

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 17 – Part 1

THE SACRED SUPPER OF CHRIST AND WHAT BRINGS IT TO US

Chapter seventeen is one of the longest chapters of the Institutes. It is so because, in the time of the Reformation (which began in 1517) there were multiple, mutually exclusive ways of understanding the communion. They ranged from the meal as merely a remembrance of what Christ said and did (Zwingli), to Christ being spiritually present in the supper (Calvin), to Christ being present “in, with and under” the elements (Luther - consubstantiation), and then to Roman Catholicism in which the bread and wine became the actual body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation). While it will seem odd to us, Christians during the 16th and 17th centuries not only argued about the differences, but killed each other over them. Thus, Calvin spends a great deal of time explaining and defending his view.

Summary: Calvin begins with a rationale for Jesus instituting communion. *“God has received us once for all into his family, to hold us...as sons. Therefore, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father, concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life. To this end therefore, he has through the hand of his only begotten Son, given to the church another sacrament (baptism being the first) that is a spiritual banquet wherein Christ attests himself to be life giving bread upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality”* (pg. 1359-60). Though this sounds rather straight forward (we belong to God’s family and so God spiritually feeds us), given the disagreements over communion, Calvin believes that it *“demands a careful explanation”* (pg. 1360).

He begins this careful explanation by explaining that that the bread and wine *“...represent for us the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ”* (pg. 1360). He continues *“Now Christ is the only food for our soul, and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength...Since however, this mystery of Christ’s secret union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible, he shows its figure and image in visible signs...we are therefore bidden to take and eat the body which was once and for all offered for our salvation in order that...we may conclude...that the power of his life-giving death, will be efficacious in us.”* (pg. 1360-61). In these sentences Calvin is trying to hold two things in tension. The first is that the elements are not actual body and blood, but are representations of them. The second is that when we receive the supper, we are spiritually receiving the body and blood of Christ. In other words, Calvin rejects the Roman assertion that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ, the Lutheran assertion that Christ is physically present in, under and with the elements, and the Zwinglian assertion that Christ is not present at the supper at all. Instead he argues that Christ is spiritually but not physically present in the meal.

Calvin expands on this idea of Christ being spiritually present in the sacrament with these words. *“Thus when bread is given as a symbol of Christ’s body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes...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 the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ’s blood* (pg. 1363). Thus, in Calvin’s understanding, though Christ is not physically present, he is present in spirit to *“...nourish, refresh, strengthen and gladden”* us (pg. 1363).

Reflections: As Presbyterians we speak of communion as a “means of grace.” What we mean by that phrase is that in communion, the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection (the defeat of sin and the empowering of our lives for good) are made real, in ways that are not ordinarily available; that there is something that actually happens to us and in us when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

Questions:

1. What were you taught about communion as a child?
2. What is your present understanding of communion?
3. What do you think of Calvin’s view of Christ being spiritually present? Why?