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“Real presence” and sacramental praxis – Reformed reflections on the Eucharist

ABSTRACT

As the subtitle indicates, this essay focuses on a Reformed understanding of the Eucharist or Sacrament of Holy Communion. After a brief introduction indicating why this topic is important today, the essay engages a number of key themes. First amongst these is the historical character of the sacrament which needs to be kept in tension with what Calvin referred to as its mystery. The second is the distinctly Reformed understanding of the relationship between Word, Spirit and Sacrament, and its implications for Eucharistic practice within Reformed congregations. The third is the meaning and significance of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This goes to the heart of the essay, for how this is understood is crucial for a proper Eucharistic theology and praxis. The essay argues that Calvin’s understanding of the real presence has generally been lost within Reformed circles and needs to be recovered if the Sacrament is to be restored to its rightful place.

Amongst the themes suggested to authors of this *Festschrift* I have selected the sacraments, focusing specifically on Holy Communion or the Eucharist. There are three reasons for my choice, each of which relates to Smit’s interests as a Reformed ecumenical theologian.

First, from a Reformed perspective, the “true church” is found where the Word is faithfully proclaimed *and* the sacraments are “rightly administered”. Sacramental praxis (which embraces both theological understanding and liturgical practice) is, therefore, central to the identity of the Reformed church. God’s grace may not be contingent on our having a sound theology of the sacraments or being liturgically adept, but if the “true church” requires the right administration of the sacraments, then good sacramental praxis can never be a matter of indifference.

Second, in 1857, sacramental praxis became the bone of contention when the Dutch Reformed synod at the Cape allowed segregation at the Lord’s Table. This is the background to Smit’s contribution to much theological discussion over the past decades relating especially to the Belhar Confession. A recent essay of Smit’s, Calvin on the Sacraments and Church Unity (Smit 2010), which developed out of that interest is an important contribution to the Reformed understanding of the ecclesiological and ethical significance of the sacraments

Third, there is a growing desire amongst many Reformed Christians for a more meaningful and frequent celebration of Holy Communion. Many of us have moved beyond the polemics of the past and have discovered much to treasure in traditions other than our own. The agreements achieved between various confessional families, alongside the liturgies that have evolved in concert with them, are all evidence of a remarkable convergence in Eucharistic

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celebration (Thurian and Wainwright 1983). However, for this to be “rightly” integrated into the life of the church we need a clear understanding of what constitutes genuinely Reformed sacramental praxis.

SACRAMENT, HISTORY AND MYSTERY

One of the first books on the sacraments that I read as a student was *The Theology of the Sacraments* by Donald Baillie, Professor of Systematic Theology at St. Andrews University. Baillie observed that while there was in his day “a growing desire for the more frequent communion – which from the very beginning was in principle part of our Reformed tradition – and, along with this, a yearning for a deeper understanding of the sacraments”, this had not yet gotten very far, largely because “we do not possess a theology of the sacraments” (Baillie 1957:40). To put that right, Baillie argued, it was necessary to rediscover the sacramental character of Christian faith and the universe we inhabit. There is something about human nature and the gospel of grace that demands a “strange, visible, tangible expression, in material things and in perceptible actions”, which is what we mean by “sacramental” (Baillie 1957:42). The sacraments are, in fact, “concentrations of something very much more widespread, so that nothing could be in the special sense of a sacrament unless everything was in a basic sense sacramental” (Baillie 1957:42).

At the same time, the Christian sacraments are rooted in a historical narrative without which they lose their significance and specificity as “Christian”. What transpired on the night of Jesus’ arrest in the upper room and over the next few days from the cross to the resurrection marked the beginning of the new covenant and the birthing of a new humanity. The Eucharist cannot be understood apart from this history and its relation to what Jesus said and did when he shared the peace, took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples with the words: “This is my body given for you.” As such, the Eucharist is a sacramental celebration of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of our hope for the transformation and reconciliation of all things in him. The Eucharist is a celebration of God’s redemptive love for the world in Jesus Christ. Therefore, what we do in the liturgy is directly linked to how we participate in God’s mission in the world.

There is one further fundamental aspect of the Eucharist that follows from this and that is central to my reflections, namely the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. Nothing has been more contentious and divisive in the history of Christianity, as the debates at the time of the Reformation demonstrate. How we understand the “real presence” will inevitably shape the way we celebrate the “holy banquet”, as Calvin called it. Later I will focus specifically on the “real presence” of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine, but the “real presence” cannot be narrowly confined to these elements. Christ is truly present in the Word proclaimed, in the community of faith that is “his body”, in the bread and wine, and in the neighbour or “other” through whom he encounters us. In fact, the Eucharist requires a cosmic understanding of Christ as the “real presence” of the mystery of God through the Spirit in history and in our midst. This is what the ancient Church meant when it referred to the liturgy of the “divine mystery”, that is, the mystery of God revealed in Jesus the Christ.² In affirming the real presence we are affirming above all else that Christ is the *sacrament* of the world (*sacramentum mundi*).

² The Greek word *mysterion* was translated into Latin as “*sacramentum*”.

WORD, SPIRIT AND SACRAMENT

The Reformers were united in their opposition to what they regarded as idolatrous and superstitious practices in the celebration of the Mass in the late medieval church. Their objections to the “sacrifice of the Mass”, transubstantiation, priestly mediation and excessive ritual are well known, as are the steps they took to reform sacramental praxis. Today, however, it is necessary to focus our attention not on the problems that the Reformers identified in sacramental practice in their day, but on the problems that have developed within Reformed practice itself. Most will be immediately recognised and the reasons for them generally acknowledged. However, the underlying theological cause may not be so clearly understood. I will argue that the problems have to do chiefly with a failure to maintain the unity of Word, Spirit and sacrament, and thus affirm the “real presence” of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Despite the fact that Calvin wanted a weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper as indicated in the New Testament, this seldom became part of the Reformed ethos.³ There were several reasons for this. In Calvin’s Geneva this was due to opposition from the civil authorities who, despite their adherence to the Reformed faith, preferred the Catholic practice of taking communion infrequently. This practice continued as the Reformed church expanded and was later reinforced by practical considerations, as in Scotland and South Africa. Yet even when these attenuating circumstances did not apply, a quarterly or at best a monthly service of Holy Communion became normative. And while frequency does not necessarily determine significance, infrequency changes the character of Sunday worship and can have serious negative consequences on the life of the church. Amongst these is the separation of the Word and sacrament.

Calvin was insistent that the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments belonged together (Maxwell 1952:112-119). However, infrequency of Holy Communion inevitably meant that a separation occurred to the detriment of both Word and sacrament. For just as there should be no Holy Communion without first listening to the Word, by the same token, as Karl Barth observed, “a service without sacraments is one which is outwardly incomplete” (Barth 1938:211). When we speak of the Eucharist we are not referring to that part of the liturgy when we share in Holy Communion, but the service as a whole, including the reading and preaching of the Word. To do otherwise undermines the incarnational core of Christian faith: “the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us” (Jn. 1:14). In fact, to separate Word and sacrament suggests a Docetic Christology, namely that Christ is not understood as truly present in time and space as flesh and blood, but only as divine Word – a danger to which Calvin himself was not immune.⁴

But while Calvin’s (and Reformed theology’s) insistence on the unity of action of the Word and Spirit in the sacrament may not entirely satisfy Catholic critique, it is or should be fundamental to Reformed sacramental praxis. And yet, in my experience, one of the most frequent omissions in Reformed practice is the omission of what is traditionally known as the “epiclesis”, that is, the invocation that the Holy Spirit should consecrate the bread and wine so that they are for us “the body of and blood Christ”. From a Reformed perspective, this omission reduces the Eucharist to a fellowship meal or *agape*. The prayer of thanksgiving

3 Cf. my discussion in De Gruchy 2009:177-190.

4 Cf. the critique of Calvin’s doctrine of the “real presence” in Dix 1943:632f.

is incomplete without invoking the Spirit to bless the elements that are being set aside “for this holy use and mystery”.

Related to the separation of Word, Spirit and sacrament, as well as to the infrequency of communion, is the extent to which Sunday came to be regarded as the Christian Sabbath instead of the day of resurrection, the Spirit and the new creation. This sabbatical ethos meant that the synagogue alone provided the model for Sunday worship with (at best) the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper tacked on at the end instead of being an integral part and its distinctive climax. This also led to an almost exclusive focus on Jesus’ death on the cross (“holy Saturday”) rather than on his triumph over sin and death and, therefore, on the risen presence of Christ as Host at his Table. As a result of the resurrection, the “last” supper has become the “Lord’s Supper”. As on the road to Emmaus, it is the *risen* Christ who meets and becomes known to us in the “breaking of the bread”.

Further bad practice derives from regarding Holy Communion as a teaching opportunity deemed necessary in order to correct the false teaching of others. Thus, in much Reformed practice the service came to include lengthy rubrics on precisely what was taking place at the Lord’s Table and, more especially, what was not taking place. This didactic emphasis made Holy Communion more an occasion of “sound teaching” than a joyous celebration of the risen and, therefore, real presence through the Word and Spirit of Christ whose life we share in the bread and wine.

Finally, bad practice also derives from relating church discipline to “taking communion”. There is scriptural warrant for ecclesial discipline related to the Eucharist (I Cor.11:28), but this has too often been misunderstood and abused. If the Eucharist is a means of grace, it has to do with changing lives and strengthening discipleship, not with punishing sinners by excluding them from the Table. A related and seriously misguided practice is making attendance at the Eucharist a way of checking up on whether members of the congregation have made their contribution to its financial needs. All of this turns the sacrament into an instrument of law, shifting the focus away from the presence of Christ, who graciously embraces us at his Table, to an instrument for the exclusion of deemed unworthy despite any words of invitation to the contrary.

CHRIST THE REAL PRESENCE

The Reformed tradition will always be indebted to Huldrych Zwingli for his pioneering efforts (cf. Stephens 1986). Amongst these were his emphases on the preaching of the Word, the work of the Spirit and his recovery of the Eucharist (the term he preferred to use) as a fellowship meal within the community of faith. This is an important antidote to the individualism that too often is apparent in the celebration of the Eucharist. However, the shift in Zwingli’s Eucharistic theology toward a purely symbolic understanding of the “real presence” and his strong emphasis on the Supper as a memorial (cf. Stephens 1986:224) had a profound effect on Reformed sacramental practice and may be held responsible for some of the problems I have mentioned. Calvin was certainly not blameless, but he did not make this symbolic shift and held fast to the Eucharist as a sacrament and, therefore, as a means of grace. “Zwingli”, Gerrish writes,

held the same gospel as Luther or Calvin, and he wanted the Evangelical Eucharist to give cultic expression to the Evangelical faith. Nevertheless, it does make a profound

difference that for Zwingli the Lord's Supper was an act of thanksgiving for the gospel, whereas for Luther and Calvin it was a concrete offer of the gospel (Gerrish 1982:129).⁵

What was important for Zwingli was what happened in the past, namely on the cross, which we now remember in faith and fellowship; for Calvin it was not just what happened then, but what was central was what happened *here and now* in the breaking and receiving of the bread. For Calvin the Eucharist was more than a fellowship meal where we confess our faith in Christ and give thanks for his saving death; it is a means of God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ. Despite Calvin and the Reformed Confessions, which followed his understanding, it was Zwingli who, in many ways, won the day. However, the Eucharistic nature of Calvin's theology as a whole (cf. esp. Gerrish 1993), makes him a more profound and helpful resource for the renewal of Reformed sacramental praxis today.

The Eucharist is a fellowship and covenant meal; it is a memorial and act of faith; but, above all, it is a means of redemptive grace in and through which we are encountered by Christ who is truly present through the Spirit in Word and sacrament. We recognise Christ in the "breaking of bread", feed on him by faith and with thanksgiving are united with him in one body as those called to serve the world in love and hope. But how are we to understand specifically the real presence of Christ in the sacramental "bread and wine"? That, after all, is the stumbling block that has divided the Church both prior to and since the Reformation.

The Fourth Gospel does not give an account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, but it is profoundly sacramental in its use of symbols or signs. In its signs such as those at Cana in Galilee are the equivalent of miracles in the synoptics: they point us to and become windows through which we see and grasp hold of the kingdom of God. But symbols and signs can be understood in several ways. They can simply represent something, like the South African flag calls to mind our nation and, in doing so, makes us feel proud and stirs us to patriotic deeds. But the flag does not really resemble South Africa in any way. There is little correspondence between the symbol and reality. This understanding is symbolic in a Zwinglian sense. The signs at the Eucharist can move us to devotion, (sometimes profoundly) strengthening our faith and our love, but everything depends on our response to them rather than on the grace we receive through them.

However, symbols can also be understood in another way, as in John's Gospel and in Calvin's Eucharistic theology, namely as communicating the reality to which they refer: so the breath that gives us life corresponds with the Spirit who renews us; the water that cleanses our bodies is the water in which we are baptised into Christ; the bread we eat and the wine we drink are the same as those elements that nourish us at the Eucharist. And just as bread we eat and wine we drink change as they enter our bloodstream in order to sustain our lives, the bread and wine of the Eucharist "are set apart from all common use" and in some significant way become what they signify. As Calvin put it in his Genevan Catechism of 1541, "as wine strengthens, refreshes, and rejoices a man physically, so His blood is our joy, our refreshing and our spiritual strength" (Torrance 1959:60, Q. 341). Closely following Calvin, this is how most early Reformed confessions and theologians usually understood the "real presence".⁶

5 Gerrish distinguishes between the "symbolic memorialism" of Zwingli, the "symbolic parallelism" of Bullinger and the "symbolic instrumentalism" of Calvin.

6 Cf. the discussion on "The Lord's Supper" in Heinrich Heppe's sourcebook on Reformed dogmatics (1950:632-656).

In his exposition of chapter six of John's Gospel – where Jesus speaks about himself as the "bread of life" and utters his enigmatic, and for some troubling, statement about "eating his flesh" and "drinking his blood" (6:52-56) – Calvin declared "that souls feed on his flesh and blood in precisely the same way that the body is sustained by eating and drinking" (Calvin 1961:169). We are united to Christ and share his life. And, while Calvin said that this passage does not refer directly to the Lord's Supper, he continued by saying that there was "nothing said here that is not figured and actually presented to believers" in that "sacred Supper" (170). In fact, Calvin went so far as to say that "they are false interpreters who lead souls away from Christ's flesh"; clearly meaning interpreters of the Eucharist as the French text makes clear (170). Yet Calvin did not accept the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. So in what sense was Christ truly present in the consecrated "bread and wine"? Or, put differently, what do we mean – and not mean – when we pray in our Reformed liturgies that in receiving the bread and wine we may be made partakers of Christ's body and blood?

Although the sacramental reality of the presence of Christ's "body and blood" in the bread and wine at the Eucharist was part of Christian tradition from earliest times,⁷ the dogma of transubstantiation was only adopted at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The formulation of the dogma in the language of medieval scholasticism was the outcome of a debate sparked by the theologian Berengar of Tours. Berengar maintained that it was not necessary to believe in the physical change (trans substance) in the bread and wine in order to believe in the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. According to him, this undermined the mystery of the Eucharist. In ensuing debates Berengar was required to recant, something that would in retrospect influence Calvin, believing as he did that Berengar was faithful to tradition and to Augustine in particular.⁸ Partly as a result of the controversies with the Reformers, the dogma of transubstantiation was reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, and in response the Protestant churches reinforced their own dogmatic positions.⁹

Anyone familiar with the debates about the "real presence" in Catholic theology that preceded and followed Vatican II¹⁰ will know that, despite some disagreements, the official doctrine firmly remains "transubstantiation" as defined by Trent. In 1965, it was again confirmed by Paul VI in an encyclical as follows:

For there no longer lies under those species what was there before, but something quite different since after the change of the substance or nature of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, nothing remains of the bread and wine but the appearances, under which Christ, whole and entire, in His physical "reality" is bodily present. However, it is significant that Paul VI immediately qualified his statement with the words, "although not in the same way as bodies are present in a given place" (*Mysterium Dei* in Neuner and Dupuis 1983:438). This is not exactly what Calvin believed, but it is far closer to what he believed than what Zwingli maintained. To quote from his *Genevan Catechism* in answer to the question whether at the Supper we receive what is truly given to us: "... I do not doubt that he makes us partakers of His very substance, in order to unite us with Himself in one life" (Torrance 1959:62, Q. 353).

7 Apart from the New Testament itself, see also, for example, Justin's Apology, I/lxvi, (c. 150).

8 Cf. Kilian McDonnell 1967:53-59. See also the documentation in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Neuner and Dupuis 1983:407-443).

9 Cf. Gerrish 1982:118-130; Niesel 1962:271-275.

10 Cf. Gutwenger on transubstantiation (1975:1751-1755). For the debates on the Eucharist at Vatican II cf. Josef Andreas Jungmann 1967:31-34. Cf. also *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (1970:332-347).

In light of pre-Reformation history, the Roman Catholic Benedictine scholar Killian McDonnell (1967:59) rightly asserts that Calvin was “not an innovator”. He saw himself standing firmly in the Augustinian tradition on symbols and signs in the Eucharist. There is also some correspondence between Calvin and Eastern Orthodoxy, both with regard to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist and a hesitation to speculate on the mystery of Christ’s real presence. In connection with what was just said, let me share the following personal story.

In December 1963, I was one of the thousands of students who participated in the World Student Christian Federation’s conference held in Athens, Ohio, in the United States. The keynote speaker was Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann. He enthralled his predominantly Protestant audience with his daily lectures on worship and mission. The second lecture was on the Eucharist. The latter Schmemmann described as a journey “into the dimension of the Kingdom”. From the beginning of the liturgy until its culmination in mission, Schmemmann told us, we are drawn deeper and deeper into the mystery of the kingdom, seeing our lives and the world in a new way as we encounter the presence of Christ through the Word and Spirit in each moment and action of the Eucharist. Only by understanding the Eucharist in this way could we begin to appreciate the “real presence” of Christ in the bread and the wine, and the real presence of Christ in the world. But, said Schmemmann,

to understand their initial and eternal meaning in the Eucharist, we must forget for a time the endless controversies which little by little transformed them into “elements” of an almost abstract theological speculation (Schmemmann 1963:20).

I was profoundly moved by what Schmemmann said, not least because he shifted the focus in the Eucharist from a static scholastic debate about the “real presence” to a dynamic Trinitarian understanding of the Eucharist as a journey into the mystery of the kingdom of God revealed in Christ and made real to us through Word and Spirit.

While this is not precisely how Calvin himself described the Lord’s Supper, it does resonate with what he said. Christ is the host at the Table of the “holy banquet”, giving himself to us in his Word and sacrament through the Spirit in the breaking of the bread and the drinking from the cup. In this way we are united with him in his death and resurrection as well as with each other within the “body of Christ”. But Calvin refused to reduce the mystery to rational concepts.

Now if anyone should ask how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it. Therefore I embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink [Jn. 6:53ff.]. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me to take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that we receive them (Calvin *Inst.* IV.ii.32 – 1960:1403f.). More succinctly, as Calvin wrote to fellow reformer Peter Vermigli: “I adore the mystery rather than labour to understand it.”¹¹ In sum, we can say with good reason that Calvin’s position resembles much of what we find in the church virtually until the thirteenth century.

11 In a letter to the reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli, August 1555 (in Gerrish 1993:128).

Many later Calvinists thought Calvin's language was far too close to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass and preferred Zwingli's position, though neither the Lutherans nor the Catholics felt that Calvin's position was adequate. At stake was the objectivity of Christ's presence in the bread and wine. Calvin agreed, but insisted that the mystery could not be reduced to a formula that bordered on magic, nor could the "whole Christ" be confined to the elements. However, he did not doubt that in eating the bread and drinking the wine we do receive the "body and blood of Christ" that was offered once for all on the cross. Through the Holy Spirit the symbols of bread and wine convey what they signify and in eating and drinking them we receive the "bread of life" that "nourishes us into eternal life" (cf. Calvin *Inst.* IV, xvii, 5 – 1960:1365.) More than that he could not and did not say. Nor need he have done so.

In sum, let me reiterate what I intimated at the beginning. The "right administration" of the sacrament from a Reformed perspective assumes the "real presence" of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. Christ is present through the Spirit and the Word throughout, just as he is truly present in the bread and the wine, in the community gathered in his name and in those we greet with the "kiss of peace". However, if we do not believe in his presence in the bread and wine that is set apart and through the Spirit becomes for us his life giving "body and blood" that we receive in faith, then the sacrament becomes a fellowship meal of remembrance, an *agape*, but is not the Eucharist as Calvin understood it. If this is what we do believe, then it should be evident in our practice, in the structure of the liturgy, in the prayer of thanksgiving and the invocation of the Spirit, and in its importance for the transformation of the Church in the service of the world.

I give the last word to Pope John Paul II, who helps us understand the point of it all in a way that is surely beyond all controversy. In a letter to his fellow bishops in 1980 he wrote: "The sense of the Eucharistic Mystery leads us to love for our neighbour, to love for every human being" (Neuner and Dupuis 1983:443). That is the ultimate end of sacramental praxis, discovering the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the "other". To that Calvin would undoubtedly have added a loud "Amen". So should we.

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