

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 17 – Part 3

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 16th and 17th 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 two articles Calvin explained that Christ was not only spiritually present in the sacrament but that the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection are offered to us in it as well. In this section, he returns to a discussion of the purpose of communion.

Summary: We begin this article with a summary of Calvin’s rejection of the notions that 1) Christ is physically present either “in” or “under” the bread and wine and 2) Christ is not present in the supper at all. *“But we must establish such a presence of Christ in the supper as may neither fasten him to the element of bread, nor enclose him in the bread... and we must reject that the sacrament is to be received...solely by the imagination or understanding of mind...”* (pg. 1382). For Calvin, so long as Christians reject those two views and believe that in the supper they are receiving the *“...nourishment of eternal life...”* (pg. 1382), then they are on the right track concerning the sacrament of communion.

Calvin defends this view by examining Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. *“What Christ took into his hands and gave to the disciples he declared to be his body; but he had taken bread - who therefore cannot understand that bread is still shown? And accordingly, that there is nothing more absurd than to...”* transfer to the bread the physical presence of the one breaking it (pg. 1383). Thus, the symbols (the bread and wine) are different from the things that they symbolize (the body and blood of Jesus). In other words, bread stays bread. Even so it is still important to him that there be a visual connection between the symbol and the thing symbolized. To make his point he quotes Augustine (354-430 CE), *“If sacraments did not have a certain likeness to those things of which they are sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all”* (pg. 1386).

At this point Calvin discusses one of the central acts of the Roman Church, which is the “adoration of the host.” (The host is the consecrated bread, which is considered to be the body of Christ. As such it was and still is often paraded in procession and treated as if it is the incarnation of Christ). He objects to the adoration of the host because the sacrament is supposed to cause people to seek to follow Christ more closely. It is to be an encouragement for their spiritual journey. If, however, they believe that in the host, they have already reached their destination in Christ, then they are not challenged to continue their journey of personal transformation. Calvin puts it this way, *“...if the function of the Sacrament is to help the otherwise weak mind of man so that it may rise to look upon the height of spiritual mysteries, then those who are halted at the outward sign wander from the right way of seeking Christ”* (pg. 1412).

Reflections: When my wife Cindy and I went on a trip for our 35th wedding anniversary, we were in Prague when we watched a procession on the Feast of Corpus Christi, or the feast of the body of Christ. In the procession, a priest was holding aloft the host in an elaborate container. Even as a Protestant, I could admire the beauty of the procession (bells, flower petals, chanting, incense). Yet at the same time I found myself a bit uncomfortable with the message...that Christ was more present in that piece of bread, than in the people in the procession. That moment was a reminder to me of how our theology about the sacraments can and does influence our theology about where Christ is most present.

Questions:

1. How does the sacrament of communion nourish you?
2. How do you see the connection between the symbols and the symbolized in communion?
3. How has communion encouraged you on your spiritual journey?