

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 17 – Part 2

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 sacrament of 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), 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 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries not only argued about these differences, but killed each other over them. Thus, Calvin spends a great deal of time explaining and defending his view. In the last article Calvin gave an overview of his belief that Christ is spiritually present in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. In this section, he expands on his initial statements.

**Summary:** Calvin begins by noting that the promise of Christ’s forgiveness and salvation are “sealed in the supper” (pg. 1363). He writes that “It is not, therefore, the chief function of the Sacrament simply to...extend to us the body of Christ. Rather, it is to seal and confirm the promise by which...his flesh...and blood...feed us unto eternal life” (pg. 1363). Calvin continues that the promises are confirmed when in the sacrament “we receive him (Jesus) by faith” (pg. 1364). What this means is that when we partake of communion, we are not simply eating bread and drinking wine, but that something is happening that through our faith in Christ, the benefits of that faith (forgiveness and salvation) are being transferred to us. This means that in communion there is something beyond “an outward profession” (pg. 1366) of belief that is occurring. In a sense, he argues that when we eat and drink at the table, we become actual, spiritual partakers of Christ and all that Christ accomplished on the cross.

Calvin believes that all of this is possible because of the work of the Holy Spirit. He writes that “...our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ in the same way that bread and wine keep and sustain physical life...for though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by so great a distance, penetrates to us so that it becomes our food; let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses...” (pg. 1370). The Spirit is the conduit through which this mysterious feeding becomes possible and because of that, whenever Christians take communion, they are to be “...persuaded that the truth of the thing (what Jesus has done for us) is surely present...” (pg. 1371) at the table. He summarizes his view in this way. “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...that we may grow into one body with him...and also feel his power in partaking of all his benefits” (pg. 1372).

Calvin then argues against transubstantiation, the Roman view that the bread and wine become the real body and blood of Christ, and consubstantiation, which is Luther’s view that Christ’s body is physically present “under” the bread. He argues that these are not possible because 1) the body of Christ is in heaven with God and so cannot be here on earth 2) Christ is not returning until he comes in his second coming 3) and it takes what is a mystery and turns it into something that needs “...some physical form of enclosing” (pg. 1379).

**Reflections:** Many years ago, I was doing some continuing education at a local Roman Catholic Seminary in San Antonio. During a break, I asked a priest if he believed in transubstantiation as explained in classic Roman Catholic theology. He smiled and replied that that he did not, but that he still believed in the real presence of Christ in communion. In some ways, I believed that he and I were not all that far apart in our beliefs; that we both believed that there is a mystery in communion that we cannot fully explain, in that on the table are bread and wine (juice) but that in and through what we do, Jesus and his saving love for us are made real.

**Questions:**

1. Which of the views of communion (listed in the opening paragraph) best suits your views?
2. How does (if it does) taking communion offer you hope and comfort?
3. How comfortable are you with the idea of communion being a mystery?