, there is no better doctrine to teach the mortification of sin than that of the Lord's Supper, rightly understood, in which we see the broken bread and poured out wine. He writes, "He that hath not learned this, never learned anything aright from this ordinance, nor did he ever receive any benefit from it."¹⁴⁹ There is something which the ordinance conveys, however, which by God's action has the ability to bring mortification to the sinner. Meeting there at the death of Christ, believers encounter their duty to "engage themselves unto God." Owen adds, "I would beg of you all, brethren, that not one of us would pass through or go over this ordinance, this representation of the death of Christ, without a fresh obligation to God to abide more constant and vigorous in the mortification of sin."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 581.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 582.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

(v) Faith

The role of “faith,” of course, is evident throughout, but Owen’s *Lesser Catechism* gives a good indication of precisely what Owen thought faith was, or of how it is to be defined. He says in it that faith is “an assured resting of the soul upon God’s promises of mercy in Jesus Christ, for pardon for sins here and glory hereafter.”¹⁵¹ Where does one get this lively faith, Owen asks in the next question. He answers that it comes by the “effectual working of the Spirit of God,” which is a call not able to be resisted and effectively transposes us from being children of wrath to becoming the children of God.¹⁵² He expands this definition in the *Greater Catechism*, where he adds, in a footnote, that “faith is in the understanding, in respect of its being and subsistence,—in the will and heart, in respect of its effectual working.”¹⁵³ So, we know from his catechetical works that faith comes from the work of the Holy Spirit within the heart of the believer; and further, we see that faith is something existing within the mind, or inner self (understanding, heart and will are all mentioned) of the believer. Or again, we may say simply that faith is a seed planted by the Holy Spirit within the heart of the believer, and that this effectual work of the Holy Spirit comes about through the preaching of the Word.¹⁵⁴

In his Lord’s Supper discourses, Owen constantly makes reference to the object of faith and to the response that faith must make to be authentic. Owen believed that there are those people who possess only what he called “historical faith,” or “temporary faith.” By historical faith he appears to have meant that the individual in question has acknowledged that God’s Word is true, but that this in and of itself is not authentic faith (authentic

¹⁵¹ *Works* I, 468.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 486.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

faith requiring further response). Temporary faith, for its part, is that faith by which a person has some measure of the joy which comes from being united with Christ, but that has no lasting power.

Owen speaks about the object of faith as that point to which believers' understanding must always be directed. To turn their eyes away, even for a moment, would be an indication of merely historical or temporary faith, both which must be avoided if a person is to be qualified as the elect of God, as those included in the covenant. The object of faith has two degrees, furthermore. The primary focus of faith is the truth of God's Word and the promises which he makes in that Word. But there is also a more defined object, in Owen's estimation, and that is the suffering and death of Christ.¹⁵⁵ Precisely this, Owen says, is the purpose for the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, to clearly display before the eyes of the elect the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. But what specifically in the ordinance does Owen want their understanding turned toward?

Owen has a number of things in mind as objects of faith in the Lord's Supper. The human nature of Christ, for instance, must be an object of faith because it is through his human nature that the believer is saved. More specifically in this connection, he insists that the believer must grasp that it is the body and blood of Christ that has saved us, and particularly the body and blood (as he puts it) "separated." Here Owen takes particular notice of the Old Testament sacrifices where the animal was violently killed and the blood poured out and the body burned with fire. Jesus Christ also had his blood poured out and his body was bruised and beaten. Owen also wants to make sure that the ultimate object of faith is the person of Christ, but in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, what is

¹⁵⁵ *Works* XVI, 527.

required is that believers have Christ in his broken body and shed blood as object of faith, since it is through these that they participate in Christ.¹⁵⁶

The question might be asked how it is that faith participates in Christ in the Supper. Again, Owen parses out the matter in his answer: Christ is received both sacramentally and spiritually. Surprisingly, however, Owen argues that to receive Christ sacramentally is not linked to partaking of the elements. Participating in the eating of bread and the drinking of wine is only a small aspect of the wider question of sacramental participation in Christ, which evidently has as its focus the varied factors to which we have been drawing attention. He writes that, “it doth not consist (as some have thought) *in partaking of the elements*; that is but one part of it, and but one small part. Our sacramental reception consists in the due observation of the whole order of the institution according to the mind of Christ.”¹⁵⁷

However, believers also receive him spiritually, and this, Owen says, takes a “*special act of faith*.”¹⁵⁸ Faith, Owen argues, has various degrees, various degrees which give the believer various receptions of Christ. Through the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, the act of faith is connected to a sensible experience of Christ in the soul. Thus, it could be argued, Owen suggests that the soul eats the body and drinks the blood of Christ, and this by a special act of faith.¹⁵⁹ What he means by this “sensible experience” is the mind’s ability to actually believe that the bread and wine are actually the body and blood of Christ. Thus he has transferred the mystical experience of the sacrament to a rational experience of the sacrament. And for this he scolds the Roman Catholic Church for

¹⁵⁶ *Works IX*, 525.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 591.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ It might be important at this point to remember that Owen equates the soul with the mind.

giving birth to the idea of transubstantiation because they could not through their minds (faith) rationally eat and drink from the body and blood of Christ.¹⁶⁰

The special act of faith which Owen speaks about brings Christ close to the believers' soul in the sacrament. What is the faith which unites the believer spiritually for Owen? He writes:

The great work of faith is to make things which are absent, present to the soul, in regard to their sweetness, power and efficacy; whence it is said to be "the evidence of things not seen:" and it looks backward unto the causes of things, and looks forward unto the effects of things,—to what hath wrought out grace and to what grace is wrought out; and makes them, in their efficacy, comfort, and power, to meet and centre in the believing soul.¹⁶¹

He adds in this context that faith does not gain confidence merely on the basis of the reality of the impression thus made on the soul, but it is satisfied by the experience nevertheless.¹⁶² This experience is described as an experience of incorporation, of being part of the body of Christ.¹⁶³ This incorporation is not on account of the fact that the believer has physically eaten the body and blood of Christ, but only on account of an experience which is aroused in the soul, and which exists by faith rather than by sight.¹⁶⁴ This experience, then, takes the ordinance and applies it to the heart so as to generate spiritual and

¹⁶⁰ *Works IX*, 591. Kopic, *Communion with God*, 223, argues the exact opposite. He writes that faith increases the mystery of the Lord's Supper as opposed to transubstantiation. What he fails to consider is the role Owen has for reason and the mind, particularly as this is the vehicle of faith.

¹⁶¹ *Works IX*, 530.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 591.

¹⁶³ Much could be said at this point about being re-created into the image of God. But suffice it to say, Owen insists that the union of the believer with Christ is that at conversion the believer is given the Holy Spirit, which in turn makes the believer act like Jesus.

¹⁶⁴ Owen writes, "In a word, we are *so to believe it as to put our trust for life and salvation* in those things that we call to remembrance. *Trust and confidence belong to the essence of saving faith*. . . . If God help us afresh to receive the atonement at this time, we have discharged our duty in this ordinance; for here if the atonement proposed, from the love of God, and from the love of Christ, by virtue of the compact between the Father and the Son, through the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ, in his whole person, soul and body. Here is an atonement proposed unto us: the working of faith is to receive it, or to believe it *so as to approve of it* as an excellent way, full of wisdom, goodness, holiness; to embrace it, and trust in it." *Works IX*, 588.

moral benefits. Owen writes that three things come from this incorporation, “an increase and quickening of vital principles, there is growth, and there is satisfaction.”¹⁶⁵ That is to say, incorporation into Christ is something proved in religious experience and by godly habits.

Summary and Conclusion

Owen was concerned that the Lord’s Supper be celebrated at least once a week “or at least as often as opportunity and conveniency may be obtained.”¹⁶⁶ He insists this because he argues that “we have in no other ordinance” the same communion enjoyed with Jesus Christ as is found in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁶⁷ We have argued that Owen understands the Lord’s Supper as a covenant meal, whereby the elect renew their vows of faithful and godly living. Owen’s insistence that the Lord’s Supper is a communion with Christ must be understood in this light. Communion with God is not natural, and it must be voluntary; thus it cannot be a state or conditions, but must be something expressed in actions.¹⁶⁸ The infinite distance between God and humanity can only be bridged in the death of Christ. Jesus Christ is that bridge, and he is the foundation and conduit through which communion with God is possible. “Our communion, then, with consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹⁶⁶ *Works XV*, 512

¹⁶⁷ *Works IX*, 620

¹⁶⁸ *Works I*, 8

of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him”¹⁶⁹

Communion, therefore, is the essence of the Lord’s Supper for Owen. Communion involves a give and a take between two parties. That there is this possibility for communion between God and humanity is beyond comprehension for Owen, and yet, God has made it possible through the covenant of the mediator, in which is God (the Son) becomes human (in Jesus Christ). Thus, humanity has the possibility to commune with God through the person and work of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. The Lord’s Supper is understood as a transaction that takes place that allows for this communion to be sustained. It is for this reason that the Lord’s Supper is so important for Owen. A few remarks will further clarify the sense of this.

In the first Chapter it was suggested that Owen did his theology against the background of Arminianism and Socinianism, but more importantly against the background of developments in the Church of England involving the work of Archbishop Laud particularly. Tyacke has identified the doctrine of grace to be at the heart of the Arminian controversy, and thus the problem perceived with the Church of England, which was accused, by the Puritans, of falling into the Arminian heresy. The sacraments, for Owen, are not the means by which God dispenses his grace, since this happens only through the preached word. The sacraments, as we have seen, are tools by which the elect are kept in the path of grace. The Savoy Declaration made it very clear that the grace of God is dispensed through the preaching of the Word of God alone. Laud, it might be remembered,

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

held instead that the sermon was for instruction, and therefore was not properly to be considered under the rubric of worship.

The form and meaning of worship was also a point of contention between the Church of England and the Puritans. Worship for the Puritans was primarily about the nurture of personal piety, and personal piety was in turn the measure by which the elect were admitted into the church. Worship, for the Puritans, was therefore properly the activity of an exclusive community of those who could attest to a regenerate state. It is obvious, then, that in Puritanism God's grace was restricted to the few and the chosen. For Laud and the established church, by contrast, worship was about the observances of the institution, rather than something centred around personal piety. Thus, the liturgy, the sacraments, and public prayers were the means for the dispersion of God's grace, and accordingly constituted the bulk of worship for the established church.

Owen, as has been discovered, held that the sacraments brought the communicant to the place of recognizing and contemplating the justice of God against sin, and that through the sacrament, the elect are brought to the place where the atonement is personally actualized or appropriated, to the place where they can come to know that they are in fact members of the covenant of grace and that they do not stand under condemnation in terms of the covenant of works. The sacrament is therefore, in a manner of speaking, a visual tool whereby the elect can apprehend that there is saving merit—for them personally—in the work of Christ. The exercise of faith, indeed, is the exact measure of the believer's understanding of the merit of Christ's work. God's grace is restricted to those who have a deep sense of their sin and to those who have been admitted to the gathered church.

It was suggested in the first Chapter that one of the theological paradigms through which one must approach Owen is the covenant, and this has been borne out in what has been argued concerning the Lord's Supper. The covenant of grace is the covenant whereby the elect are united with Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper, then, is a celebration for believers that first, the conditions of the covenant of works have been fulfilled, and second, that believers are united to Jesus Christ and so enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace. This explains the immense role that faith plays in Owen's theology. The covenant of works sets the stage for the celebration of the Lord's Supper in his thought. This cannot be underscored enough, and yet it is this dimension of his thought which is often neglected by those who have argued that Owen follows the sacramental theology of Calvin. This claim will be examined in the next Chapter, where it will be maintained by way of contrast with Owen that union with Christ is the paradigm through which Calvin addresses the theology of Lord's Supper.

Federal theology, in effect, is restrictive of the grace of God, and this restriction on grace is characteristic of Owen's sacramental theology. Grace, for Owen, is restricted to those who are admitted to the gathered church; it is restricted to those who have a deep and deepening sense of their sin and unworthiness; it is restricted to those who can exercise faith (without which the Supper is bare representation); it is restricted to those who have that form of personal piety which is measured in the lives of the elect. This point is lost on those who argue that Owen follows Calvin. In examining the sacramental discourses, we can admit that Owen on occasion suggests things similar to Calvin, or to what one could imagine Calvin saying. One example of this might be where Owen says that the Lord's Supper is "an holy action" that "communicate[s] unto us spiritually his body and

blood by faith.”¹⁷⁰ We can imagine Calvin saying the same thing, and in fact, Calvin says, that “the souls of the faithful” are fed “with the body and blood of the Lord.”¹⁷¹ Wherein lays the difference between the two? The difference lies first of all in the audience to whom Owen and Calvin address their views of the sacrament. For Owen the sacrament is restricted to those who are the “godly,” whereas Calvin has in view the right administration of the sacrament to the established church. The difference also lies in what is new in Owen’s theology, which has its root in Federal theology. In Owen, attention is directed to the character of the faith and life of the communicant. In Calvin’s theology, the grace of God is made available to all, so that the faithful will indeed feed on Christ because the Spirit of God will lift them to the presence of Christ.

Kapic, who argues that Owen must be understood as “anthroposensitive,” misses this point. He suggests that Owen tries to hold together the divine action and the human response in fine balance. He writes, “in this sacrament God’s act is primarily to exhibit Christ to his people, and their primary act is to receive him by faith,” and continues, “Christ is present in this sacrament, but without faith the participant does not benefit from that presence.”¹⁷² What he misses is that the understanding of the human response involved here has been defined and so restricted by Owen’s Federal theology. Thus there cannot be any response except by those who have been approved by their life into the fellowship of the gathered church. Owen’s supposedly “anthroposensitive” approach is therefore actually undermined by his Federal theology. Mathison, in suggesting that “there is still a strong Calvinistic emphasis in Owen’s writings,” raises the question

¹⁷⁰ *Works* 1, 491

¹⁷¹ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 173

¹⁷² Kapic, *Communion with God*, 227

“whether Owen understands eating as the equivalent of believing or as a consequence of believing,” which shows that Mathison too has missed the importance of Owen’s commitment to Federal theology.¹⁷³ It is quite clear from Owen’s sacramental discourses that eating is a *consequence* of believing. This is underscored by the fact that the discourses are addressed to a gathered church, in which there is no room for the salvific grace of God to flow from anything except the preached Word, so that eating is not the equivalent of believing.

What is distinguishing about Calvin’s sacramental theology is that he argues that in the Lord’s Supper, the believer is lifted into the presence of Christ. Thus it is a theology of ascent. This ascent of the believer is initially founded on the creation of humanity to be in communion with God, and on the importance attached to the work of the Spirit in Calvin’s theology as a whole. What Owen teaches, by contrast, is not a theology of ascent; in fact, it can only be argued that his is a subjective sacramental theology, thoroughly conditioned by his emphasis on the fallenness of the believer and by his whole approach to the working of grace through the covenants. Owen accordingly claims that, by faith, participation in the Lord’s Supper brings the same advantage “as there would have been if we had stood by the cross.”¹⁷⁴ The work of the Holy Spirit is restricted in Owen’s sacramental theology to the recognition of these dynamics in the subjective religious life of the believer. Owen’s stress on the subjective and the spiritual conditions under which the believer can share communion with Christ are, in short, so determined by the need for awareness by the communicant of his or her sinfulness, that, as a result, there is no objec-

¹⁷³ Mathison, *Given for You*, 101

¹⁷⁴ *Works* XVI, 596; in another place he writes that the believer must work their minds and hearts in order to receive the sacrament, he writes, “stirring up our hearts unto the particular acting of faith in Jesus Christ, who herein is lifted up before us.” How do we stir up our faith? Owen writes, “that which we endeavor in this ordinance is, to get a view by faith,—faith working by thoughts, by meditation, acting by love.” *Works* IX, 593

tive offer of the grace of God in the bread and the wine. As we shall see, Calvin's approach—for all his forbidding reputation for supposedly defending such ideas—is actually very different.

Chapter 3: John Calvin's Sacramental Theology

Having examined the Lord's Supper in Owen's theology in the previous Chapter, we now turn to the sacramental theology of John Calvin. It will be important, however, before treating his theology of the Lord's Supper, as such, to develop a better understanding of one of the central unifying motifs in Calvin's entire theology, which also informs his understanding of the Supper: the theme of union with Christ. Whereas in Owen's theology, in short, the central motif is that of covenant, and even the covenant of works as defined in Federal theology, in Calvin we find a central emphasis on union with Christ. What is interesting in that in both theologians, the relationship with Christ is obviously key, whether by the covenant of works as in Owen, or, as we shall see, by virtue of union with Christ in his body and blood as in Calvin. The one expression of union, however, is legal, while the other is, I shall argue, received by faith in a more mystical sense. One theologian holds forth the justice of God as the rule, while the other emphasizes the mercy of God as the means. For though both mercy and justice are spoken of in each of the two theologies, there is a characteristic emphasis in each on one rather than the other, and these emphases are different.

Thus, before examining Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper in detail, in order to compare his treatment to Owen's, we shall need to outline the broad contours of Calvin's understanding of union with Christ through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 21, writes that "The theme of mystical union itself has received some measure of attention in the

For it is this distinctive understanding of the believer's actual participation in Christ which comes to expression in Calvin's theology of the Supper.

Union with God in Christ

Union with God is not only the chief end (*telos*) of humanity — a theme which Calvin shares even with certain versions of Platonism — but he finds room in many other areas of his theology to come back to this idea.¹⁷⁶ In his teaching concerning the law, for instance, Calvin speaks of how the purpose of the Law is that we might cleave to God.¹⁷⁷ When he comes to teach on the question of election, he speaks of it as joining humanity to the Father by “an indissoluble bond.”¹⁷⁸ Taking up 1 John 4:14, Calvin writes: “God is so united to us by faith and love, that he really dwells in us and renders himself in a manner visible by the effect of his power.”¹⁷⁹

It should be noted at this point, so as to avoid confusion, that Calvin taught in connection with this theme of union that the function of Christ as Mediator is precisely to join us to God, and that therefore, such union is in no way a natural potentiality of sinful humanity. Though formerly alienated from God because of sin, we are brought back into

secondary sources, but usually only by way of a denial of a mystical strand in Calvin. For example, in a note on Calvin's use of the term *unio mystica* in *Institutes* 3.11.10, McNeill and Battles quote Wilhelm Niesel's remark that Calvin's notion of union with Christ “has nothing whatever to do with the absorption of the pious mystic into the sphere of the divine being.” While Tamburello accepts that as true, it implies that there is no other way of understanding union with Christ except by “absorption in the divine being.”

¹⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.25.2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.8.51.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.21.7.

¹⁷⁹¹⁷⁹ Calvin's Commentary 1 John 4:14; unless otherwise noted, all references from Calvin's *Commentaries* will be labeled “CTS” are from the Calvin Translation Society series of *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. and trans. John King *et al.* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1856; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

union with God only through Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁰ As such, the kingly office of Christ is to “lead us little by little to affirm union with God.”¹⁸¹ Even salvation comes to us by faith, Calvin writes, “for this reason, because it joins us to God. And this comes not in any other way than by being united to the body of Christ, so that, living through his Spirit, we are also governed by him.”¹⁸²

Being “united to the body of Christ,” as Calvin puts it here, or to use a more common term, being “engrafted into Christ,” also needs to be discussed briefly, not least because Calvin associates these terms with the doctrine of election. The certainty of election is, of course, one of the most challenging aspects of his theology in that the perception of it influences one’s view of the eternal destiny of humanity — thus also the quest for the certainty of individual election in Calvinism. On account of the decree of election being hidden in the counsel of God, however, certainty concerning one’s personal state seems impossible. Yet, Calvin insisted that the certainty of election could indeed be found in Christ who is the pledge and “earnest” of eternal election. The certainty of election, and therefore of salvation, stems from one’s union with Christ which comes about through faith. Calvin argues, in short, that God’s hidden counsel of election is revealed in Jesus Christ through the gift of faith, and that faith engrafts one into the body of Christ as

¹⁸⁰ It is important to note in conjunction with the mediation of Christ to understand that even in the Garden of Eden, Christ, who was symbolized by the tree of life, acted as the visible testimony that in God we live and move and have our being (CTS. Gen 3:22). In speaking about the tree of life he writes: “the tree of life was a figure of Christ, inasmuch as he is the eternal Word of God: it could not indeed be otherwise a symbol of life, than by representing him in figure. Wherefore, by this sign, Adam was admonished, that he could claim nothing for himself as if it were his own, in order that he might depend wholly upon the Son of God, and might not seek life anywhere but in him” (CTS. Gen. 2:9). In complete contrast to this, Owen writes concerning the Mediator “That the persons entering into covenant be in such a state and condition as that it is no way convenient or morally possible that they should treat immediately with each other as to the ends of the covenant; for if they as so, a mediator to go between is altogether needless. So it was in the original covenant with Adam, which had no mediator” (*Works* XXII, 55). What Owen says is that Adam was in a perfect state in the Garden of Eden and because of this perfect state there was no need of a mediator. In contrast to Calvin, Owen suggests that Adam had immortality and life in himself, outside of Christ.

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.5.

¹⁸² CTS. James 2:14.

the Elect one.¹⁸³ It is important to note, then, first that for Calvin, union with Christ presupposes election, and second, that to understand a believer's union with Jesus Christ, it is pivotal to understand election in Calvin's thought.¹⁸⁴ Even very early in his writings, Calvin insists in his first catechism (1538): "Just as all who before the foundation of the world were foreordained to life were chosen in Christ, so it is he in whom the pledge of election is set forth to us. Accordingly, we receive and embrace him in faith."¹⁸⁵

There remains yet one more aspect of the language of union with Christ which we need to address, which we have already encountered and which Calvin uses throughout his work, and that is the idea of the "body" of Christ. In one sense, this is an ecclesiological theme. As election engrafts us into Christ through faith, it follows naturally that election is also the foundation of the church. The church, as the body of Christ (*corpus Christi*), is thus composed of those who are engrafted into Christ, or, to be more precise, of those whom the Spirit by faith engrafts as members into the Church, and this precisely because they have been engrafted into Christ. One of Calvin's favourite images of the church, accordingly, is that of the body with Christ as the head. We see here, however, that the ecclesiological theme has a deeper, Christological basis. "The body, it is true, has its nerves, its joints, and ligaments, but all these things derive their vigor solely from the Head so that the whole binding of them together is from that source."¹⁸⁶ Calvin associates the body with the head so closely, indeed, that he actually argues that the church *completes* the person of Jesus Christ, and that if Christ were separated from the Church, it

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.22.7.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.22.10.

¹⁸⁵ John I. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1997).

¹⁸⁶ CTS Colossians 2:19.

would amount to his incompleteness.¹⁸⁷ How are believers engrafted into the church and consequently into Christ? Ronald Wallace acknowledges the difficulty of understanding what exactly Calvin means by engrafting into the church, because it is not always possible to tell whether he means the glorified or the ecclesial body.¹⁸⁸ Calvin's response is that they have been baptised by one Spirit, and are given continually through the Lord's Supper to drink the life-giving blood of Christ, so that in this way, "we may have life in common with him—which we truly have, when he lives in us by his Spirit."¹⁸⁹

To sum up the discussion thus far, therefore, it should be clear that although Calvin is commonly thought to have embraced an Isaiah-like transcendent otherness of God in his theology, this by no means excludes his ability also to recognize and articulate the relationship between God and the creature, and indeed to speak of the union that God wills, and that God has enacted with humanity, in the person of Jesus Christ. This, furthermore, is a major theme in this theology. It is not a mere aside; rather, union with God in Christ stands as one of the core principles of his theology.¹⁹⁰ Calvin makes persistent reference to union with God the Father, going so far as to say that such union is the "chief end of humanity." This union with the Father is possible through the mediatorial work of

¹⁸⁷ CTS 1 Corinthian 12:12.

¹⁸⁸ Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, 154-155.

¹⁸⁹ CTS 1 Corinthian 12:13.

¹⁹⁰ It might be important at this point to acknowledge the importance of the new perspective on Calvin (NPC) for the development of this thesis. The NPC has its main impetus from the work of J. Todd Billings, "Calvin, Participation and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ" (PhD diss. Harvard University, 2005), and Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010). Billings argues against the Radical Orthodoxy theologians who argue that Calvin's notion of participation is anemic or non-existent (see footnote 74). Billings suggests that, in fact, Calvin does define salvation as participation. He says that communion in Christ with the Father by the Spirit is the ground for justification and sanctification, which is Calvin's *duplex gratia*. Canlis also focuses on Calvin's idea of participation but more precisely on the notion of descent and ascent. This has not been ignored by Calvin scholars; however, she argues it has not received the attention it deserves. What the NPC has uncovered is the integral component creation plays in Calvin's theology. For Calvin the eternal Word is the mediator of creation and not merely of soteriology. The creation which we exist in is sustained *in Christ*. The tree of life was a sign that unfallen Adam should not, in Calvin's words "seek life anywhere but in the [Son of God]." The mediator, as the Word, does not bridge the infinite distance between God and humanity, but is the very person where communion with God and humanity occurs. The sacrament of the Eucharist is the human ascent to the mediator and thus to communion with God.

Jesus Christ, which is the work of reconciliation. The source of this reconciliation is found ultimately in the doctrine of election. Jesus Christ, being the author of election, requires engrafting into him.¹⁹¹ Calvin's stress on union could be summarized in the following way: union with God the Father is made possible by being in union with the Son; the engrafting into Christ is made possible by being in union with the body of Christ; and all this manifests the union of believers with the Author of election.

Having briefly explored the broader context wherein Calvin explores union with Christ, we are now in a position to look more closely at how union with Christ is actualized. How, in short, are we to flesh out that salvation which resides in Christ, and that, without such actualization, is only a possibility, a "potential grace" as François Wendel calls it, that is not received "automatically?"¹⁹² What may seem so theologically obvious to the Calvinist, that all salvation resides in Christ, for Calvin himself was the triumph of grace. But as Wendel points out, such grace is only potential until humanity is united with the one in whom salvation resides. Hope for the salvation of humanity rests in Christ alone, which begs the question, how and in what sense, it comes about that what Christ possesses becomes our possession.

Calvin famously takes up to answer this question at the beginning of Book 3 of the *Institutes*, where he writes:

We must now examine this question. How do we receive those benefits which the Father has bestowed on his only-begotten Son – not for Christ's private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us and we are separat-

¹⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.22.7.

¹⁹² François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963), 234.

ed from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.¹⁹³

What must immediately be noticed here is the condition set upon humanity which, if not met, makes Christ's work of salvation of no value to them. His response is that salvation does not extend to all humanity but is conditioned by the gift of faith. Faith engrafts us spiritually into the body of Christ. What follows will develop this idea, and with it three primary claims: first, faith is the means of union; second, this union is spiritual; and third, this union is actually an engrafting into the body of Christ.

(i) Faith

Calvin insists that salvation is fully invested in the person of Jesus Christ, and that as such, humanity must be joined to him for salvation through faith. Despite the coming of God to us in the flesh in the incarnation, Calvin says that to be without faith is to be without Christ, separated from his body and without life.¹⁹⁴ Faith, of course, must be understood in its instrumentality rather than as having any intrinsic value of its own, for faith, says Calvin, brings nothing to God and actually illustrates humanity's need and poverty.¹⁹⁵ Faith must ultimately be understood in its relationship to its object, rather than in relation merely to those who do or do not have it.

As such, faith is an immensely important term for Calvin, for faith is nothing less than the means by which Christ dwells in us:

¹⁹³ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.1.1.

¹⁹⁴ CTS I John 5:12.

¹⁹⁵ CTS John 6:29.

What a remarkable commendation is here bestowed on faith, that, by means of it, the Son of God becomes our own, and ‘makes his abode with us’. By faith we not only acknowledge that Christ suffered and rose from the dead on our account, but, accepting the offers which he makes of himself, we possess and enjoy him as our Saviour.¹⁹⁶

How is such faith, therefore, best defined? Faith, Calvin maintains, is the knowledge of God’s will toward us, according to which God is a merciful Father, whose mercy comes to us through the promises made in Christ.¹⁹⁷ Thus there are three components to faith: (a) that God is merciful; (b) that God’s mercy is available through Christ; and (c) that God’s mercy through Christ is for me. The gospel is God’s pledge that he is well disposed toward us.¹⁹⁸ At this point, we arrive at Calvin’s celebrated definition of faith as: “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”¹⁹⁹

Faith and knowledge are called saving not because knowledge or faith save, but rather on account of the idea that knowledge and faith receive that which they do not possess independently. Faith and knowledge look to God for mercy, and hearing the promise, they receive Christ. Therefore, Calvin says, in faith we reject the terrifying late medieval view of Christ as “standing afar off, and not rather dwelling in us!”²⁰⁰ He continues pressing this point home when he speaks of the security of faith, “because he makes us, en-

¹⁹⁶ CTS Ephesians 3:17.

¹⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.2; *Ibid.*, 3.2.6. Here we see once again the huge gulf between Owen and Calvin. For Calvin, faith does not exist as something which we possess mentally and which can be harnessed and put to good use, rather, it is an acceptance of the Father’s mercy toward the believer.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.2.7.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.2.24.

grafted into his body, participants not only in his benefits but also in himself.”²⁰¹ The reason faith is saving, then, is ultimately because it unites us to the saving Christ, rather than because it is itself saving, and therefore faith never meditates upon Christ as separated from the believer. He writes, “But how can there be saving faith except in so far as it engrafts us into the body of Christ?”²⁰²

One further point needs to be understood about faith before we continue to examine the nature of the union with Christ of which Calvin speaks. This is that faith must never be understood as synonymous with engrafting into Christ. The believers’ engrafting into Christ is an effect of faith, but is not itself faith. This is critical to grasp because we have already noted that for Calvin, salvation rests only in the person of Christ, and therefore, that union with Christ is what brings about salvation. Faith is merely a vehicle, the vehicle by which believers receive that salvation. In short, the importance of faith resides in its ability to unite a believer to Christ. Calvin writes:

This deserves our careful attention. Most people consider fellowship with Christ, and believing in Christ, to be the something; but the fellowship we have in Christ is the consequence of faith. In a word, faith is not a distant view, but a warm embrace of Christ, by which he dwells in us, and we are filled with the Divine Spirit.²⁰³

(ii) Spiritual Union

Having briefly examined the role that faith plays in a believer’s union with Christ in Calvin’s theology, we need now to discover the power which activates this union. As we have already discovered, faith is instrumental, and actually has no value or power

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 3.2.30.

²⁰³ CTS Ephesians 3:17.

within itself to effect union with Christ. It is at this stage that we are introduced to an element of Calvin's soteriology, ultimately, which must not be missed, namely the role of the Holy Spirit. Faith, he writes, engrafts us "spiritually" into the body of Christ.²⁰⁴ At the very beginning of *Institutes*, Book 3, Calvin says that the "secret energy of the Spirit" needs to be examined if we are to understand communion with Christ.²⁰⁵ Calvin is not afraid to say that the work of God is incomprehensible to human understanding, and communion with Christ is no exception. His argument will be that communion with Christ is a spiritual union, since it is the Spirit's efficacious work to bring an unbeliever to Christ, and the means of this efficacious work is faith, as has already been discussed.

On account of this agency of the Holy Spirit, in short, union with Christ is understood as "spiritual."²⁰⁶ The connection between faith and the Spirit is important because Calvin writes that faith or the establishing of faith is "the principal work of the Holy Spirit."²⁰⁷ He reinforces this point by appealing to the New Testament, when he writes in the same place, "Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air or beat upon our ears."²⁰⁸ The work of the Spirit is critical because of the perversity and corruption of fallen humanity, so that by nature, we are unable even to grasp the promises or the need for the mercy of God offered in the person of Jesus Christ. Calvin again uses the phrase "inner teacher" in reference to human perversity when he writes: "Now, all of us

²⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.13.2.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.1.1.

²⁰⁶ Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder*, 150-159, makes a very important point about the Spirit as agent and that is a real possibility of making the Spirit simply an extension of the work of Christ or as a bridge to the benefits of Christ. This is the role that the Spirit plays in Owen's theology. Canlis argues, as does this thesis as well, that Calvin spoke about a participatory role for the Spirit, such that by the Spirit the believer shares in the reality of the benefits of Christ mediatorial work

²⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.1.4.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly it [the Word of God] cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it.”²⁰⁹

Calvin, in his definition of faith, makes mention of two ways or two effects of the work of the Spirit in believers, that is, on their minds and in their hearts. As faith is instrumental in effecting our union to Christ, there are also two instruments which the Spirit himself uses to effect living faith. The two instruments are the preached Word of God, which reveals the mercy of God to the mind, and the sacraments which seals the mercy of God to the heart.²¹⁰ We need to turn to this work in this respect for a few moments to understand how the Spirit uses the sacramental “means of grace” to effect faith and union with Christ.

We have encountered Calvin making use of the term “inner teacher” as a way to refer to the work of the Holy Spirit applying the Word of God to the hearts of its hearers. Here we encounter something a little different, although it yields similar fruit, in that he calls the Spirit the “internal minister.”²¹¹ The “external” minister employs, generally in the context of public worship, the preached word and the sacraments, which are, of course, liable to corruption and fallible. However, the “internal” minister, the Holy Spirit, takes these earthly and fallible instruments and uses them to effect union with Christ by his “secret virtue.”²¹² It is noteworthy that in Calvin’s theology, over against what has been seen in the theology of Owen, it is not only through the preaching of the gospel that

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.2.34.

²¹⁰ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 172.

²¹¹ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, , 173; In *Institutes* 4.14.9, Calvin speaks about the inward teacher, also the Holy Spirit. This is an important point for Calvin and we can begin to sense that he is very convinced that the Christian is living in two spheres, one earthly and one heavenly.

²¹² Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 173.

the Spirit effects union with Christ, but also through the sacraments. In the sacrament of baptism, for instance, the external minister uses an earthly element (water) and the internal minister “baptizes with the blood of the spotless Lamb.”²¹³ The two, though not *necessarily* related in Calvin’s theology (for the reprobate also are among the baptized), are nevertheless intimately related in the life of the church. And finally, in the Lord’s Supper, the external minister holds forth the external elements of bread and wine, and the internal minister “by his secret virtue ... feeds the souls of the faithful ... with the body and blood of the Lord.”²¹⁴ From these examples, we can see that the external minister employs external teaching or the corporeal elements of water, bread and wine, but that the Holy Spirit is pleased to use these elements to unite the believer to Christ by means of them, by creating faith in the believer through them. Thus, the believer’s union with Christ is spiritual, but it is spiritual precisely by virtue of the Spirit, taking the carnal and making it spiritual.

This is not the only sense, however, in which Calvin considers the believer’s union with Christ as something spiritual. The other sense is quite simply that the Spirit is said to indwell the believer: “It is the Spirit alone, therefore, who by dwelling in us, makes himself known by us; for, otherwise, he is unknown and incomprehensible.”²¹⁵ We recall that earlier, mention was made of the kingly office of Christ, whereby he dispenses his gifts to the believer so that the believer might be led into greater union with the Father. This, however, is something that is only accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes: “For the Spirit has chosen Christ as his seat, that from him might abun-

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ CTS John 14:17. When Owen speaks of union with Christ, which he only does a few times in all his voluminous works, he only uses this sense of union, that is, that the believer shares the same Spirit as Christ. On account of this sharing of the Spirit, the believer is enabled and is duty bound to conform to the *imago dei*, namely Jesus Christ.

dantly flow the heavenly riches of which we are in such need. The believers stand unconquered through the strength of their king, and his spiritual riches abound in him.”²¹⁶

Although it might be accurate to say that, according to Calvin, the Spirit dwells within the believer, what must not be forgotten in this connection is that Calvin does not tolerate any suggestion that the Spirit is disconnected from Christ. For Calvin, the Spirit is the “bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”²¹⁷ In another place, he writes: “When [Christ] says, I will come to you, he shows in what manner he dwells in his people, and in what manner he fills all things. It is, by the power of his Spirit.”²¹⁸ A very clear distinction needs to be made, therefore, in attempting to rightly understand Calvin, concerning the role of the Spirit. Calvin stresses the point that the role of the Spirit is to effect union with Christ, and that in this work, the Spirit does not stand in the place of Christ. Even though the Spirit has the same essence and they are together worshipped and glorified, the Spirit is not the Saviour, for salvation resides in the person of Christ alone. To put the point another way, the Spirit’s function is to testify of Christ.

If the work of the Spirit is to glorify Christ, and to point us to him, it becomes clear that “spiritual union” is union with Christ, even though it is mediated by the agency of the Spirit. So Calvin says: “Nothing, therefore, is bestowed on us by the Spirit apart from Christ, but he takes it from Christ, that he may communicate to us ... for he does not enlighten us, in order to draw us away in the smallest degree from Christ.... In a

²¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.5.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.1.3.

²¹⁸ CTS John 14:18.

word, the Spirit enriches us with no other than the riches of Christ, that he may display his glory in all things.”²¹⁹

As we conclude this brief discussion of spiritual union, three points of summary are called for: first, the work of the Spirit is principally one of ministering so that elect humanity might be called by the gospel and receive the gift of faith. Calvin is very clear that the work of the Spirit is connected to the Word, and that the Spirit does not have any function apart from the Word. Second, the Spirit accommodates himself to humanity, by employing the actions of the external minister and making the corruptible incorruptible, so that, for example, in receiving the bread and wine the worshipper by the power of the Spirit has communion in the flesh and blood of Christ. Here it is clear that Calvin tries to avoid any notion that the believer’s union with Christ is superficial or fictional, in the sense of being “merely” spiritual and inward. It is the whole human being that is involved. He writes, “Observe, that the spiritual connection which we have with Christ belongs merely to the soul, but also to the body, so that we are flesh of his flesh, etc.”²²⁰ This realist emphasis is perhaps distantly reflected in Owen’s later preoccupation with practical holiness, but it has in Calvin a much more mystical sense, according to which both soul and body are made one with the risen Lord. While there is no doubt that actions follow, in Calvin’s theology the bodily aspect is about something more, and much more basic, than moral action. Thus a “spiritual union” can have distinctly physical, bodily implications. To put the same point another way, it is the resurrection of the flesh that faith anticipates in hope, and not merely the immortality of the soul.

²¹⁹ CTS John 16:14.

²²⁰ CTS 1 Corinthians 6:15.

Bodiliness also has another role to play in Calvin's account. For even though Christ's bodily presence is in heaven, believers are not less joined to Christ in his body, by virtue of being made one with him in faith by the Spirit. Calvin contends that by the Spirit, believers enjoy Christ's actual presence, which of course involves something more than a literal, physical presence, but which does not for this reason exclude the reality of his ascended, physical body.²²¹ Thus, Calvin taught that union with Christ is spiritual, but that the Spirit communicates the salvation which only resides in Christ's flesh. Because of the importance of this theme, the Spirit must never be undermined or neglected, but equally the work of the Spirit in the salvation of the elect must never be thought to extend beyond the work of Christ. Calvin himself summarizes his thought as follows:

But, as the cleansing effected by Christ, and the attainment of righteousness, are of no avail except to those who have been made partakers of those blessings by the influence of the Holy Spirit, it is the propriety that he [Paul] makes mention of the Spirit in connection with Christ. Christ, then, is the source of all blessings to us; from him we obtain all things; but Christ himself, with all his blessings, is communicated to us by the Spirit. For it is by faith that we receive Christ, and have the graces applied to us. The Author of faith is the Spirit.²²²

(iii) Engrafting

We set out to understand what Calvin meant at the beginning of Institutes, Book 3, concerning the benefits the Father had bestowed on Christ, which are to be distributed to the saints, and proposed to consider it in three ways: first, that faith is the means; second, that the union is spiritual; the finally, that the union is actually an incorporation into the body of Christ. It is this last point which we now attempt to unfold.

²²¹ CTS John 14:27; if Christ had not left this world the Spirit could not be given, Calvin adds from John 16:7, "But for more advantageous and for more desirable is that presence of Christ, by which he communicates himself to us through the grace and power of his Spirit, than if he were present before our eyes."

²²² CTS 1 Corinthians 6:11.

In considering a believer's union with Christ we have already examined the instrument by which one is united to Christ, namely faith, and we have considered the agency by which we are united to Christ, namely the Holy Spirit.²²³ Finally, we come to the most pressing of the questions left to be answered, which concerns the manner in which a person is united with Christ. Calvin wanted to be very clear that faith and the work of the Holy Spirit unite us to Christ, and we have seen that in a sense these describe how a believer is united with him; however, something basic to Calvin's treatment of that union has still not been made explicit. For the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ is essential to any developed understanding of the possibility of union with him, and although it might seem trite to make this point, Calvin insists that the essential reality of the gospel is none other than the person of Christ. The instrument of faith and the agency of the Holy Spirit, indeed, ultimately rest on him.

At the slight risk of repetition, we can observe again how Calvin says that faith "embraces," "possesses," and "receives" Christ.²²⁴ Or again, "This, then, ... is offered by the Father: namely, [Christ] clothed with his gospel."²²⁵ Calvin wrote that "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 to us."²²⁶ What needs to be understood and is of critical importance for understanding the believer's union with Christ in Calvin's theology is that this salvation does not consist in a mere recognition or even an embrace of the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. Such

²²³ Baptism is outside the scope of this thesis, however, the language of engrafting and participation indicates that baptism is not simply an exhortation to die to the flesh and live by the Spirit; it is also the means by which God enacts the promise to do so. See Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, chapter 14.

²²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.8; 3.3.1; 3.1.4.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.2.6.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.1.1.

knowledge is essential, but not sufficient, says Calvin. Something else, something that he calls “participation,” is needed:

For the promises offer him, not for us to halt in the appearance and bare knowledge alone, but to enjoy true participation in him. And, indeed, I do not see how anyone can trust that he has redemption and righteousness in the cross of Christ, and life in his death, unless he relies chiefly upon a true participation in Christ himself. For those benefits would not come to us unless Christ first made himself ours.²²⁷

This is not a point easily overlooked in Calvin’s theology, for it is a major theme in his work. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, he again draws a distinction between being made partakers of the benefits of Christ, on the one hand, and partaking of Christ himself, on the other. He writes (in words markedly different than Owen’s):

Some explain, that [Christ’s body] is given to us, when we are made partakers of all the blessings which Christ has procured for us in his body – when, I say, we by faith embrace Christ as crucified for us, and raised up from the dead, and in this way are effectually made partakers of all his benefits. As for those who are of this opinion, I have no objection to their holding such a view. As for myself, I acknowledge, that it is only when we obtain Christ himself, that we partake of Christ’s benefits. He is, however, *obtained*, I affirm, not only when we believe that he is made an offering for us, but when he dwells in us – when he is one with us – when we are *members of his flesh*, (Eph. v.30) – when, in fine, we are incorporated with him (so to speak) into one life and substance.²²⁸

We might say that there is an insistence here that there is a strict distinction but not a separation between Christ’s benefits and his person. Furthermore, we can say that union with Christ for Calvin involves nothing less than participation, or a fellowship in the person of Christ, without which the benefits procured in his death and resurrection are seemingly not communicable to the believer. Calvin insists on this point for no less a reason than his

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.17.11.

²²⁸ CTS 1 Corinthians 11:24.

whole understanding of the gospel. The gospel as understood by Calvin is not the external or formal redemption of humanity through Jesus Christ, but rather, and more strictly, Jesus Christ offered to humanity in the intimacy of the life of faith. Salvation consists primarily, then, in participation in or a union with the person of Jesus Christ.

We have already noted the fact that, in Calvin's theology, this union is characterized by faith, made efficacious by the Spirit, grounded in election, and founded on the person of Christ. Dennis Tamburello writes, "Calvin wants to speak of *unio* in relation to faith, the Holy Spirit, the gospel (scripture), the sacraments, and election. It is intimately connected with all of these, but identical with none of them."²²⁹ But how, after all, does one participate in the person of Jesus Christ in Calvin's theology?*

It is clear that Calvin is convinced that the believer's union with Christ is very deep and integral. We have just noted that a believer's union with Christ is not primarily a matter of receiving the benefits of Christ, nor is it only a "spiritual" union in the sense of the inner self of the mind or heart. What becomes abundantly clear from even a cursory reading of Calvin is that a multiplicity of terms and images is used to describe this union with Christ. One gets a distinct sense that Calvin is unable to find just the right terminology to describe the intimacy of the union of Christ in view. Calvin at once describes union as becoming one body with Christ, and he is equally comfortable to say that believers are of the same substance with Christ (both, clearly, being classical theological claims). Union with Christ, furthermore, must be "actual," "real," and "true".²³⁰ The fellowship or participation with Christ of which he speaks is not merely a matter of the "un-

²²⁹ Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 85.

²³⁰ CTS 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 1Corinthians 11:24.

derstanding or imagination.”²³¹ Tamburello wrestles with this issue, and comes to the same conclusion that language cannot adequately express how the union with Christ is real and actual, and that, at the same time, while union is “real,” it is not a union of identity or essence.²³²

The key to understanding Calvin at this point lies, surely, in Christology. In commenting on John 17:26, Calvin suggests that the little clause, “And I in them,” teaches us, “that the only way in which we are included in that love [the love between the Father and Son] which he mentions is, that Christ dwells in us; for as the Father cannot look upon his Son without having likewise before his eyes the whole body of Christ, so, if we wish to be beheld in him, we must be actually his members.”²³³ It is ecclesial and mystical language such as this, I wish to suggest, that comes closest to explaining what Calvin meant by insisting that salvation could only be had through a participation in Christ, and what it means to speak of “a real and actual communication with him.”²³⁴

One of the clearest expressions of this idea appears in the language Calvin uses in his remarks on Ephesians 5:25-33, where he uses the phrase “flesh and bones” of the relation between Christ and the church. The original context of the text is a typological discussion of marriage, and Calvin has no trouble using it here similarly to make the point that Christ, in taking upon himself human nature, has united those who believe with himself, even insisting that the text “expresses something higher and more emphatic.”²³⁵ Making reference to Genesis 2, Calvin extends the point when he writes, “So, if we are

²³¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.11.

²³² Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 89.

²³³ CTS John 17:26.

²³⁴ CTS Galatians 2:20.

²³⁵ CTS Ephesians 5:30.

true members of Christ, we share his substance, and by this intercourse unite into one body.”²³⁶ This marital image, in fact, arguably comes closest to how Calvin wants to understand the union that Christians have with Christ. As he puts it, “Such is the union between us and Christ, who in some sort makes us partakers of his substance. We are bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, not because, like ourselves, he has a human body, but because, by the power of his Spirit, he makes us a part of his body, so that from him we derive our life.”²³⁷

This example illustrates the extent to which Calvin was prepared to go in order to press home to his readers the unity that a Christian shares with Christ, which is not merely imaginary or one that is “imputed,” but is, rather, a union with the very body of Christ. The fact that he draws upon one of the staples of traditional mysticism at this point is a clue to his intent. A genuine fellowship, a “communion,” we may say, is in view. It is particularly important to note that a Christian’s union with Christ is not merely reducible to the act of believing in him; it is not even something that is focused narrowly or necessarily upon the act of faith in appropriating his death and resurrection for us. It is, in principle, a richer idea, and this underscores both Calvin’s differences with Owen, and the importance of Calvin’s insistence that union with Christ must be actual in order for us to receive his benefits.

So far, an attempt has been made to identify clearly the nature and character of a believer’s union with Jesus Christ in Calvin’s theology. Initially, I indicated that in many aspects of Calvin’s thought, whether he is speaking about the law, or of election, or of the

²³⁶ CTS Ephesians 5:31.

²³⁷ Ibid.

kingly office of Christ, the theme of union is a central idea informing and indeed permeating his thought. Secondly, I noted that Calvin uses many different analogies to describe a believer's union with Christ. The third point made was that salvation, for Calvin, resides in the person of Jesus Christ alone and not merely in his benefits. This third point itself had three implications. First, faith is to be understood in an instrumental sense, as that which unites us to Christ. There is no intrinsic value in faith other than its being the provided means whereby God's mercy and promise are apprehended, and as the means which unites one to Christ. Second, union with Christ is a spiritual union, which is to say, the Holy Spirit is the agent which unites the believer to Jesus Christ. Calvin, however, is very clear that the believer is not united to the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is, rather, the "internal minister" which takes the Word and sacraments and by his secret virtue effects a union between the believer and Christ. Union with the person of Christ is spiritual also on account of his living within us. By this second meaning of spiritual union, Calvin holds that the Spirit gives the believer gifts which come from Jesus Christ, or that vitality whose source is Christ. Third, and last, the implication is that a believer's union with Jesus Christ is real and actual. This mystical union may be best understood by way of the analogy of marriage, by which one can say of another, "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh."²³⁸

Our findings thus far, therefore, have illuminated the intensity of Calvin's idea of union with Christ. And yet, we truly are still at a loss as to what precisely Calvin meant in saying that a believer is engrafted into Christ "really," "truly," and "substantially." The reason for this, I wish to suggest, is that the answer to this question lies elsewhere, and

²³⁸ Ibid.

the place it is answered is in Calvin's theology of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is to that discussion that we now, once again, must turn.

Calvin's Theology of the Lord's Supper

Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper was distinctive from the very beginning. It can rightly be characterized as a theology of ascent, in which Calvin very profoundly moves beyond the controversies of his time surrounding substance and local presence into a discussion of participation in and union with Christ. As was mentioned previously when speaking about the Holy Spirit, Calvin allows for, or makes room for, communion in the substance of Christ's body and blood by shifting that discussion into the realm of the Spirit. The Spirit, in short, raises believers to participate in Christ, making them one with him in his body and blood, and precisely this is what is figured and realized in the Lord's Supper. Against the view that only a local presence in the elements is adequate, he writes: "But greatly mistaken are those who conceive no presence of flesh in the Supper unless it lies in the bread. For thus they leave nothing to the secret working of the Spirit, which unites Christ himself to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence."²³⁹

It has been shown earlier that faith is, for Calvin, the instrument by which one is united to Christ, and in what follows we will need to examine this more deeply in relation to the Lord's Supper. Calvin is usually understood to relate faith to the Word, and Calvin

²³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.31; in his CTS Exodus 16:32 Calvin, commenting on the story of providing an omer of manna to be kept before the tabernacle as a testimony to the people of his gracious provisions in the wilderness, writes: "He descends to them, therefore, not to occupy their minds with gross superstition, but to raise them up by degrees to spiritual worship."

indeed says that “faith rests upon the Word of God as a foundation”; what is often less appreciated is that he continues in the same sentence to say, “when the sacraments are added, it rests more firmly upon them as columns.”²⁴⁰ The sacraments, indeed, offer certain advantages in this respect: “by them he manifests himself to us ... and attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by the Word.”²⁴¹ So, we see again a marked distinction between Calvin and Owen, for Calvin emphasizes the idea of simplicity and maintains that the sacrament adds a certain clarity that the preached Word lacks. Thus the sacrament does not only reveal the divine presence with the believer, but it focuses the believer on the means by which that presence is realized, in the humanity of Jesus Christ, or in his body and blood.²⁴² For it is in the person of Jesus Christ, Calvin maintains, that salvation resides.

Calvin’s theology of union with Christ is for such reasons essential for understanding his sacramental theology. This is an aspect of Julie Canlis’ recent work on Calvin’s thought. Canlis stresses the importance of ascent to and participation in God, all the while noting that the theme has been undervalued and therefore that Calvin’s theology of the Christian life has not been properly understood. Canlis observes that Calvin sees the sacraments “as part and parcel of the primary move of grace, in which God’s movement toward us enables our communion, or ascent, to him.”²⁴³ This clearly fits with the rest of Calvin’s theology, in which the sovereignty of God and the human dilemma are such that human perception needs to be reconfigured, so that we are able to participate and com-

²⁴⁰ *Institutes* 4.14.16.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² John Baillie speaks about the function of mediation of grace and meaning when he writes: ‘Though we are more directly and intimately confronted with the presence of God than with any other presence, it does not follow that He is ever present to us *apart* from all other presences. And, in fact, it is the witness of experience that only “in, with and under” other presences is the divine presence ever vouchsafed to us ... Clearly, then, the immediacy of God’s presence to our souls is a mediated immediacy.’ Cited in Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 9.

²⁴³ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 160.

mune with God. Canlis writes on the importance of ascent for understanding Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper when she says: "if a human life has been brought "up" into God without change or confusion, and our "partaking" of his very humanity is raising us up into God's *koinōnia*, then we see just how essential the Eucharist is as a confirmation of Calvin's doctrine of participation."²⁴⁴ The phrase, 'if a human life has been brought "up" into God,' is a reference to the assumption of flesh by the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, and the idea that this human nature did not change in this event underscores the importance of the humanity of Christ in Calvin's theology. It also highlights the priestly ministry which Christ continues to perform in Calvin's theology on behalf of his church—as well as the graciousness of the Father in taking finite creaturely being and making it the recipient of eternal life after the example of Jesus Christ.

In order for there to be such an ascent, whether of Christ to the right hand of the Father, or even of the creature's participation in God in the Lord's Supper, of course, there needs to be first a descent. In Calvin's theology, the descent of the Son of God into our humanity and so into our brokenness is the precursor to his and our ascent. It is the descent of Jesus—his taking upon himself our humanity—which points to and is the condition for our ascent, and this by the partaking of his flesh and blood which the sacrament of the Lord's Supper signifies. It is not, of course, that our literal eating the sacramental signs of his flesh and blood is equated with participating, but rather, that these are the means of that participation. As Calvin puts it:

But, in order that we may be capable of this participation, we must rise heavenward.... [I]t seems incredible, that we should be nourished by Christ's flesh, which is at so great a distance from us. Let us bear in mind, that it is a secret and

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

wonderful work of the Holy Spirit, which it were criminal to measure by the standard of our understanding.... Allow [Jesus] to remain in his heavenly glory, and aspire thou thither, that he may thence communicate himself to thee.²⁴⁵

This is the movement which is experienced in the sacrament, and by virtue of which the bread and wine become to us the body and blood, as the believer is brought into the heavenly places by the virtue and power of the Holy Spirit. As Canlis says, “The Holy Spirit brings us into God’s reality, not him into ours.”²⁴⁶

This is also what Calvin clearly seeks introduce in his extraordinary discussion of the “*mirifica commutatio*” at the beginning of his discussion of the Lord’s Supper in *Institutes*, Book 4:

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming the Son of man, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty upon himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.²⁴⁷

It is interesting to note that before Calvin speaks about the wonderful exchange and the theology of the Lord’s Supper he grounds the whole discussion in the soteriological idea of adoption, a theme developed extensively in the chapters immediately preceding the discussion of the Lord’s Supper, in connection with baptism. “God has received us, once for all, into his family,” he says, “to hold us not only as servants but as sons.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ CTS 1 Corinthians 11:24.

²⁴⁶ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 163.

²⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.2.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.17.1.

It is through the sacrament of baptism, in short, that the believer is included in the family of God and it is the purpose of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to "assure us of his continuing liberality."²⁴⁹ The Lord's Supper is thus conceived as gift, as "a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality."²⁵⁰ As recipients of the grace of adoption, and thus as children of God, we are brought to the tree of life, as it was in the beginning. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper underscores the idea that, for Calvin, humanity is not self-sufficient but even at creation depended upon a source of life outside of itself. Therefore, by being adopted into the family of God and the believer's union with Christ, they are being recreated and thus the need for that life-giving bread is essential for the realization of the wonderful exchange and the experience of his immortality.

If Canlis is correct in suggesting that Calvin's theology of the Supper must be understood as a theology of ascent, then what do we say of the allegation that Calvin must be accused of dualism and of exhibiting a certain repugnance towards this world? Calvin has often been accused of teaching that the believer must desire to leave behind earthly matter, but I wish to suggest that this cannot be farther from the truth. Even though in his doctrine of the Lord's Supper Calvin rejects the Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologies of local presence in the Supper and accuses them of the desire to "drag him [Christ] from heaven," the impetus for this is not that he repudiates this world.²⁵¹ Rather, it is because of his belief that the *telos* of humanity, and indeed, of the doctrine of salvation, is to be united with God in Christ. His discussion of the wonderful exchange highlights this idea,

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 4.17.30.

making clear that it is not a rejection of this world which guides his discussion of the sacrament, but rather the opposite: in that Christ took on the lowliness of our human nature, so also we are taken up into him to share in his glory.

Calvin emphasises that Christ in his incarnation meets humanity in all its limitations, including its physical limitations. The implication of the wonderful exchange which the Incarnation involves is that our natural, mortal bodies are redeemed; by his descending to take on our mortality, we ascend to share in his immortality. This must be remembered in the context of Calvin's treatment of the Lord's Supper: Christ's flesh is, because of the wonderful exchange, the fountainhead of life which brings us to our *telos*. It is for this reason that Calvin insists that the "true and natural body" of Christ—the same body "which hung on the cross"—must be communicated to us in the Supper.²⁵² Thus, in contrast to Owen, the only "exhibiting" which Calvin speaks of, the exhibiting of Christ's flesh and blood, is something given in the elements of bread and wine.

It is a common problem in Calvin studies to come to this point of recognizing that Calvin insists that the believer must eat the body and blood of Christ and at the same time insist that Christ is at the right hand of his Father. So the necessity of Christ's physical body and Christ's separation from believers in time and space is one of the perennial discussions surrounding Calvin's sacramental theology.²⁵³ We can see that the solution to this problem could be resolved by arguing that the Spirit can unite that which is separated

²⁵² John Calvin, *Tracts Containing Treatises on the Sacraments, Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 401-402

²⁵³ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 164, argues that Calvin "obsesses with spatial determinants throughout his account of the Eucharist." It is helpful to remember that Calvin is bound by his theology of accommodation, and that the point of this is not as spatial as Ward suggests. Also see John Milbank, "Alternative Protestantism: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition," in James K.A. Smith and James H. Olthuis, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 35.

by time and space. This is the most common way of understanding Calvin which leads to a theology of partaking of the body and blood in a spiritual manner grounded on faith.²⁵⁴

Calvin is very aware of this problem as presented, but the underlying problem as he sees it is not one involving the overcoming of spatial distance, as such, but one involving subjecting God to circumscription. When Calvin says that the body of Jesus Christ is not in, under, or subsumed in the bread, but is rather at the right hand of the Father, we are not to understand this in crudely spatial terms. On the one hand, the argument of the Lutheran Westphal,²⁵⁵ who maintained that that Christ is locally present in the bread and wine, is rejected by Calvin. Calvin says that local presence and real presence cannot be confused, and argues that local presence is the wrong way of conceiving of Christ's presence in the Supper. He claims in this connection that Christ is substantially present without being locally present.²⁵⁶ Calvin writes that the body and blood are communicated by the Spirit, "without any change of place," so that "our souls obtain spiritual life from his substance."²⁵⁷

In this regard, it might be helpful to note that Calvin also has something to say about the "place" said to be in question, the right hand of the Father. The right hand of the Father, Calvin says, "does not mean any particular place, but the power which the Father has bestowed on Christ, that he may administer in his name the government of heav-

²⁵⁴ There is a clear correlation here with Owen. He wanted to uphold the true exhibition of the Christ in the bread and wine but was not able to bring his theology to the idea of participation because his thinking was grounded in the covenant which obligates the believer to answer the covenant obligations.

²⁵⁵ Joachin Westphal (1510-1574) was a German Lutheran theologian. He was educated by Luther and Melanchthon. He is best known for his involvement in the theological controversy over the Lord's Supper. He opposed those who denied the local presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

²⁵⁶ Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, 298-302

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 384.

en and earth.”²⁵⁸ A significant source of confusion is done away with by understanding this key point, so that the right hand of God is not said to be a place, but a metaphor for the power and authority of God in the hands of Christ.²⁵⁹

There is one other clue which is really of benefit in coming to understand how the believer is meant truly to eat the body and blood of Christ when he is physically ascended. Calvin actually agrees with Peter Lombard, the great medieval theologian, who said that, “although the whole Christ is everywhere, still the whole of that which is in him is not everywhere.”²⁶⁰ Calvin insists that though in his flesh he has ascended into heaven, still the whole Christ is everywhere, yet not in his wholeness. There are a range of observations which can be made about this claim. The first is the one already noted, that heaven is not a spatial place which “contains” things. Heaven for Calvin cannot be described as occupying any physical place in space, or indeed in time. Second, and following from the first point, heaven is seen as “distant,” but this distance is not a distance involving space, but is rather a distance of transcendence, and this difference of transcendence is precisely what the Holy Spirit overcomes. For just this reason, Calvin insists that Christ’s physical body is in heaven, while at the same time insisting that his body and blood are also communicated to the believer without change of place, by virtue of the work of the Spirit, the “bond of our union with Christ.” Third, Canlis is correct in this connection when she writes, “Calvin saw the Spirit’s work as that of transposition: taking what was the realm of physicality and moving it to the Trinity’s domain”, and again, “The Spirit is not a spiritualized mode of Christ; rather the Spirit is the person in whom we now have

²⁵⁸ CTS Ephesians 1:20.

²⁵⁹ Bullinger speaks of the ascent of Christ this way, “the body of Christ is in heaven in a state of glory, not here below on earth in a state of corruptibility,” for “the heaven into which our Lord was taken up is a certain place, not on this earth nor everywhere, but distinct from the earth, above this corruptible world.” Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 159.

²⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.30.

access to the embodied Jesus.”²⁶¹ Calvin, in characteristic humility, says, “I shall not be ashamed that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.”²⁶²

Earlier mention was made of the virtue or the power of the Spirit to unite believers to Christ, so that the life-giving flesh and blood of Christ is communicated to them, and of the notion that it is a distance of transcendence which the Spirit overcomes. Through the Spirit, the communicant, in eating the bread and drinking the wine, is given on earth the life-giving substance which is the body and blood of Christ. In other words, the communicant is participating in the substance of heaven on earth.²⁶³ It could not be otherwise, for Calvin, since that transcendence, that government and authority of God can never be contained in bread and wine as such. The Spirit, however, takes the external elements of bread and wine and “by his secret virtue ... feeds the souls of the faithful ... with the body and blood of the Lord.”²⁶⁴

To sum up, then, union with Christ and participation in God is, for Calvin, the *telos* of humanity. Having been adopted into his family by baptism, God continues to feed and nourish his children through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. In the Lord’s Supper, the believer truly eats the body and blood of Christ, and because he is the true and only source of life, there is no life outside of his body and blood. Although Christ in his resurrected body is at the right hand of the Father, yet in the sacrament received in faith in space and time, we do eat his body and drink his blood. This mystery is accomplished by the secret virtue of the Holy Spirit, who has the power to overcome the barrier of tran-

²⁶¹ Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder*, 117.

²⁶² Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.32.

²⁶³ Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, 121

²⁶⁴ Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, 173.

scendence by lifting the believer into the eternal and heavenly kingdom, there to commune with the source of life. In the sacrament, the *sursum corda* is the rule by which the believer must adore Christ. Thus, Calvin finds any adoration dangerous and crass which directs attention to the elements themselves, and seeks out any other means of adoration. Furthermore, and in conclusion, we are brought to affirm that Calvin could not conceive of the sacrament in any other way except in terms that allow for Christ to be truly, really, and indeed “substantially” present by the Spirit’s lifting the believer to Christ by his secret virtue.

What emerges, then, from this treatment of Calvin’s theology of the Lord’s Supper, and of its presuppositions in soteriology, is that there are marked differences between John Calvin and the later “Calvinist,” John Owen. Which of the two the typical expressions of Calvinism in the English-speaking world have tended to follow seems, against this background, an important question, so stark is the theological contrast between them. While it is often taken for granted that the typically “Puritan” expressions of Calvinism were faithful to their sources in the earlier Reformation, it would appear to follow from the argument of this thesis that this is not at all obvious. At this point, of course, we encounter another limitation related to the scope of this thesis, so that these matters obviously cannot be pursued at length. However, we may at least conclude with some general and tentative suggestions, leaving the question of a more extensive discussion for another day and for others.

Summary and Conclusion

One of the central goals of this thesis has been to develop an understanding of the Reformed view of the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We have considered this topic through examining two of its representative theologians, John Owen and John Calvin. John Owen was chosen on account of his eminence within the English Reformed tradition. He stands out from among his peers as the so-called "English Calvin," whose influence was felt in the ecclesiastical, political, and academic life of England. His prolific pen produced some of the best known treatises on the most important topics of the day, defending the Reformed faith from the attacks of the Arminians, Socinians, and the high church Anglicans. Although he did not write a full treatise on the Lord's Supper *per se*, he did produce twenty-eight invaluable discourses which set out his understanding of the sacrament of the sacrament.

We have discovered that his theology of the Supper is guided by his doctrine of the covenant. Covenant or Federal theology finds its pattern in the covenant of works, and thus in a mutual relationship of obligations. First, humanity is obligated to obey God, and God in turn promises life eternal. Humanity, however, failed in fulfilling its obligations under the covenant, and thus God's justice demanded that humanity must die. In Federal theology, however, there is also a second covenant which is commonly called the "covenant of the Mediator." This covenant was established before time between the Father and the Son to guarantee that God's justice would be answered by the death of the Son, when humanity failed in its obligations. It is this covenant of the Mediator which made possible the final covenant—the covenant of grace. This covenant, however, we

argued also to be a covenant of obligations. We thus concluded that it really is a disguised form of the covenant of works.

This interpretation is borne out by Owen's belief that both the covenant of grace and the covenant of works are still directing the affairs of humanity. Those who do not possess saving faith are still under the obligations of the covenant of works, and secondly, Christ in his humanity had to answer to its covenant obligations. The second reason why we contended that the covenant of grace is the covenant of works in disguise is on account of the fact that the obligations of the covenant of grace are actually the same as those under the covenant of works. Thus, possessing saving faith brings us to fulfil the requirements of the covenant, though now it is done out of gratitude. The reason for obtaining eternal life under the covenant of grace is that provision has been made in it for a mediator, whereas under the covenant of works no mediator is available. This covenantal dynamic is the controlling paradigm for Owen's theology of the Lord's Supper.

The primary claims of Owen's sacramental theology revolve around three main ideas. These are, first, the acting of faith on the part of the believer, specifically to accept the atonement that the Lord's Supper celebrates; second, the role of faith in the receiving of the sacrament itself, that is, to accept the offer of God's promises, without which it is of no effect; third, the acting of faith to accept the re-displaying of the covenant's sealing. These three points converge to form the substance of Owen's theology of the sacrament.

The place of the atonement is very important in covenant theology on account of its interpretation of the Garden of Eden. In Eden, it is said, God established a covenant with Adam, and Adam possessed everything within himself, as a creature created perfect

and in the image of God, to fulfil the obligations of the covenant, and this without a mediator. Thus, when failure came, the role of the mediator as the one who made atonement between the justice of God and the sin of humanity became all-important; indeed, we could say if anything that the mediator comes to have an exaggerated role. This is clear from Owen's discourses which continually remind his audience that in the ordinance Jesus is clearly displayed as crucified for them. He reminds them that the suffering of Christ was for their sins and the effect of Christ's death was for the making of peace between God and humanity.

Secondly, there is the role for faith which Owen requires in the ordinance. The great act on our part in the ordinance is the receiving of Christ by faith. It is not enough that God has exhibited him as the fulfilment of the gospel promises. He argues that if the believer does not receive him by faith in the ordinance, then the communicant comes short of the mercy and grace which the sacrament is designed to provide. The offer of God is of no value or profit unless received by faith, and so, for Owen, the sacrament is merely a bare representation if it is received otherwise. Faith accepts the offer of Jesus Christ by God the Father. There is a very strong case for the view, indeed, that Owen held that the believer's acceptance of the offer of Christ is what makes the sacrament uniquely valid. Again, the acceptance of the offer of Christ is once again another way of underscoring the atonement as the central aspect of the sacrament in Owen's theology. Thus communion with Christ, and participation in Christ, are conditioned by the believer's embrace. God is apparently active only to the point of offering, and then he becomes passive, waiting for believers' acceptance. This obviously undermines the objectivity of the

sacrament, and even the sovereignty of God, his freedom to act in this world by his own will.

Third, the ordinance, Owen says, is a confirmation of the covenant. This theme is regularly spoken about in his discourses. He goes so far as to suggest at one point that the ordinance is a kind of feasting on the leftovers from the original sacrifice of Christ.²⁶⁵ It is this meal, however, that obligates the participants to honour the covenant thus sealed; as the believer sits at the meal he or she is eating and drinking as a token of personal acceptance of the atonement made, as a display of faith in that atonement, and a rededication to the obligations of the covenant.

It thus emerges very obviously that there is a major difference between Owen and Calvin. Owen's thought is controlled by his commitment to covenant theology, and this is what is seen in his sacramental theology, which develops in stark contrast to Calvin's sacramental theology. Absent in Owen's discourses is any mention of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper, despite his avid interest in Pneumatology, so much so that even in his lengthy treatise on the Holy Spirit there appears to be no mention of the Lord's Supper, where most Reformers—and certainly Calvin—could not have avoided the subject.²⁶⁶ Owen speaks of participation in Christ, but this participation is reserved for talk of the atonement, and of carrying through with a godly life, which is seen as the evidence for our having accepted the atonement and its covenant obligations. Lastly, Owen's repeated use of the concept of faith gives it a much more important role in his approach than the merely instrumental one it has in Calvin's theology. This thesis suggests, in ef-

²⁶⁵ *Works IX*, 596.

²⁶⁶ Mayor, "The Teaching of John Owen concerning the Lord's Supper," 170.

fect, that Owen has placed on believers' faith a burden which faith cannot carry.²⁶⁷ Faith, in Owen's theology, effectively realizes the whole of the sacramental experience. Owen's ideal Christian harnesses all of the senses and trains the mind to think consciously about the death of Christ and appropriate it. Faith must, through its knowledge, place the believer at the foot of the cross so that he or she might receive the cleansing from sin that is promised. Faith, in fact, must create the experience of having communion with Christ in the ordinance.

Through our treatment of Owen's theology of the Lord's Supper, we have tried to see how, or indeed if, the believer can communicate with Christ in his presence in the Lord's Supper on the terms proposed. Given that Owen stands in the tradition of Calvin, one might have expected to find in his work a vibrant, and perhaps a more developed theology of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Lord's Supper. One might have expected that the main discussions concerning the internal and external minister would be in evidence still, and an effort made to uphold the importance of the actual eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Christ—not only for the remission of sins or for the purposes of remembrance of the covenant with God, but as the source of the believer's very life, in which communion with Christ the incarnate one leads to transformation and glorification. Are there reasons why Owen would have made such a radical departure from the promise which is latent in Calvin's sacramental theology?

²⁶⁷ Calvin, on the other hand, is clear that faith does not lend a reality to the sacraments which they otherwise lack. Christ's presence in the sacrament is not a reward for faith. The presence of Christ is truly offered by God in the sacrament, whether or not received by faith. Yet, without faith, the sacrament does not give its benefit. "You ask: Do the wicked, then, by their ungratefulness cause the ordinance of God to be voided and nullified? I reply: What I have said is not to be understood as if the force or truth of the sacrament depended upon the condition or choice of him who receives it. For what God has ordained remains firm and keeps its own nature, however man may vary. For since it is one thing to offer, another to receive, nothing prevents the symbol consecrated by the Lord's Word form being actually what it is called, and from keeping its own force. Yet this does not benefit a wicked and impious man." Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.16

I would like to suggest that there are at least three reasons why Owen would have held a sacramental theology so radically different from Calvin. All are posited here in very tentative terms, intended to be less definitive than suggestive of further work to be done. First, reference might be made to Charles Taylor's understanding of reforming movements.²⁶⁸ On Taylor's account, Calvin could be said to have held to a view of the Lord's Supper as "enchanted" experience—in the sacrament, we are taken up into the very presence of the risen, ascended Christ, there to feed spiritually upon his body and blood. Taylor suggests that in early modernity, there was a collapsing of the transcendent world, so that that it became possible for people to believe that their lives could only be lived in a very natural, ordinary way. Conversely, it became difficult for people to believe that they could encounter the sacred in any way which looked to undermine the natural. Paradoxically, Taylor's argument is that with the collapsing of the transcendent world, the importance of the human experience of religious faith in and of itself was intensified. Christianity, in short, came to consist more and more in personal commitment and personal faith, and as God was less involved in the world of ordinary, outward empirical experience, Christian faith came to be pushed back onto the resources of believers themselves and their personal commitments.

The continuing reformation movement, of which Owen was a part, insisted that the Christian life must be lived in ordinary day to day activities. A believer worships God in everyday existence and experience, so that no part of human existence is considered profane. The problem with this view might be put succinctly: if everything in general is "enchanted," to use Taylor's term, then is anything in particular? In such a world, I would

²⁶⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 61ff.

suggest, it must become very difficult indeed to sustain the fabric of devotion, except by a huge exercise of will. What happens in the theology of John Owen, from this point of view, can be seen as an implication of the collapse of the transcendent, so that the believer is left to live life and set Christian goals for living in the purely “immanent” world. This may be an illuminating way of reading Owen’s sacramental theology, given that his consistent emphasis is on believers’ obligations to fulfil the covenant empirically. The consistency of their Christian life becomes the determining factor in believers’ story of personal salvation, and this is mirrored in Owen’s constant insistence that believers should give an account of their sins, enumerating and calling them by name. Most particularly, however, we see this in his treatment of the Lord’s Supper, where the total experience of participating in Christ is lived out in this-worldly existence. There is no room for an ascent into the heavenly kingdom in the sacramental meal through the Spirit; in a manner of speaking, the heavenly kingdom has become the here and now.

This leads to the second point, which is that if Davies’ thesis is correct, and Charles I was setting about re-affirming a doctrine of the divine right of kings, which demanded a transcendent world through which God governed the world via king and bishop, then we can perhaps grasp how there came about such controversy. For the divine right of kings is wedded to the notion of a transcendent world, controlled by king and bishop, with access to the divine being limited to these offices and being mediated by the institutions they represent. The Laudian turn to an insistence on the real presence of Christ in the sacrament then makes good sense, because the bishop is a kind of gatekeeper of the presence of God, and the institutional church is the divinely-appointed channel of sacramental grace. Thus, when Laud argued that the sacrament generally, and the altar

in particular, are the greatest places of God's presence on earth, even greater than can be found in the Bible and pulpit, then we can understand Owen's critique and his reaction to the theology. Owen's "disenchanted" theology required an important pulpit ministry to teach the people how to live the Christian life in everyday experience. Covenant obligations had to be explained so that the believer could have a confirmed and comfortable sense of living in communion with God in the here and now. Such observations have obvious ramifications for how Owen is to be understood in his immediate political context and at the height of his powers in Commonwealth England, but there is insufficient scope to pursue this theme further at present.

Thirdly, accepting the covenant of works as the guiding principle for theology really demands an immanent or this-worldly focus. There are many references in Owen's theology which point to this, but in his sacramental discourses we can clearly identify the trend. As has been argued, Owen places a huge emphasis on the atonement and on the physical realities of Christ's experience as the mediator. Therefore, the broken bread is meant to remind the believer that Christ's body was broken and the poured out wine is meant to bring the communicant to remember that Christ's blood was poured out for our sins, to appease the wrath of God's justice. The sorrow which Christ experienced, again, is to be reflected in the life of the believer, not because Christ was sorrowing over his sin but because he carried the sin of the world. Thus Christ's life becomes an example for believers to follow.

The effect of covenant theology, it could be argued, was thus to transfer the real presence of Christ, which had been believed to be in the Lord's Supper, into the ordinary lives of the believer. The real presence of Christ in this world is to be displayed in the

lives of the godly, those who take a special interest in living godly lives, while only those who are living godly lives can be assured that they are indeed the elect.

In Calvin's sacramental theology, by contrast, we have discovered that the Lord's Supper is the means by which the believer is strengthened. In the meal the believer is given the spiritual nourishment of the life-giving body and blood of Christ. This life-giving body and blood is, furthermore, a resource for union with Christ and fellowship with God. This is not to suggest that Calvin's theology has no pietistic features of its own. The importance of daily devotion and of concrete obedience in Christian living is indeed important for Calvin, but such godly living comes from, or is the result of, being united with Christ, and so of having been fed with his body and blood. The godly life flows from the Lord's Supper, because in it the believer, as Calvin sees things, truly, really, and even substantially feeds upon the body and blood of Christ.

In conclusion, one final point could be made about the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper, but that again we cannot pursue at any length. Many of the Reformed Churches have been massively influenced by the same forces which we have argued can be seen in Owen, namely, the development of covenant theology in the context of the collapsing of the transcendent world into the immanent world. It has been suggested that a close reading of Owen can lead us to understand both the historical genesis of this sort of theology, and certain of its flaws. However, given Calvin's status as a father of the Reformed tradition, the Reformed Churches would do well to re-evaluate the richness of his theology of ascent and of his stress on union with Christ and fellowship with God, grounded in the incarnation of the Son and the gift of the Holy Spirit, particularly as these themes appear and come together in his treatment of the Lord's Supper.

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