

The Eucharist: The Church Fathers vs. John Calvin

(Different Views or Damnable Heresy?)

By Ward Fenley

Introduction

If any one denieth, that, in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist, are contained truly, really, and substantially, the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and consequently the whole Christ; but saith that He is only therein as in a sign, or in figure, or virtue; let him be anathema.¹

If any one saith, that, in the sacred and holy sacrament of the Eucharist, the substance of the bread and wine remains conjointly with the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and denieth that wonderful and singular conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body, and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood-the species Only of the bread and wine remaining-which conversion indeed the Catholic Church most aptly calls Transubstantiation; let him be anathema.²

If any one saith, that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving; or, that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated

¹ The Council of Trent, *Thirteenth Session, The Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Canon I*

² C.T., *Thirteenth Session, The Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist, Canon II*

*on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice; or, that it profits him only who receives; and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, pains, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be anathema.*³

It may seem strange that an essay on Eucharistic perspectives by John Calvin and the Church Fathers would commence with three statements from Roman Catholicism's Council of Trent. These statements from the Council of Trent (CT), seem strong and perhaps unique because of the severe wording. And surely the Council was indeed a response of counter-reformation against Luther's proposals. Many Protestants assume that the doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that at consecration the bread and the wine become the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ⁴) originated with the Roman Catholic Church. While it was made an *official* teaching of the RCC,⁵ the same teaching is clearly set forth among the ante-Nicene and post-Nicene Church Fathers. What makes the above statements in CT significant is that the statements echo the enormous weight and saving efficacy that the Church Fathers placed upon the Eucharist. In order to understand Calvin's stark deviation from this teaching, a comparison of his view must be made with that of Church Fathers. In doing so, it is necessary to establish to what degree the Eucharist was considered a fundamental or essential tenet of faith among the Fathers. That is, was belief in the historic Christian view of the Eucharist considered necessary for salvation? It was agreed at the council of Nicaea that those who denied the deity of Christ were anathematized.⁶ Canon I of the First Council of Constantinople declares, "Every heresy is to be anathematized."⁷ Cyril at the Council of Ephesus brought forth twelve anathemas, not the least

³ C.T., *Twenty-Second Session, Canons on the Sacrifice of the Mass, Canon III*

⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY Westminster John Knox Press 2005), 174.

⁵ Gonzalez, *Essential*, 174

⁶ Council of Nicea A.D. 325

⁷ Council of Constantinople A.D. 381

of which condemned Nestorius for his heretical belief concerning the nature of Christ.⁸ Even affirming a person of heretical belief was considered worthy of condemnation, as Pope Leo does to Eutyches when he writes the bishop of Constantinople: “But when [Eutyches] had refused to be party to the anathematising of his wicked doctrine, your fraternity would have realised that he was persisting in his false belief and that he deserved a verdict of condemnation.”⁹ At the second council of Nicaea, mere iconoclasm was considered heretical:

If anyone does not *confess* that Christ our God can be represented in His humanity, let him be **anathema**.

If anyone does not *accept* representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be **anathema**.

If anyone does not *salute* such representations as standing for the Lord and His saints, let him be **anathema**.

If anyone *rejects* any *written or unwritten* Tradition of the Church, let him be **anathema**.¹⁰

So then we understand that ante and post Nicene Fathers were very clear in their anathemas, even for something as seemingly harmless as opposing iconic representation. How much more would they consider heretical and worthy of anathema one who denied what could be considered as the most important of all Christian beliefs next to the affirmation of the divinity of Christ? This is a valid question, considering the negligence and corruption of the church existing at the

⁸ Council of Ephesus A.D. 431

⁹ Council of Constantinople A.D. 451

¹⁰ Second Council of Nicaea A.D. 787

time of the framing of the Council of Trent. Loraine Boettner writes concerning the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist: “It is the very sternest doctrine of their church. It is one of the chief doctrines, if indeed it is not the chief doctrine, upon which their church rests.”¹¹ Did Roman Catholicism simply imagine the weight placed upon the Eucharist? Justo Gonzalez rightly observes that Communion “from the very beginning had been the central act of Christian worship.”¹² Yet Gonzalez seems to point to a later time when the Mass became essentially and fundamentally important: “...this notion of the Mass as sacrifice eventually became standard doctrine in the Western Church.¹³ Gonzalez also writes, “[...] and finally in the thirteenth century the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) would proclaim the doctrine of transubstantiation.”¹⁴ Regarding Medieval architecture, Gonzalez writes, “The cultic purpose of church buildings centered on the medieval understanding of communion. This was seen as the miraculous transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord, and as the renewal of the sacrifice of Christ.”¹⁵ But Gonzalez also confirms, “At least by the fourth century, it is common to find claims that this presence is the physical body of Christ.”¹⁶ Philip Schaff, in his *History of the Christian Church*, shows the importance of the Eucharist to the ancient church: “[The ancient church] looked upon [the Eucharist] as the holiest mystery of the Christian worship, and accordingly celebrated it with the deepest devotion...”¹⁷ Gonzalez reports the

¹¹ Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Phillipsburg, NJ Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company 1962), 175.

¹² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume I* (New York, NY HarperCollins Publishers 2010), 165

¹³ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 288.

¹⁴ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 321.

¹⁵ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 381.

¹⁶ Gonzalez, *Essential*, 174

¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church V. II* (Grand Rapids, MI WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1910), 241. Schaff curiously (and one might think intentionally) misleads his readers into thinking that that teaching did not arrive until the middle ages and the scholastic period: “The Eucharistic [transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and spiritual presence of Christ] controversies in the middle ages and during the sixteenth century are among the most unedifying and barren in the history of Christianity... The different theories represent elements of truth which have become obscured or perverted by scholastic subtleties...” Schaff *History V. I*, 474. But then, in V. III (which deals with the period between A.D. 311-600) Schaff writes: “In the previous period we distinguish

morbid rumor that arose because very early Christians “spoke of being nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, and since they also spoke of him as a little child, some came to the conclusion that, as an initiation rite, Christians concealed a newborn in a loaf of bread, and then ordered the neophyte to cut the loaf. When this was done, they all joined in eating the warm flesh of the infant.”¹⁸ The history of the Church’s affirmation of transubstantiation and its saving efficacy is displayed not only with statements but even in its architecture.

This is not to say that the Eucharist (Sacraments) was not important to Calvin. But his view differed significantly from the Church Fathers. The Church Fathers will be examined first in order to establish what the standard teaching on the Eucharist was. Then we will examine Calvin’s view.

While Gonzalez’s *Essential Theological Terms* does not offer a definition of Justin Martyr’s *transmutation*, the Eastern theologian Dositheus equates *transubstantiation* and *transmutation*.

This is important, as we will later consider Martyr’s use of the term. Dositheus writes:

In the celebration of this we believe the Lord Jesus Christ to be present. He is not present typically, nor figuratively, nor by superabundant grace, as in the other Mysteries, nor by a bare presence, as some of the Fathers have said concerning Baptism, or by impanation, so that the Divinity of the Word is united to the set forth bread of the Eucharist hypostatically, as the followers of Luther most ignorantly and wretchedly suppose. But [he is present] truly and really, so that after the consecration of the bread and of the wine, the bread is transmuted,

three views: the mystic view of Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus; the symbolical view of Tertullian and Cyprian; and the allegorical or spiritualistic view of Clement of Alexandria and Origen.” While there were differing nuances, the basic view that the bread and wine were turned into the real and true Body and Blood of Christ was held by each of those mentioned by Schaff.

¹⁸ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 60.

transubstantiated, converted and transformed into the true Body Itself of the Lord,... the wine is converted and transubstantiated into the true Blood Itself of the Lord¹⁹

Since the terms can be used interchangeably, and since the definition of transubstantiation used by the Roman Catholic Church is identical to the belief of the Church Fathers (as will be shown), transubstantiation will be used to describe the beliefs of the Church Fathers regarding the Eucharist throughout this examination. CT sets forth the following:

The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation."²⁰

The teaching of transubstantiation and its efficacy centuries before the Fourth Lateran Council

There is abundant evidence by the Church Fathers which plainly state that the wine and the bread is turned into the true Blood and Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that by participating in that meal, one receives forgiveness of sins and has salvation perpetuated.

¹⁹ John Leith *Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Piscataway, NJ Transaction Publishers 1963), 502-503.

²⁰ United States Catholic Conference *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (The Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 347.

THE CHURCH FATHERS ON THE EUCHARIST

It is here that we turn to the plentiful support of the Church Fathers as they declared with boldness the doctrine of transubstantiation and its saving efficacy. Even if not stated *directly* in the major councils and creeds, yet in their diverse and particular statements, it is patently clear that the Fathers treated the Eucharist as an essential of the Christian faith, in which, without participation, one could not rightly be considered a Christian and a recipient of eternal life. In fact, they would be considered *anathema*.

The Ante-Nicene Fathers

Ignatius of Antioch proclaims the nature and efficacy of the Eucharist, as well as an anathema toward those who disagree: “Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God ... They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes.”²¹ To the Romans he writes: “I desire the Bread of God, the heavenly Bread, the Bread of Life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.”²²

Jurgens directs us to Clement (of Alexandria) from his *The Instructor of Children*: “ ‘Eat my flesh)’ [Jesus] says, ‘and drink my blood.’ The Lord supplies us with these intimate nutrients, he

²¹ W.A. Jurgens *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, MN The Order of St. Benedict 1994), 178.

²² Alexander Robert, James Donaldson (Editors) *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York Charles Scribner’s Sons 1905), 77.

delivers over his flesh and pours out his blood, and nothing is lacking for the growth of his children.’ ”²³ Jurgens displays a lucid presentation of Tertullian’s view of the Eucharist:

Likewise, regard to days of fast, many do not think they should be present at the sacrificial prayers, because their fast would be broken if they were to receive the body of the Lord. Does the Eucharist, then, obviate a work devoted to God, or does it bind it more to God? Will not your fast be more solemn if, in addition, you have stood at God's altar? The body of the Lord having been received and reserved, each point is secured: both the participation in the sacrifice and the discharge of duty.²⁴

In his *Against Heresies*, **Irenaeus** exclaims: “Again, giving counsel to His disciples to offer to God the first-fruits from among His creatures, not as if He needed them, but so that they themselves might be neither unfruitful nor ungrateful, He took from among creation that which is bread, and gave thanks, saying, ‘This is My Body.’ The cup likewise, which is from among the creation to which we belong, He confessed to be His Blood.”²⁵

Dennis Billy cites a sermon by **Athanasius**:

[...] So long as the prayers of supplication and entreaties have not been made, there is only bread and wine. But after the great and wonderful prayers have been completed, then the bread has become the Body, and the wine the Blood, of our Lord Jesus....Let us approach the celebration of the mysteries. This bread and this wine, so long as the prayers and supplications have not taken place, remain

²³ Jurgens *Faith*, 178.

²⁴ Jurgens, *Faith*, 125.

²⁵ Jurgens, *Faith*, 95.

simply what they are. But after the great prayers and holy supplications have been sent forth, the Word comes down into the bread and wine—and thus is His Body confectioned.²⁶

Athanasius, the great doctor of the Church who is most well-known for his brilliant counter of Arianism, in the above statement explicitly affirms the Eucharist as the true Body and Blood of Christ.

Justin Martyr, an early Church apologist speaks of transubstantiation, but uses the term transmutation: “For we do not receive these as just ordinary bread and drink. But Jesus Christ our Saviour became human by the word of God—having both flesh and blood for our salvation. So we have been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of his word is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh. Our blood and flesh are nourished from it by transmutation.”²⁷ As Justin Martyr does here, so we will see among the others that transubstantiation (or transmutation) is taught and inseparably linked to efficacious grace among those who participate. According to Martyr we are “nourished” by transmutation, a “nourishment” as will later be proven, differs greatly from Calvin’s “nourishment.”

Origen, in conformity with the Church position not only confirms transubstantiation/transmutation, but he also warns his readers of neglecting the Body:

I wish to admonish you with examples from your religion. You are accustomed to take part in the divine mysteries, so you know, when you received the body of the Lord, you reverently exercised every care lest a particle of it fall, and lest

²⁶ Billy, *Beauty*, 133.

²⁷ Marcus Dods, trans. D.D. *We Don't Speak Great Things—We Live Them! (The First Apology of Justin Martyr)* (Tyler, TX David W. Bercot), 93.

anything of the consecrated gift perish. You account yourselves guilty, and rightly do you so believe, if any of it be lost through negligence. but if you observe such caution in keeping His Body, and properly so, how is it that you think neglecting the word of God a lesser crime than neglecting His Body?²⁸

Cyprian, in writing on the Lord's Prayer, gives a blunt warning of suffering loss of salvation by not participating in the Eucharist:

For Christ is the bread of life and the bread here is of all, but is ours. And as we say 'Our Father,' because He is the Father of those who understand and believe, so too we say 'our Bread,' because Christ is the bread of those of us who attain to His body. Moreover, we ask that this bread be given daily, lest we, who are in Christ and receive the Eucharist daily as food of salvation, with the intervention of some more grievous sin, while we are shut off and as non-communicants are kept from the heavenly bread, be separated from the body of Christ as He Himself declares, saying: 'I am the bread of life which came down from heaven. If any man eat of my bread he shall live forever. Moreover, the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.' Since then He says that, if anyone eats of His bread, he lives forever, as it is manifest that they live who attain to His body and receive the Eucharist by right of communion, so on the other hand we must fear and pray lest anyone, while he is cut off and separated from the body of Christ, remain apart from salvation, as He Himself threatens, saying: 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you.' And so we

²⁸ Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA Ignatius Press 1988), 237.

petition that our bread, that is Christ, be given us daily, so that we, who abide and live in Christ, may not withdraw from His sanctification and body.²⁹

Again, Cyprian confirms the position of the early Church from his *Mystagogical Catechesis*:

“This teaching of the Blessed Paul is alone sufficient to give you a full assurance concerning those Divine Mysteries, which when ye are vouchsafed, ye are of [Eph 3:6] and blood with Christ. For he has just distinctly said, [1 Cor 2:23-25] Since then He Himself has declared and said of the Bread, who shall dare to doubt any longer? And since He has affirmed and said, who shall ever hesitate, saying, that it is not His blood?”³⁰

The Post-Nicene Fathers

Because of the vast list of post-Nicene Fathers, we will focus on several closest in proximity to the Nicene Creed within approximately fifty to seventy-five years.

St. Basil is perhaps not as obvious in his words concerning the Eucharist, but considering the overall direction of the Church Fathers, it is understood what he intends:

To communicate every day, to be a sharer in the holy body and blood of Christ is, indeed, a good and beneficial practice, for he says plainly: ‘He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life’ (Jn 6:55). Who doubts but that to share continually in life is nothing other than to live in manifold ways. We, for our part, communicate four times in each week: on the Lord’s day, on the fourth day

²⁹ Roy J. Deferrari (trans.), *The Fathers of the Church, St. Cyprian Treatises* (New York Catholic University Press 1958), 143.

³⁰ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, R.W. Church (trans.), *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (Crestwood, NY St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1951), 67.

[Wednesday], on the day of preparation [Friday], and on the Sabbath [Saturday], also on other days if there is a commemoration of a saint.³¹

Basil, like others, equates “communicat[ion]” with the Body and Blood of Christ and the communion of saints. This will be a very important piece later as we understand creedal terminology and intent.

St. John Chrysostom comments on what power converts the elements: “It is not the power of man which makes what is put before us the Body and Blood of Christ, but the power of Christ Himself who was crucified for us. The priest standing there in the place of Christ says these words but their power and grace are from God. 'This is My Body,' he says, and these words transform what lies before him.”³² The word “transform,” for John is more than a mere change as is proven by the phrase, “which makes what is put before us the Body and Blood of Christ.”

Cyril of Jerusalem leaves no room for doubt about his perspective on the Eucharist:

“[Jesus Christ] by his own will once changed water into wine at Cana in Galilee, So why should we not believe that he can change wine into blood? [...] We should therefore have full assurance that we are sharing in the body and blood of Christ. For in the type of bread, his body is given to you, and in the type of wine, his blood is given to you, so that by partaking of the body and blood of Christ you may become of one body and one blood with him.”³³

For Cyril, this is a miraculous event resulting in God’s people becoming one body and one blood with Him. Cyril elaborates on this teaching: “So do not think of them just as bread and wine. As

³¹ Billy, *Beauty*, 174.

³² Herman Joseph Heuser, *The American Ecclesiastical Review* (Washington D.C. Catholic University of America Press 1965), 336.

³³ McGrath, *Christian Theology, an Introduction*, 414.

the Lord himself has declared, they are body and blood. And if your senses suggest otherwise, then let faith, and be assured beyond doubt that you have received the body and blood of Christ.”³⁴

St. Hilary of Poitiers states that not only is transubstantiation true, and not only does it convey grace, it also is the view of the Church:

As to the reality of His flesh and blood, there is little room left for doubt, because now, both by the declaration of the Lord Himself and by our own faith, it is truly Flesh and truly Blood. And these Elements bring it about, when taken and consumed, that we are in Christ and Christ is in us. Is it not true? Let those who deny that Jesus Christ is true God be free to find these things untrue. But He Himself is in us through the flesh and we are in Him, while that which we are with Him is in God.³⁵

Again, almost always these Church Fathers accompany the teaching of transubstantiation with actual perpetuation of salvation through participation in the Eucharist.

There is sometimes obscurity in the writings of the Fathers concerning whether they are speaking of Christ’s actual outpouring of blood while Christ was dying or whether it is the repeated sacrifice in the Eucharist. But here **St. Ambrose** writes in the present tense: “If, as often as blood is poured forth, it is poured for remission of sins, I ought always to receive it, that my sins may always be forgiven me.”³⁶ Ambrose takes the Eucharist to the personal level, indicating that without such re-pouring of Christ’s blood (and by inclusion, the re-breaking or re-sacrificing of

³⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford, UK Blackwell Publishing 2007), 550.

³⁵ Dennis Billy, *The Beauty of the Eucharist* (Hyde Park, NY New City Press, 2010), 149.

³⁶ T. Thompson trans., *St. Ambrose on the Mysteries and the Treatise on the Sacraments* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1919), 116.

Christ's Body³⁷) he may not have the forgiveness of sins, a belief which seems to have been held unanimously among the Fathers.

Finally, we turn to the patron saint of Calvinists, **St. Augustine**. Augustine is often referenced by "Calvinists" because of his views on the decrees of God and the doctrine of predestination.

However, predestination does not lend itself well to the doctrine of transmutation or transubstantiation, if indeed saving efficacy is accomplished through participation in the Eucharist, and if indeed salvation is lost as a result of not participating in that sacrament.

Granted, Augustine might argue that only the elect will participate in the Eucharist, thus ensuring the perseverance of the real saints through the re-pouring of Christ's blood. Regardless, the weight placed upon Augustine by Protestants is immense, and therefore Augustine's views on the Eucharist are significant, as we consider Calvin's sacramental perspective.

From his book, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology*, Paul Alvis refers to Augustine's Sermon 272 in order to help bridge the gap between Catholics and Protestants:

What you see is the bread and the chalice; that is what your own eyes report to you. But what your faith obliges you to accept is that the bread is the Body of Christ and the chalice the Blood of Christ. ... How is the bread His Body? And the chalice, or what is in the chalice, how is it His Blood? Those elements, brethren, are called Sacraments, because in them one thing is seen, but another is understood. What is seen is the corporeal species, but what is understood is the

³⁷ The Council of Trent defines with clarity the intent of the Fathers: "And forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who once offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid, if we draw nigh unto God, contrite and penitent, with a sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence." Session XXII, chapter II.

spiritual fruit. ... 'You, however, are the Body of Christ and His members.' If, therefore, you are the Body of Christ and His members, your mystery is presented at the table of the Lord, you receive your mystery. To that which you are, you answer: 'Amen'; and by answering, you subscribe to it. For you hear: 'The Body of Christ!' and you answer: 'Amen!' Be a member of Christ's Body, so that your 'Amen' may be the truth.³⁸

Here Augustine speaks of the conversion or transmutation. He implores them from the empirical to the mystical and faith. That is, if he were speaking in purely mystical/spiritual terms he would not have made the distinction between sight and faith. Augustine waxes strong in this statement from his sermons on the Psalms regarding the sin of not adoring the "flesh" of Christ:

For He received earth from earth; because flesh is from earth, and He took flesh from the flesh of Mary. He walked here in the same flesh, and gave us the same flesh to be eaten unto salvation. But no one eats that flesh unless he adores it ; and thus it is discovered how such a footstool of the Lord's feet is adored; and not only do we not sin by adoring, we do sin by not adoring."³⁹

There is no mistaking the fact that early Church Fathers and those immediately surrounding the Council of Nicaea believed in what the Roman Catholic Church would call *transubstantiation*. It is also clear that they believed that the Eucharist accomplished saving grace to those who participated in it and that those who did not would suffer loss of salvation and commit sin. This is important as we consider John Calvin's view.

³⁸ Paul Alvis, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology* (New York, NY T&T Clark International 2010), 189.

³⁹ Jurgens, *Faith, V. III*, 20.

CALVIN ON THE EUCHARIST

Calvin, who is considered by many to be the greatest Protestant theologian, was previously a Roman Catholic who understood the position of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Eucharist. One would find it hard to believe that he would not be familiar with the Church Fathers' position regarding the Eucharist.

From Calvin's Sermons on Galatians he describes the Sacraments with the words, *picture* and *images*:

For doth he speak in so lofty and dark a style as we can understand nothing? No: but contrariwise he abaseth himself, and thereto things it not enough to have spoken, but also addeth Sacraments to his word, which are the true pictures that we ought to have. Like as when we see, it is a picture which showeth us that we be full of filth and uncleanness, till we be washed: and by whom? We must seek our washing from above. Besides this, it showeth us that we must be renewed by the Holy Ghost of God. That then is a good picture...As much is to be said of Lord's supper. When we see the morsels of bread and the drops of wine... These (I say) are the good images God has set afore us:⁴⁰

Calvin makes this interesting comment about Old Testament sacraments and ceremonies that sheds light on his view of Sacraments in the New Testament: "For God ordained not the Sacraments to the end that by endeavoring to observe them, men should purchase any virtue that might be imputed to them for righteousness: but rather to teach them that it

⁴⁰ John Calvin *Sermons on Galatians* (Audubon, NJ Old Paths Publications), 321-322.

stood them in hand to seek all at God's hand."⁴¹ This should cause us to ask of his persuasion concerning the Eucharist, as Calvin clearly teaches that the Church existed throughout Old Testament Israel and that it is a Church to continue throughout all ages.

Calvin's View of Election, Predestination, and Perseverance Not Compatible with the Early Church Position on the Eucharist

Since Calvin believed in the absolute predestination of individual believers, for him it cannot be that a person should ever be lost. But the early Church teaching on the Eucharist logically forces the idea that a believer could be lost if they do not participate in Communion. In his monumental *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin has a large section on the *means of grace* and speaks of the Communion of Saints and links it with the doctrine of predestination: "First, [the Communion of Saints] by God's election, and cannot waver or fail any more than his eternal providence can. Secondly, it has in a way been joined to the steadfastness of Christ, who will no more allow his believers to be estranged from him than that his members be rent and torn asunder."⁴² This perspective would naturally lead one to conclude that there is not a perpetuation of salvation through the participation in the Eucharist but rather as Calvin would argue, the Eucharist is merely a *show*, an *image*, and a *picture* of what is an already unchangeable reality. He confirms this: "by partaking in the Lord's Supper we attest our unity in true doctrine and love."⁴³ For Calvin, partaking in the Eucharist is a proof rather than a cause.

⁴¹ Calvin *Galatians*, 234.

⁴² John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion Book IV* Editor John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA The Westminster Press), 1015.

⁴³ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1021.

Of the Roman Catholic Mass, Calvin writes, “Surely, their chief bond of communion is in the Mass, which we abominate as the greatest sacrilege.”⁴⁴ He articulates why he would raise such an accusation: “The more detestable is the fabrication of those who, not content with Christ’s priesthood, have presumed to sacrifice him anew! The papists attempt this each day, considering the Mass as the sacrificing of Christ.”⁴⁵

Calvin has not misrepresented Roman Catholicism as some Catholics would affirm. The Council of Trent does consider the Eucharist as the continual sacrifice of Christ.⁴⁶ But in Calvin’s accusation of Rome, is he not also accusing the Fathers if both refer to the Eucharist as Christ’s true and real Body and Blood? Hippolytus gives us light as to how the Eucharist was viewed. Referring to the passage in Proverbs, “And she hath furnished her table,” he writes: “it also refers to his honored and undefiled body and blood, which day by day are administered and offered sacrificially at the spiritual divine table, as a memorial of that first and ever-memorable table of the spiritual divine supper.”⁴⁷ He speaks of the Table as an offering and sacrifice. As mentioned earlier, Ambrose and Tertullian regard the meal as the sacrifice of Christ. This idea Calvin abominates throughout his exposition of the Lord’s Supper.

In his *Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord* Calvin speaks further about sign and representation:

Now what is said of the word applies as well to the sacrament of the Supper, by means of which the Lord leads us to communion with Jesus Christ. For seeing we are so weak that we cannot receive him with true heartfelt trust, when he is presented to us by simple

⁴⁴ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1050

⁴⁵ Calvin *Institutes II*, 503

⁴⁶ C.T., *Twenty Second Session, chapter II*

⁴⁷ Hippolytus *The Refutation of All Heresies V. I* (Edinburgh, U.K. T & T Clark, MDCCCLXVIII), 439

doctrine and preaching, the Father of mercy, disdaining not to condescend in this matter to our infirmity, has been pleased to add to his word a visible sign, by which he might represent the substance of his promises, to confirm and fortify us by delivering us from all doubt and uncertainty.⁴⁸

This is in contrast to the statements of the Church Fathers which repeatedly state that the bread and wine become the “true” Body and Blood of Christ. Calvin makes no such statements (or if a similar statement is made, Calvin qualifies it to the degree that it becomes indecipherable to the reader concerning the actual meaning of his words), but instead refers to them as signs, images, representations, and pictures. In the *Treatise*, Calvin even refers to the Supper as a *mirror*: “Let us recollect, then, that the Supper is given us as a mirror in which we may contemplate Jesus Christ crucified in order to deliver us from condemnation, and raised again in, order to procure for us righteousness and eternal life.”⁴⁹

Calvin’s Obscure Wording

While Calvin frequently uses terms like *sign* and *representation*, when forced to declare a position, instead of using the clear wording of the Fathers, Calvin uses the word “substance.”:

For this reason I am wont to say, that the substance of the sacraments is the Lord Jesus, and the efficacy of them the graces and blessings which we have by his means. Now the efficacy of the Supper is to confirm to us the reconciliation which we have with God through our Saviour’s death and passion; the washing of

⁴⁸ John Calvin *Tracts Relating to the Reformation* (Edinburgh, UK The Calvin Translation Society M.DCCC.XLIX), 166.

⁴⁹ John Calvin *Tracts*, 169.

our souls which we have in the shedding of his blood; the righteousness which we have in his obedience;⁵⁰

One would think that Calvin's frequent references to the Church Fathers would draw him to use their precise and obvious wording. One would also be presumptuous to assume that Calvin was unfamiliar with the Fathers' view on the Eucharist, especially as a former Roman Catholic and considering his immense theological stature.⁵¹ It would seem that Calvin, in order to stay somewhat committed to acknowledging his adherence to the Fathers, uses vastly different terminology so as not to contradict his opposition to the Mass of Roman Catholicism, and yet not admit what could be inferred as disagreement with the position of the early Church. Consider this murky statement:

We begin now to enter on the question so much debated, both anciently and at the present time how we are to understand the words in which the bread is called the body of Christ, and the wine his blood. This may be disposed of without much difficulty, if we carefully observe the principle which I lately laid down, viz., that all the benefit which we should seek in the Supper is annihilated if Jesus Christ be not there given to us as the substance and foundation of all. That being fixed, we will confess, without doubt, that to deny that a true communication of Jesus Christ is presented to us in the Supper, is to render this holy sacrament frivolous and useless an execrable blasphemy unfit to be listened to.⁵²

⁵⁰ John Calvin *Tracts*, 169.

⁵¹ It is curious how infrequently Calvin references the Church Fathers throughout his elaboration on the means of grace in book IV of the *Institutes*. Yet in other areas he shows himself to be well-acquainted with both the ante and post-Nicene Fathers.

⁵² John Calvin *Tracts*, 170.

How do we interpret Calvin's "a true communication of Jesus Christ is presented to us in the Supper," and his, "to deny [it...] is to render this holy sacrament frivolous and useless an execrable blasphemy unfit to be listened to."? By saying, "a true communication" is Calvin saying there are many communications of Jesus Christ? Whatever it is of which Calvin is attempting to persuade his readers, it is hazy in comparison to the clarity with which the Fathers speak. Yet Calvin would label it a terrible blasphemy to deny his interpretation. But then Calvin reverts back to *signs*:

Now, if it be asked whether the bread is the body of Christ and the wine his blood, we answer, that the bread and the wine are visible signs, which represent to us the body and blood, but that this name and title of body and blood is given to them because they are as it were instruments by which the Lord distributes them to us.

This form and manner of speaking is very appropriate.⁵³

The question Calvin raises would have afforded him the perfect opportunity to defend the transparent statements of the Church Fathers. Yet Calvin merely describes the bread and wine as "visible signs, which represent to us the body and blood." Then, rather astonishingly, he maintains that "this form and manner of speaking is very appropriate." Is Calvin intending to be in contrast with the Fathers' form and manner of speaking, which might not be appropriate for Calvin's theology? There is nothing unclear about the statements made by the Fathers. In descriptions of the Mass, Roman Catholic teaching appeals to the clear wording of the Fathers. Yet many Protestants, like Calvin seem to be curiously evasive regarding those statements.

⁵³ John Calvin *Tracts*, 171.

In a statement of utter obscurity, without definitions of terms, and with no reference to the Church Fathers, Calvin exclaims:

Thus it is with the communion which we have in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. It is a spiritual mystery which can neither be seen by the eye nor comprehended by the human understanding. It is therefore figured to us by visible signs, according as our weakness requires, in such manner, nevertheless, that it is not a bare figure but is combined with the reality and substance. It is with good reason then that the bread is called the body, since it not only represents but also presents it to us. Hence we indeed infer that the name of the body of Jesus Christ is transferred to the bread, inasmuch as it is the sacrament and figure of it. But we likewise add, that the sacraments of the Lord should not and cannot be at all separated from their reality and substance. To distinguish, in order to guard against confounding them, is not only good and reasonable, but altogether necessary; but to divide them, so as to make the one exist without the other, is absurd.⁵⁴

The questions must be raised: What exactly is mysterious to Calvin? Since the Body and Blood laid open by the Fathers was clearly visible, why does Calvin insist on calling it invisible (“which can neither be seen by the eye”)? if he is indeed upholding the Faith and its essential components? Why does Calvin continue to refer to them as signs and not the true Body and Blood of Christ? If they are signs, images, pictures, and representations, and if they are invisible, then how is it that they are “realities” for Calvin? What does he mean when he says that “the name of the body of Jesus Christ is transferred to the bread, inasmuch as it is the sacrament and

⁵⁴ John Calvin *Tracts*, 171-172.

figure of it.” And how is it that the Sacraments are not to be separated from reality and substance, when Calvin doesn’t actually define what substance and reality are?

In the *Institutes*, Calvin entitles chapter eighteen, *The Sacred Supper of Christ and What It Brings to Us*. After having explained that Satan had wreaked havoc upon the Church of the past and “even in our day,” Calvin makes his first point of what the Supper brings to us, thus by making this his first point, it should be assumed that he is setting the record straight before going on to convey the diverse blessings of the Eucharist: “First, the signs are bread and wine, which represent for us the invisible food that we receive from the flesh and blood of Christ.”⁵⁵ What is certain here is a distinct contrast between the transubstantiation taught by the Fathers, which is clearly visible food and Calvin’s invisible food. For if the consecration of the elements brings about the true Body and Blood of Christ, then it is indeed visible food. We also again see Calvin’s *signs* and *representations*. In the same chapter he writes, “[Christ] shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity.”⁵⁶ Calvin’s theology of one sacrifice for all time helps explain this statement: “For he in some measure renews, or rather continues, the covenant which he once for all ratified with his blood (as far as it pertains to the strengthening of our faith).”⁵⁷ This is critical for our understanding of Calvin. For Calvin, there is no saving grace affected by the Eucharist. Rather, the participant is already saved and redeemed by God’s sovereign choice in election through the once-for-all substitutionary atonement by Christ. For Calvin, the believer is simply strengthened in his or her walk with Christ, as is evident by Calvin’s parenthetical explanation. If any *grace* is conveyed in Calvin’s Eucharistic theology, it is simply that we can “assure ourselves that eternal life...that we cannot be

⁵⁵ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1360.

⁵⁶ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1361.

⁵⁷ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1361.

condemned for our sins from whose guilt he has absolved us, since he willed to take them upon himself as if they were his own.”⁵⁸ Calvin’s theology of the atonement places all the accomplishment of redemption and salvation as procured by Christ’s one-time sacrifice. It efficaciously worked for the elect, and thus the Eucharist, for Calvin, assures us that it was already accomplished rather than a perpetuating of eternal life and conveyance of saving grace.

Regarding the spiritual presence of Christ, Calvin suggests that “...we have such full witness of all these things that we must certainly consider them as if Christ here present were himself set before our eyes and touched by our hands.”⁵⁹ The suspicious wording is unmistakable: “as if.” For the Fathers there were no “as ifs” or possibilities. For the Fathers the Eucharist was the “true Body and Blood,” and therefore Christ’s flesh and blood were physically there to see, to touch, and to eat and drink. Calvin says of Christ’s blood, “These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.”⁶⁰ From Calvin’s perspective, these are not words to be misconstrued for what he considered something already accomplished: “[...] the Sacrament sends us to the cross of Christ, where that promise was indeed performed and in all respects fulfilled. For we do not eat Christ duly and unto salvation unless he is crucified, when in living experience we grasp the efficacy of his death.”⁶¹

Calvin’s Clear Wording

The intent of the Eucharist for Calvin is evident: “What we have so far said of the Sacrament abundantly shows that...it was ordained to be frequently used among all

⁵⁸ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1362.

⁵⁹ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1363.

⁶⁰ John Calvin *Tracts*, 170.

⁶¹ Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1363.

Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's Passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim his goodness."⁶²

In his first epistle to the Corinthians, Paul remembers the words of Jesus, "This is my body." Calvin, at last, clarifies his view with self-declared honesty in contradistinction to the Church Fathers:

*I shall state, first of all, sincerely and without disguise, and then farther, I shall state freely (as I am wont to do) what my views are. Christ calls the bread his body; for I set aside without any disputation, that absurd contrivance, that our Lord did not exhibit the bread to the Apostles, but his body, which they beheld with their eyes, for it immediately follows — This cup is the New Testament in my blood. Let us regard it then as beyond all controversy that Christ is here speaking of the bread. Now the question is—"In what sense?" That we may elicit the true meaning, we must hold that the expression is figurative; for, assuredly, to deny this is exceedingly dishonest."*⁶³

By logical implication, but with somewhat indirect reference, the Reformer accuses the literalism of the Church Fathers as "exceedingly dishonest." He plainly states that this is his sincere view and without disguise. He refers to Christ's use of the bread:

"Hence the name of the Spirit is transferred to the visible sign [dove]. Why should we not maintain that there is here a similar instance of metonymy, and that the

⁶² Calvin *Institutes IV*, 1422.

⁶³ John Calvin *Commentaries, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians V. XX* (Grand Rapids, MI Baker House 1996), 376-377.

term *body* is applied to the bread, as being the sign and symbol of it? If any are of a different opinion they will forgive me; but it appears to me to be an evidence of a contentious spirit, to dispute pertinaciously on this point. I lay it down, then, as a settled point, that there is here a sacramental form of expression, in which the Lord gives to the sign the name of the thing signified.”⁶⁴

Calvin’s view is the view of memorialism. Though referred to as sacramental by Calvin himself, yet it is merely a view of the Eucharist which encourages one in their faith rather than keeping one saved. It is the view that the bread is not the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, but a picture, representation, image, and sign. It is a denial and disregard for the Patristic view of the Eucharist. Is this merely a matter of difference of opinion? Calvin, concerning the perspective on the body writes, “They turn [toward the bread] not merely with their eyes, and their whole body, but even with the thoughts of the heart.”⁶⁵ The Fathers were adamant that *faith* in the doctrine of transubstantiation was necessary for salvation and to keep from sinning. So the question remains, would the Church Fathers pronounce Calvin as accursed from Christ, as Trent surely did? This was not merely an individual eating and drinking of Christ’s Body and Blood. This was the participation in His Body and the Communion of Saints.

The Danger of Denial

Ignatius, Cyprian, Origen, and St. Hilary gave severe warnings against denial and/or abstinence from the Eucharist. Alister E. McGrath comments on the association between transubstantiation and efficacy, “Note especially the link between feeding on the

⁶⁴ Calvin *Commentaries*, 377.

⁶⁵ Calvin *Commentaries*, 380.

Eucharistic elements and the promise of divinization.”⁶⁶ That is, McGrath notes that divinization comes through participation in the Eucharist, and of course conversely there would be no divinization for the abstainer, or for the denier.

On the Communion of the Saints and the Apostles’ Creed

From his Encyclical on the Holy Eucharist, Pope Paul VI quotes St. Cyprian, Letter of Cyprian to a Certain Magnus, 6 (76), 5; 255 A.D.:

Finally, the sacrifices of the Lord proclaim the unity of Christians, bound together by the bond of a firm and inviolable charity. For when the Lord, in speaking of bread which is produced by the compacting of many grains of wheat, refers to it as His Body, He is describing our people whose unity He has sustained, and when He refers to wine pressed from many grapes and berries, as His Blood, He is speaking of our flock, formed by the fusing of many united together.⁶⁷

Gregory of Nyssa writes:

The God who was manifested mingled himself with the nature that was doomed to death, in order that by communion with the divinity, human nature may be deified together with him. It is for this purpose that by the divine plan of his grace he plants himself in believers by means of that flesh, composed of bread and

⁶⁶ McGrath, *Christian Theology Reader*, 551.

⁶⁷ Pope Paul VI *Encyclical on the Holy Eucharist* (http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pa06mf.htm) 1965.

wine, blending himself with the bodies of believers, so that man also may share in immortality by union with the immortal.⁶⁸

Would Calvin's view be considered heresy and outside the bounds of orthodoxy according to the Fathers? It appears this is the case. Some have argued that the belief about the Eucharist as believed by the Fathers was not a creedal issue. But in light of the aforementioned statements regarding the Communion of Saints, it would appear that this is what the Apostles' Creed had in mind: "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints."⁶⁹ In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it acknowledges that "Communion of saints" in the Apostles' Creed is not merely referring to holy persons but also holy things:

946 After confessing "the holy catholic Church," the Apostles' Creed adds "the communion of saints." In a certain sense this article is a further explanation of the preceding: "What is the Church if not the assembly of all the saints?" The communion of saints is the Church.

947 "Since all the faithful form one body, the good of each is communicated to the others.... We must therefore believe that there exists a communion of goods in the Church. But the most important member is Christ, since he is the head.... Therefore, the riches of Christ are communicated to all the members, through the sacraments." As this Church is governed by one and the same Spirit, all the goods she has received necessarily become a common fund."

⁶⁸ Daniel Guernsey *Adoration: Eucharistic Texts and Prayers Throughout Church History* (San Francisco, CA Ignatius Press, 1999), 49.

⁶⁹ Philip Schaff *The Creeds of Christendom, The Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI Baker Book House 1931), 45.

948 The term "communion of saints" therefore has two closely linked meanings: communion "in holy things (sancta)" and "among holy persons (sancti)."

"Sancta sancti's! ("God's holy gifts for God's holy people") is proclaimed by the celebrant in most Eastern liturgies during the elevation of the holy Gifts before the distribution of communion. The faithful (sancta) are fed by Christ's holy body and blood (sancta) to grow in the communion of the Holy Spirit (koinonia) and to communicate it to the world.⁷⁰

According to the Apostles' Creed, the Fathers and the Roman Catholic Church, the Eucharist and the Communion of Saints were inseparable. To deny either would be to deny both and consequently, from the Fathers' perspective, this would place one outside the Faith once for all delivered to the saints. One may accuse the Roman Catholic Church of many things, but to say that they misrepresented the Fathers concerning the Eucharist would be inaccurate. It appears that John Calvin, according to Rome and the Fathers, could very well have been considered anathema.

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 247.