

**The Sacramental Theology of the Reformers: A Comparison of the
Views of Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli**

By
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Introduction

Of the various issues related to the Reformers' protest against the Roman Catholic Church, few encapsulate the objections and perspectives of the Reformers like that of the sacraments. It is in the debate around the number and meaning of the sacraments, both with the Catholic Church and with fellow Reformers, that principles otherwise documented and discussed take practical form. As they confront the abuses such as the use of Masses as a means of raising money by means of Indulgences, and challenge the theology of the established church of the day, one can see both their commitment to the Scriptures, and their acknowledgment of tradition and respect for the teaching of the Church Fathers. There is both a radicalism and a conservatism in their approach, demonstrating the pull of *sola scriptura* on the one hand, and social pragmatism on the other.

It is important to remember that these heroes of the Reformation were all initially loyal Catholics. Martin Luther sincerely believed the church could be reformed from within; in the end he was excommunicated for his views—he was not willing to leave. Huldrych Zwingli had been a priest, and embraced Reformation ideas initially as a means of introducing moral and social reform to Zurich. John Calvin never received any formal theological education: he was raised within the Catholic Church and trained as a lawyer.¹ This is not to say that these men were not committed to the truths of Scripture and willing to stand up against the Catholic Church and its many deviations from that standard; however, this perspective does help one to understand the context in which they formulated their views of the sacraments.

It is the thesis of this paper that the views of the sacraments taken by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, in both their positive expositions and in their polemical writings, are a mixture of Scripture and tradition. In some ways they bring the light of biblical teaching to bear upon the subject, and in others they show over-sensitivity to the political needs of their environment. Before exploring this thesis, however, it is necessary to

¹ David C. Steinmetz, "The Theology of John Calvin" in David Bagchi and David Steinmetz (eds.), The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 113.

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examine the prevalent view of the sacraments at the close of the medieval period in order to understand exactly what the Reformers were attempting to reform.

The Sacraments in the Medieval Period

The term “sacrament” originates from the Latin word *sacramentum* (μυστήριον in Greek), which in classical times referred to an oath or an obligation, but had taken on the meaning of “something set apart.” There is no concrete evidence that the term was used in a technical sense prior to the third or fourth century,² but it came to designate a particular church rite or outward sign that in some way conveys grace to the recipient.³ Precisely which rites or signs made up the full number of sacraments was not clear, partly due to the flexible definition of the term. Baptism and the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, were without question considered among the sacraments, and were early on designated “dominical,” since they were authorized by the Lord Himself.⁴ Hugo of St. Victor (d. 1141), in his treatise *De Sacramentis Fidei Christianae* defined the term “sacrament” such that it encompassed not only the sign, but also the physical medium through which grace is communicated;⁵ as a result he was able to count thirty of them. Peter Damian (d. 1072) had listed twelve sacraments, but it was Peter Lombard’s list of seven sacraments in his famous *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, or simply “Sentences” (c. 1150), that was made official at the Council of Florence in 1439.⁶

²J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 4th ed. (London, UK: A&C Black, 1968), p. 193.

³Thomas Aquinas held that the sacraments themselves were containers of grace, whereas Duns Soctus held that God had covenanted to be present when the sacrament was performed. While this distinction has importance for understanding realism and nominalism in scholastic thought, in a discussion on the communication of grace via the sacraments in medieval theology, they amount to the same thing: the sacraments themselves communicate grace.

⁴Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), p. 54.

⁵Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume I*, (Peabody, Ma: Prince Press, 1997), p. 505.

⁶Carl A. Veltz, *The Church of the Middle Ages: Growth and Change from 600 to 1400*, (St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), p. 87. These seven sacraments were affirmed by the seventh session of the Council of Trent on March 3, 1547 (McGrath, p. 195).

The seven sacraments officially recognized by the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation⁷ were: baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction. It will be helpful by way of comparison with the views of the Reformers to give an overview of the Catholic understanding of each of these.⁸

Baptism: The Roman Catholic Church considered baptism to be essential for salvation, since it was administered for cleansing from Original Sin and for spiritual rebirth. While adult baptism was certainly acceptable, it was common practice to baptize infants since it was believed that any infant that died unbaptized would go to hell. Given high infant mortality rates in the medieval period, it is understandable that paedobaptism would be common. The candidate would either be immersed or have water poured over them. As with all of the sacraments, baptism was held to be effective regardless of the spiritual condition of the administrator; as long as the candidate (or the candidate's sponsor in the case of an infant) had the faith and the will to receive the grace delivered through the sacrament, the rightly-administered sacrament would be effective in itself.⁹

The Eucharist: This sacrament was believed to convey to the recipient grace to sustain him or her spiritually by applying the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death to the person. The Mass, as it was called, was not seen, therefore, as a re-sacrifice of Christ, but a re-presentation of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on behalf of the world. The liturgy would be given in Latin, and at the point when the elements of bread and wine were consecrated, the Catholic Church taught that these then became in substance the actual body and blood of Christ.¹⁰ As a consequence of this belief, it was not uncommon for the

⁷ And, of course, to this day.

⁸The following is drawn mainly from Latourette, pp. 528-533, and William R. Cannon, History of Christianity in the Middle Ages, (New York, Ny: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 313-315.

⁹The Latin phrase commonly used is *ex opere operanto*, or "through the work worked," as opposed to *ex opera operantis*, or "through the work of the worker." This latter view held that the efficacy of the sacrament depended on the moral and spiritual condition of the one administering the sacrament—a view held by the Donatists in the fifth century.

¹⁰The doctrine of transubstantiation was declared the official teaching of the Church at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. There had been much debate and discussion concerning how Christ's words of institution (i.e., "This is my body," and "This is my blood") were to be understood. By the application of Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents to differentiate between the outward form of the elements and their true identity, the Church was able to formulate this view. Thus, at the moment of consecration, while the external appearance, or accidents, of the elements remained the same (i.e., they looked like bread and wine), the internal identity, or substance, changed from bread and wine to Christ's

elements to be worshiped. Also, it became standard practice to only administer the bread to the laity, since it was feared that passing the cup might cause spillage of what would then have been considered Christ's blood, which would profane it.¹¹ It was reasoned, however, that when the laity receives only the bread, they are still receiving Christ in His fullness, not in part.

Confirmation: The officiating bishop would make the sign of the cross on the head of the candidate with oil to confer the status of spiritual maturity, infusing him with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Penance: It was noted earlier that the sacrament of baptism cleansed the candidate from Original Sin. For post-baptismal sin, especially sins considered to be "mortal sins,"¹² a person could confess this sin to a priest who would then declare forgiveness, or absolution. The Catholic Church believed that the priest had access to the "treasury of merit," consisting of the overflow of merit from Christ and the saints, and he could apply such grace to the penitent for the remission of his or her mortal sin. However, some act of penance was usually required for the absolution to be effective. This could take the form of alms-giving, fasting, pilgrimages, gifts to the Church, and so forth.¹³

Marriage: Essentially, the purpose of the sacrament of marriage in the medieval church was to sanctify the act of sexual union, so that a distinction could easily be drawn between fornication and legitimate conjugal relations. For this reason, marriages that were not consummated could be nullified. Children constituted the blessing of marriage since it was believed that the main purpose served by sexual relations was the propagation of offspring.¹⁴

own flesh and blood.

¹¹Not to speak of the theological quandaries that may result from spilling Christ's blood onto the floor or clothing.

¹²The seven mortal, or "deadly," sins were identified as pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

¹³It is important to note that the practice of Indulgences is related directly to the sacrament of penance. Through special Masses, pilgrimages, or other deeds, the Pope or a local bishop could grant a shortening of one's time in Purgatory by application of merit from the Treasury of Merit. It was the implications of this, namely that one could in some way purchase grace, or attain salvation through monetary gifts and good works, that provoked Martin Luther to post his ninety-five theses.

Ordination: Only priests and bishops received ordination, and it was by this sacrament that the power to perform the duties of the priest—including administration of the other sacraments—was communicated. Roman Catholic priests were expected to remain celibate.

Extreme Unction: This sacrament evolved from the practice of anointing the sick with oil in conjunction with prayer for healing. It was connected with penance such that the sins of the sick could be alleviated with the performance of appropriate acts of penance. In the end it was only administered to those believed to be dying, in the belief that the anointing with oil would bring healing, but more importantly, perhaps, would bring forgiveness of sin as the soul departs this world to face judgment.

The Reformers and the Sacraments in General

Luther's view of the sacraments was that they are outward signs that accompany a promise. In his work, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520), Luther notes that with every promise God makes, there is a sign attached: the rainbow with the promise not to destroy the world again by flood, circumcision with the promise to Abraham of his seed's inheritance, the wet fleece to Gideon along with the promise that he would defeat the Midianites, and so forth. Ultimately, however, there is only one single sacrament, according to the usage of the term in the Latin Vulgate, Christ himself,¹⁵ and three sacramental signs that point to Him: baptism, "the bread" (the Eucharist), and penance.¹⁶ By the end of the same work, Luther came to acknowledge that penance lacked a tangible sign given by the Lord Himself, and so he fell in line with the other Reformers in acknowledging only baptism and the Eucharist.¹⁷ He insisted, however, that every

¹⁴ As noted by Peter Brown (Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Ca: University of California Press, 2000), p. 501), this was Augustine's view, and it evidently became the prevailing opinion of the church.

¹⁵"et manifeste magnum est pietatis sacramentum quod manifestatum est in carne, iustificatum est in spiritu, apparuit angelis, praedicatum est gentibus, creditum est in mundo, adsumptum est in gloria" (1 Timothy 3:16).

¹⁶Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" in Martin Luther, Three Treatises, 2nd rev. ed. (Philadelphia, Pa: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 132.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 258: "Nevertheless, it has seemed proper to restrict the name of sacrament to those promises which have signs attached to them. The remainder, not being bound to signs, are bare promises. Hence there are, strictly speaking, but two sacraments in the church of God—baptism and the bread. For

promise of God had to have a word and a sign, a testament and sacrament, and the greater power is in the word, the testament, “for a man can have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament.”¹⁸

Whereas the Roman Catholic Church held that the sacraments were a means of earning merit, Luther believed that the purpose of the sacraments was to encourage the faith of the believer. Whatever efficacy the sacrament had toward forgiveness of sin or receiving Christ, it was dependent upon the faith of the recipient, not on the power of the priest or any inherent power in the ceremony or the sacrament itself:

Hence it is a manifest and wicked error to offer or apply the mass for sins, for satisfactions, for the dead, or for any needs whatsoever of one’s own or of others. You will readily see the obvious truth of this if you firmly hold that the mass is a divine promise, which can benefit no one, be applied to no one, intercede for no one, and be communicated to no one, except only to him who believes with a faith of his own... Therefore, let this irrefutable truth stand fast: Where there is a divine promise, there every one must stand on his own feet; his own personal faith is demanded, he will give an account for himself and bear his own load...¹⁹

This does not mean that the sacraments were without value. Indeed, the sacraments visibly bring the cross to the believer. It is by means of the outward experience of the sacraments that God gives the inward experience.²⁰

For Ulrich Zwingli, who had served as a military chaplain, the word *sacramentum* had more of its classical meaning of an oath or a pledge, initially understanding this in terms of a pledge of God’s faithfulness to men, then later as a pledge of loyalty between believers, to the community.²¹ By receiving the sacrament, the believer identifies himself with the Christian community. The sacrament does not communicate grace, but it

only in these two do we find both the divinely instituted sign and the promise of forgiveness of sins. The sacrament of penance, which I added to these two, lacks the divinely instituted visible sign, and is, as I have said, nothing but a way and a return to baptism.”

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁹ Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” pp. 167-168.

²⁰ Scott Hendrix, “Luther,” in Bagchi and Steinmetz, The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology, p. 51.

²¹ McGrath, p. 180.

signifies the presence of grace that has already been given to the recipient.²² Zwingli held firmly to the secondary role of signs, perhaps aware of how easily people get drawn to the symbol and miss the spiritual reality behind it.²³ The sacrament is subordinate to the Word of God: it is the public proclamation of God's Word that elicits the faith that the sacrament signifies.²⁴ However, the sacraments appeal to the senses, and in this way can strengthen faith.²⁵ But neither the preaching of the Word nor the sacrament can guarantee faith, since the Spirit blows where He will and does not need either preaching or sacrament to be effective.²⁶

John Calvin defined a sacrament as:

an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety toward him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.²⁷

Calvin agreed with Zwingli that the Word of God is sufficient to assure believers of their salvation, and that sacraments are not necessary, however God has given the sacraments to the church in light of human ignorance and frailty. In this sense, they are helps, visual aids to the gospel truths preached from the pulpit.

Thus the sacraments are, as it were, seals to seal the grace of God in our hearts, and render it more authentic, for which reason they may be termed visible doctrine.²⁸

²²Gregory J. Miller, "Huldrych Zwingli," in Carter Lindberg (ed), The Reformed Theologians (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), pp. 161-162.

²³Ibid., p. 162.

²⁴McGrath, p. 181.

²⁵ W. Peter Stephens, "The Theology of Zwingli," in Bagchi and Steinmetz (eds.), The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology, p. 88.

²⁶ Miller, "Huldrych Zwingli," p. 162.

²⁷John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), IV.14.1.

²⁸John Calvin, "Confession of Faith in the Name of the Reformed Churches of France," in Henry Beveridge (trans.), Treatises on the Sacraments: Tracts by John Calvin (Grand Rapids, Mi: Reformation Heritage Books, 2002), p. 152.

The sacraments are symbols of a present reality in the life of the believer, and since they represent that which is true for the recipient, they do not depend upon the spiritual condition of the minister for their benefit. In this sense, Calvin agreed with Augustine and the Catholic Church—but he went a step further, agreeing with Zwingli on the supremacy of the Spirit over the sacrament:

We hold, however, that they are useful only when God gives effect to them, and displays the power of his Spirit, using them as instruments. Hence the Spirit of God must act to make us feel their efficacy for our salvation.²⁹

Unlike Zwingli, who, as noted above, emphasized the fact that, while certainly useful, the sacraments were unnecessary, Calvin stressed the necessity of the sacraments in light of man's sinful condition and need for the sustenance they provide.³⁰ He also identified them as one of the marks of a true Christian church: where the Word is preached and the sacraments properly administered, there is a true church, regardless of the quality of its membership.³¹

So, while there appears to be surface-level agreement between Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin on the number of the sacraments, and the necessity for faith with respect to the efficacy of the sacraments, there are some fundamental differences between them that will be played out as each sacrament is examined in turn. Luther held there to be a strong link between the sign of the sacrament and that which it signifies. The sacraments are not mere symbols, but they mediate the power of Christ, and are capable of demonstrating the faith of the recipient.³² Zwingli saw the significance of the sacraments simply in terms of an oath; they are symbols and do nothing that the Spirit could do without them. Calvin's position appears to be a mediating one: while the sacraments are signs and symbols, there

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., 153.

³¹McGrath, p. 190.

³²Ibid., p. 188.

is a strong link between the sacrament and that which it signifies. A lump of silver changes its value when it is stamped as a coin—it does not cease to be silver, but it has become money. Likewise, the sacraments are ordinary bread, wine, and water, but they have been “stamped” by the Lord and made into sacraments such that they have been given a new significance.³³ The symbols are not empty: when the Lord gives the symbol of his body in the bread of the Eucharist, the recipient should be assured he is partaking of Christ. This visible sign is “in seal of an invisible gift,” i.e., Christ’s body given to us.³⁴

The Reformers and the Sacrament of Baptism

For the Magisterial Reformers as a whole, there were certain elements of the sacrament of baptism that were consistent with the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. First, the fact that the sacrament itself depended upon the faith of the recipient to be effective or meaningful. Second, that while it was acceptable to baptize believing adults, it was preferable to baptize people as infants. The first point of similarity is true simply because both the Catholic Church and the Reformers held to the Augustinian view of the efficacy of the sacraments. On the second point, the similarity truly only exists externally, and while there may be similar sociological reasons for continuing the practice of infant baptism (which shall be explored below), the theological justifications for the practice could not be more distinct from one another. For the Roman Catholic, baptism of infants was necessary to purge them of Original Sin, in case the child should die in infancy, to secure his or her place in heaven. The Reformers, on the other hand, saw in baptism a continuation of the covenantal sign of circumcision by which the infant child of believing parents was received into the church, God’s covenant community. This is, of course, to speak very broadly of the Reformers; even within this general consensus of opinion, each Reformer held differing views.

For Luther, baptism signified more than simply the washing away of sin, although it was that: it was death and resurrection, “full and complete justification.”³⁵ He taught

³³Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.16.18.

³⁴*Ibid.*, IV.17.10.

³⁵Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” p. 190-191.

that the sinner does not need to merely be cleansed of his sin, but he needs to die to sin and rise again to new life, as a new creation. For this reason, he believed that immersion was the preferable mode of baptism.³⁶ The promise baptism signifies is that whoever is baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16). Of course, faith must be present for the promise of baptism to be effective, but herein lies the power of baptism: it is not merely a momentary event, but something that has lasting efficacy.³⁷ While the ceremony may only last a short time, given the promise behind it, one can gain strength in times of weakness by recalling one's baptism and gaining assurance. Indeed, in repentance, when the penitent rises up from his sin, he is in fact recalling his baptism and the promise of salvation affected there. Since it is at baptism that the sinner receives the gift of salvation by faith, Luther considered it "the first sacrament and the foundation of all others, without which none of the others can be received."³⁸

There was a clear distinction in Luther's mind between the one administering baptism, and the one actually baptizing. While the candidate is baptized at the hands of a man, it is God Himself that actually baptizes; and he does not mean this in terms of internal and external acts (i.e., man baptizes on the outside while God performs the internal work). The one baptizing does so as "the vicarious instrument of God, by which the Lord sitting in heaven thrusts you under the water with his own hands, and promises you forgiveness of your sins, speaking to you upon earth with a human voice by the mouth of his minister."³⁹

Luther did not believe there to be any conflict between this view of baptism and the practice of infant baptism. In response to those who might say that paedobaptism is not effective because infants can neither comprehend God's promises nor exercise faith, he appeals firstly to the power of God's Word to change any heart, and an infant's heart is no more helpless than a godless adult's heart. Secondly he cites the prayers of a

³⁶Ibid., p. 191.

³⁷Ibid., p. 192.

³⁸Ibid., p. 181.

³⁹Ibid., p. 184.

believing church through which God can change, cleanse, and renew the child.⁴⁰ In this sense, the church believed on behalf of the child, and hence presented the required faith for the baptism to be effectual.⁴¹ It is, after all, the Word of God that is proclaimed at baptism, and it cannot fail to bear fruit.⁴² In response to the Anabaptists, Luther argued that since faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, He is at liberty to grant it to whomever He wants, even an infant. Also, since that faith is dependent upon the gift of the Spirit, and not on the act of baptism, one need never be concerned if he or she has been properly baptized and hence truly been granted faith.⁴³

In this, and subsequent discussion of Luther's sacramental theology, it is important to remember that of all the main Magisterial Reformers, Luther was the most conservative.⁴⁴ That is to say, Luther's chief concern in the Reformation of Wittenberg was the doctrine of justification by faith, and opposing those things that would undermine this teaching. In view of this, Luther tended to be a lot more tolerant of other issues that were of greater importance to Zwingli, Calvin, and others, but seemed to him to be matters of indifference.⁴⁵

Zwingli's view of baptism was in line with his sacramental perspective which, in contrast to Luther, separated the external sign from the internal act. Indeed, in what little he wrote on the subject initially, he denied the necessity of baptism and taught that confirmation of baptized infants should be delayed until they could confess faith.⁴⁶ In

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 197.

⁴¹Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 331.

⁴²McGrath, p. 179.

⁴³Scott Hendrix, "Luther," p. 52.

⁴⁴This fact is evident from his attitude toward images, church music, and, as will be discussed below, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, in which he was much closer to the traditional Roman Catholic positions than his fellow Reformers. See Diarmaid McCullough, *The Reformation: A History* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2003, p. 144.

⁴⁵The distinction between "Reformed" and "Lutheran" first became evident in Zwingli's objections to Luther's Eucharistic theology. However, there are underlying reasons for this distinction (e.g., Luther's disinterest in humanism versus Zwingli and Calvin's promotion of a humanistic approach to Scripture, and the political situation in Wittenberg versus the situations in Zurich and Geneva—the discussion of which falls beyond the scope of this paper. For a brief evaluation, see McGrath, pp. 57-63.

⁴⁶W. Peter Stephens, "The Theology of Zwingli," p. 88.

fact, early on in his career, Zwingli was troubled with the concept of infant baptism, since he shared Erasmus' concern over the doctrine of Original Sin, and hence saw no need for infants to receive a baptism which supposedly cleansed them from this stain.⁴⁷ Whether he was convinced by theological argumentation, or by the political situation in Zurich, it is evident that he was reasoning in favor of infant baptism by 1524, and in 1525 was using such argumentation against the Anabaptists.

The idea that infant baptism was related to Old Testament circumcision first seems to have appeared in the writings of the Reformers in a letter from Martin Luther to his young disciple Philipp Melanchthon in 1522. The Zwickau Prophets, a group of Anabaptist activists, were causing trouble in Wittenberg, and Luther had written to advise Melanchthon on dealing with them. In a passing comment, he noted a connection between the practice of circumcising infant males as a sign of entry into the old Israel, and the practice of baptizing infants as a sign of entry into the new Israel. Luther did not develop this idea himself, but Zwingli caught hold of it and made much of the argument against the Anabaptist antagonists in Zurich.⁴⁸

Zwingli taught that, as circumcision in the Old Testament initiated the child into the covenant community, so baptism has that same role in the New Testament, recognizing that those baptized may already believe, or will at least be granted faith sometime in the future.⁴⁹ There is, after all, a unity between the two testaments in a single covenant, a unity that the Anabaptist insistence on believer's baptism—which inevitably led them to deny their children the font—ruptured.⁵⁰ There were, of course, differences between the two covenant signs aside from the obvious change in the symbol itself. Baptism is painless, and also can be applied to both males and females.

Zwingli was not put off by the standard argument of the Anabaptists that the New Testament contained no explicit command or example of infant baptism. The New Testament says nothing about women partaking of the Lord's Supper, but the church—

⁴⁷McGrath, p. 186.

⁴⁸McDiarmaid, pp. 149-150.

⁴⁹W. Peter Stephens, "The Theology of Zwingli," p. 88.

⁵⁰Ibid.; Miller, "Huldrych Zwingli," p. 162.

and even the Anabaptists—permitted women to the table. Also, it is more than likely that infants were part of the households mentioned in the New Testament as having been baptized.⁵¹

Ultimately, for Zwingli, these infants were the children of Christians, and as such they were part of the body of Christ, the community of faith, regardless of how much they understood this fact. To deny baptism to an infant was tantamount to depriving the infant of Christ Himself, and contrary to Christ's command in Matthew 19:13-14. Baptism was for the child an outward display of his covenant unity with the rest of the church.⁵² The fact that the infant received baptism as opposed to earning it by some exercise of faith demonstrated the need for humility in approaching God; the sacraments are, after all, about God's promises to man, not what man does for God.⁵³

There is an underlying political element to the issue of infant baptism that cannot be overlooked, especially given Zwingli's initial hesitancy to embrace the practice. The rise of the city state in medieval Europe meant that cities were seeing themselves as entities on their own apart from the state in which they were situated, and hence could decide for themselves, for example, whether or not they accepted Reformed teaching. Zwingli himself saw church and state as referring to the same body of people, and hence to deny baptism to a child is to deny that child full rights of membership into the city. It was an act of disloyalty that the civil magistrate had every right to punish,⁵⁴ as Ozment points out:

Infant baptism remained an important religious and civic rite in the sixteenth century. It conveyed responsibility for a new life into the hands of the congregation and citizenry, who together promised to rear the child in love and obedience to the laws of both God and man.⁵⁵

⁵¹Specifically, Acts 16:31-34 and 1 Corinthians 1:16.

⁵²W. Peter Stephens, "The Theology of Zwingli," p. 88; McGrath, p. 186.

⁵³Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 159.

⁵⁴McGrath, p. 187.

⁵⁵Ozment, p. 331.

Also, to the people of Zurich, the concept of “covenant” held a great deal of meaning, since it was by means of covenants that the Swiss cantons were able to live and work together despite their differences.⁵⁶ In light of the division threatened by the Anabaptists, regardless of whether the concept was biblical, there was certainly political motivation to promote infant baptism.

Calvin’s view of baptism appears to be a mediating path between that of the Roman Catholic Church, which ascribed to the water the power to cleanse from sin and grant salvation, and that of Zwingli who saw baptism as a sign, like the insignia a soldier might wear on his uniform to indicate his commander, and his allegiance to his army.⁵⁷ Calvin describes baptism as “the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, that being grafted into Christ we may be accounted children of God.”⁵⁸ The purpose of the sign is firstly for the benefit of faith, and secondly as a testimony, or confession, among men. It is “the evidence of our purification,” or the “sealed instrument by which [God] assures us that all our sins are so deleted, covered, and effaced, that they will never come into his sight, never be mentioned, never imputed.”⁵⁹ This is why Christ commanded that all those who believe should receive baptism, since in this way it builds up the faith of the believer, and reminds him or her of the benefits received by virtue of His death and resurrection. Through the waters of baptism, the believer’s mortification to sin and new life in Christ is exemplified, but also the believer’s union with Christ is proclaimed. It is Christ’s blood that cleanses from sin, and hence it is through that union with Christ that the believer’s sin is washed away.⁶⁰ This cleansing from sin does not apply simply to Adam’s sin; this applies to all sin for all time. Since it is not the baptismal waters themselves that cleanse but Christ’s atoning blood, this total forgiveness and cleansing comes from Christ to the believer. Baptism, therefore, gives the believer the assurance that he or she is no longer under God’s

⁵⁶McDiarmid, p. 150.

⁵⁷See McGrath, p. 181.

⁵⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.15.1.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid., IV.15.6.

condemnation, and that he or she no longer stands guilty before God.⁶¹ Since Calvin saw such a strong bond between the sign of baptism and the command to baptize—along with the promise of salvation to those who believe and are baptized (Mark 16:16), Calvin rejected Zwingli’s “symbol-only” position.

Although Calvin held to this connection between the promise of salvation and baptism, he believed firmly that it was proper, and biblical, to baptize infants. He neither saw this as a concession to the Catholic Church’s view that baptism itself cleanses from sin, nor as inconsistent with the position enunciated above. Indeed, Calvin devotes the whole of chapter sixteen of book four of his *Institutes* to a defense of infant baptism, probably in the wake of the pressing challenge of Anabaptist groups, and especially Servetus, whom he specifically targets in the thirty-first section.

The basis of Calvin’s argumentation is the link between circumcision and baptism, not simply in the fact that they are both symbols of admission to God’s covenant people, but that since circumcision was expressly given to the children of Abraham and their descendants, so the sign of baptism should likewise be given. To deny the baptism of children is to question the wisdom of God in giving the covenant sign of circumcision to children.⁶² The purpose for which God gave circumcision to His old covenant people is the same for which He gave baptism to the new covenant people—indeed, there is no difference between the two covenants, the only change is in the outward sign “which is the least part of it.”⁶³ Calvin saw in the Abrahamic covenant sign the ideas of mortification to sin and renewal, which baptism also represents in terms of repentance and regeneration.⁶⁴

The baptized infant is, therefore, the recipient of the covenant promises and blessings of God; he or she is separated from the heathen and made a part of God’s covenant community, the church. Within the context of the church, the baptized infant is nurtured and encouraged to live according to the covenant promises: he is not saved by

⁶¹Ibid., IV.15.10.

⁶²Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.16.20.

⁶³Ibid., IV.16.4.

⁶⁴Ibid., IV.16.3.

his baptism. Calvin denied a connection between the sign of baptism and actual regeneration, claiming that God is able to regenerate whomever He pleases whenever He pleases. While the proclamation of the Word is given in Scripture as the method by which God's elect are called to Him, it is presumptuous to insist that God be restricted to this means only. God is free to call His elect, whether adult or infant, at any time:

The advantage which we receive from the sacraments ought by no means to be restricted to the time at which they are administered to us, just as if the visible sign, at the moment when it is brought forward, brought the grace of God along with it. For those who were baptized when mere infants, God regenerates in childhood or adolescence, occasionally even in old age.⁶⁵

He cites John the Baptist as an example of a child still in the womb who was animated by the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶ However, baptism must be given to the infant as a sign of his or her participation in the covenant and membership in the church, outside of which there is no salvation.⁶⁷

Without calling into question either the sincerity or the validity of any of the Magisterial Reformers' arguments in favor of infant baptism, one must also account for the social and political situation, as noted above concerning Zwingli and Zurich. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin all interacted and depended upon the political leaders of their various domains for the propagation of reformation belief and practice. Since the middle ages, baptism had played an essential role in the church-state to bind the infant to the church, and hence it was not a voluntary practice, and it could not be renounced.⁶⁸ It would be easy to understand, given the enormity of the task they faced in many other areas, that they felt it simpler to find biblical justification for continuing the practice of infant

⁶⁵John Calvin, "Mutual Consent of the Churches of Zurich and Geneva as to the Sacraments," in Henry Beveridge (trans.), *Treatises on the Sacraments: Tracts by John Calvin*, p. 218.

⁶⁶Ibid., 16.19. On the question of infants who die in infancy, Calvin preferred to remain agnostic to their fate .

⁶⁷Steinmetz, "The Theology of John Calvin," p. 124.

⁶⁸R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, reprint (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 18.

baptism that did not compromise their principles, than trying to drive a wedge between them and the state, whose favor they needed to support and further their cause. Unlike the Anabaptists, the Reformers were not trying to start a new church—at least they did not wish to be perceived that way.⁶⁹

The Reformers and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

With regard to baptism, the Reformers' dispute with Rome was essentially over the meaning of "sacrament." If the Roman Catholic Church could properly understand what a sacrament is, then for the most part the Reformers would have had little issue with their practice of baptism.⁷⁰ Over the Lord's Supper, or the Mass, however, the difference was far more substantial. The Reformers not only objected to Rome's misunderstanding of sacrament as applied to the Mass, but Rome's teaching on the nature of the elements, the purpose of the Mass, and just about every aspect of the Roman Catholic Church's perspective of the sacrament.

Martin Luther was certainly not interested in starting a separatist movement. His initial concern was for the reform of the church from within, and this fact is very much in evidence in his comments on the Lord's Supper in his 1520 work The Babylonian Captivity of the Church. While he criticizes many of the beliefs behind the sacrament, he does not reject outright much of the actual ritual of the Catholic Mass. He recognizes

⁶⁹"[I]t is reasonable to suppose that the reformers rejected believers' baptism not *because* of the sometimes rather specious analogies or arguments which they used, but for the much more fundamental reason that they were not about to found a sect rather than a community church. They insisted that the promises of the Gospel be preached and applied to everyone; they founded *churches*, not sects or heresies. Their traditional view of baptism mirrored their universal vision of reform itself." Euan Cameron, The European Reformation, p. 161.

⁷⁰As noted previously, the Roman Catholic Church practiced infant baptism and held that faith had to be present at least in the parents for the sacrament to be effective. The major difference with the Reformers was their insistence that baptism cleansed the infant from the stain of Original Sin. The Reformers' position was that the stain of Original Sin, and all other sin, was removed by the grace of God bestowed upon the His elect, and baptism symbolized this cleansing. There was certainly no covenantal structure around Rome's understanding of paedobaptism, but one could argue that this structure was applied by the Reformers to give biblical consistency to their position; they did not derive their position from their understanding of the covenants. David Bagchi seems to concur with this perspective: "Of the dominical sacraments, baptism was not on the whole a controverted point between Catholics and mainstream Protestants: it is significant that its appearance in van der Vorst's list [of the top nine controverted issues in Germany in the late 1530s], in second to last place, is due to differences over baptismal liturgy, not baptismal theology." (David Bagchi, "Catholic Theologians of the Period Before Trent," in Bagchi and Steinmetz, The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology, p. 226.

that a lot of the ritual is unnecessary, but he does not go so far as to condemn it. The fact that he continues to refer to the sacrament as “the Mass” is itself quite telling of his attitude.⁷¹

With regard to the Catholic Church’s practice of administering only the bread to the laity, Luther took the position that it is a matter for the church and each celebrant to determine. He believed that it was wicked to deny the cup to anyone, since the Lord instituted the administering of both kinds; it should not be withheld from those who want it. It was legislating one way or the other that he seemed to object to more than anything else.⁷²

Luther was most concerned that amidst all the vestments, the prayers, the organ playing, and general ornamentation of the Mass that the sacrament not lose its Christ-centeredness. It is not in the ceremony that the power of the sacrament resides, but in the words of institution and the faith that is exercised upon the proclamation of these words. Everything else is superfluous.⁷³ It is in the Mass that Christ promises the forgiveness of sin through His body and blood. The words of this promise must be heard by all who come forward to partake for the sacrament to be effectual.⁷⁴

Luther’s conservatism shines through most clearly, however, in his teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Mass;⁷⁵ that is, in his answer to the question “in what sense can Christ be said to be really present in the Mass?” The Roman Catholic answer was in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Luther’s rejection of this doctrine was not as complete as his fellow Reformers would have preferred—especially Zwingli. The real problem for Luther was not so much the idea that Christ’s words of institution, “this is

⁷¹Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in Martin Luther, *Three Treatises*, p. 153.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 142-143.

⁷³Ibid., p. 153.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 160.

⁷⁵ Although, to be fair, McGrath points out that Luther would have abandoned this position if he could be convinced that it was unbiblical (McGrath, p. 179). It can not be ignored, however, that the literal understanding of the words *hoc est corpus meum* was what he had become familiar with in the years prior to 1517, and since he felt the clarity of the Scriptures was at stake preferred not to venture beyond these very words.

His issue was with the way in which Rome tried to explain how this could be, how precisely the bread and the wine could also literally be Christ’s body and blood. Luther rejected the Aristotelian language Rome employed,⁷⁷ preferring to say that the sharing of properties between Christ’s human and divine natures after the ascension⁷⁸ is such that where one is the other can also be, and hence, by an incomprehensible work of the Spirit, the body and blood of Christ are really present with the bread and the wine. It is futile trying to explain how this happens since it is a work of the Spirit; all that matters is that Christ’s words be taken to mean literally what He says.

Zwingli agreed with Luther that the Lord’s Supper, or Eucharist, should be presented in both kinds to the laity; this was the intent of Christ in giving both elements at the Last Supper, and should therefore be the practice of the church.⁷⁹ Also, Zwingli taught that the Eucharist is a commemoration of Christ’s death, and that death was a one-time event for our sins. When Christ instituted the sacrament, He had not yet died and so the meal was to be understood as a memorial of His upcoming death;⁸⁰ the bread and wine left as reminders of the sacrifice that He was about to make.⁸¹

Under the influence of Cornelius Hoen, whose critiques of transubstantiation based on the earlier work of Wessel Gansfort had found their way into his and Luther’s possession,⁸² Zwingli argued that Christ’s words of institution could not be taken literally. The word “is” in the phrase “this is my body” had to be understood as “signifies,” otherwise a number of errors would have to be permitted, among which he noted that the

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 150-151.

⁷⁷Ibid., pp. 144-145.

⁷⁸Referred to as the *communicatio idiumatum*.

⁷⁹Huldrych Zwingli, “Short Christian Instruction,” in H. Wayne Pipkin (trans.), Huldrych Zwingli: Writings Volume Two (Allison Park, Pa: Pickwick Publications, 1984), p. 73.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 74.

⁸²McGrath, p. 182; W. Peter Stephens, “The Theology of Zwingli,” p. 89.

doctrine of transubstantiation would have to be accepted, and that Christ would have to suffer again since it is His literal flesh that is consumed.⁸³

Zwingli found support for his view in John 6. He noted that in John 6:63, Christ states that the flesh profits nothing; would Christ give His people a sacramental sign that profits nothing?⁸⁴ Further, in 6:54, when Christ speaks of eating His flesh and drinking His blood in order to gain eternal life, He is clearly speaking of His suffering on the cross which, when one's faith is resting on this foundation, brings life and justification:

These words, I say, believed by us and sunk into the depths of our souls win eternal life, for by faith alone are we justified. Therefore, the faith which is certain is that Christ crucified is our redemption and salvation. It is itself these words which Christ spoke which are spirit and life.⁸⁵

Hence for Zwingli, the word "eating" in John 6:54 is the equivalent of believing: "His body is eaten when it is believed that it was slain for us."⁸⁶

It was important for Zwingli to demonstrate to his detractors, particularly Luther, that he was not alone in believing that "this is my body" should be understood to mean "this signifies" or "this represents." In his defense he was able to cite Luther's one-time co-laborer Karlstadt, and also Tertullian and Augustine.⁸⁷ More importantly, however, he believed the Scriptures were on his side, and he noted the use of similar *tropes*, or figures of speech, elsewhere in Scripture, proving that it would not be inconsistent for a similar figure to be on the lips of Christ. Indeed, Christ Himself said in John 15:5, "I am the vine"; and in Matthew 13, when explaining the parable of the tares, Christ says "the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world..." (Matthew 13:37-38). In both of these instances "is" should be understood to mean "represents" or

⁸³Huldrych Zwingli, "Friendly Exegesis, that is, Exposition of the Matter of the Eucharist to Martin Luther," in H. Wayne Pipkin (trans.), *Huldrych Zwingli: Writings Volume Two*, pp. 277-278.

⁸⁴Huldrych Zwingli, "Letter to Matthew Alber Concerning the Lord's Supper," in H. Wayne Pipkin (trans.), *Huldrych Zwingli: Writings Volume Two*, p. 136.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 134.

⁸⁷Zwingli, "Letter to Matthew Alber," pp. 137-140.

“symbolizes”; Christ did not intend His listeners to believe a literal equivalency between Himself and a vine, or the field and the world.⁸⁸ Of particular note was the example found in Exodus 12:11, where the Lord says that the lamb, or sacrifice, “is the Lord’s Passover.” Clearly, “signifies” is to be understood here, paralleling Christ’s words of institution.⁸⁹

If Scriptural examples were not sufficient to demonstrate how reasonable it was to see this figure of speech being used at the institution of the Supper, Zwingli cited common, everyday conversation as proof that such a way of speaking is not unusual, such as referring to a man as a “pillar,” or “the prow” or “stern” of the ship of state.⁹⁰

Zwingli took issue with Luther’s understanding of the interplay between Christ’s human and divine natures. As far as Zwingli was concerned, Christ ascended to the right hand side of the Father, and since His human nature was a real humanity, it would be wrong to think it could extend beyond the normal spatial capacities of a true human body, even in a glorified state. Since the angel at the tomb declared “He is not here,” it is evident that the risen Christ was not in all places at once.⁹¹ It is certainly possible for Christ in His divine nature to be omnipresent, but in His human nature He is confined to a bodily presence in one location at a time. Hence, Christ is able to say “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20), and “You do not always have me” (John 12:8), and both sayings can be true depending on whether He is speaking of His divine or His human nature.⁹²

So, the issue for Zwingli was not whether Christ actually said “this is my body... this is my blood,” but rather what he meant by those words. In his later writing Zwingli was willing to state that Christ is present sacramentally in the Eucharist, but he maintained that Christ was not present bodily offering salvation to those who consume.

⁸⁸Huldrych Zwingli, “Subsidiary Essay or Crown of the Work on the Eucharist,” in H. Wayne Pipkin (trans.), *Huldrych Zwingli: Writings Volume Two*, pp. 201-203.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 211-212.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 205; Zwingli, “Friendly Exegesis,” p. 251.

⁹²These are examples of *alioiosis*, or the sharing of properties. See W. Peter Stephens, “The Theology of Zwingli,” p. 90.

The outward symbol cannot affect the inward faith, otherwise that would deny God's freedom in election.⁹³

In light of the Emperor's growing hostility to the work of reformation in Europe, and the growing response from Catholic states, Philipp of Hesse, a convert to the evangelical movement by Melanchthon, saw the need to join together the German Lutheran and Swiss Reformed sides to show a united front. Such a union would be impossible if Luther and Zwingli could not come to terms over theological issues. In an attempt to forge consensus he held a discussion, or colloquy, at his castle in Marburg in 1529, inviting both Luther and Zwingli along with Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Bucer, and Johannes Oecolampadius of Basel.⁹⁴ The discussion between these leaders of the reform movement became quite lively at times. D'Aubigne's discussion of the Colloquy includes quotations that give a sense of the tension between the two sides:

"I oppose you," said [Zwingli], "with this article of our faith: *Ascendit in caelum*—he ascended into heaven. If Christ is in heaven, as regards his body, how can he be in the bread? The Word of God teaches us that he was like his brethren in all things (Heb. ii. 17). He therefore cannot be in several places at once."

Luther.—"Were I desirous of reasoning thus, I would undertake to prove that Jesus Christ had a wife; that he had black eyes, and lived in our good country of Germany. I care little about mathematics."

"There is no question of mathematics here," said Zwingli, "but of St. Paul, who writes to the Philippians, *μορφὴν δούλου λαβών*."

Luther, *interrupting him*.—"Read it to us in Latin or German, not in Greek."

Zwingli (*in Latin*).—"Pardon me: for twelve years past I have made use of the Greek Testament only." Then continuing to read the passage, he concluded from it that Christ's humanity is of a finite nature like our own.

Luther, *pointing to the words written before him*—"Most dear sirs, since my Lord Jesus Christ says, *Hoc est corpus meum*, I believe that his body is really there."

Here the scene grew animated. Zwingli started from his chair, sprung towards Luther, and said, striking the table before him:

"You maintain then, doctor, that Christ's body is locally in the Eucharist; for you say Christ's body is really *there—there—there*," repeated Zwingli.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴For further details of the Marburg Colloquy, see McGrath, pp. 189 ff.; Cameron, pp. 165 ff.; Ozment, pp. 334 ff.; and McDiarmid, pp. 172 ff.

“*There* is an adverb of place. Christ’s body is then of such a nature as to exist in a place. If it is in a place, it is in heaven, whence it follows that it is not in the bread.”

Luther.—“I repeat that I have nothing to do with mathematical proofs. As soon as the words of consecration are pronounced over the bread, the body is there, however wicked be the priest who pronounces them.”

Zwingli.—“You are thus re-establishing Popery.”⁹⁵

In the end, Luther and Zwingli agreed on fourteen out of fifteen articles embodying the main doctrines of the Christian faith, and of the fifteenth, they agreed on most of the issues of importance regarding the Lord’s Supper. Where they divided was on the Real Presence: whether the Christ’s true body and blood can be present corporally in the bread and wine.⁹⁶

Calvin regarded the Lord’s Supper as a means by which God demonstrates to His people their participation in the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf. The purpose of the Supper is to focus the believer’s attention on His Savior that he may receive the graces and benefits of Christ’s atoning work.

Here, then is the singular consolation which we derive from the Supper. It directs and leads us to the cross of Jesus Christ and to his resurrection, to certify us that whatever iniquity there may be in us, the Lord nevertheless recognizes and accepts us as righteous... the Supper is an attestation that having been made partakers of the death and passion of Jesus Christ, we have every thing that is useful and salutary to us.⁹⁷

Christ presented physical elements, bread and wine, in the institution of the Supper in order to communicate these truths in a way that the dull and sinful minds of His people could understand. Just as God condescends to speak to men in Scripture by means of language they understand, as a nurse might lisp to little children,⁹⁸ so He

⁹⁵J. H. Merle D’Aubigne and H. White, *History of the Reformation of the 16th Century*, reprint (Prestonsburg, Ky: Reformation Publishers, 2008), pp. 530-531.

⁹⁶Cameron, p. 165; William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 3rd reprint (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), p. 218.

⁹⁷John Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Lord’s Supper,” p. 170.

⁹⁸Calvin, *Institutes*, I.13.1.

presents the mystery of the communion between Himself and His people in the Supper by way of physical symbols to which they can relate.

[The communion which we have in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ] 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.⁹⁹

Calvin appears to take a middle road between Luther and Zwingli on the issue of the Real Presence.¹⁰⁰ He clearly felt that the Eucharistic elements were more than mere signs, but he could not accept either Luther or Rome's view that Christ's words of institution were to be taken in the most wooden and literal sense. Indeed, he voiced the same objections Zwingli did to the idea that Christ's humanity could be both at the right hand of the Father and in the Eucharistic bread simultaneously. Christ's humanity was a real humanity, and even in His glorified state, that humanity was confined to a spatial location. The very term "ascension," for example, implies a translation from one place to another: when He ascended into heaven, He was no longer on earth.¹⁰¹

While Calvin did not regard the bread and wine to be, or to in any way actually contain or "hide," the literal body and blood of Christ, he did not consider them to be mere signs. Not only do the elements give spiritual sustenance as they remind the believer that Christ's body was broken and blood shed on his behalf, but the believer receives Christ's body—not in some kind of physical union, but spiritually—and experiences that union with Christ:

The substance of Christ's humanity was not, in Calvin's view, bones and sinews and veins, but the power and effect of his crucified and risen humanity for human salvation. Christ is therefore substantially present wherever the power and effect

⁹⁹John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper," p. 171.

¹⁰⁰Though McGrath believes this middle road is only apparent, and that Calvin's view is more a reflection of his theology regarding the way the knowledge of God is communicated than any attempt to mediate between rival positions. See McGrath, pp. 192 ff.

¹⁰¹Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.17.27.

of his life, death, and resurrection are present. The eucharist is an instrument through which Christ mediates such power to the church.¹⁰²

Christ's presence with the church is not, however, in a physical sense, nor by means of the ubiquity of His natures—Christ's human nature is not omnipresent as is His divine nature. Rather, it is by means of the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ is present with His church.¹⁰³

With regard to the external forms surrounding the sacrament, whether the communicants break bread and pass it among themselves, whether they pass the cup around or hand it back to the deacon, whether to use leavened or unleavened bread, red or white wine—all these were issues Calvin regarded as not addressed in Scripture and, hence, at the discretion of each church to determine its practice.¹⁰⁴ He is far more passionate about the frequency with which the Supper is celebrated. Calvin's conviction was that it should be practiced frequently, since it calls to mind Christ's sufferings, builds up faith, proclaims God's praises, and stirs His people toward unity and kindness to one another:

As often as we communicate in the symbol of our Saviour's body, as if a pledge were given and received, we mutually bind ourselves to all the offices of love, that none of us may do anything to offend his brother, or omit anything by which he can assist him when necessity demands, and opportunity occurs... Thus we ought always to provide that no meeting of the Church is held without the word, prayer, the dispensation of the Supper, and alms.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

This brief survey has focused specifically on the three main Magisterial Reformers and has not accounted for the views of their successors, who to some extent

¹⁰²David C. Steinmetz, "The Theology of John Calvin," in Bagchi and Steinmetz, The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology, p. 126.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰⁴Calvin, Institutes, IV.17.43.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., IV.17.44. In IV.17.46, Calvin goes so far as to regard the common practice of prescribing communion once a-year as "an invention of the devil."

carried forward and developed the positions set forth above. Without doubt, the most successful of the Reformers was Calvin, whose theology as a whole was further developed—though not too far beyond the intents of their originator¹⁰⁶—and became the theology of the Reformed movement. Even today, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the standard of Reformed teaching in English-speaking countries, continues the legacy of Calvin, and many other churches that fall within the Reformed tradition owe much of their theological underpinning, by the grace of God, to the work of the Genevan Reformer.

Luther's focus was clearly on reclaiming the centrality of Christ in the church, His headship of the church, and the fact that it is only through Christ, and not through works of satisfaction, that salvation is attained. This possibly explains why Luther was prepared to leave much of the sacramental theology of the church alone, dealing only with those aspects that impinged upon his main theme. Hence, however the sacraments are to be administered, they must be done in the recognition that they have no power in themselves; it is only the Christ-given faith of the believer that makes them effective. It seems that, as long as this principle was maintained, and the believer was not left in any confusion as to what the sacraments mean and how he or she benefits from them, Luther was willing to leave much of the rest to the preference of the church.

Zwingli, on the other hand, started his reform of Zurich as a humanist, chiefly concerned with the life and morals of the city with no real thought to doctrinal reform.¹⁰⁷ He soon became convinced of the need to base one's belief on Scripture, and while he went much further with his doctrinal reform, he was always under the scrutiny of the city council and dependent upon them. Hence, his view of the sacraments was much more radical than Luther's, but arguably still contained concessions to the state.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶While it is often argued that Calvin would not have been a "Five Point Calvinist"—a reference to the doctrines put forth at the Synod of Dort in 1619 as a response to the Arminian Remonstrants—it is evident from his writings that while Calvin did not explicitly set forth those doctrines in that fashion, he certainly held to them in principle. See James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, Ny: Calvary Press, 2000), pp. 253-262 for a discussion on the topic.

¹⁰⁷McGrath, p. 69.

¹⁰⁸E.g., infant baptism.

Like Zwingli, Calvin was attempting to bring reformation to a city, working under the oversight of a city council to which he was responsible. Unlike Zwingli, Calvin was not a trained theologian, and also, unlike Zwingli, Calvin did not set out to lead the reformation movement in Geneva. Rather, he was persuaded to stay and help bring reform to the city while passing through on his way from Noyon to Strasbourg, where he was hoping to settle down and enjoy a quiet academic career.¹⁰⁹

Another difference with Zwingli that must not be overlooked is the fact that Calvin actually belongs to the second generation of Reformers. By 1536, when Calvin started his work in Geneva, Lutheran theology was already dominating Germany, and Zwingli's Zurich had been reformed for over ten years. Not only did he have the wisdom of his predecessors to draw from, but he had a period of exile from Geneva in Strasbourg to gain experience and maturity of thought. Hence, his approach lacks the radical edge of Zwingli, and also the conservative spirit of Luther, in his sacramental theology.

This review of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments has, hopefully, shown their strengths and weaknesses, where they hold fast to the principle of *sola scriptura*, and where they sided more with tradition. Sometimes that lean toward tradition was out of a desire not to move too quickly with change, as was the case with Zwingli.¹¹⁰ On other occasions, it was because there were more pressing issues at stake, and matters of ceremony and practices not explicitly addressed in Scripture could be left to the discretion of each church.

It is also the hope of this author that in discussing these views, the importance of the issues with which they dealt has been evident. These three men differed on their interpretation of passages relating to the sacraments, and also on their understanding of the meaning of the sacraments, however, their chief concern always remained the integrity of the gospel message in the midst of the performance of each sacrament. They all valued the place of the preached word, that the sacrament should never be performed without the understanding that comes from a biblically-based sermon. Also, the believer should understand the relationship of the sacrament to his faith and life. However they

¹⁰⁹McGrath, p. 97.

¹¹⁰This approach, however, led to the Anabaptist uprisings, which came about largely because these radicals thought Zwingli was moving too slowly, and not going far enough in his reform.

might believe that it happened in practice, the fact is that the sacraments communicate gospel truth to the recipient that is life and blessing to them. Whether in the waters of baptism, or in the consuming of bread and wine, the sacraments confirm the believer as one who stands before God cleansed by the blood of Christ, and adopted into His kingdom by virtue of his communion with his Lord and Savior.