

The “Extra Calvinisticum” and Calvin’s Eucharistic Theology

David G. Peters

Introduction

The sixteenth century Swiss reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) was an amazing systematic theologian and exegete. His preaching, teaching, disputations, religious and political counseling, and especially his writings have had a profound effect on the religious and political thought of much of Western civilization. The subject of our treatise is the intersection of Christology and eucharistic theology in the thought of John Calvin.

Exactly what was Calvin’s understanding of the person of Jesus Christ? And how did that Christological insight influence his eucharistic theology, if at all? It is our thesis that understanding the so-called “*extra calvinisticum*” can be used as a key to answering both of these questions because it leads us to Calvin’s understanding of the person of Jesus and to his understanding of what is and what is not distributed and received in the Lord’s Supper, and how that distribution and reception take place. As Heiko Oberman observes, “Historically and systematically the discussion about the real presence ushers in questions of Christology. It is in this context that the expression *extra calvinisticum* developed.”¹ We shall proceed by defining what is meant by the phrase “*extra calvinisticum*” by studying the historical context in which this expression was coined. In so doing we will note that John Calvin was not the first theologian to teach this Christological notion. Then we shall examine the function of the *extra calvinisticum* in Calvin’s eucharistic theology.

I. *Extra Calvinisticum*: Definition and Historical Background

E. David Willis gives a simple definition of the phrase *extra Calvinisticum*: “The so-called *extra Calvinisticum* teaches that the eternal Son of God, even after the Incarnation, was united to the human nature to form One Person but was not restricted to the flesh.”² The Benedictine Kilian McDonnell gives a little longer definition:

The Godhead of Christ fills all things, and although it is joined to the humanity and dwells in it, the Godhead is not bound to the humanity. One can predicate no dependence of the divinity on the humanity, not even in the smallest degree. The divinity has not “left heaven to hide itself in the prison of the body” [quoting Calvin’s *Institutio* IV.17.30]. The divinity, unmixed and undivided, does not limit itself to the humanity, but while dwelling there, remains also entirely outside of the humanity.³

Next to predestination, the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper has since the sixteenth century been the most hotly contested issue between Calvinists and Lutherans.⁴ Calvin’s main objection to the Lutheran understanding of the sacrament was that the Lutherans understood the body and blood of Christ to be present substantially (*substantialiter, realiter*) and would allow no figurative understanding of Jesus’ words of institution (*verba*). The Lutherans believed that Christ’s true body was able to be simultaneously present on many altars by virtue of the communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*) and therefore truly present under the physical elements of bread and wine. The Lutherans did not believe or teach that this ubiquity of Christ’s body actually caused the real presence to occur wherever the Sacrament was celebrated, although many of the Reformed partisans understood that to be the Lutheran position. The Lutherans simply taught that, because Jesus Christ is 100% true God and 100% true man in one person, the properties of his divine nature are communicated to his

¹Heiko A. Oberman, “The ‘Extra’ Dimension in the Theology of Calvin,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 21:1 (January 1970) 54.

²Edward David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the so-called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology*, Studies in Medieval Thought, vol. II (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966) 1. This is a reworking of the author’s doctoral dissertation at Harvard University’s Divinity School.

³Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 221.

⁴Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, 3rd ed. Gene J. Lund, tr. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968) 264.

human nature and vice versa, thereby enabling his body to be in many places simultaneously according to the property of omnipresence, which is an attribute of his divine nature. Again, this omnipresence (or ubiquity, as the Reformed called it) is not the cause of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament; it simply answers those who question how Christ's body can be at once in many places. The Lutherans taught that the *causa efficiens* of the real presence is Christ's *verba*, and that the *causa instrumentalis* is the proclamation of the *verba* at the celebration of the Sacrament. In other words, Jesus' body is really present in the Sacrament because Jesus said so; after all, he said "This is my body," and "This is my blood of the new testament." But the notion of the physical body of the man Jesus being ubiquitous was untenable to many.

This distinctly Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament was challenged by Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), the reformer of Zurich. Whereas Luther emphasized the unity of the divine and human *hypostases* in the God-man Jesus, Zwingli emphasized the distinction of the two natures. Just as the Lutherans suspected the Zwinglians of Nestorianism, the Zwinglians suspected the Lutherans of monophysitism. Neither suspicion was correct, for both were within the bounds of orthodox Christology spelled out at the Council of Chalcedon.

Zwingli did not accept Luther's use of the *communicatio idiomatum*. This terminology, though used in the ancient Greek church, was neither understood nor used by medieval theologians.⁵ For Zwingli, the *communicatio idiomatum* was but an "*alloiosis*" — a figure of speech by which we attribute to one nature the qualities of another. For example, Zwingli had no problem calling Mary the Mother of God, but recognized this expression as an *alloiosis*, since he believed that she was only the mother of Jesus' human nature. Luther, on the other hand, called Zwingli's *alloiosis* "the devil's mask" and would have none of it. Whereas Luther maintained that on Calvary's cross God died, Zwingli contended that only Christ's human nature died since deity cannot die. Zwingli considered any reference to the Divine Being dying had to be understood as an *alloiosis*, attributing the attribute of mortality to Christ's humanity rather than his deity. Yet Luther explained: "Because divinity and humanity are one person in Christ, Scripture also, on account of such personal unity, attributes to the Godhead everything that belongs to the humanity.... In truth, the Son of God has been crucified for us; that means the person who is God."⁶

Zwingli considered Luther's understanding of the *verba* to be absurd; and since the idea of Christ's real body and blood being found under the bread and wine in the Supper introduced what Zwingli considered an absurdity, not far from the transubstantiation-concomitance position which he had already rejected, he felt justified in introducing his own interpretation. According to Zwingli, since the bread and wine in the Sacrament retain every one of their properties even after the *verba* are spoken, it would be absurd to understand the *verba* according to their literal sense. Therefore, "*est*" must mean something other than "is." In Zwingli's view, since the elements of bread and wine are not the body and blood of Christ, they must merely be symbols which signify Christ's body and blood. "*Est*" must mean "*significat*."⁷ This is the position which Zwingli took before, during and after the famous Marburg Colloquy of 1529. The primary participants were Luther and Melancthon on the "Lutheran" side; Zwingli and Œcolampadius on the "Zwinglian" side; and Bucer, who held to a mediating position but with strong Zwinglian leanings. The Colloquy did not solve any real issues,⁸ but it did provide

⁵Hermann Sasse, *This is my Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*, revised Australian edition (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977) 118-128. Sasse reports [p. 120, footnote 35] that the *communicatio idiomatum*, in a slightly altered form, was expressed by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theol. III, Q.3, Art.6*, answer to objection 3. Here Aquinas set forth a rule to explain the relations of the attributes of the persons of the Trinity and of the two natures in Christ: the communication of the properties belonging to the nature (*communicatio proprietatum pertinentium ad naturam*), i.e., that property which belongs to one nature can be said to belong to the entire person.

⁶Sasse, *op. cit.*, 120-121, quoting Luther's *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), Weimarer Ausgabe 26, 322, 20 f.; American Edition 37, 151 ff.; also quoted in the Formula of Concord (1577), Thorough Declaration, Article VIII, in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) 1029. The clash between Luther and Zwingli on the matter of the *alloiosis* versus the *communicatio idiomatum* is spelled out in some detail – from a decidedly Lutheran perspective – on pages 1015-1049.

⁷Zwingli probably learned this from a treatise he had studied which had been written by the Dutch humanist Honius.

⁸Sasse, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

a forum at which several of the main players in the evangelical Reformation were able to meet and address one another face to face.

John Calvin was probably not influenced very much by Huldrych Zwingli — at least not directly. He was, however, influenced by Martin Bucer (especially during their close association during Calvin’s brief ministry in Strasbourg), and he had studied quite closely the writings of both Bucer and Luther. Calvin loved to study the writings of Philip Melanchthon, especially his *Loci Communes*, and maintained quite a bit of cordial correspondence with Master Philip for many years. As Bucer and Melanchthon had hoped to forge some mediating position, some middle ground — some compromise, if necessary — on which all the major evangelical reformers could agree, so Calvin hoped to find a *via media*.⁹ As he later wrote in his *magnum opus*, the *Institutio*:

Now here we ought to guard against two faults. First, we should not, by too little regard for the signs [bread and wine], divorce them from their mysteries, to which they are so to speak attached [as Calvin accused the Zwinglians of doing by considering them merely empty signs of Christ’s distant body in heaven]. Secondly, we should not, by extolling them immoderately, seem to obscure somewhat the mysteries themselves [as Calvin accused the Lutherans and Catholics of doing by emphasizing the real presence in the bread and wine].¹⁰

While at Strasbourg in 1540, Calvin signed the 1540 version of the Augsburg Confession — Melanchthon’s most recent edition of his *Variata*. By signing this document, Calvin was generally considered to have affiliated himself with the Lutheran cause. Article 10, which had formerly rejected the Reformed teaching, was replaced with the words: “Concerning the Lord’s Supper they [the Lutherans] teach that the body and blood are truly presented [*vere exhibeantur*] with bread and wine to those who eat in the Lord’s Supper.”¹¹ Since Melanchthon included these words in place of the words which he had formerly used and which were included in the Wittenberg Concord of 1536 (“*vere et substantialiter adesse*” — that the body and blood of Christ are “really and substantially present”), and because he excluded from his 1540 edition the condemnation of the Reformed doctrine which had been in previous editions, we can only conclude that Melanchthon was shifting away from orthodox Lutheranism and toward the Reformed, perhaps hoping to associate himself eventually with the Calvinists and South Germans who followed Bucer. Later, in Calvin’s *Last Admonition* to the Lutheran Westphal in 1557, Calvin wrote to Martin Schalling, “Nor do I repudiate the Augsburg Confession, to which I have previously subscribed, in the sense in which the author himself has interpreted it.”¹²

However, Calvin was not impressed with the attempts of Melanchthon and Bucer to paper over fundamental disagreements between the Catholic and Reformed parties. In 1541 he wrote a letter to his associate William Farel in which he lamented that Melanchthon and Bucer “have drawn up ambiguous and insincere formulas concerning transubstantiation, to try whether they could satisfy the opposite party by yielding nothing.” Calvin continues, “I could not agree to this device.”¹³

The more Calvin developed his Christology and his sacramental theology, the more obvious it became to him that there would be no *via media*. Otto Ritschl (1860-1944) wrote that Calvin’s eucharistic theology was, like that of Bucer’s, a mediating position between Lutheran and Zwinglian extremes, but conceded: “Calvin remained essentially faithful to Zwingli’s symbolic theory (*dem Symbolismus Zwinglis*).”¹⁴ McDonnell

⁹François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*, Philip Mairet, tr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 329-330.

¹⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tr. Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX and XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) IV.17.5, pp. 1364-1365. Herein simply called *Institutio*.

¹¹“*De coena Domini docent, quod cum pane et vino vere exhibeantur corpus et sanguis Christi vescentibus in Coena Domini.*”

¹²F. Bente, “Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord,” *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921) 26, 27, 174.

¹³David C. Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 14-15.

¹⁴B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 6, quoting Ritschl, *Die reformierte Theologie*, Vol. 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926) 239.

discusses a host of philosophical influences on Calvin, inspiring him to a less objective view of Christ's presence in the Supper and to a more subjective: the "Platonic dialectic" over against Aristotelian structures and causality, Scotist and Occamist philosophies, the "mystical movement" and "*devotio moderna* piety," a reaction against "too much ecclesiastical incarnationalism," and a series of religious movements beginning in the twelfth century which seemed to say, "Give us less church and more Christ." These influences, McDonnell concludes, "manifest themselves in a flight from secondary causality and ... in a reassertion of the sovereignty of God as the only cause. They are, in their way, an attempt to give divinity back to God, to restore a measure of transcendence."¹⁵ Assuming this is correct, it is no surprising that Calvin rejects the Lutheran understanding of the Sacrament as an objective means by which Christ gives the objective substance of his body and blood to sinners, and moves toward Zwingli's subjective and symbolic understanding of the elements, "apparently influenced by a weakened sense of instrumentality."¹⁶

Seeking to unite the evangelical reforming movements throughout Switzerland, Calvin signed the *Consensus Tigurinus*, drafted in 1549 to express agreement with Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor at Zurich. Article 21 rather cavalierly divided the natures of Christ, saying, "In so far as Christ is a man, He is to be sought nowhere else than in heaven." Article 22 said of the *verba*, "Beyond controversy, they are to be taken figuratively." Article 24 proclaimed it to be "absurd to place Christ under, and to unite him with, the bread."¹⁷ Calvin was certainly not working his way toward a *via media* by striking a concord with Bullinger. Some consider this to be the first shot reopening the eucharistic controversies between the German Lutherans and the Swiss Reformed.

We will not here delve into the various eucharistic and other controversies already beginning to rear their ugly heads within Lutheranism at this time. Suffice it to say that Joachim Westphal, Lutheran pastor at Hamburg, was an early opponent of the "crypto-Calvinists" within the Lutheran fold — those members of Lutheran congregations who privately (generally) held to Calvinist notions, especially concerning the "spiritual presence" as opposed to "real presence" of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Westphal published an exposé in 1552 entitled *Medley of Confused and Mutually Dissenting Opinions on the Lord's Supper, Compiled from the Books of the Sacramentarians*. In this work he demonstrated that Calvin, in spite of using terminology that sounded quite Lutheran to the untrained ear, was in fact denying the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. Westphal cited Calvin's denial of the *manducatio indignorum* as proof that Calvin denied that the body and blood were really presented to all communicants. The following year he published a sequel, rallying support for orthodox Lutheran doctrine. In 1555 Calvin published his *Defense of the Sound and Orthodox Doctrine Concerning the Sacraments*. Many others chimed in and took sides, publishing their own tracts and books. Calvin withdrew from the fray after producing his *Last Admonition of John Calvin to J. Westphal*.¹⁸

Two years later, Tileman Heshusius, a Lutheran who had moved from Heidelberg to Magdeburg, published a diatribe against the Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist entitled *De Praesentia Corporis Christi in Coena Domini Contra Sacramentarios*. Considered by some to have been quite a fanatic, Heshusius is described by Wendel as "the very type of that small-mindedness which can only conceive of theology under the aspect of disputations as gross as they are inopportune." At first Bullinger and Calvin were disinclined to worry about such a small matter. However, by 1561, Calvin had changed his mind and he published *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper*. In this lengthy document Calvin sets forth his eucharistic theology in great detail and gives a history

¹⁵ McDonnell, 36-38.

¹⁶ Gerrish, 7.

¹⁷ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, "On Christology, Brenz and the Question of Ubiquity," *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord 1580–1980*, Arnold J. Koelpin, editor (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980) 235.

¹⁸ Gawrisch, 235-236.

of the eucharistic controversies between the Lutherans, Catholics, and Reformed. The war of pamphlets and booklets was only widening the gulf between the parties.¹⁹

Whether or not the term *extra calvinisticum* was ever used in any of these eucharistic debates is not known; it is not found among any works written before the 1580s. According to Willis, some literature from that decade identifies the emphasis on the word *extra* was recognized as particularly Calvinist. A gentleman named A. Hunn (1550-1603) wrote that “the *extra* had become a subject of special discussion between Lutheran and Reformed theologians” and that the Calvinists (whom he labeled “Pezeliani” rather than Calvinists) taught a Zwinglian and Nestorian doctrine and would sacrifice all else rather than give us “*illud Extra*.”²⁰ Noting a distinction between the prepositions *praeter* and *extra*, Hunn states:

The orthodox formula is, as I say, that the Logos is not elsewhere outside [EXTRA] the flesh. The false and inconsistent statement is the one which says the Logos is not elsewhere and beyond [PRAETER] the flesh. ... Although beyond [PRAETER] the flesh the Logos is in the Father and dwells in the saints and is with all creatures by one or another kind of presence, nevertheless outside [EXTRA] the flesh the Logos is and subsists nowhere.²¹

Although the preference for using specific prepositions as a sort of *shibboleth* for identifying Calvinism as opposed to Lutheranism appears to be a merely semantic argument, Hunn is quite right in his concern for distinguishing the two positions. This is not a distinction without a difference. Hunn is reporting a distinct and different Christology among the Calvinists, which he simply identified as *illud Extra*.

Circa 1610 the gnesio-Lutheran dogmatician Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) of Jena wrote in the first volume of what would become his nine volume *Loci*:

One ought to teach that after the incarnation took place the person of the Logos was neither beyond [*extra*] the flesh nor was the flesh beyond [*extra*] the person of the Logos; nor were the two natures joined by a certain bare side-by-side existence but by a profound interpenetration which the Fathers teach with the example of the glowing iron and the animated body.

Gerhard rejected many of the metaphors and similes which had been introduced by Calvinists in support of their doctrine and preferred to stick with the similes used by the Greek church fathers.²²

In the 1620s there was a relatively minor dispute between the Lutherans at Tübingen, led by Johannes Brenz, and the Lutherans at Giessen, led by Martin Chemnitz — both of whom were highly respected pillars among orthodox Lutherans. Both schools agreed to the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, that each of the two natures of Christ had communicated its attributes to the other nature already at the moment of his conception in his virgin mother’s womb, and that among these the divine attribute of omnipresence (or ubiquity, as the Reformed kept saying) was also communicated to the human nature of Jesus. Yet it is perfectly obvious that, during his earthly pilgrimage, Jesus’ body was not everywhere simultaneously. The two Lutheran schools of thought differed in their explanations. The Tübingen scholars said that there was a hiding (*krypsis*) of the power of Jesus’ body to be everywhere — that Jesus abstained only from the visible use of that ability for those 33 plus years, but that his human body nevertheless continued to possess that power of ubiquity even during those years. The Giessen theologians taught that during Jesus’ visible life on earth there was an emptying (*kenosis*) of the attribute of ubiquity from Jesus’ body, and that he did not merely abstain from the full and constant use of that divine attribute. The Tübingen men claimed that the God-man Jesus abstained only from the visible use of his ubiquity even though he actually exercised that power but in an invisible way, ruling and filling the universe with both natures, yet invisibly except in the body of the man Jesus. The Giessen men taught

¹⁹Wendel, 104-105; J.K.S. Reid, tr. and ed., *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXII (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954) 257-324.

²⁰Willis, 18-19; A. Hunn, *Assertio Sanae et Orthodoxae Doctrinae de Persona et Maiestate Domini* (Frankfurt am Main, 1592) 191.

²¹Willis, 19; quoting Hunn, 152-153.

²²Willis, 20; quoting Johann Gerhard, *Locorum Theologicorum*, Tom. I, 3rd ed. (Jena: Steinmann, 1628) 649, “*De Persona et Officio Christi*,” I.3.30.

that, since Christ had emptied himself of the attribute of ubiquity during his exinention, he nevertheless ruled over the world during those 33 years — but not through his flesh. For this Theodore Thumm of Tübingen chastised the Giessen theologians for reintroducing “*illud ipsum extra Calvinisticum*.”²³ This would appear to be the earliest extant example of the phrase *extra calvinisticum*.

Calvin’s doctrine was not entirely new. The eucharistic debate between the Lutherans and the Reformed was simultaneously a debate about Christology. The Lutherans accused the Reformed of separating the natures of Christ in the same way Nestorius had. The Reformed accused the Lutherans of confusing the natures in the same way Eutyches had. Calvin, of course, being the astute theologian that he was, tried his best to steer a middle path between the Scylla of Eutychianism and the Charybdis of Nestorianism. Complaining that some “seize upon the attributes of his [Christ’s] humanity to take away his divinity,” and that others seize upon “his divinity to take away his humanity,” Calvin points out that Christ is both God and man:

We therefore hold that Christ, as he is God and man, consisting of two natures united but not mingled, is our Lord and the true Son of God even according to, but not by reason of, his humanity. Away with the error of Nestorius, who in wanting to pull apart rather than distinguish the nature of Christ devised a double Christ! ... Let us beware, also, of Eutyches’ madness; lest, while meaning to show the unity of the person, we destroy either nature. ... Just as Nestorius had justly been condemned at the Synod of Ephesus, so Eutyches was afterward justly condemned at the Councils of Constantinople and Chalcedon. For it is no more permissible to commingle the two natures in Christ than to pull them apart.²⁴

When St. John wrote “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14), he was neither saying that the *Logos* was changed into flesh or even mixed together with flesh. In the miracle of the incarnation in the womb of the virgin, “He who was the Son of God became the Son of Man — not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For we affirm his divinity so joined and united with his humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet these two natures constitute one Christ.”²⁵ With this statement of Chalcedonian orthodoxy, Calvin goes on to present his concept of the communication of attributes:

Thus, also, the Scriptures speak of Christ: they sometimes attribute to him what must be referred solely to his humanity, sometimes what belongs uniquely to his divinity; and sometimes what embraces both natures but fits neither alone. And they so earnestly express this union of the two natures that is in Christ as sometimes to interchange them. This figure of speech is called by the ancient writers “the communicating of properties (*idiomaton koinonia*)”²⁶

In the next section Calvin continues to extol the *idiomaton koinonia*:

But since Christ, who was true God and also true man, was crucified and shed his blood for us, the things that he carried out in his human nature are transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity. ... Because the selfsame one was both God and man, for the sake of the union of both natures he gave to the one what belonged to the other.²⁷

In general, Calvin’s writings seem quite Chalcedonian. Perhaps he was sensitive to the suspicions that his opponents were voicing. Nevertheless, no matter how skillfully he tried be Chalcedonian, his opponents still found reasons to consider Calvin (and later Calvinism) a little too Nestorian to be orthodox. Calvin did not mean exactly the same thing that Luther meant when he spoke of the *communicatio idiomatum*. For example, in the immediately preceding quotation, Calvin mentions “the things that he carried out in his human nature are

²³This discussion in Willis, 20-21 is reported by G. Thomasius, *Christi Person und Werk*, II (Erlangen: Theodore Bläsing, 1857) 446.

²⁴*Institutio* II.XIV.4 (1:486-487). Martin Luther gives an excellent account of the first four ecumenical councils and explains how Nestorius, condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and Eutyches, condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 448, fell into gross error all because of their failure to comprehend the *communicatio idiomatum*; “On the Councils and the Church,” *Luther’s Works*, American Ed., 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 93-119.

²⁵*Institutio*, II.XIV.1 (1:482).

²⁶*Ibid.* (1:482-483).

²⁷*Institutio*, II.XIV.2 (1:484).

transferred improperly, although not without reason, to his divinity [emphasis mine].” Calvin was not entirely willing to grant that every attribute of each of Christ’s natures was communicated to the other nature. Calvin never accepted Luther’s teaching that the ubiquity of the divine nature of Christ was also communicated to the human nature by virtue of the incarnation. In fact, Calvin never accepted that genus of the doctrine of the communication of attributes known as the *genus maiestaticum*, according to which all of the attributes of the divine majesty are said to have been communicated to the man Jesus Christ at his incarnation. The Lutheran view is that, after Christ’s incarnation, he was and is always and everywhere incarnate (*ensarkos*). Calvin’s view is that after the *Logos* became *ensarkos*, he was not and is not totally *ensarkos* — that his human nature is limited in time and space, both on earth and in heaven, because the divine attribute of ubiquity is not communicated to the human nature of Christ. The eternal Son of God, then, rules the universe from a position outside of the man Jesus Christ, the so-called “Calvinistic outside,” or *extra Calvinisticum*.²⁸

To accept this idea, that the divine nature of Christ is still *extra carnem*, is to surrender the personal union of the two natures in Christ (*unio mystica*). This is exactly what the Calvinistic Heidelberg Catechism does:

Question 47: *Then, is not Christ with us unto the end of the world, as he has promised us?* [Answer:] Christ is true man and true God. As a man he is no longer on earth, but in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit, he is never absent from us.

Question 48: *But are not the two natures in Christ separated from each other in this way, if the humanity is not wherever the divinity is?* [Answer:] Not at all; for since divinity is incomprehensible and everywhere present, it must follow that the divinity is indeed beyond the bounds of the humanity which it has assumed, and is none the less ever in that humanity as well, and remains personally united to it.²⁹

It is hard to find a much clearer definition of *extra Calvinisticum* than that!

II. *Extra Calvinisticum*: Function

Why did Calvin teach this Christology which have come to bare his name? On the one hand he wanted to keep his Trinitarian theology in line with the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople. After all, Calvin was dealing with several anti-Trinitarians, such as Michael Servetus, George Blandrata, and the Socinians. Calvin surely did not want to leave a “vacancy” in the Holy Trinity during those years of Jesus’ earthly pilgrimage. But it is specifically Calvin’s Christology that interests us here.

Many passages from the works of John Calvin can be cited to demonstrated his strong beliefs concerning the eternal generation of the *Logos*, the two natures in Christ, the necessity of the incarnation of the divine *Logos* for our salvation, and the hypostatic union. During Calvin’s lifetime — and for many centuries since — Lutherans and others have pointed out to Calvin and to Calvinists many Bible passages which teach the communication of attributes, and particularly the *genus maiestaticum*.³⁰ It is not our purpose here to attempt to disprove Calvin’s position, but to explain it, and especially to explain its function in Calvin’s eucharistic theology.

Calvin depends on a number of sources for his understanding of the so-called *extra Calvinisticum*. One source is the philosophical construct: “It is the true nature of a body to be contained in space, to have its own dimensions and its own shape. Away, then, with this stupid fiction which fastens both men’s minds and Christ to bread!”³¹ Calvin here depends on human reason — philosophy, if you will — and ridicules those who believe that the true body of Christ is in the bread in the Lord’s Supper.

Another source on which Calvin leans quite heavily is St. Augustine. In the index of volume XXI of the Library of Christian Classics edition of the *Institutio*, one easily notices that Calvin cites Augustine far more

²⁸ cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950) 124-126.

²⁹ “The Heidelberg Catechism,” Mark A. Noll, ed., *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991) 145.

³⁰ A classic example of how Calvin cannot bring himself to accept the *genus maiestaticum* is found in *Institutio* IV.XVII.29 (2:1400).

³¹ *Ibid.*

than any other author (not counting the Scriptures). Augustine's entries comprise a full 15 columns! Such a dependency on Augustine ought not surprise us; it seems that all of the Reformers — even those within the Roman Catholic Church — wanted to claim to have Augustine on their side. Calvin also repeatedly cited Augustine when writing specifically on the Lord's Supper in other works. For example, when writing against the Lutheran Heshusius in *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper*, Calvin cites Augustine as an authority seventeen times.

Because the body of Christ ascended before the very eyes of his disciples, there is no way that Calvin can believe that Christ's body is present in the sacramental elements. In his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, Calvin writes:

M: But did Christ in taking himself to heaven withdraw from us, so that now he has ceased to be with us?

C: Not at all. On the contrary, he has undertaken to be with us even to the end of the world (Matt. 28:20).

M: But when he is said to dwell with us, does this mean that he is bodily present?

C: No. There is on the one hand the body received up into heaven (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9); and there is on the other his virtue, which is diffused everywhere.

M: In what sense do you say that he sits at the right hand of the Father?

C: These words mean that the Father conferred on him the dominion of heaven and earth, so that he rules all things (Matt. 28:18).

M: But what is meant by the right hand, and what by his sitting?

C: It is a metaphor taken from princes....³²

Although the Scripture passages clearly teach that Jesus ascended and that Jesus is with us always, etc., Calvin says that Jesus is not with us, but that the virtue of Jesus is with us. This statement comes from the mind set that a body can only be in one place at one time, and cannot be "diffused" or in any other mode or manner in more than one place at any given time. This is logical thinking on Calvin's part, but fails to do justice to Jesus' words, "And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20), not "And surely my virtue shall be with you always."

Calvin expounds on this point concerning his ascension and the state of his body in the *Institutio*. Notice how he depends on Augustine as an authority for his teaching:

Carried up into heaven, therefore, he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight. Not to cease to be present with believers on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power. But by his ascension he had fulfilled what he had promised: that he would be with us even to the end of the world. As his body was raised up above all the heavens, so his power and energy were diffused and spread beyond all the bounds of heaven and earth. I prefer to explain this in Augustine's words rather than my own: "Christ was to go by death to the right hand of the Father, whence he should come to judge the living and the dead. This he would do in bodily presence, according to pure doctrine and the rule of faith. For his spiritual presence with them was to come after his ascension. ... He ascended into heaven, and he is not here: for there he sits at the right hand of the Father; yet he is here, for the presence of majesty has not withdrawn. Therefore we always have Christ according to the presence of majesty...."³³

So Christ's body is no longer with us, but his majesty is — i.e., his divine nature is both here on earth and in heaven, but his human nature is spatially limited to the Father's side in heaven.

Calvin's doctrine of Christ's session at God's right hand made it impossible for Christ also to be really and substantially present in the Lord's Supper. He addresses the Lutheran objection due to their insistence on the real, substantial presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper:

But greatly mistaken are those who conceive no presence of flesh in the Supper unless it lies in the bread. For thus they leave nothing to the secret working of the Spirit, which unites Christ himself to us. To them Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we

³²J.K.S. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, LCC XXII, 101.

³³*Institutio* II.XVI.14 (1:523).

should not just as much enjoy his presence! The question is therefore only of the manner, for they place Christ in the bread, while we do not think it lawful for us to drag him from heaven. ... Only away with that calumny that Christ is removed from his Supper unless he lies hidden under the covering of bread! For since this mystery is heavenly, there is no need to draw Christ to earth that he may be joined to us.³⁴

The body of Christ is said to be finite, occupying one space at a time. Christ's body, then, since his ascension and session at the right hand of the Father, is therefore limited — locally circumscribed in one place, and unable for this reason to be on many altars at once. Nevertheless, *finitum non capax infiniti*. The eternal *Logos*, God's Son, cannot be contained in the physical body of Jesus which is seated at God's right hand. His Spirit fills his entire creation. And it is Christ's ubiquitous Spirit that enables us to commune with Christ and to feed on his body and blood in the Sacrament.³⁵

It is worthwhile to consider the role of the Spirit in Calvin's eucharistic theology. It is often difficult to determine whether Calvin means the Holy Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity) or whether he is speaking of Christ's spiritual existence apart from his flesh when Calvin speaks of "Christ's Spirit" and "the Spirit of Christ" and other such similar terms. Calvin writes in *Partaking of the Flesh and Blood*: "I teach that the body of Christ is given us for food by the secret energy of the Spirit."³⁶ And he continues:

For us to have substantial communion with the flesh of Christ, there is no necessity for any change of place, since by the secret virtue of the Spirit he infuses his life into us from heaven; nor does distance at all prevent Christ from dwelling in us, or us from being one with him, since the efficacy of the Spirit surmounts all natural obstacles.³⁷

Calvin considers the role of the Spirit indispensable for a communicant to receive the benefits of the sacraments. Calling the Spirit "that inward teacher," he says that the sacraments are "empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power. ... The sacraments profit not a whit without the power of the Holy Spirit."³⁸ In this locus on the sacraments in general, Calvin is clear about which Spirit he means.

He is just as clear about the Spirit in the section which deals directly with the Lord's Supper.

A serious wrong is done to the Holy Spirit, unless we believe that it is through his incomprehensible power that we come to partake of Christ's flesh and blood. ... They [the Lutherans] falsely boast that all we teach of spiritual eating is contrary, as they say, to true and real eating, seeing that we pay attention only to the manner, which with them, is carnal, while they enclose Christ in bread. For us the manner is spiritual because the secret power of the Spirit is the bond of our union with Christ."³⁹

Recalling that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament, it is wise to consider what Calvin considers a sacrament to be. He writes in his Geneva Catechism:

M: What is a sacrament?

C: An outward attestation of the divine benevolence toward us, which represents spiritual grace symbolically, to seal the promises of God in our hearts, by which the truth of them is better confirmed.

M: Does there subsist in the visible sign such virtue as to establish our conscience in assurance of salvation?

C: This it has not of itself indeed, but of the will of God, for it was instituted to this end.

M: Since the proper function of the Holy Spirit is to seal the promises of God in our minds, how do you attribute this to the sacraments?

³⁴*Institutio* IV.XVII.31 (2:1403).

³⁵Hägglund, 264-265.

³⁶Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 263.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 278.

³⁸*Institutio* IV.XIV.9 (2:1284-1285).

³⁹*Institutio* IV.XVII.33 (2:1405).

C: There is a wide difference between the two. For to move and affect the heart, to illumine the mind and to render the conscience sure and tranquil is the business of the Spirit alone, so that it ought to be considered wholly his work and be ascribed to him, lest his praise be deferred to another.⁴⁰

Here Calvin grants that the Holy Spirit's job is to use the sacraments to symbolize the spiritual grace which only the Spirit himself can give. This grace does not come from or even through the symbols themselves, but through the power and working of the Holy Spirit who uses the sacraments as his tools; but to consider the sacraments in a Lutheran (or, for that matter, Catholic) sense as instruments or means by and through which the Holy Spirit actually works his grace in the hearts and minds of God's people would be, in Calvin's estimation, deferring the praise due the Spirit to another — to the physical elements (water, bread and wine) themselves.

In Calvin's understanding, every sacrament has an outward physical sign, and that sign is symbolic of some inner spiritual reality — a spiritual reality which is signified by the sign. In the case of the Lord's Supper, the outer physical signs are the bread and the wine. The inner spiritual reality of these outward signs is the body and blood of Christ. This is what the bread and wine signify. Calvin, in spite of his desire to steer a middle course between Luther's "*est*" and Zwingli's "*significat*" does finally wind up in the same camp with Zwingli. Yet Calvin is a long way from Zwingli when it comes to the eating and drinking of the elements in the Supper. Zwingli taught that the elements of bread and wine were exactly that, and taught a much more crass symbolism than did Calvin. For Zwingli, the Lord's Supper is a mere memorial meal where the soul of the communicant is strengthened by the confrontation with the bread and wine which are a very vivid reminder of what Jesus Christ did to earn our salvation. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper is more than a mere memorial meal, but an opportunity for believers to lift up their hearts to the Lord, to be spiritually transported to the throne of grace where Christ resides at the Father's right hand, there to be fed spiritually on Christ's body and blood for the blessings of spiritual growth and immortality which were won on the cross by Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, in the final analysis, for Calvin the elements are merely symbolic — signs of an inner spiritual reality which the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ give the believer through faith. Due to his philosophical presuppositions and his *extra calvinisticum*, Calvin can draw no other conclusion than that Jesus, since his ascension, is literally in no position to feed his people with the real substance of his body and blood at the many altars around the world.

Conclusion

Even while teaching his so-called *extra calvinisticum*, Calvin believed that he was being faithful to the orthodox Trinitarian theology and Christology espoused and expressed at Nicæa and Chalcedon. Nevertheless, by teaching the *extra calvinisticum*, he unwittingly drew perilously close to the very Nestorian heresy which he so vehemently and so often disavowed. This Nestorian tendency in Calvin was revealed especially in the eucharistic controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Calvin teaches the so-called *extra calvinisticum* because it is a logical deduction of one of his overriding presuppositions: *finitum non capax infiniti*. This presupposition is also one of the reasons he cannot accept the idea that in the Lord's Supper the pastor actually distributes Christ's real, substantial body and blood to the communicants; rather, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, the believing communicants feed spiritually on the substance of Christ's body and blood which is locally circumscribed at the right hand of the Father. *Finitum non capax infiniti*. This spiritual feeding on Jesus's flesh and blood at God's right hand in heaven occurs through the agency of the Holy Spirit. The finite body of the God-man Jesus cannot contain all of the infinite *Logos* — therefore the *Logos* must dwell not only in Christ's flesh but *etiam extra carnem*. Neither can the infinite *Logos* be contained in the host and cup of the Sacrament — therefore *est* cannot really mean *est* in the *verba*, but must finally mean *significat*. As far as Calvin was concerned, this understanding of Christology and the Eucharist is

⁴⁰Reid, 131.

entirely in line with the decisions of the third ecumenical Council at Ephesus (A.D. 431), the fourth ecumenical Council at Chalcedon (A.D. 451), and the teachings of that great fourth century church father, St. Augustine.

How important is the *extra* in Calvin's doctrinal system? According to Niesel, the *extra* does not constitute the center of Calvin's Christology. Calvin did not write any doctrinal statements dedicated to expounding the *extra*. He only discusses the *extra* while debating the theology of his opponents. Therefore, according to Niesel, "It is false to regard the *Extra Calvinisticum*" as the most essential feature of Calvinistic Christology, as is customary."⁴¹ However, says McDonnell:

The occasion for Calvin's formulation, and the purpose for which it was created is polemic, and, what is of greater interest here, a eucharistic polemic. It is found in the first edition of the *Institutes* where it is used as a tool against the Lutheran doctrine of the Eucharist. The *Extra Calvinisticum*, then, is essentially eucharistic in origin, and in overtones, and this gives added validity to its normative value in Calvin's eucharistic theology.⁴²

Calvin never did disavow the *extra* aspect of his Christology. Neither did he ever avow that Christ is present in the Eucharist in any manner other than spiritually. To accept the real, substantial presence of Christ in the Sacrament would require Calvin to disavow his *extra* and to avow the complete *communicatio idiomatum* of Christ's divine and human natures. Since his over-arching presupposition was *finitum non capax infinitum*, Calvin could never accept any mode of Christ's presence in the Eucharist other than spiritual. That would require the divine attribute of ubiquity — omnipresence — to be communicated to Jesus' human nature, which communication Calvin deemed impossible.

⁴¹Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*. Harold Knight, tr. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) 119.

⁴²McDonnell, 222.

Bibliography

- Bainton, Roland H. *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1956.
- Barth, Karl. *The Theology of John Calvin*. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, tr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995. Translation of *Die Theologie Calvins* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1922).
- Battles, Ford Lewis. *Interpreting John Calvin*. Robert Benedetto, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996.
- Beardslee, John W. III, ed. and tr. *Reformed Dogmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Bente, F. "Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord," *Concordia Triglossa*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921.
- Calvin, John. *Calvin's Commentaries*, Henry Beveridge, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984. Reprint; originally printed for the Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
- . *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tr. Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX and XXI. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
- Cave, Sydney. *The Doctrine of the Person of Christ*. The Studies in Theology Series. London: Gerald Duckworth, 1925.
- Chemnitz, Martin. *Loci Theologici*, vol. I. Jacob A.O. Preus, tr. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989.
- . *The Lord's Supper*. Jacob A.O. Preus, tr. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. Translation of *De Coena Domini* (Jena, 1590).
- . *Two Natures in Christ*. Jacob A.O. Preus, tr. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971. Translation of *De Duabus Naturis in Christo* (Leipzig, 1578).
- Colacci, Mario. *The Doctrinal Conflict between Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity*. Minneapolis: T.S. Denison, 1962.
- Elwood, Christopher. *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth Century France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Farley, Benjamin Wirt, ed. and tr. *John Calvin: Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*. Baker Book House, 1982.
- Galot, Jean. *Who is Christ? A Theology of the Incarnation*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981.
- Gawrisch, Wilbert R. "On Christology, Brenz and the Question of Ubiquity," *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord 1580–1980*. Arnold J. Koelpin, ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980, 229-253.
- Gerrish, Brian Albert. *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- González, Justo L. *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed., vol. 3. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987.
- Hägglund, Bengt. *History of Theology*, 3rd ed. Gene J. Lund, tr. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968.
- Haroutunian, Joseph, tr. and ed. *Calvin: Commentaries*. Library of Christian Classics (Ichthus Edition). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958.
- Hesselink, I. John. *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary*. Columbia Series in Reformed Theology. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.
- Klotsche, E.H. *The History of Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979.

- Kuske, David P. *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English*, 3rd ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998.
- Letham, Robert. "Faith and Assurance in Early Calvinism: A Model of Continuity and Diversity," *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*. Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994, 355-384.
- Marshall, Bruce. *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Savior in Rahner and Barth*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- McDonnell, Kilian. *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- McNeill, John T. *The History and Character of Calvinism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- Melanchthon, Philipp. *Loci Communes*, 3rd Latin edition (1543). Jacob A.O. Preus, tr. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992.
- Milner, Benjamin Charles, Jr. *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*. Studies in the History of Christian Thought, vol. 5. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970.
- Niesel, Wilhelm. *The Theology of Calvin*. Harold Knight, tr. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956.
- Noll, Mark A., ed. "The Heidelberg Catechism," *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991, 133-164.
- Oberman, Heiko A. "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 21:1 (January 1970) 43-64.
- Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. 3 vols. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950.
- Reid, J.K.S., tr. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*. Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXII. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954.
- Sasse, Hermann. *This is my Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar*, rev. Australian ed. Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977.
- . *We Confess Jesus Christ*. Norman Nagel, tr. We Confess Series, vol. 1. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984.
- . *We Confess the Sacraments*. Norman Nagel, tr. We Confess Series, vol. 2. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985.
- Schaff, Philip. *Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis: The Creeds of Christendom*, vol.1, 6th rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1919.
- . *History of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed. Vols. III and VIII. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1910.
- Schaller, John. *Biblical Christology*, rev. ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1981.
- Steinmetz, David C. "Calvin and the Patristic Exegesis of Paul," *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*. David C. Steinmetz, ed. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 100-118.
- . *Calvin in Context*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Wallace, Ronald. *Calvin, Geneva and the Reformation*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988.
- Wendel, François. *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought*. Philip Mairet, tr. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Willis, Edward David. *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the so-called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology*. Studies in Medieval Thought, vol. II. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966.