

“Fear God and give glory to Him!”

Luther versus Calvin’s Teaching

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It is one of the strange facts of the history of the Reformation of the sixteenth century that the two reformers who were to have the most lasting influence on the course of religious developments in subsequent centuries never met. Although Martin Luther and John Calvin were contemporaries during 36 years of their lives (and during 10 years of their public reforming activities), and although there were many occasions on which the two of them could have met, they never did. In fact, they did not even correspond. That is not to say that they were not aware of one another’s work and teaching. Calvin, especially, was very much impressed and influenced by the writings of his senior, Luther. He also criticized him. Nor was Luther ignorant of Calvin’s writings and doctrines. Nevertheless, the title of this essay would be misleading if it were to give the impression that we possess a specific evaluation of John Calvin’s teaching from the pen or mouth of Martin Luther—that is, an evaluation and critique expressly addressed to the subject of Calvin’s teachings, as Luther wrote, for example, against the false teachings of Erasmus, Zwingli, and scores of others. For not only did Martin Luther not correspond with Calvin, he didn’t even (except on one occasion noted in the *Tischreden*) publicly criticize him for his teaching. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Luther did write volumes on those subjects which, in Calvin’s teaching, were contrary to the revealed truth of Holy Scripture. Mainly because Luther was such a thorough theologian, and without a doubt also because Luther was aware of Calvin’s errors, we can write an essay entitled “Luther Versus Calvin’s Teaching.”

I. Calvin

We are familiar with the life and work of Martin Luther, but perhaps not so much with that of John Calvin. Luther was 26 years old, an Augustinian monk and a priest of two years when Jean Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, France. Calvin’s father, Gerard, was first a notary of the local cathedral chapter and finally fiscal administrator of the Noyon diocese. At the age of 12, in 1521, the year Luther was formally excommunicated from the Church of Rome and appeared before the Diet of Worms, young Calvin received his first benediction, followed by a second in 1527. He began his studies in Paris in 1523, became Licentiate of Arts in 1528, studied law, at the wish of his father in Orleans and Bourges, became Licentiate of Law in 1532 and Doctor of Laws in 1533. In Orleans, a centre of humanism where Erasmus had taught Latin, Alexander Greek and Reuchlin Hebrew, Calvin associated with followers of Luther, among them his cousin, Pierre Robert Olivetan, who had to flee to Strasburg because of his Lutheran opinions. After his father’s death in 1531, Calvin took up humanistic studies in Paris. His first published work was a commentary on Seneca’s *De Clementia*. In 1533 he was impressed by the evangelical Lenten sermons of Gerard Roussel in the Louvre (Roussel was a disciple of Lefevre d’Etaples, an evangelical Catholic). That same year, Calvin apparently had his “sudden conversion,” to which he includes in his Preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms* (1555/7), and of which nothing further is known. On Nov. 1, 1533, his friend, Nicolas Cop, the newly

appointed rector of the University of Paris, delivered a bold rectorial address advocating the biblical humanism of the party of the king's sister, Marguerite d'Angouleme (also inspired by Faber Stapulensis). Calvin himself was in some way associated with the address, and he had to flee and remain in hiding for most of the following year. He visited the aged Lefevre d'Etaples at Nerac and, in May of 1534, resigned the clerical benefices that had been reserved for him from his childhood. This signaled his break with the Roman Catholic Church. Later that year he wrote two prefaces that were to appear at the beginning of the Old and New Testaments in the French Bible prepared by his cousin, Olivetan, for the Waldenses. No doubt that year also saw the beginning of his work on his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In January, 1535, Calvin left France for Basel because of the persecution that followed the Incident of the Placards (Oct. 1534). The manuscript of the *Institutes* was completed in August, 1535, and published in Basel in March of the following year, with a prefatory address to Francis I of France. This first edition of the *Institutes* was to be followed by 5 more Latin editions (1539, 1543, 1550, 1559). In each edition he greatly expanded the work.

In 1536, Calvin went to Ferrara, Italy under the pseudonym of Charles d'Espeville, The reason for his stay there is unclear, but it probably was to enlist the sympathies of Duchess Renee, the first cousin of Francis I, in behalf of the persecuted Protestants of France. Although he was soon forced to leave by the duke, his influence on the duchess was lasting. She corresponded with him until his death. On his return from Italy in April, 1537, Calvin made a brief visit to Paris (taking advantage of the Edict of Courcy) and then headed for Strasburg, where he wanted to settle and serve the cause of the Gospel with his pen. The Imperial troops barred the way and he was forced to make a detour to Geneva. When William Farel, the fiery Reformation preacher in Geneva heard of Calvin's arrival, he went to him and begged him to stay. When Calvin spoke of his desire to go to Strasburg, Farel told him that God would curse him if he did not give himself to the work of the Lord in Geneva. Calvin stayed, and first became a lecturer on the Bible, then a preacher. Soon he attempted to enforce his ideals concerning Christian society and politics in Geneva. In 1537 he wanted the entire population of the city to pledge itself to the true faith, as he expounded it in his *Geneva Catechism*. Church and state were woefully mixed together in his system. Severe church discipline was attempted. In 1538, the resistance of the old Genevans prevailed, and Farel and Calvin were given three days to leave the city. Calvin went first to Basel, then, at the invitation of Martin Bucer, came to Strasburg, where he served a congregation of French refugees. In 1532 or 1540, he signed the Augsburg Confession, and was generally considered a Lutheran. From Strasburg he wrote his famous *Reply to Bishop Sadolet*, who was attempting to bring Geneva back into the Roman Catholic fold. Here he also published the second edition of his *Institutes* and in 1540 married the widow of an Anabaptist he had converted. During this period, Calvin had the opportunity to gain a firsthand impression of the German reformation and to meet some of the German reformers, notably Melancthon, at the colloquies of Frankfurt (1539), Worms (1540) and Regensburg (1541). On September 13, Calvin returned to Geneva at the invitation of the city council. Now he had a free hand to establish his social and political policies of the ideal Christian community and he proceeded to do so with gusto. From 1541 until the end of his life in 1564, he ruled Geneva with an iron hand. Strict church discipline was legalistically enforced by the secular authorities. Not only exclusion from the Lord's Supper, but also fines, public disgrace, banishment, imprisonment and death were used to punish moral offenses. The burning of the anti-trinitarian, Michael Servetus, in 1553, was only the most publicized of many executions. "Within four years, 58 were burned at the stake, 76 were exiled; and in 1545 during the raging of a pestilence

43 women were burned as witches; and Geneva was a city a little larger than Watertown, Wisconsin” (in 1946).¹

In 1559, Calvin founded the Geneva Academy, which was to become the centre from which Calvinism would spread to the Netherlands, England, Scotland and other areas. That same year he published the final edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Throughout his life, Calvin wrote commentaries on the various books of the Bible. The only books he did not write on were the Song of Solomon and Revelation. After long years of illness, he died on May 27, 1564.²

II. Calvin on Luther and Luther on Calvin

At the time of Calvin’s conversion and the first edition of the *Institutes*, Luther had already fought most of his great battles. Calvin had no doubt, read most of Luther’s great reformation treatises, such as *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, *The Freedom of a Christian Man*, *To The Christian Nobility*, *The Bondage of the Will*, his catechisms and his *Great Confession on the Lord’s Supper*. Calvin freely acknowledged his debt to Luther and openly expressed his admiration for him. He called him a “preeminent servant of Christ.” To Pighius the papist he wrote: “Concerning Luther we testify with out dissimulation now as heretofore that we esteem him as a distinguished apostle of Christ, by whose labour and service, above all, the purity of the Gospel has been restored at this time.” Even after Luther had unsparingly denounced all sacramentarians in his Brief-Confession of 1544, and severed all-fellowship with them, Calvin reminded Bullinger in a letter what a great and wonderfully gifted man Luther was, and with what fortitude, ability and powerful teaching he had shattered the kingdom of Antichrist and propagated the salutary doctrine. “Even if he should call me a devil,” he wrote, “I would accord him the honor of acknowledging him to be an eminent servant of God.” Nevertheless, Calvin disagreed sharply with Luther’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper—not openly at first, for he had signed the Augsburg Confession—but later, when he came more under the influence of Zwingli and Bullinger; and he did not hesitate to ridicule those who believed in the “God in the bread” as Luther did.

Luther also had respect for Calvin. In a letter addressed to Martin Bucer dated Oct. 14, 1539, he sends respectful greetings to Herrn Johann Sturm and Johann Calvin, “whose books I have read with special pleasure.”³ However, Luther was not uncritical of Calvin, as his remark recorded in the *Tischreden* reveals: “Calvin is a learned man, but very suspect of error with regard to the Sacrament. Oh, dear God, keep us in Your Word!”⁴

It would be interesting to know which books of Calvin Luther had read with special pleasure in 1539. One of them was certainly his *Reply to Sadolet*. If he had read the *Institutes*, it would most likely have been the first edition of 1536, which Calvin had modeled after Luther’s Catechism and in which it appears he did not yet teach his double predestination. According to Reformed Scholar Ford Lewis Battles, it was Martin Bucer’s influence that brought Calvin to a “deeper understanding” of predestination⁵ through his *Metaphrases* on Romans (1536). Luther’s *Table Talk* comment expressing his suspicion of Calvin’s teaching on the Sacrament, however, dates from 1538. It would also be interesting to know just how much Philip Melancthon told Luther about his good friend Calvin and his views. That Melancthon was greatly influenced by Calvin from the outset is clear. But Luther apparently did not consider Calvin’s influence a threat to his restored Gospel, otherwise he surely would have spoken out clearly against his teachings. He was more concerned about the teachings of the other Swiss reformers. It was through

Calvin's formulations, however, that the crass false teachings of the Swiss regarding the sacraments gained respectability and acceptance in much of the Lutheran Church in Germany after Luther's death, and it was Melanchthon who allowed this to happen.

With the unmasking of the Crypto-Calvinists in Lutheran Germany, beginning in 1552, the errors of Calvin began to be clearly identified by orthodox Lutheran theologians. At first only Calvin's errors with regard to the Lord's Supper and the Person of Christ were condemned under the term "Calvinism," but gradually his other errors were also included in the term. The Formula of Concord condemns Calvin's errors on the Lord's Supper, the Person of Christ and Predestination (Art. VII, VIII, and IX). The Saxon Visitation Articles of 1592 add his doctrine of Baptism to the list. We shall use these headings, in a different order, to present Martin Luther's pure and true doctrine as opposed to Calvin's errors.

III. God's Eternal Election

Like Luther, Calvin was basically Augustinian in his theology. He was so, in fact, to a greater degree than Luther. "Luther's Augustinianism was modified and corrected by his attachment and fidelity to Scripture; Calvin's, on the other hand, following the line of strict logic and dialectics, of which science and art he was a master, and which in turn mastered his theological thinking, developed Augustine's predestinarianism to the ultimate," writes Arnold Sitz.⁶ Reformed scholar Battles writes:

"The measure of dependence of Luther and Calvin upon Augustine cannot be easily stated, but certainly both reformers were frank to recognize their debt to him, without in the least exempting his opinions from the test of Scripture. Calvin may be said to stand at the culmination of the later Augustinianism. Calvin goes beyond Augustine in his explicit assertion of double predestination, in which the reprobation of those not elected is a specific determination of God's inscrutable will."⁷

Like Luther, Calvin repeatedly stated that we must not go beyond Scripture in our investigation of predestination:

If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place (the precincts of divine wisdom), he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit. For it is not right for man unrestrainedly to search out things that the Lord has willed to be hidden in Himself.... If this sole thought prevails with us, that the Word of the Lord is the sole way that can lead us in our search for all that it is lawful to hold concerning Him, and is the sole light to illumine our vision of all that we should see of Him, it will readily keep and restrain us from all rashness. For we shall know that the moment we exceed the bounds of the Word, our course is outside the pathway and in darkness, and that there we must repeatedly wander, slip and stumble.⁸

Luther would have heartily concurred. Unfortunately, Calvin did not take his own advice. From the outset, he oversteps the bounds of the Word and defines predestination as "God's eternal

decree, by which He determined with Him what He willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.”⁹

Calvin correctly taught that God’s election of those who would be saved was not based on His foreknowledge of their faith (*intuitu fidei*), but that it was entirely by God’s grace. But because he drew the logical inference that therefore it is God’s will that those He has not chosen for life should be lost and condemned, he had to say that God does not want all men to be saved. Commenting on John 6:39,40, he states “If He willed all to be saved, He would set His Son over them, and would engraft all into His body with the sacred bond of faith.”¹⁰ Therefore, he also taught a limited atonement. Expanding on Augustine’s interpretation of St. John’s statement that Christ is the expiation not only for our sins, but “also for the sins of the whole world” (I Jn. 2:2—Augustine said that the “whole world” is the “*ecclesia electorum per totum mundum dispersa*”), Calvin writes, “*sub ‘omibus’ reprobos non comprehendit, sed eos designat, qui simul credituri erant et qui per varias mundi plagas dispersi erant.*”¹¹ Also logical, therefore, is his teaching that God foreordained the Fall of Adam into sin. “The decree is dreadful, I confess. Yet no one can deny that God foreknew what end man was to have before He created him, and consequently (note the logic! J.S.) foreknew because He so ordained by His decree.”¹² It follows then, too, that when God through the general call of the Gospel “invites all equally to Himself through the outward preaching of the Word,” He is actually holding this call out as a “savour of death, and as the occasion for severer condemnation” for those who are predestined to damnation. And even if they do believe for a while, He then “justly forsakes them on account of their ungratefulness and strikes them with even greater blindness,” while those who are predestined to life can never fall away.¹³ Nor was Calvin moved to modify his position by passages such as Ez. 33:11; 1 Tim. 2:3,4 and 2 Pet. 3:9, which speak of God’s will for the salvation of all men and expressly state that He does not want any to be lost. With the logic of double predestination as his starting point, he simply denies that they can mean what they say, and twists them to refer to the elect only. For example, he explains 1 Tim. 2:4 (“God wills all men to be saved”) as follows: “Paul surely means only that God has not closed the way unto salvation to any order of men; rather He has so poured out His mercy that He would have none without it.”¹⁴

In his introduction to the Saxon Visitation Articles of 1592 in *Creeds of Christendom*, Philip Schaff claims that “Luther (in his book against Erasmus) taught the same doctrine on the subject of predestination as Calvin.”¹⁵ Other Calvinists have made the same claim. There are some passages in *De Servo Arbitrio* which, taken out of context, would seem to support this view, but a careful reading of the work reveals that Luther and Calvin did not teach the same thing at all regarding predestination. F. Bente, in historical introduction to the Symbolical Books in *Concordia Triglotta*, proves that Luther’s teaching in *De Servo Arbitrio* and throughout his ministry was in full agreement with Article XI of the *Formula of Concord*.¹⁶

We must distinguish, Luther says, between the majesty of God and His hidden will on the one hand, and His revealed and preached will on the other. Commenting on Ezekiel 33:11, Luther writes:

Moreover, why some are conscience struck by the Law, while others aren’t, so that some accept the proffered grace while others despise it, this is a different question and is not treated here by Ezekiel, for he is speaking of the preached

and offered mercy of God, not of that hidden will of God that must be considered with great reverence, which ordains according to His counsel which and what kind of people, according to His will, will be able to receive the preached and offered mercy. This will is not to be searched out, but is to be reverently worshipped as the deepest, holiest mystery of the divine Majesty, which God has reserved for Himself and has forbidden us to know. Now when the *Diatribes* reasons: “Does the holy God mourn the death of His people which He Himself has worked in them?” (for this just seems too unreasonable to her), we answer as we have said before: we must speak differently of God or of the will of God that is preached to us, that is revealed to us, that is offered to us, with which we occupy ourselves, than of the God who is not preached, not revealed, who has not been offered, with whom we have nothing to do. Therefore, inasmuch as God hides Himself and does not want to be known by us, He is none of our business.... We must not try to seek God out in His Majesty and in His Essence ... but insofar as He is clothed in His Word and has manifested Himself therein and offered Himself to us therein, we deal with Him. This Word is His glory and beauty with which the Psalmist, 21,6, celebrates Him as being clothed.... So we say that the holy God does not mourn the death of His people which He Himself works in them; rather, He mourns the death He finds in His people and of which He tries to rid them. For that is what the preached God does: He takes away sin and death and saves us. For “He sent forth His Word and healed them”(Ps. 107 20). But God, as He is hidden in His majesty, does not mourn, does not take death away, either, but works life and death and all things in all men. For here God has not limited Himself through His Word, but remains free over all things. God does many things without revealing them to us in His Word; He also wills many things without telling us in His Word that He wills them. In this way He does not want the death of the sinner, namely, according to His Word; but He wants it according to that unsearchable will. But now we must look to the Word and let that unsearchable will be; for we must allow ourselves to be led by the Word, not by that unsearchable will.... It is enough for us just to know that in God there is a certain unsearchable will.... So you are right in saying: “If God does not want the death of the sinner, the blame must be laid on our will, if we are lost.” Right, I say, if you are talking about the preached God, for He wants all men to be saved, since He comes to all with the Word of salvation; and it is the fault of the will that will not receive Him (Matt. 23:37).... But why the divine majesty does not take away this weakness of our will, or change everyone, since it’s not in the power of man anyway, or why God holds man accountable for this, since man can’t be without it—this we must not search out, and even if you would want to search it out diligently, you could never find it out, as Paul says, Rom. 9:20 “Who art thou, that repliest against God?”¹⁷

We see from this passage from *De Servo Arbitrio* that “while holding that we must not deny the majesty and the mysteries of God, Luther did not regard these, but Christ crucified and justification by faith in the promises of the Gospel, as the true objects of our concern. Nor does

he, as Calvin did, employ predestination as a corrective and regulative norm for interpreting, limiting, invalidating, annulling, or casting doubt upon, any of the blessed truths of the Gospel. Luther does not modify the revealed will of God in order to harmonize it with God's sovereignty. He does not place the hidden God in opposition to the revealed God, nor does he reject the one in order to maintain the other. He denies neither the revealed universality of God's grace, of Christ's redemption, and of the efficaciousness of the Holy Spirit in the means of grace, nor the unsearchable judgments and ways of God's majesty".¹⁸ While Calvin sought to uphold the glory of God by emphasizing His hidden will and majesty, Luther saw the true glory of God in His revealed will and in His universal, saving grace. "This Word is His glory and beauty with which the Psalmist, 21,6, celebrates Him as being clothed."¹⁹

Luther often warned against trying to discover the hidden will of God regarding election outside of the Gospel. In a letter of comfort written in 1528, he urges a man who is troubled by predestination to simply believe God's Word in the Gospel. "For the Word is true, but the thoughts of men are useless and vain. One must also think thus: God Almighty has not created, predestinated and elected us to perdition, but to salvation, as Paul asserts, Eph. 1,4; nor should we begin to dispute about God's predestination from the Law or reason, but from the grace of God and the Gospel, which is proclaimed to all men."²⁰

Luther was speaking from experience, "For I am well acquainted with this malady," he says in another letter, dated April 30, 1531, "having lain in this hospital sick unto eternal death." In this letter he writes: "The chief of all the commandments of God is that we picture before our eyes His dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is to be the daily mirror of our heart, in which we see how dear we are to God, and how much He has cared for us as a good God, so that He even gave His dear Son for us. Here, here, I say, and nowhere else, a man can learn the true art of predestination. Then it will come to pass that you believe on Christ. And if you believe, then you are called: if you are called, then you are surely predestinated. Do not suffer this mirror and throne of grace to be plucked from the eyes of your heart."²¹

In summary, Luther did not deny that God has, in Christ, predestinated those who will be saved to eternal life, but he refused to draw the logical corollary that Calvin drew without Scriptural warrant, that God has predestined the others to eternal damnation. Instead, Luther urged men to cling to that very Gospel promise of universal grace and atonement that Calvin denied, and to see their election in Christ, and to believe that God wants all men to be saved, as He says in His Word. For Luther, the doctrine of predestination was not the overriding, everpresent norm of all theology, as it was for Calvin; it stood in the service of the Gospel, to comfort Christians in their afflictions. Thus the *Formula of Concord* quotes his advice in the Preface to the Epistle to the Romans: "Follow the Epistle to the Romans in its order, concern yourself first with Christ and His Gospel, that you may recognize your sins and His grace; next, that you contend with sin, as Paul teaches from the first to the eighth chapter; then, when in the eighth chapter you will come into (will have been exercised by) temptation under the cross and afflictions, this will teach you in the ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters how consolatory predestination is."²²

IV. The Sacraments

Calvin defined a sacrament as follows: "It is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of His good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward Him in the presence of the Lord and of His angels

and before men. Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward Him.”²³ Did Calvin consider the sacraments to be means of grace? You might think so according to this statement, “Therefore, let it be regarded as a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in Him the treasures of heavenly grace. But they avail and profit nothing unless received in faith.”²⁴ However, he warns that “our confidence ought not to inhere in the sacraments, nor the glory of God be transferred to them. Rather, laying aside all things, both our faith and our confession ought to rise up to Him who is the Author of the sacraments and of all things.”²⁵

Calvin rejected Zwingli’s view of the sacraments as mere outward signs by which a Christian distinguishes himself from unbelievers. He believed that through the use of the sacraments the Holy Spirit, “that inward Teacher” comes to those who believe and increases their faith and trust in God’s promises.²⁶ He also taught that the Old Testament sacraments (circumcision, purifications, sacrifices, etc.) were essentially no different from the New Testament sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in what they conveyed, although he granted that Christ was more fully expressed in the Christian sacraments.²⁷ He calls Augustine’s statements “The sacraments of the old law only promised the Saviour; but ours give salvation” an exaggeration by which the church father simply meant to say what he says elsewhere, “The sacraments of the Mosaic law foretold Christ, but ours tell forth Christ.”²⁸

For Calvin, the sacraments were means of grace in the limited sense that through them the Holy Spirit strengthened faith. He would not say, however, that they are means through which the Holy Spirit actually gives us the blessings of Christ. Luther, on the other hand, was clear on this point. “For something to be or to be called a sacrament, there first has to be an external, tangible sign or created thing, through which God deals with us visibly, that we might be sure of Him.... But the external work or sign neither counts nor does anything by itself, unless His Word is added, through which such signs become powerful and we understand what God is working in us through such signs. But to both of these must also be added a divine command, through which we are assured of His will and work in such a sign connected with the Word.”²⁹

Of course, Luther also rejected the *opus operatum* concept of the sacraments. He always stressed that the benefits are received only through faith in the promises of God. He considered the Old Testament sacraments to have nothing more than signs and types of Christ and His blessings. “The sacraments of the Old Testament and of the law did not justify through their own power and effect, but were mere signs, symbols and types before the people. But Baptism is a water bound up and comprehended in and with God’s Word, in which grace is promised; for the sacraments of the New Testament are not just mere signs, as those in the Old Testament were, but they also work forgiveness of sins, righteousness and salvation in those who use them in true faith.”³⁰

Calvin’s concept of the sacraments is seen by many to straddle the fence between Zwingli and Luther. In the end, however, all he does is spiritualize Zwingli’s teaching on the sacraments, for he denies any real efficacy of the external means connected with the Word. While Luther teaches that God comes down to us with His blessings in the sacraments, Calvin says that we rise up to Him in faith when we use them.

V. Baptism

Baptism, defined in the *Institutes*, is “the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the Church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.”³¹ It is not just “a token and mark by which we confess our religion before men,” but rather “a token and proof of our cleansing, ... like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted and effaced that they can never come to His sight, be recalled or charged against us.”³² He denies that Baptism actually works and confers regeneration, the grace of God, and salvation. It only signifies and seals these (Saxon Visitation Articles).³³ “For Paul did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, or that water contains in itself the power to cleanse, regenerate and renew; nor that here is the cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts.”³⁴ Commenting on John 3:5 (“Unless a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”), Calvin writes: “Christ here indicates the way in which God regenerates us, namely through water and the Spirit. It is as if He said: through the Spirit, who in cleansing and watering faithful souls performs the function of water. I therefore simply understand ‘water and Spirit’ as ‘Spirit who is water.’”³⁵ Thus he worms his way out of having to admit that regeneration comes through Baptism.

Calvin’s understanding of Baptism as a sign of what God does in us is clearly expressed in the following passage from the *Institutes*:

Inasmuch as it is given for the arousing, nourishing and confirming of our faith, it is to be received as from the hand of the Author Himself. We ought to deem it certain and proved that it is He who speaks to us through the sign; that it is He who purifies and washes away sins, and wipes out the remembrance of them; that it is He who makes us sharers in His death, who deprives Satan of his rule, who weakens the power of our lust; indeed, that it is He who comes into a unity with us so that, having put on Christ, we may be acknowledged God’s children. These things, I say, He performs for our soul within as surely and truly as we see our body outwardly cleansed, submerged and surrounded with water. For this analogy or similitude is the surest rule of the sacraments: that we should see spiritual things in physical, as if set before our eyes. For the Lord was pleased to represent them by such figures—not because such graces are bound up and enclosed in the sacrament so as to be conferred upon us by its power, but only because the Lord by this token attests His will toward us, namely that He is pleased to lavish all these things upon us. And He does not feed our eyes with a mere appearance only, but leads us to the present reality and effectively performs what it symbolizes.³⁶

Since Baptism is not a means of grace, but rather a testimony of God’s grace, in Calvin’s view, he rejects emergency baptism as well as baptism by women. In answer to the objection that a child which dies without Baptism will be deprived of the grace of regeneration, he says: “Not at all. God declares that He adopts our babies as His own before they were born, when He promises that He will be our God and the God of our descendants after us (Gen. 17:7). Their salvation is embraced in this word. No one will dare be so insolent toward God as to deny that His promise of itself suffices for its effect.”³⁷ In view of this teaching, that “children of Christians are holy before Baptism and from their mothers’ wombs,” and are “while still in their mothers’ wombs established in the covenant of eternal life,” as the Saxon Visitation Articles

correctly understand Calvin's doctrine,³⁸ Calvin strongly advocates infant baptism, not because baptism works anything in them, but because the "infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit."³⁹ This secret working of the Spirit is not through Baptism, but takes place already in the mother's womb—if they are among the elect. The benefit of infant baptism at the time of the baptism is for the parents. "For God's sign, communicated to a child as by an impressed seal, confirms the promise given to the pious parent, and declares it to be ratified that the Lord will be God not only to him but to his seed; and that He wills to manifest His goodness and grace not only to him but to his descendants even to the thousandth generation."⁴⁰ The children also receive some benefit, he says, in that they "are somewhat more commended to the other members" of the church. "Then, when they have grown up, they are greatly spurred to an earnest zeal for worshipping God, by whom they were received as children through a solemn symbol of adoption."⁴¹

For Luther, "Baptism is nothing else than the Word of God in the water, commanded by His institution, or, as Paul says, 'a washing in the Word;' as also Augustine says: 'Let the Word come to the element, and it becomes a sacrament.'"⁴² Luther does not separate the element from the Word, as Calvin so assiduously does. "We do not hold with Thomas and the monastic preachers who forget the Word (God's institution) and say that God has imparted to the water a spiritual power, which through the water washes away sin. Nor do we agree with Scotus and the Barefooted monks—here Calvin fits in, too—"who teach that, by the assistance of the divine will, Baptism washes away sins, and that this absolution occurs only through the will of God, and by no means through the Word or water."⁴³ In the *Large Catechism*, Luther says to those who would separate the water from the Word: "How dare you thus interfere with God's order, and tear away the most precious treasure with which God has connected and enclosed it (the water) and which He will not have separated? For the kernel in the water is God's Word or command and the name of God, which is a treasure greater and nobler than heaven and earth."⁴⁴ "Therefore," he says, "it is not only natural water, but a divine, heavenly, holy and blessed water, and in whatever other terms we can praise it, – all on account of the Word."⁴⁵ "Therefore I exhort again that these two, the water and the Word, by no means be separated from one another and parted."⁴⁶

Baptism is not just a testimony of God's grace, but a divinely instituted means of grace. "Therefore state it most simply thus, that the power, work, profit, fruit and end of Baptism is this, namely, to save. For no one is baptized in order that he may become a prince, but, as the words declare, that he might be saved. But to be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death and the devil, and to enter into the kingdom of Christ, and to live forever with Him."⁴⁷ Luther, in the well-known words of the *Small Catechism* does not hesitate to call Baptism "a gracious water of life, and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost." He even speaks of faith clinging to the water: "Thus faith clings to the water, and believes that it is Baptism, in which there is pure salvation and life; not through the water (as we have sufficiently stated), but through the fact that it is embodied in the Word and institution of God, and the name of God inheres in it. Now, if I believe this, what else is it than believing in God as in Him who has given and planted His Word into this ordinance, and proposes to us this external thing wherein we may apprehend such a treasure?"⁴⁸

Luther also stresses that the benefit of Baptism can only be received by faith, and that it does not work as an *opus operatum*. "Baptism is not our work, but God's," he says.... "God's works, however, are saving and necessary for salvation, and do not exclude, but demand faith;

for without faith they could not be apprehended. For by suffering the water to be poured upon you, you have not yet received Baptism in such a manner that it benefits you anything; but it becomes beneficial to you if you have yourself baptized with the thought that this is according to God's command and ordinance, and besides, in God's name, in order that you may receive in the water the promised salvation. Now this, the fist cannot do, nor the body; but the heart must believe it."⁴⁹

Luther also taught that infants should be baptized, not, as Calvin did, because they are holy before Baptism, but that they might receive regeneration and through Baptism enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Luther makes it plain in his sermon on the Gospel for the third Sunday after Epiphany that infants receive the benefits of Baptism through their own faith, not by virtue of the faith of others. He bases this assurance on Christ's word: "Let the little children come unto Me and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven," "He said this and He does not lie. So it must be right and Christian to bring infants to Him; that can be done nowhere else than in Baptism. So it must be certain, also, that He blesses them and gives the Kingdom of Heaven to all who thus come to Him, as His words say: "Of such is the kingdom of God."⁵⁰

Luther upholds emergency baptism, also by women. In a sermon on Matthew 18:19,20, he says: "When newborn infants are in danger of death, and the women baptize them, it is a true Baptism, for it is performed with the right words; for the women are not congregated to dance, but rather because they would like to help the infant, that it might not be lost, but come to Christ, since they, too, are Christ's."⁵¹

Luther's view of Baptism as a divinely appointed means of grace is Scriptural and full of comfort. In his large Commentary on Galatians, he comments on Galatians 3:27 ("For as many as you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ"):

This passage we should carefully note against the enthusiasts, who belittle the majesty of Baptism and speak of it in a profane and ungodly manner. Paul, on the other hand, adorns Baptism with glorious names, calling it a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost (Tit. 3:5); and here he says that all Christians who are baptized have put on Christ, as though he would say: "You have not merely received an outward sign in Baptism, by which you have been received into the fellowship of Christians," as many enthusiasts in our day have maintained (who have made nothing more than an external sign out of Baptism, that is, a short lived and empty sign); but he says, "As many of you as have been baptized, have put on Christ," that is, you have been snatched away from the law and transplanted into a new birth, which has happened through Baptism. So you aren't under the law anymore, but in a new robe, that is, you are clothed with Christ's righteousness. So Paul teaches that Baptism is not a sign, but the robe of Christ, yes, that Christ Himself is our robe. Therefore Baptism is the most powerful and effective thing.⁵²

VI. The Lord's Supper and the Person of Christ

When Calvin began writing his *Institutes*, Luther and Zwingli had already had their famous meeting at Marburg. The widely divergent and irreconcilable views of the two reformers on the Lord's Supper had been well publicized. Calvin, as we have seen, signed the Augsburg

Confession while in Strasburg, whereby he actually subscribed to Luther's Scriptural doctrine of the Supper. In 1557, however, he stated in a letter to Martin Schalling that he had subscribed "in the sense in which the author himself (Melanchthon) has interpreted it," namely, in the *Variata* of 1540.⁵³

Philip Schaff, in *Creeds of Christendom*, maintains that "Calvin's theology took a middle course, retaining, on the basis of Zwingli's exegesis, the religious substance of Luther's faith, and giving it a more intellectual form ..."⁵⁴ However, although Calvin uses the expression "real presence," his doctrine is a "denial *in toto* of the real presence as taught by Luther,"⁵⁵ as Bente says. And to deny the real presence as Luther taught it is to forfeit the religious substance of Luther's faith.

Calvin did attempt to express his doctrine in Lutheran-sounding terms, but, as Bente writes: "In fact, Calvin's doctrine was nothing but a polished form of Zwingli's crude teaching, couched in phrases approaching the Luther ... terminology as closely as possible. Even where he paraded as Luther, Calvin was but Zwingli disguised (and poorly at that) in a seemingly orthodox garband promenading with several imitation Lutheran feathers in his hat."⁵⁶

"In this Sacrament," Calvin says, "we have such a full witness of all these things (Christ's blessings), that we must certainly consider them as if Christ here present were Himself set before our eyes and touched by our hands. For His Word cannot lie or deceive us: 'Take, eat, drink; this is My body, which is given for you; this is My blood, which is shed for forgiveness of sins.'⁵⁷ This is as close as Calvin comes to the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. Taken by itself, such a statement could be understood to say that we really receive Christ's body and blood with the bread and wine that we eat and drink in the Supper. But Calvin forbids such an understanding of his words.

From the physical things set forth in the Sacrament we are led by a sort of analogy to the spiritual things. Thus, when bread is given as a symbol of Christ's body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains and keeps the life of our body, so Christ's body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ's blood.⁵⁸

The body and blood of the Lord are "represented under bread and wine," Calvin says.⁵⁹ His basic Zwinglianism is in a spiritualized form, however:

There are some who define the eating of Christ's flesh and the drinking of His blood as, in one word, nothing but to believe in Christ. But it seems to me that Christ meant to teach something more definite, and more elevated, in that noble discourse in He commends to us the eating of His flesh (John 6:26 ff). It is that we are quickened by the true partaking of Him; and He has therefore designated this partaking by the words "eating" and "drinking," in order that no one should think that the life we receive from Him is received by mere knowledge. As it is not the seeing but the eating of the bread that suffices to feed the body, so the soul must truly and deeply become partaker of Christ that it may be quickened to spiritual life by His power. We admit indeed, meanwhile, that this is no other eating than that of faith, as no other can be

imagined. But here is the difference between my words and theirs: ... for them, eating is faith; for me it rather seems to follow from faith. In this way, the Lord intended, by calling Himself the “bread of life,” to teach not only that salvation for us rests on faith in His death and resurrection, but also that, by true partaking of Him, His life passes into us and is made ours—just as bread when taken as food imparts vigor to the body.⁶⁰

The bread and the wine symbolize this partaking of Christ through faith, Calvin says, and the Holy Spirit seals it with His testimony in the Supper.

Now that sacred partaking of His flesh and blood, by which Christ pours His life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow, He also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of His Spirit to fulfill what He promises. And truly He offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart.⁶¹

The sacred mystery of the Supper consists in two things, Calvin says: “physical signs, which thrust before our eyes, represent to us, according to our feeble capacity, things invisible; and spiritual truth, which is at the same time represented and displayed through the symbols themselves.”⁶² “I say, therefore that in the mystery of the Supper, Christ is truly shown to us through the symbols of bread and wine, His very body and blood, in which He has fulfilled all obedience to obtain righteousness for us.”⁶³

Calvin labels any teaching that “attaches Christ to the element of bread” a perverse error spawned by Satan.⁶⁴ After rejecting the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, he says that “others confess that the bread of the Supper is truly the substance of an earthly and corruptible element, and scoffers no change in itself, but holds the body of Christ enclosed underneath itself. If they explained their meaning that, when bread is proffered in the mystery, a showing of the body is attached, on the ground that the truth is inseparable from its sign, I would not strongly object. But because, placing the body itself in the bread, they assign to it a ubiquity contrary to its nature, and by adding ‘under the bread’ means that it lies hidden there, we must for a little while drag these subtleties out of their lurking laces.”⁶⁵ This teaching, Calvin maintains, cancels the true corporeality of Christ. We must, he claims, “be lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds, to seek Christ there in the glory of His Kingdom.... So under the symbol of bread we shall be fed by His body, under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink His blood, to enjoy Him at last in His wholeness. For though He has taken away His flesh from us, and in the body has ascended into heaven, yet He sits at the right hand of the Father, —that is, He reigns in the Father’s power and majesty and glory.”⁶⁶ Thus, by His almighty power, “He feeds His people with His own body, the communion of which He bestows upon them by the power of His Spirit. In this manner the body and blood of Christ are shown to us in the Sacrament.”⁶⁷

Any claim of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament must be limited by two things, Calvin says. “1) Let nothing be withdrawn from Christ’s heavenly glory—as happens when He is brought under the corruptible elements of this world, or bound to any earthly creatures. 2) Let

nothing inappropriate to human nature be ascribed to His body, as happens when it is said either to be infinite or to be put in a number of places at once.”⁶⁸

The words of institution, Calvin says, must be understood as a metonymy, a figure of speech.⁶⁹ He is sensitive to the charge of rationalizing the words of Christ, and tries to defend his method by ridiculing a literal understanding of them.

Hearing Christ’s words, ‘This is My body,’ they imagine a miracle, far from His mind. But when foul absurdities come forth from this fiction, because they have already with headlong haste ensnared themselves, they plunge into the abyss of God’s omnipotence to extinguish by this means the light of the truth. Hence arises that haughty fastidiousness “We do not want to know how Christ lies hidden under the bread, being content with His words, ‘This is My body.’ But as for us, we study with no less obedience than care to obtain a sound understanding of this passage, as we do of the whole Scripture. And we do not with perverted ardor and without discrimination rashly seize upon what first springs to our minds. Rather, after diligently meditating on it, we embrace the meaning which the Spirit of God offers.... From this has risen our explanation of Christ’s words.... But following the holy virgin’s example, we do not regard it as unlawful for ourselves in a difficult matter to inquire how it can take place.”⁷⁰

The body of Christ must remain in heaven until the Last Day, Calvin says. “Peter says that Christ must be received or embraced by heaven until He come again” referring to Acts 3:21⁷¹—“These men”—the Lutherans—“teach that He is everywhere in space but without form. They object that it is wrong for the nature of the glorious body to submit to the laws of common nature.”⁷² But, Calvin objects, “it is the true nature of a body to be contained in space, to have its own dimensions and its own shape. Away then, with this stupid fiction which fastens both men’s minds and Christ to the bread!”⁷³

Calvin accuses the Lutherans of Eutychianism in their doctrine of the Person of Christ (i.e., of mixing the two natures in Christ). “But from the Scripture we plainly infer that the one Person of Christ so consists of two natures that each nevertheless retains unimpaired its own distinctive character.”⁷⁴ “What sort of madness, then, is it to mingle heaven and earth rather than give up trying to drag Christ’s body from the heavenly sanctuary?”⁷⁵

Still he maintains a “real presence” of the flesh of Christ in the Supper. “To them, Christ does not seem present unless He comes down to us. As though, if He should lift us up to Himself, we should not just as much enjoy His presence! ... Away with that calumny that Christ is removed from His Supper unless He lies hidden under the covering of the bread! For since this mystery is heavenly, there is no need to draw Christ to earth that He may be joined to us.”⁷⁶

Finally, Calvin rejects the idea that the impious and unbelievers also receive Christ’s body⁷⁷ “The flesh and blood of Christ are no less truly given to the unworthy than to God’s elect believers. At the same time it is true, however, that, just as rain falling upon a hard rock flows off because no entrance opens into the stone, the wicked by their hardness so repel God’s grace that it does not reach them.”⁷⁸ Of course, Luther did not teach that the unbelievers receive God’s grace in the Sacrament, either, but that they receive Christ’s body and blood unworthily. Calvin’s answers “But I reply that they are not condemned because they have eaten, but only for

having profaned the mystery by trampling underfoot the pledge of sacred union with God, which they ought reverently to have received.⁷⁹

Luther defines the Lord's Supper as "the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself." As with Baptism, he says, "it is the Word which makes and distinguishes this Sacrament, so that it is not mere bread and wine, but is, and is called, the body and blood of Christ.... Now it is not the word or ordinance of a prince or an emperor, but of the sublime majesty, at whose feet all creatures should fall and affirm it is as He says, and accept it with all reverence, fear and humility."⁸⁰ He goes on:

With this Word you can strengthen your conscience and say, if a hundred thousand devils, together with all fanatics, should rush forward, crying, How can bread and wine be the body and blood of Christ? etc., I know that all spirits and scholars together are not as wise as is the Divine Majesty in His little finger. Now here stands the Word of Christ: "Take, eat; this is My body; Drink ye all of it; This is My blood, etc." Here we abide, and would like to see those who will constitute themselves His masters, and make it different from what He has spoken.... For as the lips of Christ say and speak, so it is, as He can never lie or deceive.⁸¹

Luther refused to admit that the words of institution could be understood as a figure of speech. His brief definition of the Sacrament of the Altar in the Smalcald Article simply states: "Of the Sacrament of the Altar we hold that bread and wine in the Supper *are* the true body and blood of Christ, and are given and received not only by the godly, but also by wicked Christians."⁸²

While Luther insisted, as in Baptism, that the benefits of the Lord's Supper ("forgiveness of sins, life and salvation") could only be received by faith, he rejected the idea that Christ's body and blood were only received by faith in the Sacrament. In his Large Confession he writes:

Concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, ... there the body and blood of Christ are in truth orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, even though the priests who administer it, or those who receive it, should not believe or otherwise misuse it. For it does not depend on the faith or unbelief of men, but upon God's Word and ordinance, unless they first change God's Word and ordinance and interpret it otherwise, as the enemies of the Sacrament do at the present day, who, of course, have nothing but bread and wine; for they also do not have the words and appointed ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own false notion.⁸³

In his *Large Confession concerning the Holy Supper*, Luther lists "my reasons upon which I rest in this matter:"

1. The first is this article of our faith: Jesus Christ is essential, natural, true, perfect God and Man in one Person, inseparable and undivided.
2. The second, that God's right hand is everywhere.
3. The third, that God's Word is not false, nor does it lie.

4. The fourth, that God has and knows of many modes of being in any place, and not only the single one concerning which the fanatics talk flippantly, and which philosophers call *LOCALEM*, or local.⁸⁴

He goes on to describe the threefold mode of Christ's body revealed in Scripture:

First, the comprehensible, bodily mode, as He went about bodily upon earth, when according to His size, He vacated and occupied space (was circumscribed by a fixed place). This mode He can still use whenever He will, as He did after the resurrection, and will use at the Last Day....

Secondly, the incomprehensible, spiritual mode, according to which He neither occupies nor vacates space, but penetrates all creatures wherever He pleases: ... this mode He used when He rose from the closed sepulchre, and passed through the closed door to His disciples, and in the bread and wine in the Holy Supper, and, as it is believed, when He was born of His mother.

Thirdly, the divine, heavenly mode, since He is one person with God, according to which, of course, all creatures must be far more penetrable and present to Him than they are according to the second mode.... For He is one inseparable person with God; where God is, there must He also be, or our faith is false. But who will say or think how this occurs? Now since it is unknown to us, and yet true, we should not deny His words before we know how to prove to a certainty that the body of Christ can by no means be where God is, and that this mode of presence is false. This the fanatics must prove; but they will forego it.⁸⁵

Luther goes on to say that even if, as "our fanatics" teach, Christ's body had no more than the first, comprehensible mode, he would in no way deny that God's power could cause His body to be in many places at the same time. "For who will prove that this is impossible with God? Who has seen an end to His power? The fanatics indeed think thus: God cannot do it. But who will believe their thinking? With what do they make such thinking sure?"⁸⁶

Although Calvin did not use the term of Zwingli, *ALLOEOSIS*, he denied, as Zwingli did, the *genera idiomatum*, i.e., that the attributes of one nature are to be ascribed to not that nature alone, but to the entire Person of Christ. Luther claimed that such a denial undermined the very certainty of our salvation.

For if the works be parted and separated, the person must also be divided, since all the works or sufferings are ascribed not to the natures, but to the person. For it is the person that does and suffers everything, one thing according to one nature, and another according to another nature.... Therefore we regard our Lord Christ as God and man in one person, *NON CONFUNDENDO NATURAS NEC DIVIDENDO PERSONAM*, so that we neither confound the natures nor divide the person.⁸⁷

The Formula of Concord goes on to quote from Luther's book, *Of the Councils and the Church*:

We Christians must know that if God is not also in the balance, and gives the weight, we sink to the bottom with our scale. By this I mean: If it were not to

be said, God died for us, but only a man, we would be lost. But if “God’s death” and “God died” lie in the scale of the balance, then He sinks down, and we rise up as a light, empty scale.... Yet He could not sit in the scale unless He became a man like us, so that it could be said, “God died,” “God’s passion,” “God’s blood,” “God’s death.” For in His nature, God cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is correctly called God’s death, when the man dies who is one thing or one person with God.⁸⁸

Finally, Luther firmly maintained that Christ, the God-man, is indivisible, and therefore, also according to His human nature, His body and blood, He can be and is with us in His Supper.

For there are not in Christ two separate persons, but only one person: wherever it is, there it is the one undivided person; and wherever you can say, Here is God, there you must also say, Then Christ the man is also there. And if you would point out a place where God is, and not the man, the person would already be divided, because I could then say with truth: Here is God who is not man, and never as yet has become man.

However, no such a God for me! For it would follow hence that space and place separated the two natures from one another, and divided the person, and yet even death and all devils could not divide or rend them from one another. And there would remain to me a poor sort of Christ, who would be a divine and human person at the same time in no more than in only one place, while in all other places He must be only a mere separate God and divine person without humanity, No, friend, wherever you place God, there you must also place with Him humanity; they do not allow themselves to be separated or divided from one another.⁸⁹

A short conclusion to a long essay: the main difference between Luther and Calvin is evident in the excerpts from their writings in this essay a difference we have always known; it is this, that Calvin, for all his pious phrases, tried to force the Word of God and the Person of Christ into the narrow confines of human reason and logic. As a result, he lost the gracious God revealed in Scripture. Luther, as an obedient, humble child of God, refused to question the Word of God, but accepted it in childlike faith, even when it didn’t seem to conform to reason and logic. As a result, he kept his gracious God with all His gifts and blessings. “*Gottes Wort und Luthers Lehr’ vergehen nie und nimmermehr!*” Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word! Amen.

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