

The Reformation and Puritan Background for Our Reformed View of the Efficacy of the Sacraments

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Introduction – My purpose is merely to remind us of the Reformation and Puritan background for our Reformed view of the efficacy of the sacraments. I will therefore set the 16th- and 17th-century context with Luther's contribution, Calvin's contribution, and the contribution of the English Reformation. Next, I shall talk more specifically about the role of baptism and of the Lord's Supper in the way of salvation. Finally, I shall present a few practical conclusions.

I.) The Protestant Reformation Was About the Way of Salvation

1) The Contribution of Martin Luther – The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century was essentially about the gospel, the way of salvation. The late medieval way of salvation was by means of the sacraments. If one had been properly baptized and then confirmed by an age of understanding, and then took mass upon making confession and doing the prescribed penance, then one had hope of being saved. It was Luther's struggles with his conscience over confessing sins, and his being offended by the blatant sale of indulgences in association with the sacrament of penance, that led him to clearly see in Scripture the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone. This essential doctrine provided the foundation for all of Protestantism. Luther believed that this gospel doctrine was not only taught by the Word, but also was manifested in the sacraments, which he eventually reduced from the Roman Catholic seven to the two instituted by Christ and taught in Scripture, baptism and the Lord's Supper (after for a time retaining penance). For him the Word rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered (that is, setting forth the gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone) provided the marks of the true church.

2) The Contribution of John Calvin – Calvin, as a second-generation Reformer, was in a position to have a more comprehensive and balanced view than the pioneer Luther. Some historians, emphasizing his doctrine of predestination (which was not so different from that of the Augustinian Luther), have viewed him as a theologian of God the Father; others have seen him as a theologian of God the Son, emphasizing his Christology; still others have seen him as a theologian of the Holy Spirit. It is probably appropriate to understand Calvin as the theologian who best expounds the full Trinitarian way of God's salvation. Calvin also thoroughly grasps the continuity of the Protestant Reformation with the Apostolic tradition as reflected in the early Church Fathers and the Councils and Creeds of the 4th and 5th centuries, resisting the innovative views of the Anabaptists and more radical reformers, just as the early Church Fathers had maintained continuity with the Jewish faith of the Old Testament while resisting the more radical innovations of the Gnostics in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. With regard to the sacraments, Calvin emphasized baptism (including of the children of believers) and the Lord's Supper as signs and seals of the covenant, of our union with the Lord, and as such, as means of grace along with the Word and prayer. As we shall see a little later, the Reformed camp had to define its understanding of baptism over against the views and practices of the Anabaptists, and to define its understanding of the Lord's Supper in contrast not only to Roman Catholicism, but also to Lutheranism. For the moment, however, let us merely note the importance for Calvin and the Reformed faith of the sacraments as means of grace along with the Word, and hence as marks of the true church along with discipline, meaning the Word rightly taught and preached and the

sacraments rightly administered (that is, exhibiting the gospel).

3) The Contribution of the English Reformation – The Reformed tradition spread from Geneva and Zurich in Switzerland to parts of Germany, France, the Netherlands, Poland, and Hungary, but the immediate background for our Westminster Confession and Catechisms of the 1640s comes from the British Isles of Scotland, Ireland, and England. It is therefore important to look at the English Reformation, whose greatest contribution comes in the area of worship and in the beautiful language of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in the Book of Common Prayer. Although the marital history of King Henry VIII and his break with the Pope as head of the church in England tends to make one focus of the English Reformation issues of marriage and divorce and authority in ecclesiastical polity, it can be said that the main focus is worship, and specifically the Lord's Supper, as the views of Cranmer gradually evolve, and the Book of Common Prayer also evolves, as do the Forty-two Articles to the Thirty-nine Articles of Queen Elizabeth's settlement by 1563. Scholars now tend to agree that Cranmer's ultimate view of the Lord's Supper is virtually the same as that of Calvin, which we shall describe in a moment. But for now the point is that the Lord's Supper was a main focus of the English Reformation. Horton Davies, in his six-volume *Worship and Theology in England* from 1534 to the end of the 20th century, has an interesting comparison of the piety of the Roman Catholic saint and martyr Sir Thomas More and the Protestant martyr and perhaps earliest English Calvinist John Bradford.. Davies finds these two admirable characters very similar (except, we might add, for More's persecution of the Bible translator William Tyndale). He says of Thomas More that his "spirituality was Christo-centric and Church-centred at the same time. He believed that the fullest life is to be found in Christ; after His glorification, Christ is present chiefly through the word of the Scripture and through the Blessed Sacrament. Perhaps it was this sacramental element in the piety which distinguished More from the Protestant martyr most clearly." (Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, Vol. I, *From Cranmer to Hooker, 1534-1603* [Princeton U. Press, 1970], combined ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], p. 438). John Bradford was really in harmony with Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London, who by referring to the 9th-century monk Ratramnus on the Lord's Supper, had helped persuade Cranmer of a view of the sacrament very similar to Calvin's real spiritual presence of Christ to the faith of the believing recipient. As we shall see, this was the view also of the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s. But just prior to that time, Archbishop William Laud in the 1630s, although opposed to the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation, nevertheless mandated that instead of communion tables there should be an altar against the east wall of the church and that communicants should come forward to receive the elements in a kneeling posture. To the Puritans this smacked of Romish idolatry of the sort that John Knox had warned against in the famous "black rubric" introduced into the Second Book of Common Prayer in King Edward VI's reign in 1552, that kneeling was not to imply worship of the elements. The English Reformation thus made a major contribution in the area of worship, but the range of understanding of the Lord's presence in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper left the Puritans desirous of forms of worship more clearly regulated by Scripture and at the same time left free from man-made restrictions in order to be led by the Holy Spirit's influence.

II.) The Role of the Sacraments in the Way of Salvation

1) Baptism – Hughes Oliphint Old in *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) shows how the Reformers of Switzerland and the Rhineland, facing the Roman ceremonies surrounding baptism on the one hand and the

Anabaptist denial of infant baptism on the other hand, did not make a choice between “what is not forbidden is allowed” and “what is not commanded is not allowed,” but rather developed a concept of worship that is “in accordance with Scripture” (pp. 119-120; cf. pp. 142-143, 283). Scoti Old outlines Calvin’s thought on baptism as follows:

“What Calvin did was to synthesize the basic arguments of the earlier Reformers into one consistent line of thought. It is the argument from covenant theology which forms the basis of Calvin’s position Calvin asks, Should we expect God to be less gracious to the children of Christians than to the children of the Jews? In fact, we have the word of Jesus that children do belong to the Kingdom of God (Matt. 19:14), and the word of the Apostle Paul that children are included in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 7:14). Calvin goes on to say that there is no evidence that children were not baptized in the New Testament Church, nor is there any evidence that it was invented in a later period in the history of the Church Next he defends the idea that the Holy Spirit is actively bringing children to Christ even in infancy.” (Pp. 141-142, citing Calvin’s *Institutes* 4.16.1-20)

Old describes the earlier Swiss Reformers as seeing four things as essential to the baptismal rite: the washing, the baptismal invocation, catechetical instruction, and the baptismal vows.

Dependence was not on the proper ceremony, but rather on the inward working of the Holy Spirit. The catechetical instruction was postponed until the children were of sufficient age to receive such instruction. This was “a complete recasting of the rite of baptism which takes into account that it is children who are being baptized and yet also takes very seriously the part played by prayer, teaching, and profession of faith in a true celebration of baptism” (pp. 74-75).

Old continues:

“The catechetical instruction and the profession of faith were postponed until later in life. They did not understand this as though the child were only half baptized until such a time as the catechetical instruction was completed and the vows of faith performed. The washing itself was the covenant sign, but that covenant sign entailed the instruction and the profession of faith. The covenant sign entailed far more, of course; it entailed a new life. This new life would be characterized by hearing God’s Word, serving God in prayer, turning away from sin, and bearing witness to one’s faith before the world. Baptism becomes a sign at the beginning of the Christian life which will be actualized throughout the whole of the Christian life” (pp. 75-76).

It was on this basis that Reformed believers baptized in infancy were admonished “to improve their baptism.” Here is the glorious benefit of being “in the covenant” and part of the visible church. It does not mean that salvation is automatic, that one is one of the elect, any more than every circumcised individual in Old Testament Israel was necessarily one of God’s elect. But what a marvelous advantage to be among the recipients of the prayers of God’s people, the regular preaching of God’s ministers, and the fellowship of God’s people. Old describes some of the consequences of this Reformed understanding and practice of baptism:

“The development of a catechumenate for children who had been baptized in infancy was one of the most successful reforms of the sixteenth century. Its success can be measured in several ways. The Sunday afternoon or evening catechetical sermon became a characteristic of Reformed Church life throughout Europe. It quickly became something of interest to adults as well as to children. Within a generation or two this program of catechetical instruction produced a well-informed Christian public” (p. 199).

Here we have a practice, continued in some of the Reformed churches of Dutch heritage to this

very day, which we would do well to emulate.

2) The Lord's Supper – The sacrament of the Lord's Supper, intended by Christ to express our unity, became in the Reformation the main point of division among Protestants. Different understandings of the Lord's Supper between Lutherans and the German Swiss Reformed emerged in the 1520s. Mediated by Martin Bucer of Strassburg and Prince Philip of Hesse, the Marburg Colloquy of 1529 was an attempt to find agreement between Luther and Philip Melanchthon on the one side and Ulrich Zwingli and John Oecolampadius on the other. After several days of debate, Luther was surprised to find that the Reformed could subscribe to all but one of his proposed Fourteen Articles, that one point having to do with the nature of the presence of Christ in the sacrament.

Horton Davies in his account of the English Reformation lists six points that all Protestant theologies had in common:

“Firstly, all agreed in their opposition to the Catholic doctrine of Transubstantiation and the corporal presence of Christ in the Eucharist as being contrary to the nature of sacraments as signs (rather than the things signified), and contrary to Scripture. Secondly, all stressed that Christ is made present by the action of the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, all asserted that the communion of the faithful is confirmed and strengthened by sharing in the Lord's Supper. Fourthly, the sacrament is in a primary sense the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection. Fifthly, there was agreement that the elements are powerful signs eliciting from the faithful the remembrance of Christ's work and consequently a confession of the forgiveness of sins through Christ's Passion. Sixthly, all affirmed that the sacrament is received by faith in the heart or conscience of the believer” (*Worship and Theology in England*, I, 85).

John Calvin in his *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, written in French in 1540 and later translated into Latin, spent the last several sections describing the differences between Luther and Zwingli at Marburg and the failure of each to grasp the main point of the other. It is reported that Luther, before his death in 1546, had read Calvin's *Short Treatise* and approved of it. Calvin, like Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and eventually Thomas Cranmer, held to the real spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper to the faith of the believing recipient. This is the position of our Westminster Standards. Calvin also found agreement with Philip Melanchthon on this issue, but not all contemporary Lutherans agreed. When Calvin achieved agreement with Henry Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich, in the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549, accepting slight modifications on only a few of the twenty-six Heads of Agreement (“implement” rather than “instrument” in Article 13; not speaking of God as working *through* the sacraments, but “in the Supper” in Articles 14 and 19; cf. Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* [Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 2002], pp. 64-68), the *Consensus Tigurinus* was attacked by a Lutheran pastor in Hamburg, Joachim Westphal, and Calvin had to respond to him and also to Tileman Heshus. The greater unity achieved among the Swiss Reformed was at the expense of a hardening among some of the Lutherans in insisting on the real presence of the ubiquitous body of Christ.

Differences of emphasis, and perhaps even of substance, can be detected in Calvin and Bullinger, and both had their influence in England. Horton Davies recognizes that there is a tendency to move from what he terms a “Virtualist” view of the Eucharist (like that of Calvin and Cranmer) to what he terms a “Memorialist” theory (like that of at least the early Zwingli and perhaps continuing in the Zurich tradition) because of “the greater ease of defending the latter on empirical and rational grounds, even if it seems to do less than justice to tradition and Christian

experience” (I, 85). Nevertheless, in the Puritan camp he finds William Perkins and William Ames to be faithful disciples of Calvin with regard to the Lord’s Supper (II, 311-314), and he views the *Westminster Directory for Worship* and the liturgy of Richard Baxter as by no means having a low view of the Lord’s Supper (II, 319-323). He cites the prayer of invocation of the Holy Spirit in the *Westminster Directory*, the last paragraph of which reads:

“Earnestly to pray to God, the Father of all mercies, and God of all consolation, to vouchsafe his gracious presence, and the effectual working of his Spirit in us; and so (to) feed upon him that he may be one with us, and we with him, that he may live in us, and we in him and to him, who hath loved us, and given himself for us” (quoted in II, 417).

What we see, then, in the historical background of our Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper is a commitment to the real spiritual presence of Christ, not in any corporal or carnal sense, in the Lord’s Supper to the faith of the believing recipient. Like the Word and prayer, it is a means of grace—not one that works automatically, but by the Spirit’s action. It exhibits that basis of our salvation, our union with the crucified and risen Christ, which we enjoy by the grace of God, received through faith alone.

III.) Some Practical Conclusions

1) Individual and Corporate Benefits – We began by saying that the essence of the Protestant Reformation is the gospel, the way of salvation. The medieval church held forth a sacramental way of salvation, and the Roman Catholic Church still does, as an examination of its new Catechism of 1994 will bear out. No, the Reformation is not over, thankful as we may be for more cordial dialog with Roman Catholic friends, with whom we can be co-belligerents on many social issues in our increasingly secular society. And it is important that we see that salvation is an individual matter. “It is appointed unto man once to die, and after this the judgment,” Hebrews 9:27 says. “We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:10. As sinners who have trusted in the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who has risen again, ascended on high, and is coming again in power and great glory, we must individually be found in him on the judgment day. But our individual salvation has corporate benefits. Baptized into the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are in the visible church, in the covenant relationship with the triune God and with his people. The Lord’s Supper exhibits not only our union with Christ, but our communion with the saints, both those who have gone before and are part of the church triumphant, and also our sisters and brothers here in this life who are part of the church militant.

2) Frequency of Communion – Some have logically connected a high view of the Lord’s Supper with a more frequent observance of the sacrament. It is well known that Calvin desired the Lord’s Supper to be observed at least once a week. However, he acknowledged that the Scriptures do not direct how often it is to be observed. “This do, as oft as you do it, in remembrance of me,” said our Lord in instituting the Supper, and so the frequency is left to the discretion of the elders of the local church. Interestingly, at the Westminster Assembly it was the Independents, with a somewhat lower view of the Supper, who advocated weekly celebration, while the Scottish Presbyterians, with a higher view, celebrated quarterly or even (when under persecution) annually. The *Westminster Directory* urges that observance be frequent, but with careful preparation during the preceding week or on the previous Lord’s Day. I personally have long urged more frequent communion than the traditional quarterly practice of Presbyterianism, and have been blessed in churches that commune each Sunday. Admittedly, one must guard

against becoming over-familiar with the sacrament, as with any other aspect of worship, and approaching the Lord's Table without prayerful and joyful reverence.

3) Calvin's Advocacy of Unity – It is spiritually painful that the sacraments that should unite us have become a source of division. Calvin's comments on the Marburg Colloquy in his *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper* express his regret over the unnecessary division between Luther and Zwingli. Like Bucer and Cranmer, he was willing to cross ten seas if possible to establish unity among Protestant believers. He labored for unity between Geneva and Zurich and other Swiss cities in the *Consensus Tigurinus* achieved with Bullinger. Keith Mathison's very helpful book *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (P & R, 2002) quotes Calvin's response to Bucer's criticisms of the *Consensus*:

“You devoutly and prudently desire that the effect of the sacraments and what the Lord confers to us through (*per*) them be explicated more clearly and more fully than many allow. Indeed it was not my fault that these items were not fuller. Let us therefore bear with a sigh that which cannot be corrected” (p. 67).

At the same time, we should note that Calvin could write in 1554 concerning the *Consensus* in 1549:

“...even if the two excellent doctors, Zwinglius and Oecolompadius, who were known to be faithful servants of Jesus Christ, were still alive, they would not change one word in

our

doctrine. For our good brother of blessed memory, Martin Bucer, after seeing our Agreement, wrote to me that it was an inestimable blessing for the whole Church”

(Calvin,

Treatises on the Sacraments, Tracts of John Calvin, trans. Henry Beveridge, [Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002], p. 211).

In other words, neither Calvin nor Bucer may have regarded the *Consensus Tigurinus* as a perfect expression of their views of the Lord's Supper, but it could still be a blessing to the church. Likewise for us, there can be room for our different emphases regarding the mysteries of the Lord's Supper—indeed we can benefit from a variety of perspectives as rich as the facets of a diamond—so long as we are united in the sacrament's exhibition of the gospel of our union with the crucified and risen Christ, by grace alone through faith alone.