

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

I. J. Hesselink¹

ABSTRACT

Calvin has frequently been labeled "the theologian of the Holy Spirit". Although there have been a number of studies of various aspects of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's theology since the significant works of Simon van der Linde (1943) and Werner Krusche (1957), none has dealt with the role the Spirit plays in Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments. The Word and faith are requisites for any efficacious experience of the sacraments, but "whatever God offers us in the sacraments depends on the secret operation of his Spirit" (Calvin). Baptism signifies the forgiveness of our sins and regeneration, although the beginning of that regeneration may precede or follow the act of baptism. In the Lord's Supper the Holy Spirit performs two related functions: he unites that which is separated by time and space, *viz.*, the ascended Lord and the believer, and in the action of the sacrament feeds the believer with the flesh and blood of Christ. Thereby Christ is truly present in the Supper. This is a spiritual presence, but it is not something psychological or unreal. In the last analysis, Calvin concedes that this is a mystery which is "too lofty" for his "mind to comprehend". In any case, he would "rather experience it than understand it".

PREFACE

It is a privilege and a pleasure to be able to share in the *Festschrift* issue of *Acta Theologica* in honor of my friend, Professor Pieter Potgieter, Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the University of the Free State. Pieter and I first met at the initial International Calvin Congress in Amsterdam in 1978. I recall particularly intense conversations we had at the subsequent Congress in Geneva. Since then our friendship has deepened through the years as we have met at Calvin Congresses and meetings of the International Reformed Theological Institute. Among other things, we share a special interest in the theology of John Calvin. Hence I contribute this essay which, I believe, explores an aspect of Calvin's theology of the Holy Spirit that has received insufficient attention.

1 Prof. I. John Hesselink, Albertus C. Van Raalte Professor of Systematics Theology emeritus, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan, USA.

1. INTRODUCTION: CALVIN, THEOLOGIAN OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It is generally agreed among Calvin scholars today that there is no single central doctrine in Calvin's theology that controls or dominates his thought and from which it is possible to derive all the dependent strands of his theology. This consensus stands in sharp contrast to the earlier attempts to find the clue to his theology in the sovereignty of God or predestination (so traditional Calvinists)² and more recently in his christocentric emphasis (so Barthian scholars such as Wilhelm Niesel 1957). A good case can be made for both of these viewpoints, but Calvin could hardly be more christocentric than Luther, and when it comes to the sovereignty of God and predestination the honor must go to Calvin's successor Beza and to orthodox Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, there are certain distinctive characteristics of Calvin's theology that can be pinpointed such as the theme of Word and Spirit.³ Moreover, all of the above disclaimers notwithstanding, there is good reason for dubbing Calvin above all the theologian of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The venerable Princeton "divine" B. B. Warfield, is generally given the credit for calling Calvin "the theologian of the Holy Spirit". The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, he says, "is a gift from Calvin to the church" (1931:21). However, the first person to have so described Calvin may have been a French scholar, Charles Leliere who in 1901 wrote that Calvin was "le systematicien par excellence de la religion de l'Esprit".⁵ This is reiterated by a contemporary Reformed theologian, Alasdair Heron: "Of all the great Reformers it was Calvin who undertook the most systematic exploration of the Spirit's work" (1983:102). This has been subsequently reaffirmed by John Mackay, the former president of Princeton Seminary (1960:39), the late Dutch Reformed historian Simon van der Linde (1943:6); and Werner Krusche (1957:12), formerly the bishop of the Lutheran Church in Berlin, in his magisterial work. What is remarkable about Calvin's approach is the comprehensive way he applies the work of the Holy Spirit to every aspect of his theology,

2 A classic attempt in this regard was by A. Schweitzer (1854), hardly a traditional Calvinist, in his two-volume work *Das Central Dogma der Reformierten Kirche*.

3 I suggest a number of these in my chapter on "Calvin's Theology" in the forthcoming book, *The Cambridge companion to John Calvin*, edited by Donald McKim.

4 Regin Prenter (1953) makes a similar claim for Luther.

5 Cited in Krusche (1957:12).

ranging from the internal witness of the Spirit to the authority of Scripture⁶ and the Spirit's work in the universe. As the Roman Catholic theologian, Alexandre Ganoczy (1989:135) comments, "Pneumatology is present everywhere in Calvin's thought".

Since the comprehensive works of Van der Linde and Krusche of more than forty years ago, there have been no major studies of Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit, only brief essays of a more general nature, the lengthiest being the one by H. Quistorp (1964:109-150) in his collection of essays.⁷ They touch on the Spirit and the sacraments in Calvin's theology but only very briefly. The same is true of the standard studies of Calvin's theology by Wilhelm Niesel (1956) and Francois Wendel (1963), and my own introduction to Calvin's theology, *Calvin's First Catechism* (1997). In this volume I have an appendix on "Calvin, theologian of the Holy Spirit" (177-187), but the focus here is on the Holy Spirit in the Christian life.

The fullest treatments of the role of the Holy Spirit in regard to the sacraments are in the studies of Krusche and Van der Linde, but they are relatively short considering the length of these works. In fact, Krusche has no discussion of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Lord's Supper, a curious omission betraying perhaps his influence by Karl Barth.⁸ Here Van der Linde is more balanced, but in both cases these discussions are dated and can only be appreciated by those who read Dutch and English. The same is true of the lengthy essay by H. J. J. Quistorp, "Calvin's Lehre vom Heiligen Geist". Quistorp discusses a wide variety of topics, but there is not one word about the Spirit and the sacraments. As a result, there is a need for a new discussion of this theme in the English language.

6 I treat this subject briefly in an excursus in my book, *Calvin's First Catechism* (1997:54-60) entitled "The authority of Scripture — The inner witness of the Spirit".

7 For two shorter essays that deal with most of the aspects of Calvin's doctrine of the Spirit, see Leon McDill and Eifion Evans. The theme of the sixth colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society in North America was "Calvin and the Holy Spirit". These papers were edited by Peter De Klerk and published in 1989, but none dealt with the sacraments.

8 There are only a few passing allusions, e.g., in footnotes on pages 143, 146, and 149. Krusche's special interest in this section is on the nature of Christ's ascended body and his presence in the world. In Niesel's standard study of Calvin's theology (1956) we have the opposite problem. He has very little interest in Calvin's doctrine of baptism and makes only a few scattered references (40, 220-1). Such a lacuna is inexplicable in a study which claims to be a comprehensive study of Calvin's theology.

2. THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE SACRAMENTS IN GENERAL

Calvin devotes a lengthy chapter to the sacraments in general in the *Institutes* before proceeding to separate treatments of baptism, infant baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Following the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (*Confessio Augustana*), Calvin designates two marks (*notae*) of the church, *viz.*, the pure preaching of the Word⁹ and the proper administration of the sacraments (1960:1023. *Inst.* IV.1.9. I shall henceforth use the latter form of documentation since that is more common). What in Reformed and Presbyterian Churches later came to be held as a third mark, *viz.*, church discipline, was very important for Calvin,¹⁰ but he did recognize it as a true mark of the church.

In contrast to many Reformed/Presbyterian Christians, who are more Zwinglian than Calvinian in regard to the sacraments, is Calvin's high view of the sacraments. He might appear to demean them somewhat when he describes them as simply

another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel" and define a sacrament as "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our conscience the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith (*Inst.* IV.14.1)

and as

a sort of appendix (*tanquam appendicem*) with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise (*Inst.* IV.14.3).

In his Geneva Catechism (Q. 312) he even refers to the sacraments as

9 What is rarely noticed in Calvin's discussion of the marks of the church is that in distinction from the Augsburg Confession — or Belgic Confession — Calvin adds an interesting qualification to the first mark: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached *and heard...*" (IV.1.9, my emphasis).

10 As the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its own sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place.

Moreover, those who do not practice discipline, "are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church" (*Inst.* IV.12.1). On this subject see Wendel (1963:75-86, 208-303), and my book *Calvin's First Catechism. A commentary* (1997:161ff.).

inferior instruments (*d'instruments inférieurs*) according as it seemed good to [the Lord], without in any way detracting from the Holy Spirit (1950:54. The later Latin version reads *secunda organa*).

However, he regards them as “lofty and heavenly mysteries” (*Inst.* IV. 14.6) which are testimonies of God's goodness and grace toward us in Jesus Christ.

Due to the weakness of our faith and our carnal nature God “condescends to lead us to himself by earthly elements” (IV.14.4) and “leads us by the hand as tutors lead children by the means of these visible words” (IV. 14.6. The expression comes from Augustine). At the same time they are “pillars of our faith” and “mirrors in which we may contemplate the riches of God's grace, which he lavishes upon us” (IV.14.6).

The signs are important — water, wine and bread — but the Word is crucial. Faith is also indispensable, and

Christ is the matter (*materiam*) or substance of all the sacraments; for in him they have all their firmness (*soliditatem*), and they do not promise anything apart from him (IV.14.16).

Now follows the special Calvinian accent. The benefits of the sacraments “are conferred through the Holy Spirit who makes us partakers of Christ” (IV.14.16). For “the sacraments profit not a whit (*neque hilum*) without the power of the Spirit” (IV.14.9). Calvin proceeds to explain that the sacraments

properly fulfill their office when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in. If the Spirit is lacking, the sacraments can accomplish nothing more in our minds than the splendor of the sun shining on blind eyes, or a voice sounding in deaf ears. Therefore, I make such a division (*partior*) between Spirit and sacraments that the power to act rests with the former, and the ministry alone is left to the latter — a ministry empty and trifling, apart from the action of the Spirit, but charged with great effect when the Spirit works within and manifests his power (IV.14.9).

As Benjamin Milner (1970:119) points out,

The analogy of the sun and the blind eyes is apt, for the sacraments are not in themselves empty — it is only our blindness, or the absence of the Spirit, that makes them so.

Although the sacraments by themselves profit nothing, yet God has designed them to be instruments of his grace, and he effects by the secret grace of his Spirit that they should not be without benefit in the elect. Although they are dead and unprofitable figures to

the reprobate, yet they always retain their force and nature, for though our unbelief may deprive us of their effect, yet it cannot weaken or extinguish the truth of God (Calvin 1961:89).

Calvin frequently describes the role of the sacraments as confirming our faith (IV.14.3,7,8). But it is the Holy Spirit who prepares “our minds by his inward illumination to receive the confirmation of the sacraments” (IV.14.10). The Spirit works in such a way

that the Word may not beat your ears in vain, and that the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain. The Spirit shows us that in them it is God speaking to us, softening the stubbornness of our heart and composing it to that obedience which it owes the Word of God (IV.14.10).

For a sacrament to be efficacious,¹¹ there must be a conjunction of the Word and the Spirit as well as faith on the part of the believer. The office of the sacraments is the same as the Word of God, *viz.*,

to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace. But they avail and profit nothing unless received in faith (IV.14.17).

In the last analysis, however, as Ronald Wallace (1953:169) notes,

the *whole efficacy* of the sacraments depends on the Spirit, who is sovereign and free in his operation through the sacraments and not in any way constrained by the human action and will.

In Calvin’s own words:

So far, then, is God from resigning the grace of his Spirit to the sacraments, that all their efficacy and utility resides (*resideat*) in the Spirit alone (1950:285).

Accordingly,

the sacraments “contain” but do not “confer” the grace which they promise; that comes about through the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit (Milner 1970:121).

- 11 Efficacy (*efficacia*) is a key word that crops up again and again in Calvin’s discussion of the sacraments, but rarely has its meaning been explored. Shin Nomura, a young Japanese Calvin scholar (2002:129-157) has done us a service in this regard in his essay. Here Nomura examines various usages of this word as well as variants such as arcana *Spiritus efficacia* and concludes that this is “one of the most important words for interpreting Calvin’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit” (133). In English *efficacia* is translated not only as “efficacy” but also as “power” and “energy”.

3. BAPTISM

Surprisingly, in Calvin's chapter on baptism in the *Institutes* (IV.15), the references to the Holy Spirit are relatively few. However, when we examine Calvin's other writings — commentaries, catechisms, treatises, etc. — a more complete picture emerges. Calvin defines baptism as

the sign of initiation by which we are received into the society (*societas*) of the church in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children (IV.15.1).

There is no specific reference to the Spirit here although the expression "engrafted in Christ" alludes to a major theme in Calvin's theology, *viz.*, our faith union with Christ, for it is the Spirit who unites us to Christ (*Inst.* III.1.1). A more specific allusion to the Spirit is found in Calvin's definition of baptism in the Geneva Catechism, Question 324. The meaning of baptism, he says,

consists of two parts. The Lord represents to us in it, first the forgiveness of sins (Eph. 5:26-7) and second, *our regeneration or spiritual renewal* (1959:56-7; my emphasis).

Regeneration is one of the leading motifs in Calvin's understanding of baptism, and this is particularly prominent in his exposition of the doctrine in the Geneva Catechism. Recall that he has said that baptism consists of two parts: the forgiveness of sins and regeneration. He explains the former briefly in Question 325, but focuses on the latter in Questions 326 and 330. In the former he clarifies that baptism is only "the *beginning* of regeneration and its end is our becoming new creatures through the Spirit of God" (1959:57). Regeneration¹² in this context implies the two principal facets of the Christian life: mortification and vivification. This is spelled out in the answer to Question 330:

From what does regeneration get its power? Answer: From the death and resurrection of Christ. His death has this effect, that through it our old Adam is crucified and our evil nature is, as it were, buried so that it no longer has the strength to rule over us. And the renewal of our life, in obedience to the righteousness of God, derives from the resurrection of Christ (1959:58).

12 One should keep in mind that for Calvin regeneration has a very broad meaning signifying the life of faith in contrast to the seventeenth century understanding of regeneration as one of the first phases in an *ordo salutis*. For Calvin, see the *Institutes* III.3, the title of which is "Our regeneration by faith: repentance". In this chapter Calvin discusses both mortification and vivification as component parts of repentance, and thus sanctification is also comprehended under this term.

Much of this emphasis on the correlation of baptism and regeneration is missing in the *Institutes* with the exception of two sections (IV.15.5, 6). A key text for him is Romans 6:3-5. He briefly comments on its meaning and then illustrates with the metaphor of a plant.

Just as a twig draws substance and nourishment from the root to which it is grafted, so those who receive baptism with right faith truly feel the effective working of Christ's death in the mortification of their flesh, together with the working of his resurrection in the vivification of the Spirit [Rom. 6:8].

In this connection, he also alludes to Titus 3:5:

He saved us ... in virtue of his own mercy, through the washing of regeneration and of renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Calvin then concludes this section with the comment,

Thus, the free pardon of sins and the imputation of righteousness are first promised to us, and then the grace of the Holy Spirit to reform us to newness of life (IV.15.5).

He elaborates briefly on this theme in the next section. After affirming that "all the gifts of God proffered in baptism are found in Christ alone" who cleanses us by his blood, he adds a little later that

we obtain regeneration by Christ's death and resurrection only if we are sanctified by the Spirit and imbued with a new and spiritual nature.

Then follows a technical distinction of a scholastic nature: in baptism we

discern in the Father the cause, in the Son the matter, and in the Spirit the effect, of our purgation and regeneration (IV.15.6).

Another important New Testament passage where baptism and the Spirit are linked together is 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body", but Calvin mentions it only in passing, and makes nothing of it. In his commentary on this passage, however, he adds,

Paul, of course, is speaking [here] about the baptism of believers, which is efficacious through the grace of the Spirit (1964b:265).

Here again we encounter that crucial word, "efficacious". Calvin does not hesitate to point out the importance of faith in relation to the sacrament, but in the last analysis it is efficacious because of the grace of the Spirit. Accordingly, it would appear that for believers baptism is inviolable. Moreover, Calvin unhesitatingly affirms that "at whatever time we are baptized, we are

once for all washed and purged for our whole life". Not only that, Calvin, like Luther, urges us to find great comfort in our baptism when we are troubled. "As often as we fall away", he says, "we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins" (IV.15.3; cf. IV.15.1, 10).

This would seem to settle the matter, at least for believers, but elsewhere the reformer sounds quite a different note. On the one hand he can say (on the basis of Romans 8:1) that

those whom the Lord has once received into grace [and] engrafted into the communion of his Christ ... through baptism ... are absolved of guilt and condemnation.

Here there is a parallel between baptism and justification from all eternity, and, in fact, Calvin links them together (IV.15.10). But in the middle of this sentence he interjects a qualification — "*so long as* they persevere in faith in Christ" (IV.15.12; my emphasis). Similarly in the Geneva Catechism, Question 331:

How is this grace applied to us in baptism? Answer: In it we are clothed with Jesus Christ, and receive his Spirit, *provided* that we do not make ourselves unworthy of the promises given to us in it (1959:58; my emphasis).¹³

What about this proviso? Is baptism efficacious only for those believers who are faithful? Earlier he had said that "as often as we fall away", we can still find comfort and assurance in our baptism. He repeats this in IV.15.4. The answer, if there is one, may be found in Calvin's response to the Anabaptist objection that the Reformed (and Lutherans) sometimes only come to faith after their baptism. This would seem to apply particularly in the case of infant baptism, although Calvin's response here appears to apply particularly to adults who have been unfaithful:

We reply that we indeed, being blind and unbelieving, for a long time did not grasp the promise that had been given to us in baptism; yet that promise, since it was of God, ever remained fixed and firm and trustworthy ... We therefore confess that for that time baptism benefited us not at all, inasmuch as the promise offered us in it—without which baptism is nothing — lay neglected... But we believe that the promise itself did not vanish. Rather, we consi-

13 The Latin version of this question reads quite differently. Question: "How are these benefits conferred on us through baptism?" Answer: "Because unless we render the promises unfruitful by rejecting them, we are fed [or clothed] with Christ and granted his Spirit" (1964a:134).

der that God through baptism promises us forgiveness of sins, and he will doubtless fulfill his promise for all believers. This promise was offered to us in baptism; therefore, let us embrace it by faith (IV.15.17).

An earlier observation, made in the context of the discussion of vows, may also provide a partial answer to this apparent contradiction. A certain type of vow, Calvin maintains, is “holy and salutary”, but

no one can maintain in this life the perfect obedience to the law which God requires of us. For inasmuch as this stipulation [to keep a vow] is included in the covenant of grace under which are contained both forgiveness of sins and the spirit of sanctification, the promise which we make is joined with a plea for pardon and a petition for help (IV.13.6).

Conclusion: Baptized believers may prove unfaithful from time to time and may occasionally prove unworthy, but if they eventually repent and flee to God’s mercy, the promises of God’s grace will remain firm and his Spirit will not be taken away. Lack of faith does not negate the promise. On the other hand, some people make the sacrament

of no effect by their perversity. Nevertheless, the sacrament loses nothing of its nature, although none but believers feel its efficacy (Geneva Catechism, Question 329, 1959:57).

Calvin does not refer to 2 Timothy 2:13, but he might well have done so, for this verse seems to say, in effect, what he is arguing in the above quotations. “If we are faithless, he [Christ] remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself”.

4. INFANT BAPTISM

When it comes to infant baptism many of the same arguments apply. In the *Institutes* the references to the Holy Spirit are few but they are extremely significant. Calvin’s main argument here is based on the unity of the covenant and the anagogic relationship between circumcision and baptism,¹⁴ a relationship to which Paul also refers in Colossians 2:11-12 (IV.16.11. Cf. IV.16.21). He also appeals to Jesus’ reception and blessing of children (IV.

14 Two studies focus on the covenantal character of the sacraments, particularly baptism, the recent work by Lillback (2001:242-263 [Chapter 13]); and the older study by Pierre Marcel (1953). The title of Marcel’s book (*The Biblical doctrine of infant baptism*), however, is a misnomer. It should read “The Reformed doctrine of infant baptism”.

16.7) and the sanctification of children if one of their parents is a believer (based on 1 Cor. 7:14. See *Inst.* IV.16.6, 15). Just as the children of Jews were

made heirs of God's covenant and distinguished from the children of the impious and were called holy seed [Ezra 9:2; Isa. 6:13], for this same reason the children of Christians are considered holy.

Here Calvin is thinking of 1 Corinthians 7:14:

The unbelieving husband is consecrated ["sanctified": NIV] through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy (RSV. See IV.16.6, 15).¹⁵

The children of believers are also holy because of the covenantal relationship. "The offspring of believers are born holy", Calvin avers,

because their children while yet in the womb, before they breathe the vital air, have been adopted into the covenant of eternal life (1958b:345).

The common objection to the baptism of infants, not only by the Anabaptists of Calvin's time, but also by Baptists, Pentecostals, and some influenced by Karl Barth in our time, is that infants cannot understand the Word or respond with faith. This might seem to point up an inconsistency for Calvin since he holds that both understanding and faith are essential components of an effective sacrament.¹⁶ Calvin's response to such objections is that God's regenerative work through the Holy Spirit can and does at times begin prior to birth, i.e., in one's mother's womb. Here he points to John the Baptist (see Luke 1:15) and Jesus (IV.16.17-18). Even though at birth and later such infants have no understanding of their status or situation, God can work mysteriously in their lives. Calvin believes that God's work,

though beyond our understanding, is still not annulled. Now it is perfectly clear that those infants who are to be saved (as some are surely saved from that early age) are previously regenerated by the Lord (IV.16.17).

We must not limit God's power within the "narrow limits of our thinking" (*Ibid.*).

Ultimately, it is a matter of God's gracious election — although this applies to adults as well as infants. In baptism "God's election alone rules as

15 In the "Form of administering baptism" for the use of the Church of Geneva Calvin again appeals to this text (1958:115).

16 Jill Raitt (1980:51ff) deals with this question in her essay.

of free right” (IV.16.15). This is also the basis of the Reformed belief that the death of infants does not preclude them from being received by God into glory.

If those whom the Lord has deigned to elect received the sign of regeneration, but depart from the present life before they grow up, he renews them by the power, incomprehensible to us, of his Spirit, in whatever way he alone foresees to be expedient (IV.16.2).

However, the normal pattern would be that

infants are baptized into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit (IV.16.20).

John Dillenberger, after citing this passage, comments:

Here Calvin calls upon the Spirit to rescue him in this dilemma [that infants do not possess faith]. In one sense, his conception of the Spirit is his escape hatch, but from another standpoint it is the pivot upon which everything turns (1971:18).

Here Calvin refers to a “seed” of faith implanted by the Spirit in the life of an infant. Elsewhere he says that if it please the Lord, he can

shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom he will illumine in the future with the full splendor of his light (IV.16.19).

This “seed” or “spark” of faith and repentance implanted in the hearts of covenant children

are renewed by the Spirit of God according to the measure of their age until by degrees and its own time this power hidden within them increases and shines forth openly (1972:252).¹⁷

17 This comes close to, but must be distinguished from, the notion of “presumptive regeneration”, which is alleged to have been taught by Abraham Kuypers. Van der Linde, in any case, says that when Calvin refers to a “seed of faith implanted in a child”, “We zijn hier in een andere gedachtensfeer dan bij Kuypers” (1943:186, n. 6). John Murray (1952:57) appears to concur: “To aver that baptism is dispensed to infants on the ground of presumptive regeneration appears to be without warrant...”. He then points out that the notion of “presumptive election” is found in the First Helvetic Confession:

We baptize our children ... of whom it may be assumed that they have been elected by God (*praesertim quum de eorum electione pie est praesumendum*) (Article 21).

Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield also held this view (57-58).

The implication is that baptism, to be efficacious, must eventually result in repentance and faith. Children who have been baptized

must one day respond to the promise with a faith aroused by the hearing of the Word and the action of the Spirit (Raitt 1980:59).

When children "come of age they are to acknowledge the truth of their baptism" (Geneva Catechism, Q. 339, 1959:59).

Baptism does not guarantee salvation, whether of an infant or an adult. Also, we cannot bind the work of the Spirit to the act of baptism. Regeneration, i.e., the work of the Spirit in the life of a believer, usually precedes and sometimes follows the act of baptism. Actually, the efficacy of a sacrament, whether adult or infant baptism, or the Lord's Supper

must not be tied down to an instant of time. God, whenever he sees fit, fulfills and exhibits in immediate effect that which he figures in the sacrament. But no necessity must be imagined so as to prevent his grace from sometimes preceding, sometimes following, the use of the sign (1958a:342).

In any case, God's sovereign grace and the mysterious work of the Spirit cannot be bound to a sacramental rite — or any sacred rite for that matter. "God keeps his own timetable of regeneration" (IV.16.31, point 16).

In making the Reformed case for infant baptism the argument usually is based on the parallel between circumcision and baptism in the context of the covenant of grace. Calvin argues in a similar fashion, but Dillenberger's comment, cited earlier, has considerable merit, *viz.*, that Calvin's conception of the Spirit is "the pivot upon which everything turns".

5. THE LORD'S SUPPER

Nowhere is the work of the Spirit in Calvin's theology more prominent than in his view of the Lord's Supper. Here the conclusion of Jill Raitt's essay of Calvin on infant baptism provides a nice transitional paragraph:

The heart of reformation doctrine, justification by faith, the gift of free grace, is thus rigorously maintained by Calvin's particular doctrine of baptism, especially infant baptism. Faith is not something poured into the child without regard for its understanding but offered as one of Christ's primary benefits through the promise alive in the Christian community. Christ's presence, through the Holy Spirit, is continually offered in Word and sacrament until the day that the child becomes an effective recipient, responsible to walk in the way of the Lord. Baptism then continues to offer the sealed promise that in Christ sins are forgiven and justification continuously

applied. Thereafter, the Lord's Supper continues to be a means of growth in sanctification by uniting ever more closely the believer and Christ, from whom every benefit flows (1980:60).

To do justice to the role of the Holy Spirit in Calvin's wonderful doctrine of the Lord's Supper would require a much lengthier essay than this.¹⁸ Here I simply focus on the special role the Holy Spirit plays in his understanding of the sacrament.¹⁹ A fundamental presupposition of Calvin's in regard to the Lord's Supper is that the ascended body of Christ is localized, so to speak, in heaven. Hence the body of Christ cannot be ubiquitous, as it is for Luther.²⁰ What Calvin affirms briefly in his Catechism of 1538 is repeated again and again in various later works, to wit:

For although Christ, having ascended into heaven, ceases to reside on earth ... still no distance can prevent his power from feeding his believers on himself and bringing it about that they still enjoy ever-present communication with him, though he is absent from that place (Hesselink 1997:35).

What is missing here, however, is how the distant, ascended Christ becomes one with us in the Supper. The answer is the Holy Spirit. In his *Short treatise on the Lord's Supper*, written only two years later, the role of the Holy Spirit in this connection is still largely absent. Calvin only alludes to the fact that it is the Holy Spirit who "gives efficacy to his ordinance" and that "the virtue [or power] of the Holy Spirit is joined to the sacraments when they are duly received" (1964c:149), although he concludes the Treatise with the affirmation that we must hold that

- 18 In contrast to Calvin's doctrine of baptism, where we are still lacking a definitive study, there is a plethora of full-scale studies of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In addition to the work in French by Jean Cadier (1951), in German by Hans Grass (1954), and Dutch by G. P. Hartvelt (1960), there are four excellent books in English, each one distinctive in its approach: Ronald Wallace (1953), Kilian Mc Donnell OSB (1967), B. A. Gerrish (1993) and Thomas J. Davis (1995).
- 19 Most of what follows in the rest of this essay is taken *verbatim* from my book *Calvin's First Catechism. A commentary* (1997:147-150). I have, however, done more research on this subject since writing this book, so there is significant new material here.
- 20 While Krusche virtually ignores Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper in his book (1957) he devotes considerable space to Christ's ascension, and the problem, as he sees it, for Calvin to have a real presence of *totus Christus* in view of the localisation of the human nature of Christ. See especially 141ff.

the efficacy of the sacred mystery ... as accomplished by the secret and miraculous power (*virtus*) of God, and that the Spirit of God is the bond of participation, for which reason it is called spiritual (1964c:166).

In his Geneva Catechism, however, written the following year (French ed., 1541) Calvin is much more explicit as to how we are made "partakers of Christ's substance", even though "Christ's body is in heaven and we are still pilgrims on earth". This gap is bridged

by the miraculous and secret virtue of his [Christ's] Spirit, for whom it is not difficult to associate things that are otherwise separated by an interval of space (1959:62; Qs. 353-5).²¹

In his commentary on Paul's account of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, written in 1546, Calvin is more precise about the way the Holy Spirit unites things separated in the celebration of the sacrament. Here succinctly and clearly he explains how the flesh of the ascended Lord spiritually nourishes us. In the following passage note particularly how he first rejects Roman Catholic and Lutheran views of the real presence and then states his own view:

The sharing in the Lord's body, which, I maintain, is offered to us in the Supper, demands neither a local presence, nor the descent of Christ, nor an infinite extension of His body, nor anything of that sort; for, in view of the fact that the Supper is a heavenly act, there is nothing absurd about saying that Christ remains in heaven and is yet received by us. For the way in which he imparts Himself to us is by the secret power of the Holy Spirit, a power which is able not only to bring together, but also to join together, things which are separated by distance, and by a great distance at that (1960b:247).

Elsewhere in this commentary, he is even more explicit in distancing himself from Zwinglians and those who see in the Supper "only a memorial of something that is absent". His conclusion is that

21 Calvin says almost the same thing in the 1559 *Institutes*, but in this case he is responding to the charge of Westphal who accused Calvin of having no sense of the mysterious and miraculous in the sacrament. Calvin responds that there is nothing more incredible than that things severed and removed from one another by the whole space between heaven and earth should not only be connected across such a great distance but also be united, so that souls may receive nourishment from Christ's flesh (IV.17.24).

The body of Christ is really (*realiter*), to use the usual word, i.e., truly (*vere*) given to us in the Supper, so that it may be health-giving food for our souls. I am adopting the usual terms, but I mean that our souls are fed by the substance of his body, so that we are truly (*vere*) made one with him; or, what amounts to the same thing, that a life-giving power from the flesh of Christ (*vim ex Christi carne vivicam*) is poured into us through the medium of the Spirit, even although it is at a great distance from us, and is not mixed with us (*nec misceatur nobiscum*) (1960b:246).

The final edition of the *Institutes* is only an amplification of this thesis. Here he refers to the Holy Spirit as “the bond of connection” which is “like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us”. Calvin’s key text here is Romans 8:9, which “teaches that the Spirit alone causes us to possess Christ completely and have him dwelling in us” (IV.17.12). “Those who separate Christ from his Spirit make him like a dead image or corpse” (1961:164). More specifically, in reference to the Supper, Calvin reiterates that this spiritual eating is no less real even though Christ remains in heaven and is not “enclosed” in the elements in a carnal fashion. The solution again is the secret and “incomprehensible power” of the Spirit (IV.17.33).

Here a slight complication arises. Do we then only lift up our hearts (*sursum corda!*) to the ascended Christ and somehow feed on him there? Or, is there a sense in which the risen Christ by his Spirit descends to us and nourishes us spiritually through the partaking of the elements? Both are true, but the accent is on the former. That is, for the most part, Calvin teaches that “in order to enjoy the reality of the signs our minds must be raised to heaven where Christ is” (1964a:62, Q. 355). Calvin is so averse to any notion that Christ is physically contained or enclosed in the elements that he ridicules those who would “drag” Christ down from heaven (IV.17.31).

But if we are lifted up to heaven with our eyes and minds, to seek Christ there in the glory of his kingdom, as the symbols invite us to him in his wholeness, so under the symbol of bread we shall be fed by his body, under the symbol of wine we shall separately drink his blood, to enjoy him at last in his wholeness (IV.17.18).

Yet Calvin can also speak figuratively of Christ’s coming down to us in order to nourish us in the Supper. For

in order to be present with us, he does not change his place, but from heaven *he sends down* the efficacy of his flesh to be present in us (1960b:248, emphasis added).

We say Christ descends to us both by the outward symbol and by his Spirit, that he may truly quicken our souls by the substance of his flesh and blood (IV.17.24).

But this "descent" must not be misunderstood in such a way that Christ is literally brought down and enclosed within the elements. Those who so believe "do not understand the manner of descent by which he lifts us up to himself" (IV.17.16).

In either case, whether Christ comes down to us or we rise up to him we partake of him by faith. For there is "no other eating [of Christ's flesh and blood] than by faith". Here Calvin is distancing himself from Zwingli by asserting that this spiritual eating is not identical with faith but rather the fruit and effect of faith. So he adds,

I say that we eat Christ's flesh in believing and because it is made ours by faith, and that this eating is the result and effect of faith (IV.17.5).

We are not to imagine any other eating than that by which the hidden power of the Spirit breathes the life of Christ into us — and this we only achieve by faith alone (1972b:136).

"The godly rise by faith to fellowship with Christ" who gives to them his body.

Whoever wishes to eat the flesh of Christ must be carried by faith to heaven beyond human conception. In short, *it is the Spirit of God alone who can make us partakers of that fellowship* (1948b:211; emphasis added).

Faith is a human act, but "it is the work of God alone to begin and perfect faith", and this, like the efficacy of the whole sacramental act, is again due to "the working of the secret power of the Holy Spirit" (1948a:209).

Finally, what is meant by "spiritual presence"? Does "spiritual" mean unreal? In regard to this question, one can begin with the following simple distinctions of Otto Weber:

The "presence of Christ" in the Lord's Supper is understood by Zwingli in an "idealistic" fashion, so to speak, by Luther in a tangible — "objective" fashion, by Melancthon in an actual fashion, and by Calvin in a spiritual fashion (1983:632).²²

22 A. Mitchell Hunter explains the differences quite differently:

Zwingli stood for the view that the symbols represent what is absent; Calvin that they exhibit what is present; Luther that they "envelop" what is unseen but real (1950:178).

But what does a “spiritual fashion” mean? It is generally agreed, even by contemporary Roman Catholic Calvin scholars, that spiritual presence for Calvin does not mean it is unreal.²³ What Van der Linde says concerning Calvin’s approach to both sacraments applies here. By means of the hidden operation of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments we enjoy a genuine fellowship (*gemeenschap*) with Christ; and “this fellowship is spiritual, not spiritualistic, and real (*reel*) but not realistic” (1943:183).

The Lutherans charged that if this eating in the Lord’s Supper is spiritual, it is unreal. Calvin counters with the analogy that

our souls are fed by the flesh and blood of Christ just as ... bread and wine keep and sustain our bodily life (IV.17.10. Cf. IV.17.3).²⁴

When our Lord calls himself “the bread of life” (John 6:51) he intended

to teach not only that salvation for us rests on faith in his death and resurrection, but also that, by true partaking of him, his life passes into us and is made ours — just as bread when taken as food imparts vigor to the body (IV.17.5).²⁵

23 See, e.g., Kilian Mc Donnell (1967:223-7):

There are two traditions represented in Calvin’s doctrine, the symbolist-virtualist tradition and the realist tradition (*Ibid.*, 224).

Also the Hungarian-German Roman Catholic theologian, Alexandre Ganoczy:

Between the two extreme positions — Luther’s, which got tangled up in a realism resembling the scholastics, and Zwingli’s, which followed the exigencies of rational thought to the point of mere symbolism — Calvin proposed an interpretation oriented entirely towards the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was described as the vehicle of the heavenly Christ in his desire to communicate himself in his entirety to believers. Theologians today must, if they are to be objective, recognize that Calvin had the genius to take up a doctrine strongly attested by the eastern Fathers conforming with the Pauline and Johannine tradition (1989:132).

24 The Heidelberg Catechism employs similar analogies, e.g., in the answer to Question 79:

Christ wishes to teach us . . . that as bread and wine sustain this temporal life, so his crucified body and shed blood are the true food and drink of our souls for eternal life.

For baptism, see Question 73.

25 Presupposed in Calvin’s discussion of the Lord’s Supper is our faith union with Christ. This is one of the central themes in Calvin’s theology. Mc Donnell does not overstate the matter when he says:

As we saw earlier, thanks to the incomprehensible power of the Spirit, we are nourished in the sacrament by the substance of Christ's flesh and blood. Calvin does not hesitate to use vivid, realistic language to describe how concrete this spiritual eating is. Christ, he suggests, "proffers (*porrigit*) his sacred blood for us to taste" (IV.17.1). Calvin concedes that this is a heavenly mystery which he doesn't pretend to understand, but it is not "absurd or out of accord with reason" (IV.17.32). Despite all his attempts to explain the meaning of the heavenly feast, Calvin finally admits that he is

not ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it (IV.17.32).

6. CONCLUSION

In his view of the sacraments Calvin was indebted to several others: Augustine, Luther, and Bucer in particular. With them he sought to define the sacraments in terms of the unique, once-for-all death of Christ and his resurrection based on the Word of God. In this he simply carried forward and developed an evangelical tradition. One dimension of that tradition was to give due attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, this investigation has demonstrated, I believe, that in a special sense Calvin was indeed "the theologian of the Holy Spirit", especially in regard to the sacraments. Let Calvin speak for himself:

Whatever God offers us in the sacraments depends on the secret operation of his Spirit ... So far is God from resigning the grace of his Spirit to the sacraments that all their efficacy and utility is lodged in the Spirit alone (1950:285).

In short, the sacraments are of no avail unless they are received in faith, which is a special gift of the Spirit, dependent not on earthly elements but on the celestial operation of the same Spirit (1964e:331).

Without an understanding of this union with Christ one will easily misunderstand Calvin's teaching on justification, sanctification, his ecclesiology, and sacramental theology as well as his personal piety. Especially in regard to his eucharistic doctrine is union with Christ important as it forms the larger background, spoken or unspoken (1967:177).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Original sources

CALVIN JOHN

- 1948a. *Genesis. Vol. I.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1948b. *Isaiab. Vol. I.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1950. *Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers. Vol. III.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1958a. *Tracts and treatises. Vol. II. On the doctrine and worship of the church.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1958b. *Tracts and treatises. Vol. III. In defense of the Reformed faith.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1959a. "The Geneva Catechism". Translated from the French version. In: *The School of faith. The Catechisms of the Reformed Church.* Translated and edited by Thomas F. Torrance. London: James Clarke.
 1959b. *The Gospel According to Saint John. Part One.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1960a. *Institutes of the Christian Religion.* Edited by J.T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster.
 1960b. *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians.* Translated by John W. Fraser. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1961. *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and the Thessalonians.* Translated by Ross Mackenzie. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1964a. Geneva Catechism. In: Calvin: *Theological treatises.* Translated by J.K.S. Reid. London: SCM.
 1964b. *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon.* Translated by T.A. Smail. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1964c. "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper". In: Calvin: *Theological treatises.* Translated by J.K.S. Reid. London: SCM.
 1972a. *Matthew, Mark and Luke. Vol. II.* Translated by T.H.L. Parker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
 1972b. *Matthew, Mark and Luke. Vol. III.* Translated by A.W. Morrison. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

II. Secondary Sources

COCHRANE A (ed.)

1966. *Reformed confessions of the Sixteenth Century.* London: SCM Press.

DAVIS T J

1995. *The clearest promises of God. The development of Calvin's eucharistic teaching.* New York: AMS Press.

NIESEL W

1956. *The theology of Calvin*. Philadelphia: Westminster. (Revised German ed. 1957.)

NOMURA S

2002. "Efficacia Spiritus and Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit". In: *Calvin in Asian churches*, ed. by Sou-Young Lee. Seoul: Korean Calvin Society.

PRENTER R

1953. *Spiritus Creator. Luther's concept of the Holy Spirit*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg.

QUISTORP H J J

1964. Calvin's Lehre vom Heiligen Geist. In: *De Spiritu Sancto*. Utrecht: V/H Kemink en Zoon.

RAITT J

1980. Three inter-related principles in Calvin's unique doctrine of infant baptism. *The Sixteenth Century Journal* XI 1:51-61.

SCHWEITZER A

1854. *Das zentrale Dogma der Reformierten Kirche*. Zurich: Orell, Fesli and Comp.

TAMBURELLO D E

1994. *Union with Christ. John Calvin and the mysticism of St. Bernard*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

VAN DER LINDE S

1943. *De leer van den Heiligen Geest bij Calvijn*. Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen.

WALKER G M S

1966. The Lord's Supper in the theology and practice of Calvin. In: John Calvin, *Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 1*. Appleford, Abingdon, Berkshire: Sutton Courtenay Press.

WALLACE R S

1953. *Calvin's doctrine of Word and sacrament*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.
1959. *Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.

WARFIELD B B

1931. *Calvin and Calvinism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

WEBER O

1983. *Foundations of dogmatics*. Vol. II. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

WENDEL F

1950. *Calvin. Origins and development of his religious thought*. New York: Harper and Row.

Hesselink

The role of the Holy spirit in Calvin's doctrine

Keywords

Trefwoorde

Calvin

Calvyn

Sacraments

Sakramente

Baptism

Doop

Holy Spirit

Heilige Gees