REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

RECEIVING CHRIST BETTER:  
THE EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY OF ROBERT BRUCE

Thesis Paper  
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0CE751 Integrative Thesis

by

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To my wife

Annmaire,

who daily helps me to receive Christ better.
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INTRODUCTION

The Reverend Robert Bruce, at the age of seventy-seven, had just completed his normal helping of breakfast at his home in Edinburgh, Scotland, when he called to his youngest daughter Martha to bring him another egg.\(^1\) After musing in silence for a minute or two, he suddenly called out, “Hold, daughter, hold; my Master calleth me.”\(^2\) Next, according to historian D. C. MacNicol,

He asked that the Bible should be brought, the large house Bible, but his sight failed him, and he could not read. “Cast me up the 8\(^{th}\) of Romans,” cried he, and he repeated much of the latter portion of this scripture, till he came to the last two verses, “I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, not things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” “Set my finger on these words,” said the blind dying man: “God be with you my children. I have breakfasted with you, and shall sup with my Lord Jesus this night. I die believing these words.”\(^3\)

Bruce’s entire ministerial life and theology were marked with just such devotion to this vision of supping with his Lord.

Robert Bruce succeeded pastors and Reformers James Lawson and John Knox at the Kirk of St. Giles in Edinburgh, Scotland.\(^4\) Not unlike Martin Luther and John Calvin, he began his career pursuing the study of law, until he felt “a mighty inward work” of

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1 Robert Wodrow, *Sermons by the Rev. Robert Bruce, Minister of Edinburgh with Collections for His Life*, ed. William Cunningham (Edinburgh: The Wodrow Society, 1843), 156.
2 Ibid.
God calling him to the ministry. Eventually, against the wishes of his mother, he studied divinity at St. Andrews under the tutelage of Andrew Melville. In 1587, Melville made a motion before the General Assembly that Bruce be called to the church in Edinburgh. Bruce ministered at the St. Giles Kirk until his initially agreeable relationship with King James VI turned adversarial, and the king discharged Bruce from preaching and banished him from the kingdom in 1600.

Much of the remainder of Bruce’s life and ministry was spent in jails or in exile in various villages and towns throughout the highlands of Scotland. Nevertheless, he continued to be an effective minister of the gospel, preaching with great unction wherever he went.

He died in 1631. Though he left no formal theological work or treatises, he contributed much to the Reformed tradition through his leadership in Scotland during a time of turmoil, including his theological influence on those who would later attend the Westminster Assembly, and his remaining sermons, five of which are devoted to the Lord’s Supper.

It is on these sermons concerning the Sacrament to which this paper’s attention will focus. In 1589, Bruce delivered a series of five sermons on the Lord’s Supper which were originally published without rewriting or polishing in 1590. The sermons were

6 Howie, Scott Worthies, 146. One of the primary reasons Bruce was discharged from preaching was that he would not publicly declare the king’s innocence in regard to the murder of the Earl of Gowrie. See chapter twelve of D. C. MacNicol’s Robert Bruce: Minister in the Kirk of Edinburgh (Great Britain, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 112-121.
7 Ibid., 146-147.
8 John Macleod, Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History, 2nd Ed., (Banner of Truth Trust: Edinburgh, Scotland, 1946), 56.
10 Ibid., 7.
then translated from the old Scottish dialect to English in 1614 under the title *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper*.¹¹ Shortly thereafter M. S. Mitchell published an additional volume of sermons in 1617 containing a revised version of the sermons on the Sacrament along with eleven other sermons by Bruce. The book is entitled *The Way to True Peace and Rest*.¹² In 1843 William Cunningham published Bruce’s sermons in the original language along with a biography entitled, *Collections as to His Life* by Robert Wodrow. John Laidlow from New College followed this work with another publication of the English text of the five sermons on the Sacrament in 1901.¹³ Finally, in 1958, Thomas F. Torrance published *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh in A.D. 1589*, which he translated into English and edited into a more modern form. Interestingly, a second edition of Torrance’s book, published by Christian Focus, came out during the writing of this thesis.¹⁴

On all accounts, it seems that Bruce’s sermons on the Lord’s Supper have received the *nil obstat* of the Reformed tradition. Elton M. Eenigenburg in the *Reformed Review* lauded *The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper* as “John Calvin in modified form and as the best guide on the matter of the Eucharist short of Calvin himself,” adding, “Bruce can be understood more easily here than Calvin.”¹⁵ W. A. Baker Jr. in *Encounter* states that “the chief value of the collection of sermons is the able explanation

¹¹ Ibid., 8.
¹² Ibid. The title in its entirety is *The Way to True Peace and Rest, delivered at Edinburgh in Sixteen Sermons on the Lords’ Supper, Hezekiah’s Sickness, and other select Scriptures, by that reverend and faithful Preacher of God’s Word, Mr. Robert Bruce, for the present Ministry of the Word in Scotland.*
of the Reformed view of the sacraments.”\textsuperscript{16} Thomas Torrance praises Bruce’s Calvinistic theology as “genuinely that of John Calvin himself…and of the Scots Confession.”\textsuperscript{17}

Also, Sinclair Ferguson, in his work \textit{The Holy Spirit}, cites Bruce favorably in reference to his views of the Lord’s Supper.\textsuperscript{18}

Even so, Bruce’s sermons on the Eucharist\textsuperscript{19} contain some teaching that some have found questionable. Specifically, many have called into question his statements about the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament. In his first sermon, called “The Sacraments in General,” he writes,

\begin{quote}
Why then is the Sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word…. The Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word, that we may possess Christ in our hearts and minds more fully and largely than we did before, by the simple Word.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

These sentences were not mere impromptu remarks made by Bruce in his first sermon, for they also appear in similar form in his second sermon called “The Lord’s Supper in Particular”:

\begin{quote}
You get a better grip of the same thing in the Sacrament than you got by the hearing of the Word. That same thing which you possess by the hearing of the Word, you now possess more fully. God has more room in your soul, through your receiving of the Sacrament, than He could otherwise have by your hearing of the Word only. What then, you ask, is the new thing we get? We get Christ better than we did before. We get the thing which we had more fully, that is, with a surer apprehension than we had before. We get a better grip of Christ now, for by the Sacrament my faith is nourished, the bounds of my soul are enlarged, and so where I had but a little of Christ before, as it were, between my finger and my thumb, now I get Him in my whole hand, and indeed the more my faith grows, the
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{17} Torrance, “Introduction,” 13.
\textsuperscript{18} Sinclair B. Ferguson, \textit{The Holy Spirit} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 204.
\textsuperscript{19} This thesis uses the terms “Lord’s Supper” and “Eucharist” interchangeably.
\end{flushright}
better grip I get of Christ Jesus. Thus the Sacrament is very necessary, if only for the reason that we get Christ better, and get a firmer grasp of Him by the Sacrament, than we could have before.21

The Reformed tradition has always stressed the primacy of God’s Word in relation to the sacraments. Ligon Duncan warns those in Reformed circles to suspect those theologians who begin to “vest too much in the sacrament” or when people begin “creating a symmetry between word and sacrament in the worship of the church, or worse, exalting the sacraments as the apex of the worship experience.”22 John Calvin himself warns that “any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God’s Word.”23 The Word is primary because “the right administration of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the Word. For whatever benefit may come to us from the Supper requires the Word.”24 Calvin further warns that “we must beware lest we be led into a similar error through what was written a little too extravagantly by the ancients to enhance the dignity of the sacraments.”25

Has Robert Bruce gone too far with his “receiving Christ better in the sacraments” language? Is he outside the bounds of the Reformed tradition when it comes to the doctrine of the Word and Sacraments, especially with respect to how each relates to the other?

21 Bruce, The Mystery, 84-85.
24 Calvin, Institutes, IV.xvii.39.
25 Calvin, Institutes, IV.xiv.17.
**Thesis Stated**

This thesis examines the eucharistic theology of Robert Bruce towards two ends. First, it demonstrates that his theology of “receiving Christ better” in the Sacrament is within the bounds of the Reformed tradition. It does this by comparing and associating Bruce’s theology of the Lord’s Supper with the theology of John Calvin. Second, it demonstrates the relevance of Bruce’s eucharistic theology to the modern Reformed church.

**Thesis Overview**

Chapter 1 explains the terms used in this thesis relating to the differing views of the Lord’s Supper. Chapter 2 discusses why the theology of Robert Bruce is important for Reformed churches today. And chapter 3 argues that Bruce should be interpreted in light of his historical Calvinistic context.

On the basis of these foundational chapters, chapters 4-6 compare the eucharistic theology of Bruce and Calvin. Specifically, these chapters compare each man’s understanding of

1. The definition of a sacrament (chapter 4)
2. The relationship between the sign and the thing signified, as well as the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper (chapter 5)
3. The relationship between the Word and the Sacrament (chapter 6)

This sixth chapter deals specifically with the orthodoxy of Bruce’s “receiving Christ better” statements.
Following these “comparison chapters,” the appendix presents a discussion of Bruce’s theology on five practical pastoral matters relating to the Lord’s Supper, including teaching about the Lord’s Supper in the local church, considering which elements ought to be used during the Supper, determining the frequency of the Lord’s Supper, considering the nature of self-examination, and establishing the requirements for communing membership.
CHAPTER 1

FOUR VIEWS OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

Since this thesis will be discussing some of the most prominent theological views of the Lord’s Supper, it will be helpful to begin by defining them for clarity and consistency. While there are a variety of nuances and spectrums within each of these four views, the following definitions will center on the nature of the union between the sign (the elements of bread and wine) and the thing signified (the body and blood of Christ).²⁶

The Roman Catholic View

The view held by the Roman Catholic Church will be identified in this paper as the “Catholic view,” or the doctrine of “transubstantiation.” Robert Bruce will further refer to it as the “Papists’” view.²⁷ This view of the Eucharist was defined by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and was confirmed by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), particularly in its thirteenth and twenty-second sessions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church which was prepared following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council states the doctrine succinctly:

By the consecration the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity.”²⁸

²⁷ Bruce, The Mystery, 111.
Reymond further explains this doctrine in light of its Aristotelian language when he writes: “The elements retain the *accidents* (that which is incidental to the thing) of bread and wine, while the *substance* (that which is essential to a thing) of the elements becomes the very body and blood of Christ.”29 It was this view of the Eucharist to which the Reformers and Robert Bruce were most adamantly opposed.

**The Lutheran View**

A second view of the Lord’s Supper is the “Lutheran view,” or “consubstantiation.” This view is similar to the Catholic view in that those who partake of the Sacrament physically eat Christ’s body which is “corporally, elementally and locally present.”30 The Larger Catechism in the *Book of Concord* states that the Lord’s Supper consists of “the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, in and under the bread and wine.”31 The Augsburg Confession of 1530 also teaches that “The true body and blood of Christ are truly present under the form of bread and wine, and are there communicated to those that eat in the Lord’s Supper and received.”32

**Symbolic Memorial View**

A third view of the Lord’s Supper is the “symbolic memorial view,” also known as “memorialism” or “Zwinglianism.” While there is some debate whether Zwingli

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actually held to the position identified by his name, the term “Zwinglianism” can be understood in two different senses. First, it is the teaching that “the elements [of the Lord’s Supper] are symbolic representations of the death of Christ. Christ is said to have intended the elements to invoke in the communicant’s mind the recollection of his death on his behalf.” Thus, Zwingli describes the Sacrament as “a commemoration of the one sacrifice of the cross.” Second, as Ligon Duncan points out, “What is often called Zwinglianism…is simply the generic evangelical tendency…apparent in various ecclesial traditions, and even in some Reformed communions, to downplay the significance and efficacy of the sacraments.” When referring to the memorial view of the Supper, this thesis will be using the term in the former sense.

The Reformed View

A fourth view of the Lord’s Supper is the “Reformed view,” or “Calvin’s view.” Granted, there is a spectrum of classifications and nuances which are identified within this view, including “real spiritual presence view,” “spiritual presence view,” “true communion with Christ view,” and “true presence view.” Nevertheless, since the goal of this paper is to determine whether Bruce’s statements about the Lord’s Supper are

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33 For example, Ligon Duncan in The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century, 432 fn5, argues against Zwingli holding to a memorialistic view of the sacraments, while B. A. Gerrish in “The Lord’s Supper in the Reformed Confessions,” Theology Today 23 (July 1966): 226-227, interprets Zwingli as not moving beyond the memorialistic view even though Zwingli occasionally employs a “liberal use of…high sacramental terminology” in other writings for pedagogical reasons.

34 Reymond, A New Systematic Theology, 960.


within the bounds of the *Reformed* tradition, particularly as defined by the writings of John Calvin, it will simply refer to this view of the Supper as the “Reformed view” or “Calvin’s view.” The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), though written well-after Calvin’s time (d.1564), states the Reformed view succinctly:

> Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.\(^{38}\)

And while John Calvin has much more to say in regard to the Lords’ Supper, he certainly does not say less. That is, Calvin’s theology of the Lord’s Supper is much more expansive, nuanced, and even at times more speculative than that expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Nevertheless, his teaching stands in full accord with it.\(^{39}\)

> Of the four above-mentioned views, this paper will interact most frequently with the Catholic view, the Zwinglian view, and the Reformed view, since those views are the most relevant for the Reformed church today.

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\(^{38}\) *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 29.7.

\(^{39}\) *Duncan, Westminster Confession into 21st Century*, 475 fn80.
CHAPTER 2
THE MODERN REFORMED CHURCH
AND THE MYSTERY OF THE LORD’S SUPPER

Having understood the four predominant views of the Lord’s Supper, it is appropriate to discuss why Robert Bruce’s theology—as defined more than four-hundred years ago—is so relevant for the modern Reformed church today.

The Doctrine of Lord’s Supper is Crucial to the Reformed Faith

First, Bruce’s theology of the Lord’s Supper is important because the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper itself is such a crucial tenet of the Reformed faith, for as John W. Nevin claims, “What a man thinks of the Holy Eucharist is a plain index to what he will think of Christ, the church, and theology itself.” Unfortunately, many evangelicals would not be convinced of the significance of Bruce’s work The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper, because they are not convinced of the significance of the Lord’s Supper itself. Professor R. Scott Clark of Westminster Theological Seminary notes this trend when he writes,

A survey of virtually any evangelical bookstore finds dozens of books on spirituality, self-denial, church growth, and recovery from various addictions. Some of these contain useful advice…but few of them contain the Gospel, and

almost none of them make any reference to the use of the Lord’s Supper as a means to Christian growth.\textsuperscript{41}

Robert Letham concurs, stating,

Nothing presents a starker contrast between our own day and the Reformation than the current neglect of the Lord’s Supper…. Communion hardly features as a matter of significance. It is seen as an optional extra. Often it is treated casually, as a pleasant and cozy ceremony.\textsuperscript{42}

Peter Leithart further notes that even though there is an interest in academia regarding the Lord’s Supper, there has been little “trickle-down” of this same interest to those in the pulpit and pews. He writes, “Over the past century, sacramental and liturgical theology have been growth industries in many Christian traditions, but this explosion of interest and fresh scholarship has had little impact on the Reformed and evangelical churches in America.”\textsuperscript{43} Even John Piper, an extremely prominent and influential Reformed pastor and author, seemingly attributes little import to the Sacrament. In twenty-plus books he has written dealing primarily with the topic of Christian growth, he devotes less than one page in a single book to the Lord’s Supper as a way of growing in one’s desire for God.\textsuperscript{44}

Thus it is evident that the modern Reformed church has in large part neglected the precious gift of the Eucharist. It is in light of this neglect that Bruce’s \textit{The Mystery} can prove a particularly valuable resource in helping the church better understand and appreciate the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

\textsuperscript{44} The book where John Piper mentions the Lord’s Supper is \textit{When I Don’t Desire God} (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 79. Interestingly, one of Piper’s newest releases with the eucharistic sounding title \textit{Taste and See} (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005), which includes a chapter entitled, “Please, Feed Me More,” makes no reference to the Lord’s Supper.
Bruce’s Eucharistic Theology Addresses the Catholic and Zwinglian Views

Second, Bruce’s theology of the Eucharist is relevant to modern Reformed Christians because the issues debated today concerning the Lord’s Supper are similar to those of late sixteenth-century Scotland.

Roman Catholicism

Just twenty-nine years before Robert Bruce preached his sermons on Lord’s Supper, John Knox had written the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560). From the language in chapter 21, one can observe that Knox was contending with both the Zwinglian and Roman Catholic views of the Sacrament:

_Not that we imagine any transubstantiation of bread into Christ’s body, and of wine into his natural blood, as the Romanists have perniciously taught and wrongly believed_ [contra Roman Catholicism]; but this union and conjunction which we have with the body and blood of Christ Jesus in the right use of the sacraments is wrought by means of the Holy Ghost, who by true faith carries us above all things that are visible, carnal, and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus, once broken and shed for us but now in heaven, and appearing for us in the presence of his Father…. Therefore, if anyone slanders us by saying that we affirm or believe the sacraments to be _symbols and nothing more_, they are libelous and speak against the plain facts [contra Zwingli].

Bruce also addresses both the Catholic and the Zwinglian views of the Lord’s Supper in his _Mystery of the Lord’s Supper_ sermons. However, he particularly presses his point against the doctrine of transubstantiation in light of the persistence of Catholic practices.

For this latter reason, _The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper_ continues to be a relevant teaching, because an increasing number of Protestants have converted to Catholicism,

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with Thomas Howard being among the most notable. Furthermore, there have even been a number of prominent Reformed pastors who have recently converted to Catholicism, including Scott Hahn, a former Presbyterian minister, Dr. Kenneth Howell, a former adjunct professor at Reformed Theological Seminary-Jackson, and Marcus Grodi, a former Presbyterian Church in America pastor. Remarkably, with each of these Reformed scholars, it was the Catholic doctrine and experience of the Eucharist that was central to their conversion. For example, Scott Hahn recalls an overwhelming experience during Mass:

Then the Liturgy of the Eucharist began. I watched and listened as the priest pronounced the words of consecration and elevated the host. And I confess, the last drop of doubt drained away at that moment. I looked and said, "My Lord and my God." As the people began going forward to receive communion, I literally began to drool, "Lord, I want you. I want communion more fully with you. You've come into my heart. You're my personal Savior and Lord, but now I think You want to come onto my tongue and into my stomach, and into my body as well as my soul until this communion is complete…. What do you want me to do?" And the Lord just turned the tables and said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "That's easy. I want to come home. I want to receive our Lord in the Holy Eucharist." And I just had this sense that the Lord was saying to me, "I'm not stopping you."

Expressing similar sentiment, Kenneth Howell writes about a time in his life when he felt something was missing in his faith, so he began attending Catholic Masses for a year:

I simply didn’t know what to do or where I was going in my life. That day the Mass was the same as I had come to know it over the past year. What had seemed foreign and strange was now precious and inviting. So inviting was it that I felt as if a gigantic magnet was drawing me into something greater than myself. When we came to the Communion Rite, the priest held up the host for all to see and said these words, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

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48 Available from [http://www.chnetwork.org/converts.htm](http://www.chnetwork.org/converts.htm) [accessed 17 January 2006], This web site belongs to “The Coming Home Network,” a ministry for Protestants who have converted to Catholicism. This particular address links to over forty “conversion stories,” including the stories of Howell, Hahn, and Grodi.
49 Available from [http://www.chnetwork.org/scotthconv.htm](http://www.chnetwork.org/scotthconv.htm) [accessed 17 January 2006].
Happy are those who are called to his supper!” How many times I had seen this host before! And how many times I had believed those words with my mind! But today was different. As I looked at the host in the hands of the priest, the words welled up from my soul reaching to my lips. With a small whisper I said to myself, “I really believe that. This is truly the Son of God, the Lamb of sacrifice who takes away my sins.” With a new and deeper meaning I said with the congregation, “Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” As I left St. Peter’s in Jackson, Mississippi, that day, I knew deep in my heart that someday I had to become Catholic.

One cannot help but note the great desire of these men to really receive Christ. It is not hard to understand why the doctrine of transubstantiation, which promises partakers that they really are receiving Christ, comes with such fantastical appeal. Nor is it difficult to see why Protestants who were raised with a mere symbolism view of the Sacrament are attracted to the Catholic teaching of transubstantiation. People who want to receive Christ—and not just remember him—believe they are doing just that when they adopt this erroneous Catholic view of the Eucharist. It is in light of its present-day appeal that Robert Bruce’s teaching against the Roman Catholic view of the Lord’s Supper becomes extremely relevant to twenty-first century, Reformed Christians.

**Symbolic Memorialism**

Of even greater influence on modern Reformed evangelicals than the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, however, is the doctrine of symbolic memorialism. It is unarguably the more pervasive of the two. Calvin scholar B. A. Gerrish writes that “Calvin’s eucharistic piety has repeatedly been lost, or at least curtailed, in the churches that officially claim him as their Reformer but in fact have moved closer in their

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sacramental theology to the Zwinglian view, which Calvin rejected as profane.”

Keith Mathison similarly observes, “The symbolic doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is the dominant position within the modern evangelical church.” And Robert Letham concurs, stating that “[Memorialism] has gained in popularity over the years and is now the most widespread view in evangelical and fundamentalist circles. Many conservative Presbyterians have tended, almost by default, to adopt this position.”

It is important to note, however, that The Mystery sermons focus primarily on the errors of the Roman Catholic view. James Sanderson, who in 1960 reviewed Torrance’s translation in the Westminster Theological Journal, rightly observes, “In accordance with the tenor of his time, [Bruce] carries on a constant polemic against the Papists. While some differences with other groups are hinted at (and indeed one may read between the lines for an occasional tilt with Luther of Zwingli), it is transubstantiation which is the enemy of the faithful.”

This focus, then, begs the question, If Bruce’s sermons were targeted primarily against the errors of the Eucharist in Catholicism, how are they relevant to the modern Reformed church, which predominantly views the Eucharist from a symbolic memorialist perspective? The answer is that wherever a Calvinistic doctrine of the Lord’s Supper is taught, there is always an implicit refutation of symbolic memorialism. For example, in refuting the doctrine of transubstantiation, Bruce argues that “The thing signified is not

52 Mathison, Given for You, 262.
taken in a corporal way, but in a secret and spiritual way."\(^{55}\) Obviously, the denial of taking the elements “in a corporal way” is a refutation of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Yet the positive affirmation that the elements are taken “in a secret and spiritual way” is also an indirect rebuttal of the symbolic memorialist view of the Sacrament, which would deny any “secret,” “mysterious,” or “spiritual” participation or presence of Christ in the Sacrament.\(^{56}\) Eenigenburg rightly concludes, “At a time when hosts of Reformed church ministers in many denominations are Zwinglians, sacramentally, Bruce may have the effect of calling some…back to the much more profound understanding of the Sacrament.”\(^{57}\)

The above paragraphs have demonstrated that just as the Catholic and memorialistic views of the Lord’s Supper were prevalent influences in late sixteenth-century Scotland, so they continue to be of great influence in twenty-first century America. Thus Bruce’s *Mystery* remains extremely applicable to the modern church.

**Bruce Addresses the Relationship between the Word and Sacrament**

A third reason that Robert Bruce’s sermons on the Sacrament continue to be relevant for the modern Reformed church is that they thrust the doctrine of the Word and Sacrament to the forefront. That is, when Bruce provocatively declares that “the Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word,”\(^{58}\) he immediately brings into question the proper relationship between the Word.

\(^{55}\) Bruce, *The Mystery*, 62.


\(^{58}\) Bruce, *The Mystery*, 64.
and the Sacrament. In other words, he challenges modern evangelicals to ask, How do the Word and the Sacrament properly relate to one another? Is the Word somehow inferior to the Sacrament? Can one speak of the primacy of the Word and yet maintain the centrality of the Sacrament? What does a proper Word-Sacrament relationship actually look like in worship?

These questions are not just hypothetical. Rather, they provide much fodder for the current discussion and debate over the Lord’s Supper. For example, on the one hand, Dennis R. Lindsey argues that the current relationship between the Word and the Sacrament in Protestantism is the result of a reaction “to what it saw as the excesses of the Mass with a new emphasis upon the spoken word.”\(^59\) And further, that “the centrality of the Lords’ Supper in the life and worship of the early church can hardly be overemphasized.”\(^60\) While on the other hand, Ligon Duncan states that “more and more modern would be Calvinian sacramentarians speak of ‘giving the sacraments a central place in worship.’”\(^61\) He continues, “Exalting the sacraments as the apex of our worship experience…is thoroughly unCalvinian. The sacraments confirm the center, which is the Word, not vice versa.”\(^62\)

Bruce’s insights on the Sacrament undoubtedly provide further thought, if not answers, to the issues these men are raising. The nature of this relationship will be considered at length in chapters five and six of this thesis.


\(^{60}\) Ibid; emphasis added.

\(^{61}\) J. Ligon Duncan, Duncan, “True Communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper,” 437fn; emphasis added.

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
The Mystery is an Inviting Introduction for Students and Pastors

Fourth, The Mystery continues to be a relevant work for twenty-first-century Reformed churches because of its engaging and inviting way of explaining the Reformed doctrine of the Eucharist.63 Granted, not many English-speaking Americans would consider the original old Scots speech very inviting! But Thomas Torrance’s 1959 translation allows the modern reader to enjoy and profit from Bruce’s appealing words. And while the writing is more intellectually challenging than many laypersons would be attracted to, it seems particularly appropriate for pastors and students seeking to study the topic of the Lord’s Supper.

To begin with, Bruce is both clear and concise in his delivery. The fact that The Mystery consists of sermons—and only five of them at that—is quite inviting to modern readers who want to be introduced to the historical and theological issues of the Lord’s Supper without having to plunge into Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, commentaries, tracts, or treatises. Clarity is one of Bruce’s chief goals, as he shares in his second sermon: “I shall try, as God gives me grace, to put before you certain things to make its understanding easier.”64 James W. Sanderson, reviewing Bruce’s sermons on the Sacrament, writes in the Westminster Theological Journal, “The messages are well-structured—the outlines are repeated several times; the points listed in anticipation, then developed in order, and then summarized. This repetition, however, does not lead to tedium; it rather makes for clarity and better retentiveness.”65

63 Assuming that chapters three through six of this thesis are correct in identifying Robert Bruce’s eucharistic theology as “Reformed” or “Calvinistic.”
64 Bruce, The Mystery, 69.
In addition, the modern reader is easily engaged by the illustrative nature of Bruce’s sermons. They are pregnant with analogies, word pictures, biblical imagery, similes, and metaphors. For example, Bruce is very creative in his effort to describe the act of faith in the Lord’s Supper. He compares it to a cord, the mouth of the soul, a wedding garment, the eye of the soul, the hand of the soul, and a gift. He also uses biblical imagery to communicate the role of faith in the Eucharist, comparing it to the hemorrhaging woman’s touch of faith by which she receives Christ and is healed. And he vividly portrays how a person simultaneously experiences the outward receiving of the elements while inwardly receiving Christ by faith: “As soon as your hands take the one, your heart takes the other. As soon as your mouth eats the one, the mouth of your souls, which is faith, eats the other, that is, applies Christ to your souls.” Additionally, in describing the presence of Christ in the Supper, Bruce compares Christ to the sun: “Is not the body of the Sun in the heavens? It is impossible for you to touch the body of the Sun, and yet the body of the Sun and you are conjoined by the beams and by the light that shine on you. Why then may not the Body of Christ, although it is in the heavens, be conjoined with me here upon earth?” These illustrations make Bruce’s teaching on the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper tangible, gripping, and compelling.

Furthermore, The Mystery is vivid in its description of the communion Christians have with Christ. One may suspect that contemporaries of Bruce were exaggerating when

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66 Bruce, The Mystery, 93.
67 Ibid., 48.
68 Ibid., 87.
69 Ibid., 82.
70 Ibid., 104.
71 Ibid., 184
72 Ibid., 104.
73 Ibid., 81.
74 Ibid., 93-94. Calvin uses a similar illustration to describe Christ’s presence in the Supper. See Institutes, IV.xvii.12.
they compared his preaching to “that trumpet-sound by which the walls of Jericho were overthrown” or when they declared that “no man, since the Apostles, spoke with such power.” But Bruce’s vibrancy for Christ and for communing with him resounds from the pages of this book. For example, to the Catholics of his day who claimed that there was something better to be offered in the Sacrament, he replies,

Try to imagine to yourself what new thing you would have. No matter how much the heart of man conceives, imagines and wishes, he will never dare to think of such a thing as the Son of God. He could never presume to pierce the clouds, to ascend so high, to ask for the Son of God in His flesh to be the food of his soul. If you have the Son of God, you have Him who is the heir of all things, who is King of heaven and earth, and in Him you have all things. What more, then, can you want? What better thing can you wish for? He is equal with the Father, one in substance with the Father, true God and true Man. What more can you wish?

In similar fashion, Bruce seeks to communicate the richness and glory of Christ for the believer in each of his sermons. It is evident, then, that Bruce’s clarity, illustrative writing, and Christ-centered language are inviting for modern readers seeking to be introduced to the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the writings of Bruce have much to offer twenty-first century Reformed Christians. In particular, *The Mystery* remains an important work because of the importance of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, the engaging nature of Bruce’s language, the continuing influence of Catholicism and Zwinglianism on Reformed churches, and the ongoing debate regarding the Word-Sacrament relationship, which significantly affects how the Protestant church presently practices Communion.

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77 Bruce, *The Mystery*, 84.
CHAPTER 3

THE CALVINISTIC HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ROBERT BRUCE

Having established how relevant Robert Bruce’s theology is for the modern Reformed church, it is appropriate now to begin a careful examination of his eucharistic theology. Part of this process consists in locating him in his historical context. This chapter will compare Bruce’s overall theology of the Lord’s Supper with that of John Calvin, and show that Bruce should be understood in light of the strong Calvinistic theological tradition from which he came.

John Knox

Bruce’s Calvinistic historical context is seen first in his association with John Knox—the great Calvinistic Reformer of Scotland. It is well known that Knox attained “a close intimacy with John Calvin” when he was forced to flee Scotland and ended up at Calvin’s Geneva Academy in Switzerland. Knox referred to Calvin’s Academy as “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was since the days of the Apostles.” Because of Calvin’s great influence on him, Knox’s subsequent influence on the Reformation in Scotland was most certainly Calvinistic. John Macleod notes, “There was a possibility that the Scottish Reformation might take on a Lutheran or an Anglican complexion. The

78 Granted, John Knox was aided by members of the Calvinistic party like Whittington, Gilby, Fox, and Cole. See R. Stuart Louden and David H. Tripp, “The Lord’s Supper according to the Scottish Presbyterian Orders, Together with the Savoy Liturgy,” in Coena Domini, 1983, 463.
79 Howie, Scots Worthies, 143.
work and influence of Knox decided that this should not be so.” Of particular importance was his help in formulating the Scots Confession (1560), which was extremely influential throughout Scotland until the adoption of the Westminster Standards during the Commonwealth.

Bruce ministered at the Kirk of St. Giles in Edinburgh, Scotland, in the wake of Knox. John Macleod argues that Bruce is an heir and torchbearer of the Reformed tradition that Knox helped establish. Hence, the ministry of Bruce should be seen as part of Knox’s Calvinistic Reformed legacy.

**Andrew Melville**

Second, Bruce’s Calvinistic historical context is a direct influence of Scottish Reformer Andrew Melville. Melville studied at France and then taught for a time at the Academy in Geneva. He was a personal friend of Theodore Beza—Calvin’s closest disciple. Upon his return to Scotland, Melville provided invaluable leadership to the country’s two oldest universities. Macleod writes that Melville, while in his early thirties, “was entrusted with the work of adjusting the curriculum to current needs, leveling up the standards of learning, and to bring up the Colleges of Glasgow and St. Andrews abreast of the scholarship of the Continental schools.” Furthermore, Melville was influential in

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84 Ibid., 48.  
85 Ibid., 42.  
86 Ibid.  
87 Ibid.
fighting for the maintenance of Presbyterianism as the form of government for the Reformed church.  

Upon receiving a call to the ministry, Bruce enrolled at St. Andrews and sat under the pastoral and pedagogical tutelage of Andrew Melville. While attending St. Andrews, Bruce also developed a close friendship with James Melville, the nephew of Andrew, who was a “trusty henchmen” and was considered “no unworthy second to his uncle.” Bruce began his public ministry preaching every Sabbath with Andrew Melville at the New College in 1586. And it was Andrew Melville who with great confidence brought Bruce before the General Assembly in 1587 to be called to St. Giles, Edinburgh. Clearly, Bruce was greatly influenced by Melville’s Calvinistic theological tradition.

**Confessions, Catechisms, and Books of Order**

Third, Bruce’s Calvinistic historical context is better understood in light of the confessions and catechisms of Scotland during his day. Before the Church of Scotland adopted the Westminster Standards, the Kirk officially authorized and used the Scots Confession (1560), Calvin’s Geneva Catechism (1545), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and Craig’s Catechism (1581). In addition, the Book of Discipline and the Book of Common Order were among the Scottish Presbyterian orders of Bruce’s day. Each of

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88 Ibid., 43.  
92 Ibid.  
these subordinate standards, to which Bruce was subject, is affirmatively Calvinistic in its presentation of the Lord’s Supper, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate.

**The Scots Confession**

Historian Philip Schaff describes the Scots Confession as “Decidedly Calvinistic…yet free from the scholastic technicalities and angular statements of the Calvinism of later generations.”

Keith Matthison further notes that “the Scots Confession…clearly presents the Eucharistic doctrine of Calvin.”

John Macleod concurs, stating that “there is a particular number of close parallels between [the Scots Confession’s] way of putting things and the words of Calvin’s Institutes in the first edition.”

**The Geneva Catechism**

Regarding the Geneva Catechism, Calvin scholar B. A. Gerrish writes, “Though the Catechism does not appear among the ten confessions in the Corpus Reformatorum, it is…Calvin’s chief contribution in three major editions of Reformed symbols.”

The Geneva Catechism, obviously bearing the marks of Calvinism since it was written by John Calvin himself, was used in Scotland for the catechizing of children.

**The Heidelberg Catechism**

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96 Matthison, *Given for You*, 78.
97 Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 22.
There is some dispute as to whether the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) represents the eucharistic theology of John Calvin or of Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575). In this regard, some scholars suggest that Bullinger teaches that grace comes to the believer “during” the Sacrament, but not necessarily “through” the Sacrament.

Philip Schaff states plainly that the Heidelberg Catechism “teach[es] the Calvinistic theology of the sacraments.” Likewise, it is noted that the Heidelberg Catechism is Calvinistic in its teaching on the Lord Supper since it was written chiefly by Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583), a friend of John Calvin, in 1563. On the other hand, there are theologians who argue that the catechism should not be characterized as Calvinistic. For example, Calvin scholar B. A. Gerrish suggests that the Heidelberg Catechism “shows a subtle variation from Calvin’s Geneva Catechism.” Gerrish further explains this difference between the two catechisms when he writes,

[The Heidelberg Catechism] asks, not how does Christ communicate himself to us (cf. Geneva Cat., Q. 309)? But how do we obtain faith (Heidelberg Cat., Q. 65)? This is not, I think, a trivial distinction, but quite a fundamental one; for the Heidelberg Catechism is apparently shy about the notion of sacramental means. Despite the contrary judgments of Schaff and Muller, it does not seem to me that the Catechism teaches a full Calvinistic doctrine of the sacraments.

Rather than being Calvinistic in nature, Gerrish argues that the Heidelberg Catechism promotes what he calls “parallel symbolism”—the view of the Supper wherein one outwardly eats the bread, while inwardly, apart from any sacramental union between Christ and the elements, he feeds on the body of Christ. Gerrish contends that this view “lacks the use of instrumental expression; the outward event does not convey or cause or

100 Gerrish, “The Lord’s Supper,” 83.
101 Ibid., 543.
104 Ibid., 234-236.
105 Ibid., 234.
give rise to the inward event, but merely indicates that it is going on.”

A confession or catechism that promotes a true Calvinistic view of the Lord’s Supper will, according to Gerrish, contain an “instrumental symbolic” view of the sacraments.

Should one consider the Heidelberg Catechism Calvinistic? Gerrish certainly makes an important distinction. There is a significant difference between the idea that the elements in the Lord’s Supper are simply indicators of what is already happening inwardly (which is really more Zwinglian than even quasi-Calvinistic) versus the idea that the elements are instruments through which Christ is given to the believer by faith. Furthermore, Gerrish is correct in asserting that there is a subtle variation between the Heidelberg Catechism and the Geneva Catechism, since the Heidelberg Catechism does not explicitly state that the elements of the sacraments are the means, or the instruments, whereby Christ is given.

Nevertheless, the Heidelberg Catechism should not be thought of as promoting a parallel symbolic view, even if it does not speak of instrumentality in explicit terms. Instead, because of the underlying unity of the Reformed Confessions, it is better to assume that parallel symbolism language—such as “one eats the bread outwardly while feeding on Christ inwardly”—is synonymous with instrumentality language.

For example, when Gerrish examines the Westminster Confession, he asserts that the Article on the Lord’s Supper invites the parallelistic interpretation of the sacramental union when it states, “Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also inwardly…feed upon Christ crucified…” (Article XXXIX, sec. vii). Indeed, the statement that Christ’s Body is present “to faith” could be understood in a purely Zwinglian sense.

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106 Ibid.
107 Ibid., 239.
108 See Heidelberg Catechism Q.75-79.
109 Gerrish, “The Lord’s Supper,” 237; emphasis original.
Gerrish proposes that the Confession’s Calvinistic hesitancy is surprising, but then comments that “even more surprising is the fact that the teaching of the two Westminster Catechisms does not fully coincide with that of the Confession.”\textsuperscript{110} In particular, he claims that the Shorter Catechism teaches “the essential part of the Sacrament” and is thus heartily “instrumentally symbolic” in its presentation.\textsuperscript{111}

Gerrish’s sense of surprise in this matter could be remedied if he were not as quick to think that the Westminster Divines were double-minded in their theology of the sacraments. Instead he would be more reasonable to assume that the language of the Confession is simply a less precise way of describing Calvinistic instrumental symbolism.

This same line of reasoning can be applied to the Heidelberg Catechism. One should interpret the seemingly parallel language of Question 75 as instrumental when it states, “…He feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life, as certainly as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, which are given me as certain tokens of the body and blood of Christ.”\textsuperscript{112}

Thus, despite Gerrish’s distinctions, Philip Schaff appropriately describes the Heidelberg Catechism as “Calvinistic.” Keith Matthison concurs, stating, “While the language of the Catechism is not as unambiguous as the language of the Gallican, Scots or Belgic Confession, the same doctrine is taught…. The Calvinistic emphases seem to be clear.”\textsuperscript{113}

\begin{footnotes}
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\item[110] Ibid., 238.
\item[111] Ibid.
\item[112] Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 75.
\item[113] Matthison, \textit{Given for You}, 85-86.
\end{footnotes}
Therefore, the Heidelberg Catechism is part of the Calvinistic historical context of Bruce. But Bruce, unlike the apparent ambiguity of this catechism with respect to the sacraments, explicitly teaches Calvin’s doctrine of the instrumentality of the sacraments—even by Gerrish’s standards—as the following chapters will demonstrate.

**Craig’s Catechism**

The fourth of the confessions and catechisms which the Kirk adopted in Bruce’s day is Craig’s Catechism. It was written by John Craig, a colleague of Robert Bruce, and was adopted by the Assembly in 1592, when Bruce was the moderator.¹¹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance states that this catechism, along with the Geneva and Heidelberg catechisms, provides “the theology that lies behind Bruce’s sermons.”¹¹⁵ John Macleod describes Craig as “among those who carried on the best traditions of the Reformed theology.”¹¹⁶

**Book of Common Order and the Book of Discipline**

Finally, Bruce’s Calvinistic historical context is understood better in light of the Book of Common Order and the Book of Discipline. The Book of Common Order, also known as the Order of Geneva, was a guide for worship in the Church of Scotland. Its close affinities with Calvinism are seen by its 1556 title: *The Forme of Prayers and Ministrations of the Sacraments &c, used in the Englishe Congregation at Geneva; and approved by the famous and godly learned man, John Calvin.*¹¹⁷ The influence of this Calvinistic document is observed by the fact that in 1564, the General Assembly in

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¹¹⁵ Ibid.
Scotland required the Book of Common Order “to be in the hands of every minister, and to be his companion, not only at sacramental services (as of 1562), but in the conduct of all worship.”

The Book of Discipline, which was written in 1560, laid the foundation for Scotland’s Presbyterian form of church government. In 1581 the Church of Scotland, under the leadership of Andrew Melville, adopted it with some changes as the Second Book of Discipline. One can observe the Calvinistic influence on this work in its frequent references to the Order of Geneva as the standard for worship in the church. For example, it states that ministers are “to instruct [the youth] in their first rudiments, and especially in the Catechism of John Calvin, as we have it now translated in the Book of our Common Order, called the Order of Geneva.” Thus, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg, Geneva, and Craig’s Catechisms, the Book of Common Order and the Book of Discipline all provided a Calvinistic influence for the eucharistic theology of Robert Bruce.

In summary, one can clearly see the strong Calvinistic historical context of Bruce through the legacy of John Knox, through the personal influence of Andrew Melville, and in the Calvinistic confessions and catechisms to which Bruce was subject in his day. It is in this context that he wrote and preached his sermons on the Lord’s Supper.

118 Louden and Tripp, “The Lord’s Supper,” 463.
120 Burnet, Holy Communion, 10.
121 Knox, History of the Reformation, 252.
CHAPTER 4:

DEFINITION OF A SACRAMENT

Having considered the Calvinistic context of Robert Bruce, it is important now to actually compare his work with that of Calvin. In this light, it is interesting that some do not think Robert Bruce’s teaching on the Lord’s Supper is Calvinistic, while others contend that Robert Bruce is the quintessential guide to Calvinistic thinking on the subject. For example, John Laidlaw, in the preface of his 1901 publication of Bruce’s sermons, argues that, “the possible exaggerations in Calvin’s Sacramental ideas, just hinted at in [the Scots] Confession, are avoided by Bruce.”\(^\text{122}\) While Thomas Torrance argues, in his 1958 translation of Bruce’s sermons, that Bruce’s Calvinistic theology is “genuinely that of John Calvin himself…and of the Scots Confession.”\(^\text{123}\) Indeed, this thesis agrees with the latter assessment of Bruce.

In order to prove that Bruce’s view of the Eucharist is consistent with that of Calvin, chapters four through six examine and compare Bruce’s theology of the Supper with that of Calvin. Granted, in light of the language, genre, and cultural differences between Calvin and Bruce’s writings on the Eucharist, conclusions will be of a more general nature. Moreover, since Calvin is prolific, dynamic, and nuanced in his writings, care will be taken to avoid oversimplifying Calvin. In light of these limitations, this thesis will formulate a basic comparison of the eucharistic theologies of Bruce and Calvin based on their English writings.


\(^{123}\) Torrance, “Introduction,” The Mystery of the Lord’s Supper, 13.
This chapter will begin the comparison by examining the general definitions of a sacrament as taught by Bruce and Calvin.

**General Definitions Considered**

Both Calvin, in his *Institutes*, and Bruce, in his *The Mystery*, begin their discussion of the sacraments with a general definition of a sacrament. Considering each man’s general definition of a sacrament will be helpful in identifying what he considers an essential part of the sacrament. It is shown below that Bruce and Calvin, while emphasizing differing aspects of a sacrament; agree that the sacrament is essentially a sign and seal of the gracious promises of God in his Word.

**Definitions of “Sacrament”**

*Robert Bruce*

Before giving his own definition, Bruce notes in his first sermon that the church fathers, in whom he was well-versed, understood the word “sacrament” in the following fourfold way:

[First], sometimes they took it for the whole action, that is for the whole ministry of the elements. [Second], sometimes they took it not for the whole action, but for the outward things that are used in the action of Baptism, and the Supper, i.e., for the water and its sprinkling, for the bread and wine and their breaking, distributing and eating. Thirdly, they took it not for all the outward things that are used in the action, but also for the material and earthy things, the elements, such as bread and wine in the Supper, and the water in Baptism…. Finally, they took it not only for the elements, but for the things signified by the elements.

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125 Bruce, *The Mystery*, 41
That is, according to Bruce, the ancient theologians understood the sacrament as 1) the whole action or ceremony of the sacrament, 126 2) the outward modes of administration of the sacrament, 3) the elements of the sacrament, and 4) the things signified in the sacrament. Thus he concludes, “In these ways the ancients used the word, and there can be no question that they used it rightly.” 127

This fourfold perspective of the sacraments is central to understanding Bruce’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. It explains why Bruce is so adamant not just about the biblical teaching regarding the presence of Christ in the Supper or even about using the proper elements, but also about the proper “form” or “ceremony” of the Sacrament. With respect to this form, he says, “If the essential form is destroyed, we get nothing, for when the Sacrament is robbed of its essential form, it is no longer a Sacrament.” In addition, in his first sermon he argues,

Every ceremony which Christ instituted in the Supper is as essential as the bread and wine are, and you cannot leave out one jot of them without perverting the whole institution; for whatever Christ commanded to be done, whatever He spoke or did in that whole action, is essential, and must be done. You cannot omit an iota of it without perverting the whole action. 128

Furthermore, in his second sermon, he declares,

Every rite or ceremony is a sign, and has its own spiritual significance, such as looking at the breaking of the bread, which represents to you the breaking of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is not that His Body was broken in the bone or limb, but that it was broken in pain, in anguish and distress of heart, under the weight of the indignation and wrath of God, which He sustained in bearing our sins. Thus the breakings is an essential ceremony, the pouring out of the wine is also an essential ceremony; for, as you see clearly, by the wine is signified the Blood of

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127 Bruce, The Mystery, 41.
128 Ibid., 43.
Christ, so by the pouring out of the wine is signified that His Blood was severed from His flesh.\(^\text{129}\)

Similarly, in his third sermon he contends,

> It is His institution that must be kept. If you leave undone one jot of what He commanded you to do, you pervert the institution, for there is nothing in the register of the institution but what is essential. Thus in the celebration of Christ’s institution, we must pay careful attention to whatever He said, did or commanded to be done. We must first say whatever He said, and then do whatever He did, for the administration of the Sacrament must follow upon the Word.\(^\text{130}\)

While Bruce acknowledges the elemental perspective of the Sacrament, he emphasizes the ceremonial perspective.

> In terms of providing an actual definition of a sacrament, Bruce gives a shorter and a longer one. For his shorter definition, he takes his cue from Augustine, who defines a sacrament as a “visible word,”\(^\text{131}\) Bruce states that “the Sacrament is nothing else but a visible Word.”\(^\text{132}\) The Sacrament is for seeing, just as the Word is for hearing: “The Word leads us to Christ by the ear; the Sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye.”\(^\text{133}\)

Bruce’s expands on Augustine’s definition while continuing to keep the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament the central focus of his definition. He writes,

> I take the word Sacrament as it is taken and used today in the Church of God, for a holy sign and seal that is annexed to the preached Word of God to seal up and confirm the truth contained in the same Word, but in such a way that I do not call the Seal separated from the Word, the Sacrament.”\(^\text{134}\)

One can note two observations about the above quote. First, the opening half of Bruce’s definition is that a sacrament is a “holy sign and seal.” These terms are certainly standard
fair when it comes to the teaching of the Reformed confessions and catechisms. Nonetheless, it should again be noted that to Bruce a sign is not limited to the particular elements of bread and wine. Instead he states that a sign is “whatever I perceive and take up by my outward sense, by my eye especially.”\textsuperscript{135} In other words, a sign includes both the elements and the ceremony surrounding the elements. The sacrament further functions as a seal in order to confirm and persuade partakers of the truth of in the Covenant of Grace and the mercies of Christ.\textsuperscript{136}

Second, the second half of Bruce’s definition speaks of the sacrament being annexed to the preached Word. The Word is so central in his understanding of a sacrament that he elaborates this point by explaining, “I do not call the Seal separated from the Word, the Sacrament.”\textsuperscript{137} That is, there is no Sacrament if there is no Word. This teaching, which chapter six addresses more specifically below, is crucial to understanding what Bruce means when he speaks of receiving Christ better in the Sacrament than in the Word.

\textbf{John Calvin}

John Calvin offers three definitions of a sacrament in his \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}. First, similar to that of Bruce, Calvin affirms Augustine’s brief definition of a sacrament when he writes, “Augustine…teaches that a sacrament is ‘a visible sign of a sacred thing,’ or ‘a visible form of an invisible grace.’”\textsuperscript{138} He also

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{135} Bruce, \textit{The Mystery}, 43. \\
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 106. \\
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 41. \\
\textsuperscript{138} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xiv.1.
\end{flushleft}
affirms Augustine’s definition that a sacrament is “a visible word.” Even so, Calvin is not fully satisfied with Augustine’s short definition, “since there is something obscure in his brevity.” Therefore, he provides a longer and a shorter definition of his own. For his longer definition he states,

> It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men.

Calvin then shows what he believes to be the core of this longer definition when he writes the following more concise definition:

> Here is another briefer definition: one may call it a testimony of divine grace toward us, confirmed by an outward sign, with mutual attestation of our piety toward him.

> It is clear from these definitions that there are two essential aspects of a sacrament according to Calvin:

1) A sign whereby God confirms his promises to his people
2) A pledge or witness whereby his people attest to their piety toward God

Thus B. A. Gerrish is accurate in summarizing Calvin’s theology of the Eucharist by arguing that there is a twofold structure of a sacrament consisting of “the fundamental theme of grace and gratitude.” The Lord’s Supper consists of the Father’s gracious promises sealed and of the believers’ thankful receiving of those promises in faith.

**Comparing the Definitions of Bruce and Calvin**

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139 Ibid., IV.xiv.6.  
140 Ibid., *Institutes*, IV.xiv.1.  
141 Ibid.  
Upon examining Bruce and Calvin’s general definitions of a sacrament, it is maintained that their understanding of a sacrament is essentially the same. This statement is supported by the following three observations.

First, Bruce and Calvin both agree with Augustine, that a sacrament is a “visible word.” While this similarity may seem insignificant, it is important because it shows that they both believe that the sacrament is a ministration of the Word—thus distancing themselves from mysticism or sacramentalism.

Second, Bruce and Calvin both argue that a sacrament is a sign and seal of God’s gracious promises given to sinners in his Word.

Third, while Bruce and Calvin may have different emphases in their basic definitions of a sacrament, they still essentially agree. This truth is seen by noting the following two differences in emphases in their definitions.

The first difference is that Calvin emphasizes that the sacrament is a public attestation—a pledge of ones piety and thankfulness to God. Bruce does not include this in his definitions. However, in another place, when discussing the public nature of the Sacrament, he writes, “This Sacrament is called a Thanksgiving to God the Father for his benefits…. We are all partakers of His temporal and spiritual benefits; therefore we all ought to publicly to give Him thanks for them.”\textsuperscript{143} Thus, while Bruce does not emphasize thanksgiving in his definition of a sacrament, he does believe that it is a part of it.

A second difference between Bruce and Calvin is in regard to what they each consider a “sign” in the Sacrament. Bruce emphasizes that the “sign” of the Sacrament is the entire ceremony, or the “whole action.” Again, he writes,

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 108-109; emphasis added.
Every ceremony which Christ instituted in the Supper is as essential as the bread and wine are, and you cannot leave out one jot of them without perverting the whole institution; for whatever Christ commanded to be done, whatever He spoke or did in that whole action, is essential, and must be done. You cannot omit an iota of it without perverting the whole action.\textsuperscript{144}

While Bruce understands that from a certain perspective, one can properly speak of the signs of the Sacrament as synonymous with the elements,\textsuperscript{145} he emphasizes that all aspects of the ceremony—from the bread and wine, to the minister breaking the bread and pouring the wine, to the distribution of the elements, to the actual consuming of the elements—are the signs of the Lord’s Supper. For Calvin, the Sacrament is a ceremony, but the elements of bread and wine are the signs.\textsuperscript{146} Consequently, Calvin appears to be more permissive than Bruce in regard to what is an essential part of the Eucharist. For example, he writes,

\begin{quote}
But as for the outward ceremony of the action—whether or not believers take it in their hands, or divide it among themselves, or severally eat what has been given to each; whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person; whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white—it makes no difference. These things are indifferent, and left at the church’s discretion.\textsuperscript{147}
\end{quote}

Yet while arguing that there are certain “outward ceremonies” which “make no difference,” Calvin also contends that there are indeed certain “non-negotiable” components to the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper. He explains,

\begin{quote}
First, [the Lord’s Supper] should begin with public prayers. After this a sermon should be given. Then, when bread and wine have been placed on the Table, the minister should repeat the words of institution of the Supper. Next he should recite the promises which were left to use in it; at the same time, he should excommunicate all who are debarred from it by the Lord’s prohibition. Afterward, he should pray that the Lord, with the kindness wherewith he has bestowed this sacred food upon us, also teach and form us to receive it with faith and thankfulness of heart…. But here either psalms should be sung, or something be
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{146} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.1-3, 43.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., IV.xvii.43.
read…. When the Supper is finished, there should be an exhortation to sincere faith and confession of faith…. At the last thanks should be given and praises sung to God. When these things are ended, the church should be dismissed in peace.\footnote{148}

Thus Calvin, while stating that there are certain “outward ceremonies” which “make no difference,” also contends that there is a certain “non-negotiable” liturgy to the ceremony.

On the whole, it is evident that Calvin and Bruce place a different emphasis on the nature of “signs” in the Lord’s Supper. Bruce emphasizes the sign as whole action, while Calvin emphasizes the sign as elements. Yet they both insist on certain “non-negotiable” components of the ceremony.

However, Bruce’s view of the “sign as whole action” is open to criticism. His contention that “whatever [Christ] spoke or did in that whole action, is essential, and must be done\footnote{149} seems to draw the circle of Christ’s ordinance larger than it really is.

Hughes Oliphant Old points out that “About the year 800, Alamar of Metz, one of Charlemagne’s bishops, wrote a commentary on the liturgy which gave an allegorical meaning to every gesture, every movement, every act of the liturgy.”\footnote{150} The problem with such an approach is that the church can easily become guilty of demanding “elements” of the Lord’s Supper which Christ himself does not command. There is a similar danger in Bruce calling each part of the ceremony a sign. By arguing that everything Jesus did at the institution of the Lord’s Supper is an ordinance, Bruce makes it difficult to determine exactly what is and what is not a sign. Calvin, on the other hand, seems to take a safer and wiser approach by arguing that there are certain outward ceremonies which are not essential to the ordinance, while maintaining the importance of a proper liturgy for the

\footnote{148} Ibid.
\footnote{149} Bruce, The Mystery, 41.
\footnote{150} Hughes Oliphant Old, Guides to the Reformed Tradition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 125.
ceremony and clearly identifying the signs. This different emphasis in the meaning of a “sign” in the sacrament will play an important role in the appendix when considering the necessity of using wine and or unleavened bread in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

All in all, Bruce and Calvin agree that the sacrament is a visible word, that it is a sign and a seal of God’s promises, and that it is a public testimony of thanksgiving for the church—Bruce mentions this aspect, though not in his basic definition. And while Bruce and Calvin emphasize different perspectives of what a sign is in the sacrament, they both share very similar definitions of a sacrament. Moreover, as the following chapters will show, their overall theology of the Eucharist is essentially the same—particularly in maintaining that one receives Christ better in the Sacrament than he does in the preaching of the Word.
CHAPTER 5

SACRAMENTAL UNION AND THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

Robert Bruce believed the nature of the union between Christ and the Sacrament was at the heart of all the conflict over the Lord’s Supper.\(^{151}\) In light of the significance of this union, this chapter will examine and compare Bruce’s and Calvin’s teaching on the relationship between the sign and the thing signified, and on the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. Chapter six will consider their understanding of the relationship between the Word and Sacrament.

The Relationship between the Sign and the Thing Signified

This section will compare, contrast, and summarize Bruce’s and Calvin’s views on the nature of the union between Christ and the elements of bread and wine. Specifically, it will analyze their views in the following key areas: (1) the sign, (2) the thing signified, (3) the nature of the relationship between the sign and the thing signified, and (4) how the sign and the thing signified are received.

The Sign

Robert Bruce

Bruce defines the sign simply as “Whatever I perceive and take up by my outward sense, by my eye especially.”\(^{152}\) He further explains a sign when he says,

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\(^{151}\) Bruce, *The Mystery*, 51.

\(^{152}\) Bruce, *The Mystery*, 43.
I do not call them signs for the reason that men commonly call them signs, because they only signify something, as bread signifies the Body of Christ, and the wine signifies the Blood of Christ; I do not call them something because they only represent something. I call them signs because they have the Body and the Blood of Christ conjoined with them.\(^{155}\)

In other words, the sacramental signs are not a mere representation of the thing they signify; they are actually united to the thing they signify. Bruce adds, “Indeed, so truly is the Body of Christ conjoined with the bread, and the Blood of Christ conjoined with the wine, that as soon as you receive the bread in your mouth…you receive the Body of Christ in your soul.”\(^{154}\)

Thus Bruce argues that the sacramental signs are instruments by which believers receive the thing signified. In fact, Bruce’s doctrine of the instrumentality of the sacraments is seen throughout his sermons. He clearly explains that the sacraments “are instruments to deliver and exhibit the things they signify, and not only because of their representation are they called signs.”\(^{155}\) Again he states, “the Sacrament exhibits and delivers the thing that it signifies to the soul and heart…. It is for this reason, especially, that it is called a sign.”\(^{156}\) The reason the sacraments should be thought of as instruments is because God “has appointed them as instruments whereby He will deliver His own Son to us.”\(^{157}\) This instrumentality of the signs comes from “a power given to it by Christ and His institution, by which it is appointed to signify His body, to represent His Body and to deliver His Body.”\(^{158}\)

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 44.  
\(^{154}\) Ibid.  
\(^{155}\) Ibid.  
\(^{156}\) Ibid.  
\(^{157}\) Ibid., 45.  
\(^{158}\) Ibid., 77.
There are two important aspects of Calvin’s understanding of signs. First, Calvin sees signs as physical representations of the gospel. He says that sacraments “set his promises before our eyes to be looked upon.” They “represent God’s promises as painted in a picture and set them before our sight, portrayed graphically and in the manner of images.” Second, Calvin states that the sacraments are mere representations of Christ, but they “offer and set forth Christ to us.” Thus, in contrast to the memorial view, Calvin holds that the sacraments actually deliver the thing that they promise. He argues that the sacraments are not mere symbols, but instruments by which the partaker receives Christ: “Christ’s Supper is not a theatrical display of spiritual food but gives in reality what it depicts, since in it devout souls feed on the flesh and blood of Christ.” B. A. Gerrish therefore rightly observes that “In Calvin’s view it is the nature of the sacrament to cause and communicate (appoter et communiquer) what they signify.” Similarly, Ronald Wallace maintains, “Calvin calls the elements of the Supper ‘instruments’ by which the Lord distributes His body and blood, as well as ‘representations’ of them to us.”

In light of the above paragraphs, it becomes evident that Bruce and Calvin are very similar in their understanding of signs. They both maintain that the sacraments as signs are representations and instruments of delivering the thing signified.

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160 Ibid., IV.xiv.6.
161 Ibid., IV.xiv.17.
The Thing Signified

Robert Bruce

According to Robert Bruce, the thing signified is not only the flesh and blood of Christ and his humanity. Rather, he describes the thing signified in the sacraments as “the whole Christ with His whole gifts, benefits and graces, applied and given to my soul.”

Again, he states,

I do not call the thing signified by the signs of bread and wine the benefits of Christ, the graces of Christ, or the virtue that flows out of Christ only, but I call the thing signified together with the benefits and virtues flowing from Him, the very substance of Christ Himself, from which this virtue flows. The substance with the virtues, gifts and graces that flow from the substance, is the thing signified here.

Bruce believes that Christ and his benefits are indivisibly received in the Sacrament.

Moreover, he also argues that Christ’s human and divine natures are not to be confused or separated. His formulation is very “Chalcedonian” sounding when he explains, “It is the whole Christ, God and Man, without separation of his natures, without distinction of His substance from his graces.”

Though Bruce will speak of the body and blood of Christ as the substance of the Supper, he is opposed to the idea that believers merely feed on Christ’s flesh or humanity. He explains the importance of this distinction when he says,

If no more is signified by the bread than the Flesh and Body of Christ alone, and no more is signified by the wine than the Blood of Christ alone, you cannot say that the Body of Christ is Christ; for it is but a piece of Christ; nor can you say that the Blood of Christ is the whole Christ, for it is but a part of Him. It was not a piece of your Savior that saved you, nor was it a part of your Savior, that wrought the work of your salvation, and so, even should you get a piece of Him in the Sacrament, that would do you no good. Therefore, in order that the Sacrament

165 Bruce, The Mystery, 45.
166 Ibid., 46.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid., 75.
may nourish you to life everlasting, you must get in it your whole Savior, the whole Christ, God and Man, with all his graces and benefits, without separation of His substances from His graces, or of the one nature from the other.\textsuperscript{169}

For Bruce, believers either receive all of Christ or nothing in the Eucharist.

\textbf{Calvin}

Calvin maintains that the essence of the Lord’s Supper is summarized in Christ’s words of institution, in which he offered himself to believers. He writes, “Indeed, we must carefully observe that the very powerful and almost entire force of the Sacrament lies in these words: ‘which is given for you,’ ‘which is shed for you.’”\textsuperscript{170} Accordingly, Calvin very clearly and forcefully argues that Christ’s body and blood are given in the Sacrament. He even speaks of Christ’s “body and blood in our lips.”\textsuperscript{171}

He argues for such in the following writings. First, in his very own Catechism of the Church of Geneva, the questioner asks, “Do we then eat the body and blood of our Lord?” The catechumen answers,

I understand so. For since all our confidence of salvation is placed in him, so that the obedience he offered to the Father may be accepted for us just as it were our own, it is necessary that he be possessed by us. For he communicates his benefits to us in no other way than in making himself ours.\textsuperscript{172}

Calvin thus portrays the Supper as a time when Christ gives himself to partakers to be possessed by them. Second, in his \textit{Treatise on the Lord’s Supper}, Calvin writes, “Jesus

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 46-47.
\textsuperscript{170} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.3.
\textsuperscript{171} Calvin, “Clear Explanation of Doctrine,” cited in Matthison, \textit{Given for You}, 35.
Christ gives us in the Supper the real substance of his body and his blood.”

He adds in his *Institutes*,

> Therefore, I here embrace without controversy the truth of God in which I may safely rest. He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them.

He is not shy about arguing for Christ’s body being consumed. Calvin does not merely argue that Christ’s humanity is offered in the gospel; he also contends that all of Christ and his benefits are given. He writes, “We may say that Jesus Christ is there offered to us that we may possess him, and in him all the fullness of his gifts which we can desire.”

Calvin further declares that in the Sacrament “all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us.”

Having examined what both Bruce and Calvin believe with respect to the thing signified in the Sacrament, it is clear that they hold to essentially the same teaching. There is, however, a difference in emphasis. When each speaks of the thing signified, Bruce primarily stresses that all of Christ and all of his benefits are received, whereas Calvin emphasizes the humanity of Christ received in the Sacrament. It is possible that Calvin’s motivation in emphasizing the humanity of Christ was to not be seen as parting from the Patristics’ teachings on the Eucharist, which also emphasized the humanity of Christ received in the sacrament. Nonetheless, though emphasizing different aspects, it is evident that Bruce and Calvin affirm the same essential doctrine of the Eucharist.

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173 Calvin, “Treatise on the Lord’s Supper,” 166.
174 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.32.
177 This point is mere conjecture. Dr. W, Dunkin Rankin (Minister at Covenant Presbyterian Church
Robert Bruce believes that a proper understanding of the relationship between the sign and the thing signified can only come by the enlightening work of the Spirit:

How can you understand, comprehend this secret and hidden conjunction, unless the eyes of your mind are enlightened by the Spirit, whereby you may read a true understanding of it? But if you have any insight into these spiritual matters, which comes by faith, this conjunction will appear as clearly to the eye of your faith as the physical conjunction appears to the eye of your body.\(^{178}\)

Bruce describes the nature of the union between the sign and the thing signified by denying what it is not, and by affirming what it is. In terms of denying what it is not, he shares, “It will be far easier for me, and better for you to understand, if I tell you first how they are not conjoined: I shall make it very clear to you in that way, but is it not possible to show you so clearly how they actually are conjoined.”\(^{179}\) He then argues that there are three things that the union between the sign and the thing signified are not: First, the sign and the thing signified are not \textit{locally conjoined}; that is, they are not both in the same place.\(^{180}\) Second, the sign and the thing signified are not \textit{corporally conjoined}; that is, they do not physically touch each other.\(^{181}\) Otherwise, Bruce comments, upon partaking the Sacrament, you would be “eating the flesh of Christ with your teeth, and that would be a cruel way of acting.”\(^{182}\) And third, the sign and thing signified are not \textit{visibly joined}; that is, they are not both subject to the eye.\(^{183}\) He explains,
If the sign and the thing signified were visibly and corporally conjoined, what necessity would there be for a sign? To what end would the sign in the Sacrament serve us? ...If I saw Him present with my own eyes, as I see the bread, what need would I have of the bread? Therefore you may see clearly that there is no such thing as a corporal, natural, or any such physical conjunction between the sign and the thing signified.\textsuperscript{184}

Additionally, Bruce holds that if one can “preserve this distinction between the sign and the thing signified…, [he] will not easily slip in the understanding of the Sacrament.”\textsuperscript{185}

Bruce also describes the nature of the union between the sign and the thing signified by affirming \textit{what it is}. Specifically, he asserts that the union is “a relative conjunction, a secret and mystical conjunction, which consists in the mutual relation.”\textsuperscript{186}

One can make three observations about Bruce’s understanding of the sacramental union from this assertion.

First, Bruce says that the Sacramental union consists in a relative and mutual union. By \textit{relative}, he means the sign and the thing signified are of related or like proportion. There is “a relation which arises from a certain similitude and likeness which the one has to the other.”\textsuperscript{187} For example, just as bread nourishes the body, so does Christ nourish the soul. By \textit{mutual}, he means that “the sign and the thing signified are offered both together, received together at the same time, and in the same action, the one outwardly, the other inwardly.”\textsuperscript{188} Bruce compares this relative and mutual union to the relationship between a word (which too is a symbol) and the thing signified by the word. “For example,” he explains, “Although Paris is far away from us, yet if I speak of Paris,

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 51-52.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
the word is no sooner spoken than the town will come into your mind.” Understanding this analogy between the word and the thing it signifies and the Sacrament and what it signifies is crucial in understanding Bruce’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Thus he explains,

Between the Sacrament which is seen by the eye of your body, and the thing signified by the Sacrament, which is seen only by the eye of your souls, there is the same kind of conjunction as there is between the word and the thing signified by the word. For example, as soon as you see the bread taken into the hand of the Minister, immediately the Body of Christ must come into your mind.

In other words, Bruce believes that as soon as one sees the sign, the soul will behold the thing it signifies.

Second, Bruce says that union between the thing and the thing signified is secret. By “secret,” Bruce means “spiritual.” He argues that this union is spiritual because (1) Christ’s flesh is spiritual food, ministering unto the believer’s spiritual life, (2) the instrument is spiritual, namely faith, and (3) the mode is spiritual, that is, Christ is received in a spiritual and secret way.

Third, he maintains that that the “sacramental conjunction” is a mystery. He writes, “Every Sacrament is a mystery. There is no Sacrament but contains a high and divine mystery.” Citing Ephesians 5:32, Bruce explains that the reason for this mystery is because “the conjunction between us and Christ is full of mystery.”

In brief, Bruce says that that the sacramental union is not local, corporate or visible and that it is mutual and relative, spiritual, and mysterious.

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189 Ibid., 54.
190 Ibid., 81.
191 Ibid., 48.
192 Ibid., 48.
193 Ibid., 52.
194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
John Calvin

According to Keith Matthison, “The...distinction between a sacrament and the matter of a sacrament is very important in Calvin’s thought.” Yet Calvin equally maintains that the union is “so close and intimate that the thing signified can be identified with the sign.” Thus, Calvin maintains a distinction between the sign and the thing signified, while also maintaining a union between the two. Ronald Wallace notes well that “Calvin is thus concerned to maintain a middle course between Papists who confound the reality and the sign, and profane men who separate the sign from the realities. Paul Rorem refers to Calvin’s distinction as a “Chalcedonian balancing act.” In other words, Calvin maintains that the relationship between Christ and the elements is similar to the relationship between Christ’s human and divine nature. Thus, just as Christ’s natures are united without confusion and distinct without separation, the same thing can equally be said about the relationship between the sign and the thing signified—that they are united without confusion and distinct without separation.

Wallace supports this point when he notes that, “There is no doubt that Calvin sees an analogy which at least serves to regulate his thinking on the mystery of sacramental union, in the mystery of the union between God and man in Jesus Christ.”

Calvin further argues for the importance of maintaining the mystery of the Sacrament. He writes,

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196 Matthison, *Given for You*, 12.
198 Ibid., 165.
Now, if anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.\textsuperscript{201}

Again he emphasizes the importance of mystery when he eloquently declares,

I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them. For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue express.\textsuperscript{202}

Obviously Calvin not only believes in, but also delights in the glorious mystery of the Sacrament.

There is no doubt, then, that Bruce and Calvin are in agreement over the nature of the sacramental union in the Lord’s Supper. As demonstrated above, both are opposed to mere memorialism as well as to the idea of Christ being present in the elements in any corporal sense. Both maintain a proper “Chalcedonian” distinction between the sign and the thing signified. And finally, both defend a sense of mystery in the sacramental union.

\textit{How the Sign and the Thing Signified are Received}

Robert Bruce

Another important aspect related to the nature of the sacramental union is the manner in which the Sacrament is received. Bruce points out the twofold means by which Christ is delivered to believers in the Supper. He explains,

There is one means employed on God’s part—God helps us to get Christ; and another means employed on our part. On the part of God, there is the Holy Spirit, who offers the Body and Blood of Christ to us. On our part there must also be a

\textsuperscript{201} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.32.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., IV.xvii.7.
means employed, or else when He offers, we will not be able to receive. Therefore there must be faith in our souls to receive what the Holy Spirit offers, to receive the heavenly food of the Body and Blood of Christ.”

Thus it is by the Holy Spirit and faith that one receives Christ in the Sacrament.

Faith, which must be employed by a partaking believer, is often portrayed by Bruce as an activity taking place parallel to the activity of a believer physically eating and drinking the elements. He says that “The sign and the thing signified are received by two mouths…the bread and the wine, that are the signs, are received by the mouth of the body; Christ, who is the thing signified, is received by the mouth of the soul, that is, by true faith.”

Again he says, “As soon as your hands take the one, your heart takes the other. As soon as your mouth eats the one, the mouth of your soul, which is faith, eats the other.”

Bruce further maintains that this faith, which is necessary for receiving Christ in the Sacrament, is unable to be born out of the Sacrament. Faith can only be wrought by the ministry of the Word. He explains, “Now it is through the hearing of the Word that you get faith, and by receiving the Sacrament that you get the increase of faith; and when you have faith, the receiving of the sacrament will be fruitful.” In short, faith is both necessary for the Sacrament and is increased by the Sacrament.

Bruce also distinguishes between believing in Christ and eating Christ’s flesh and drinking his blood in the Sacrament. For Bruce, faith is the means through which one receives Christ in the Sacrament. He declares,

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203 Bruce, The Mystery, 91.
204 Ibid., 83.
205 Ibid., 81.
206 Ibid., 97.
207 Ibid., 138.
When we speak about eating the Body and drinking the blood of Christ, these expressions are sacramental. Eating and drinking, as you know, are the proper actions of the body only; but they are ascribed to the soul by a translation, by a figurative manner of speaking. That which is proper to the body is ascribed to the soul, and the soul is said to eat and drink. The eating of the soul must resemble the eating of the body. The eating of the soul is nothing else than the applying of Christ to the soul, believing that He has shed His Blood for me and has purchased remission of sins for me. But why do you call this an eating? Let us see what we mean by the eating of the body. When your body eats, you apply the meat to your mouth. If then the eating of the body is nothing else than the applying of meat to the mouth, the eating of the soul must be nothing else than the applying of the nourishment to the soul. So you see what is meant by the eating and drinking of the soul: nothing else than the applying of Christ, the applying of his death and passion to my soul. This is done only by faith.  

The other means necessary for receiving Christ in the Sacrament—the means employed by God—is the work of the Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in the Supper can be thought of in two ways. First, the Spirit is working to strengthen faith. Bruce teaches, “When the outward senses are moved, without doubt the Holy Spirit concurs, moving the heart all the more.” Therefore he urges, “Whether it be…the Sacraments or of the simple Word, ask that God may be present by His Holy Spirit.”

The second work of the Spirit is to deliver Christ to the believer. Bruce asks, “Do you not know that the Spirit who joins us and Christ is infinite, so that it is as easy for the Spirit to join Christ and us, no matter how distant we may be, as it is for our soul to link our head and the feet of our body, though they are separated from one another?” Bruce illustrates this point by explaining that “The Spirit serves as a ladder to conjoin us with Christ, like the ladder of Jacob, which reached from the ground to the heavens. So the Spirit of God conjoins the Body of Christ with my soul.”

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208 Ibid., 90; emphasis added.  
209 Ibid., 65.  
210 Ibid., 40.  
211 Ibid., 94.  
212 Ibid., 96.
John Calvin

Calvin also holds that the means of receiving the Sacrament are faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Regarding faith, Calvin argues that the sacraments do not work by any virtue in them. Rather, he maintains that they must be received by faith. He declares,

The sacraments have effectiveness among us in proportion as we are helped by their ministry sometimes to foster, confirm, and increase the true knowledge of Christ in ourselves; at other times, to possess him more fully and enjoy his riches. But that happens when we receive in true faith what is offered there.\textsuperscript{213}

That is, in order for the Sacrament to be effective, it must be received by faith.

In addition, Calvin distinguishes faith from the spiritual act of eating and drinking Christ. He states,

[There is] no other eating than that of faith, as no other can be imagined. But here is the difference between my words and theirs: for them to eat is only to believe; I say that we eat Christ's flesh in believing because it is made ours by faith. Or if you want it said more clearly, for them eating is faith; for me it seems rather to follow from faith.\textsuperscript{214}

In other words, Calvin argues that the spiritual act of eating Christ is not synonymous with believing in Christ. Instead, eating is an activity of the soul which comes by faith.

Interestingly, B. A. Gerrish critiques Calvin on this point:

Calvin appears to have caught himself in a logical bind. He has set aside as inadequate or incomplete…the simpler explanation, that to eat Christ’s flesh is to believe in Christ. He wants a true partaking of Christ’s flesh and is not content to say merely that believing is to the soul as what eating is to the body.\textsuperscript{215}

Here Gerrish questions Calvin’s thinking, suggesting that his distinction between believing and partaking in Christ lacks good logic. Nevertheless, Calvin is adamant that this distinction is very logical:

\textsuperscript{213} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xiv.16; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., IV.xvii.5.
\textsuperscript{215} Gerrish, \textit{Grace and Gratitude}, 167.
This is a small difference indeed in words, but no slight one in the matter itself. For even though the apostle teaches that “Christ dwells in our hearts through faith,” no one will interpret this indwelling to be faith, but all feel that he is there expressing a remarkable effect of faith, for through this believers gain Christ abiding in them.\(^{216}\)

Thus Calvin, in keeping with the teaching of the apostle Paul, maintains that the distinction between believing and partaking in Christ is an important one.

Regarding the Holy Spirit, Calvin teaches that “The sacraments properly fulfill their office only 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.”\(^{217}\) Simply said, the Holy Spirit works to nourish faith in the believer. Furthermore, he unites the believer to Christ, who is in heaven. Calvin writes, “The bond on this connection is therefore the Spirit of Christ, with whom we are joined in unity, and is like a channel through which all that Christ himself is and has is conveyed to us.”\(^{218}\) In a similar vein he says,

> Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such great distances, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure.\(^{219}\)

As such, the Holy Spirit unites the believer to Christ in his heavenly dwelling so that Christ is not brought down to the believer from heaven, but rather the believer is lifted up to Christ.\(^{220}\)

In summary, Bruce and Calvin both teach that faith and the work of the Holy Spirit are the means of receiving Christ in the Sacrament. Donald MacLeod attests to

\[^{216}\text{Calvin,} \textit{Institutes}, \text{IV.xvii.5.}\]
\[^{217}\text{Ibid.,} \text{IV.xiv.9.}\]
\[^{218}\text{Ibid.,} \text{IV.xvii.12.}\]
\[^{219}\text{Ibid.,} \text{IV.xvii.10.}\]
\[^{220}\text{Ibid.,} \text{IV.xvii.31.}\]
their agreement on this issue when he critiques both men on their understanding of the sacramental union:

Just as the sun’s rays come from the sun to earth, wrote Calvin, so something emanated from the body of Christ in heaven down to the Lord’s Table. If you asked “How is it possible? How can influences emanate from the Body in heaven to earth?” Calvin said simply, “The Holy Spirit can do anything!” What was this but an attempt to put the best possible face on an absurdity? But it explains why even Reformed theologians like Robert Bruce continued to speak of the mystery of the Lord’s Supper. It was a real mystery! There is nothing more mysterious than bread being made into the body of the Son of God or bread being accompanied by spiritual rays to emanate from heaven to earth. All that is very mysterious. But I doubt very much if it’s biblical.221

Whether or not MacLeod should agree with Bruce and Calvin is another matter. The point to emphasize is that he draws a very strong connection between each man’s theology of the Eucharist with respect to the nature of the sacramental union.

The Nature and Names for Christ’s Presence in the Lord’s Supper

The second major area to analyze with respect to the sacramental union is the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. According to Keith Matthison, the subject of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper “has probably been the source of more discussion and controversy than any other subject related to the Eucharist.”222 This section will consider what Robert Bruce and John Calvin each teach about the nature of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist as well as the names each gives to describe this presence of Christ.

222 Matthison, Given for You, 21.
The Nature of Christ’s Presence in the Lord’s Supper

Robert Bruce

Bruce contrasts his view of the Lord’s Supper with the Roman Catholic view. Explaining the Catholic view, he says, “The Papists’ doctrine of a real presence teaches that Christ’s Body in the Sacrament is made of bread, by changing the bread into His Body through the power of concentration.” Bruce rejects this view as “both wicked and heretical” and instead maintains that “Christ does indeed make the bread His Body, not really, but sacramentally.”

Specifically, he explains the nature of Christ’s presence in the Sacrament in terms of two major contrasts. First, Christ’s presence is spiritual, not corporal:

If you ask of us, on the other hand, how the true Body and Blood of Christ Jesus are present, we will say that they are spiritually present, really present, that is present in the Supper, and not in the bread. We will not say that His true Flesh is present in our hands, or in the mouth of our body, but that it is spiritually present, that is, present to our spirits, and our believing soul—yes, even as present inwardly in our souls, as the bread and wine are present to the body outwardly.

Thus, Bruce does deny the reality of Christ’s physical nature to the partaker, for he affirms that the body and blood of Christ are delivered to those who receive the Sacrament in faith. Instead, Bruce maintains that one cannot be conjoined to the flesh of Christ in his own flesh; rather one’s soul must be conjoined to Christ.

Second, Bruce contrasts an inward and an outward presence of Christ in the Sacrament. He describes this distinction:

Things are said to be present as they are perceived by any outward or inward sense, and as they are perceived by any of the senses; the more they are perceived,
to that sense it is present. If therefore it is outwardly perceived by an outward presence, the thing is outwardly present; for example, if it is perceived by the outward sight of the eye, by the outward hearing of the ear, by the outward felling of the hands, or taste of mouth, it is outwardly present; if however anything is perceived by the inward eye, by the inward taste and feeling of the soul, it cannot be outwardly present, but must be spiritually and inwardly present to the soul; therefore everything is present as it is perceived, so that if you do not perceive a thing outwardly, it is outwardly absent, and if you do not perceive a thing inwardly, it is inwardly absent.\textsuperscript{228}

In other words, Bruce believes that Christ’s physical presence is not the issue in the Supper. In fact, he maintains that it does a person no good to have Christ physically present in the Eucharist, if Christ is not present spiritually to a person’s soul.\textsuperscript{229} Similarly, Bruce maintains that it is one’s perception of an object and not the distance of the object that makes it present or not present to that individual. He explains,

\begin{quote}
It is not distance of place that make a thing absent, or nearness of place that makes a thing present, but it is only the perception of anything by any of your senses that makes a thing present, and it is the absence of perception that makes a thing absent. Even if the thing itself were never so far distant, if you perceive it by your outward sense, it is present to you. For example, my body and the sun are as far distant in place as the heaven is from the earth, and yet this distant does not keep the sun’s presence away from me. Why? Because I perceive the sun by my eye and my other senses, I feel it and perceive it by its heat, by its light, and by its brightness.\textsuperscript{230}
\end{quote}

It is easy to see how one might misinterpret Bruce’s words here to be overly subjective. In the above statement, it almost sounds as if Bruce were arguing that as long as something is perceived, then it is present—even if in reality it is not present. What he really means, however, is that when someone perceives a true object of knowledge, the presence of that object will not be hindered by distance.

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., 133-134.
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 92-93.
\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 134.
In brief, Bruce understands Christ to be spiritually and not corporally present, and inwardly and not outwardly present. And though Christ is received spiritually and inwardly, his humanity is not denied to the partaker.\footnote{Ibid., 47, 49, 93.}

John Calvin

According to J. Ligon Duncan, a precise apprehension of John Calvin’s view of the presence of Christ in the Supper has been a difficult task, even to those friendly to Calvin.\footnote{Duncan, “True Communion with Christ in the Lord’s Supper,” 442.} At its most simple level, Calvin’s doctrine on this subject is presented both negatively and positively. Negatively, Calvin rejects a local or corporeal presence of Christ in the elements.\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.26.} Positively, he affirms Christ’s spiritual and “sacramental” presence in the Supper.\footnote{Ibid., IV.xvii.3; Gerrish, \textit{Grace and Gratitude}, 178.}

Yet Calvin’s particular emphasis relating to the presence of Christ in the Supper is the presence of Christ’s power (\textit{virtus}) from his flesh made available through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Sinclair Ferguson argues that Calvin’s doctrine of the Supper is characterized by this doctrine of “\textit{virtus}.” He writes, “Such thinking (his so called ‘virtualism,’ because of his emphasis on the \textit{virtus} of Christ’s ascended humanity) permeates Calvin’s eucharistic teaching.”\footnote{Sinclair B. Ferguson, \textit{The Holy Spirit}, Contours of Christian Theology, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 202.} For example, in his \textit{Institutes} Calvin states that “since [the flesh of Christ] is pervaded with fullness of life to be transmitted to us, it is rightly called ‘life-giving.’”\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.9.} He also says, “[Christ] shows that in his humanity there
also dwells fullness of life, so that whoever has partaken of his flesh and blood may at the same time enjoy participation in life.”}\textsuperscript{237}

B. A. Gerrish notes in this regard that instead of Calvin arguing for the flesh of Christ in the Supper, he argues for the “vigor of his flesh,” “life from his flesh,” “the mystical and incomprehensible operation of the flesh,” and “power of the body.”\textsuperscript{238} Calvin emphasizes these aspects of Christ’s humanity in the Sacrament because “Christ had to take upon himself human flesh in order to mediate divine life to us.”\textsuperscript{239} That is, Christ’s humanity communicates divine power is a necessary source of life for all who are united to him. In summary, Calvin rejects a corporeal or local presence of Christ in the Supper while maintaining a spiritual or sacramental presence. He further emphasizes the importance of Christ’s life-giving flesh.

In conclusion, Calvin and Bruce affirm the same truths regarding Christ’s presence in the Supper. They both reject a corporeal or spatial presence of Christ in the Supper. They both argue that Christ’s body does not descend to the believer, but rather that the believer ascends to heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit to feed on Christ. And they both maintain that Christ is present \textit{spiritually, or sacramentally}, in the Supper. Nevertheless, there is a major difference in emphasis. Though Bruce addresses the reality of Christ’s presence in his flesh,\textsuperscript{240} he is content to simply state that Christ’s humanity is present spiritually. Calvin, it seems, goes a step further here. In particular, he emphasizes the \textit{power} of Christ made present through his life-giving flesh.

\textit{Terms Used to Describe Christ’s Presence in the Lord’s Supper}

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{238} Gerrish, \textit{Grace and Gratitude}, 178; emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{239} Matthison, \textit{Given for You}, 21.
\textsuperscript{240} Bruce, \textit{The Mystery}, 79.
Robert Bruce

Recently, there has been much controversy over which terms most accurately reflect the Reformed view of Communion, particularly as understood through the theology of John Calvin. Specifically, many question whether the phrase “real presence” appropriately characterizes the Reformed view.

Robert Bruce speaks of Christ’s presence in several ways. First, when addressing the errors of the Roman Catholic view, he speaks of Christ being “sacramentally present.” He writes,

Now, last of all, [the Romans Catholics] still refuse to be satisfied, and say Christ can make the bread His Body, and therefore His body is really present. We grant that Christ can make the bread His Body, for Christ being God can do whatever He will; only let them show that Christ will make the real bread His real Flesh, and then this controversy is brought to an end. Christ does indeed make the bread His Body, not really, but sacramentally.

Here Bruce actually denies the idea of Christ being “really present” in the Supper, and argues instead that Christ is “sacramentally present.”

The other ways in which Bruce speaks of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist can be seen in the following statement:

If you ask of us, on the other hand, how the true Body and Blood of Christ Jesus are present, we will say that they are spiritually present, really present, that is present in the Supper, and not in the bread. We will not say that His true Flesh is present in our hands, or in the mouth of our body, but that it is spiritually present, that is, present to our spirits, and our believing soul—yes, even as present inwardly in our souls, as the bread and wine are present to the body outwardly.

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242 Bruce, The Mystery, 131; emphasis added.
243 Ibid., 132-133; emphasis added.
He uses the phrases “spiritually present” (suggesting that Christ is present to the believer’s spirit), “really present” (suggesting that Christ really is present), and “inwardly present” (suggesting that Christ’s presence can be perceived inwardly, namely, by the soul) to refer to Christ’s presence in the Supper. He does not, however, use the phrase “real presence” other than to refer to the Roman Catholic view.

It is important to note, however, that in the above two quotes, Bruce uses the word, “really” to describe both the Catholic position and his own position. He states: “[The Romans Catholics] say…His body is really present.”\(^{244}\) And again, “We will say that [the body and blood of Christ] are spiritually present, really present. From this interchange, it is obvious that Bruce is comfortable using the language of his opponents to describe his own position. The significance of this point will be mentioned in the conclusion of this chapter.

Bruce summarizes his teaching on the presence of Christ in the Supper when he states,

> We hold that Christ is present in the Supper because He is present to our soul, to our spirit and faith; also we hold that He is present in the Supper because we have Him in His promise “This is my body.” This promise is present in my faith, and the nature of faith is to make things that are absent in themselves, present nevertheless. And therefore since He is both present by faith in His promise and present by the power of His Holy Spirit, who can deny that He is present in the Supper?\(^{245}\)

All in all, Bruce affirms the presence Christ to be spiritually, sacramentally, inwardly and even really present in the Supper.

John Calvin

\(^{244}\) Ibid., 131; emphasis added.
\(^{245}\) Ibid., 133.
Many of the debates surrounding Calvin and the description of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper are in relation to the term “real presence.” On the one hand, many scholars, beginning with John William Nevin in the nineteenth-century, argue that it is appropriate to use “real presence” to describe Calvin’s view.\textsuperscript{246} Likewise, Scottish theologian Ronald Wallace maintains that the presence of Christ in the Supper “may be called a real presence.”\textsuperscript{247} B. A. Gerrish indirectly supports the use of the term “real presence” when he writes,

The suspicion has never quite been laid to rest that even when Calvin’s language appears to affirm a \textit{real presence} and the efficacy of sacred signs, he could not honestly have meant it.\textsuperscript{248}

Gerrish thus suggests that Calvin does use the term “real presence” positively and that opponents of using this term simply turn a blind eye to the evidence.

On the other hand, scholars such as J. Ligon Duncan argue adamantly against the use of “real presence” to describe Calvin’s teaching on the matter. Duncan contends, “‘Real Presence’ is language that Calvin never uses to describe his own view of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, but rather to describe the Romans Catholic view (and by implication the Lutheran view) he is criticizing.”\textsuperscript{249} In addition, Joseph Tylenda observes,

In scrutinizing his \textit{Institutes}, the Confession of Faith, and the several treatises on the Eucharist, only three texts were found in which the term “real” is used with any reference to Christ’s body being present in the Supper, and all three texts indicate, or at least, hint at a disfavour of the word.\textsuperscript{250}

\textsuperscript{246} Duncan, “True Communion,” 446.  
\textsuperscript{247} Wallace, \textit{Calvin’s Doctrine}, 208.  
\textsuperscript{248} Gerrish, \textit{Grace and Gratitude}, 9; emphasis added.  
\textsuperscript{249} Duncan, “True Communion,” 446.  
\textsuperscript{250} See Joseph N. Tylenda, “Calvin and Christ’s Presence in the Supper—True or Real?” in \textit{Articles on Calvin and Calvinism}, 219.
In one of the three texts mentioned in the above quote, Calvin does reluctantly allow the use of the word “real” when he writes, “If they will use real for true and oppose it to fallacious or imaginary, we will rather speak barbarously than afford material for strife.” In other words, some people use the word “real” to communicate that Christ’s presence in the Supper is “not false,” as opposed to using it to refer to Christ’s local, carnal presence in the elements. Calvin, though disdaining this language (referring to it as “barbarous”), allows it in order to preserve peace.

In light of Calvin’s concession here, Joseph Tylden provides a proper response to the debate on “real presence” when he writes,

> While we favour the word true, we are aware that some authors speak differently. Though they declare that Calvin taught a real presence, their real has a twentieth-century meaning and not that of the sixteenth century. In using the words “real presence,” some interpreters of Calvin intend to demonstrate that this communion in Christ’s body is not imaginative nor illusory, neither fallacious nor deceptive. Since language is as alive as the individuals who use it, this may well be the meaning and understanding of real presence for many today. Though the individual of today reads a real presence in Calvin’s eucharistic theology, we should remember that Calvin, in the sixteenth century, remarked: “If they will use real for true and oppose it to fallacious or imaginary, we will rather speak barbarously than afford material for strife.” And although they employ the word, they are, nevertheless, with Calvin in rejecting any idea of local presence of Christ’s body in the Supper.

In other words, though Calvin is not favorable to using the same language as his opponents, it is acceptable to use “real presence” to define his view as long as one qualifies the use of “real” as meaning “true.”

In summary, Robert Bruce and John Calvin both use phrases like “spiritually present” and “really present” to describe the spiritual nature and true reality of Christ’s presence in the Supper. Furthermore, they both use the phrase “real presence,” but they

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251 Ibid., 70.
252 Ibid., 75.
use it only in a pejorative way to refer to a view of Christ’s presence in the Supper that they find objectionable.

**Conclusion**

Robert Bruce and John Calvin share essentially the same eucharistic theology when it comes to the nature of the sacramental union. First, they both hold that the signs of the Sacrament are representational and instrumental. Second, they both maintain that all of Christ and all of his benefits are received in the Lord’s Supper. Third, Bruce and Calvin affirm a proper “Chalcedonian” distinction between the sign and the thing signified. Fourth, they both stress that faith and the work of the Holy Spirit are the necessary means of receiving Christ in the Sacrament. Fifth, they both deny Christ’s local or corporeal presence in the Supper while affirming that he is present *spiritually or sacramentally*. And finally, Bruce and Calvin have both purposely chosen not to use the phrase “real presence” to describe the nature of Christ’s presence the Lord’s Supper.

Nevertheless, when it comes to sacramental union, Bruce and Calvin emphasize at least two different elements in their theologies of the Supper. First, regarding the thing signified, Bruce emphasizes that believers receive all of Christ, while Calvin emphasizes that believers receive Christ’s flesh and blood. Second, Bruce emphasizes the spiritual presence of Christ, while Calvin emphasizes the *virtus* of Christ in the Lord’s Supper—Christ’s power mediated through his flesh.

In conclusion, when it comes to the nature of the sacramental union in the Supper, Bruce holds to essentially the same eucharistic theology as Calvin. And though they each emphasize different aspects in their theology, these differences are minimal in light of
their underlying theology that remains essentially the same. Moreover, these differences
become even more minimal in light of their different historical contexts, which would
include different audiences and genres of writing. It is sufficient to say, then, when it
comes to sacramental union, Bruce and Calvin are on the same page.
CHAPTER 6

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WORD AND SACRAMENT

Robert Bruce teaches that “the Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word”\(^{253}\) This claim thrusts the doctrine of the Word and Sacrament to the forefront, as it seems to fly in the face of the Reformed doctrine of the primacy of the Word. John Calvin himself warns that “any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God’s Word.”\(^{254}\) Is Bruce guilty of teaching sacramentalism—\(^{255}\)or at least leaving the door open to it—in his eucharistic theology? Has he parted with Calvin on this point?

This chapter will examine and compare Bruce’s statements about receiving Christ better in the Sacrament than in the Word with the related teachings of Calvin. It will become evident that Bruce’s theology is notably consistent with Calvin in this area.

Robert Bruce’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament

In order to understand Bruce’s statements about receiving Christ better in the Sacrament, one must understand Bruce’s theology of the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament. To that end, this section will discuss the following three aspects of the

\(^{253}\) Bruce, *The Mystery*, 64.

\(^{254}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.14; emphasis added.

\(^{255}\) Sacramentalism is characterized by an overemphasis on the efficacy and necessity of the sacraments. Cf. Duncan, “True Communion,” 435-438, for a discussion of sacramentalism.
Word-Sacrament relationship: (1) the primacy of the Word, (2) the Sacrament as a sign, and (3) the Sacrament as a seal.

**The Primacy of the Word**

Bruce characterizes the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament by emphasizing the primacy of the Word over the Sacrament. He argues,

> I take the word Sacrament as it is taken and used today in the Church of God, for a holy sign and seal that is annexed to the preached Word of God to seal up and confirm the truth contained in the same Word, but in such a way that I do not call the Seal separated from the Word, the Sacrament. There cannot be a Seal except that which is the seal of an evidence, for if the seal is separated from the evidence, it is not a seal, but simply what it is by nature and nothing more. Thus there cannot be a Sacrament without it adhering to the evidence of the Word....[The] Word and element must together make a Sacrament. Well has Augustine said: “Let the Word come to the element and you shall have a Sacrament.”

The Word is still the Word without the Sacrament, but the Sacrament is no longer a sacrament without the Word. Therefore, Bruce refers to the Word as “the other part of the Sacrament.”

Bruce is resolute on this point:

> It is no more than what it is by nature, it is only a common piece of bread, and nothing more, unless it is annexed to the preaching of the Word and administered along with it, as Christ has commanded. Therefore I say the seal must be annexed, appended and joined to the documentary evidence, to the preaching of the Word, in confirmation of it, otherwise it is not a seal. However, with the documentary evidence which is the Word of God, it is somewhat different, for as you know, a document will produce faith and establish a right even if it is subscribed without a seal; but the seal without the document is of no value at all. So it is with the Word of God. Even if the Sacrament is not annexed to the Word, yet the Word will do its work: it enables us to receive Christ; it serves to engender and beget faith in us, and makes us grow up in faith. But the seal without the Word can not serve us in any holy use. Therefore the seal must be annexed to the Word preached, to the Covenant of mercy and grace.

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256 Bruce, *The Mystery*, 42.
257 Ibid., 62.
258 Ibid., 108.
Bruce’s above arguments set forth two reasons why the Word is primary. First, the Word can stand on its own, whereas the Sacrament fails to be a Sacrament without the Word. Second, the Word is necessary for salvation, and the Sacrament is not.

Bruce’s doctrine of the primacy of the Word is also apparent in his critique of Roman Catholicism. He adamantly opposes the practice of the Roman Catholic priests “whispering” while consecrating the elements of the Lord’s Supper, because whispering to the elements is failing to offer the people the Word. He argues that the proper administration of the Sacrament entails not the Word spoken to the elements, but the Word spoken to the people: “We say that the words ought to be directed and pronounced to the people.” ²⁵⁹ Thus he also maintains that “the Word is spoken not to alter the nature of the elements, but to alter the nature of the people.” ²⁶⁰

Consequently, Bruce holds to the primacy of the Word in the Word-Sacrament relationship, for he believes the Sacrament is indissolubly united to the Word. And far from affirming the sacramentalism found in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, he fiercely opposes it.

**The Sacrament as Sign**

Another aspect of what Robert Bruce believes about the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament is that the Sacrament is by nature a sign of the message of the Word. This paper has already discussed Bruce’s theology of the Sacrament as a sign at length in chapter 5. In summary of that discussion, Bruce holds that the Sacrament is a

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 136.
²⁶⁰ Ibid., 137.
physical representation of the Word—a “visible Word.”

The Sacrament is for seeing, just as the Word is for hearing: “The Word leads us to Christ by the ear; the Sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye.” Nevertheless, the Sacrament is not a mere representation. For “[i]f they did nothing but represent or signify a thing absent, then any picture or dead image would be a Sacrament.”

Rather, sacramental signs are signs that deliver the thing they signify. He writes, “I do not call them something because they only represent something. I call them signs because they have the Body and the Blood of Christ conjoined with them.”

Thus in Bruce’s theology of the Lord’s Supper, the Sacrament represents and delivers the message of the Word. Consequently, where there is no Word, there is no Sacrament. For the Sacrament signifies the message and person of Christ. If there is no message, then there is nothing to signify.

**The Sacrament as Seal**

Another important aspect of Robert Bruce’s doctrine of the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament is the Sacrament’s sealing nature. He states, I call the Sacrament a holy seal, annexed to the Covenant of grace and mercy in Christ. It is a seal to be administered publicly, according to the holy institution of Christ Jesus, that in its lawful administration the sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified, may take place.

In other words, the Sacrament is a seal, or an assurance, of the covenant of grace that it represents.

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261 Ibid., 54.
262 Ibid., 39.
263 Ibid., 44.
264 Ibid.
265 Ibid., 106.
Bruce further explains that the Sacrament is “a seal annexed to the Word.”266 As such, “it serves the same purpose for our souls as a common seal serves for a common document.”267 That is, it “confirms and seals up the truth [of the Word] contained in it”268 and “persuades you better of its truth.”269 Simply said, the Lord’s Supper authenticates the truth of the gospel of Christ.

Bruce makes it evident, then, that the sealing nature of the Sacrament is central to his eucharistic theology. For example, he truly believes that Christ really has given his body and blood for believers for their possession. And the reason believers possess Christ is not because of his physical proximity to them or because they somehow carnally partake of him. Rather, Christ belongs to believers because they have a right, or a title, to him.270 Bruce states,

Christ is not made mine because I pluck Him out of the heavens, but He is mine because I have a sure title and right to him, and since I have a sure title and a just right to Him, no distance, however great it may be, can make any difference to my possession of Him.271

Bruce maintains that Christ belongs to believers by title or right. And that title is given to them in the Word. The function of the Sacrament, therefore, is to confirm and authenticate the title given in the Word. He says, “The title which I do have to Him is confirmed to me for since I get my title to Him in the Word, so in the Sacrament I get the confirmation of my title.”272

As central as the sealing nature of the Sacrament is to Bruce’s theology, it is important to note that Bruce does not believe a seal is attached to the Word because the

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266 Ibid., 64.
267 Ibid.
268 Ibid.
269 Ibid. Bruce gets this description from the apostle Paul in Romans 4:11 (see Bruce, The Mystery, 107).
270 Ibid., 92.
271 Ibid.
272 Ibid., 93.
Word is somehow inferior or insufficient. Rather, he believes the seal is attached because “of our weakness and infirmity.”\textsuperscript{273} That is, the sacrament is given because of sinners’ deficiency to receive the Word, not because of a deficiency of the Word.

Thus, far from any sacramentalism in his eucharistic theology, Bruce holds that the Lord’s Supper confirms and authenticates the Word. For “by itself a seal remains what it is by nature, and is nothing more than that unless it is annexed to some document.”\textsuperscript{274}

### John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament

In his understanding of the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament, John Calvin holds to the same primary tenets of eucharistic theology as Robert Bruce. This similarity will become evident by examining Calvin in the following three areas: (1) the primacy of the Word, (2) the Sacrament as a sign, and (3) the Sacrament as a seal.

#### The Primacy of the Word

Calvin maintains that the Word is primary in the sense that the Sacrament is dependant upon the Word. He writes,

> The right administration of the Sacrament cannot stand apart from the Word. For whatever benefit may come to us from the Supper requires the Word: whether we are to be confirmed in faith, or exercised in confession, or aroused to duty, there is need of preaching.\textsuperscript{275}

Similarly, Calvin says he agrees with Augustine, who states, “‘Let the word be added to the sacrament and it will become a sacrament. For whence comes this great power of

\[\textsuperscript{273} \text{Ibid., 66.}\]
\[\textsuperscript{274} \text{Ibid., 107.}\]
\[\textsuperscript{275} \text{Calvin, } \textit{Institutes}, \text{ IV.xvii.39.}\]
water, that in touching the body [in baptism] it should cleanse the heart, unless the word
make it?"  

Furthermore, like Bruce, Calvin maintains that the Word cannot be “one
whispered”—as the Roman Catholics believe. Rather, the Word must be preached. Hence, Calvin argues that “A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is
joined to it as a sort of appendix.”

Therefore, in Calvin’s thinking, the Word is primary because it does not depend
on the Sacrament. The Sacrament, conversely, is only a sacrament if it is preceded by the
Word.

The Sacrament as Sign

Calvin is also convinced that the sacraments are physical signs or representations
of the promises of the Word. He writes,

And because we are of flesh, they are shown us under things of flesh, to instruct
us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead
children. Augustine calls a sacrament “a visible word” for the reason that it
represents God’s promises as painted in a picture and sets them before our sight,
portrayed graphically and in the manner of images.

In addition to physically representing Christ’s promises to his people, Calvin
maintains that the Sacrament “gives in reality what it depicts,” or it delivers the very
reality it portrays. Thus, like Bruce, Calvin affirms that the sacraments are instrumental
representations— instruments by which partakers receive Christ and all his benefits by
faith.

276 Ibid.
277 Ibid., IV.xiv.4.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid., IV.xiv.3.
The Sacrament as Seal

Along with signifying the promises of the Word, Calvin also holds that the Sacrament seals these promises. Similar to Bruce’s explanation of the sealing function of the Sacrament, Calvin writes,

> The seals which are attached to government documents or other public acts are nothing taken by themselves, for they would be attached in vain if the parchment had nothing written on it. Yet, when added to the writing, they do not on that account fail to confirm and seal what is written.\(^{281}\)

Thus Calvin explains that the Sacraments are seals which confirm or authenticate the message of the Word. Apart from the Word, the seal is nothing.

Furthermore, Calvin contends that the Word is in no way deficient apart from the Sacrament. He writes, “For God’s truth is of itself firm and sure enough, and it cannot receive better confirmation from any other source than from itself.”\(^{282}\) The sacraments are added, then, not because of a deficiency in the message, but because of the “dull capacity” of those who hear the message.\(^{283}\) The sacraments are God’s gracious concession and gift to his children.

Conclusion

All in all, Bruce’s theology and Calvin’s theology of the Word and the Sacrament are virtually identical. Both men hold to the primacy of the Word—maintaining (1) that the Word is necessary for faith as well as for existence of the Sacrament, and (2) that the Sacrament is not necessary for salvation, and is dependant on the Word for its existence.

\(^{281}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.5.  
\(^{282}\) Ibid., IV.xiv.3.  
\(^{283}\) Ibid., IV.xiv.6.
Furthermore, both argue that the Lord’s Supper signifies the Word, representing and delivering the thing signified, and it seals the Word, confirming and authenticating its message. Finally, both men hold that the sacraments do not in any way point to a deficiency in God’s Word, but are provided because of man’s dullness in the flesh, and as a result of God’s goodness in grace.

**Explanation of Bruce’s “Receiving Christ Better” Statements**

After considering the above explanation of Robert Bruce’s doctrine of the relationship between the Word and the Sacrament, one is prepared to better understand the meaning of his statements about “receiving Christ better” in the Sacrament. The section will (1) present these statements, (2) explain them in light of his theology of signs and seals, and (3) compare them to similar statements that John Calvin makes.

**Robert Bruce’s Statements**

Bruce speaks of believers getting Christ better in the Sacrament than in the Word two different times in his *Mystery* sermons. The first time he says it, Bruce is teaching about why the Sacraments were given to the church. He explains,

> Why then is the Sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word…. The Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word, that we may possess Christ in our hearts and minds more fully and largely than we did before, by the simple Word.  

The second time he mentions that believers get Christ better is in a sermon called “The Lord’s Supper in Particular.” In it, he declares,

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284 Bruce, *The Mystery*, 64.
You get a better grip of the same thing in the Sacrament than you got by the hearing of the Word. That same thing which you possess by the hearing of the Word, you now possess more fully. God has more room in your soul, through your receiving of the Sacrament, than He could otherwise have by your hearing of the Word only. What then, you ask, is the new thing we get? We get Christ better than we did before. We get the thing which we had more fully, that is, with a surer apprehension than we had before. We get a better grip of Christ now, for by the Sacrament my faith is nourished, the bounds of my soul are enlarged, and so where I had but a little of Christ before, as it were, between my finger and my thumb, now I get Him in my whole hand, and indeed the more my faith grows, the better grip I get of Christ Jesus. Thus the Sacrament is very necessary, if only for the reason that we get Christ better, and get a firmer grasp of Him by the Sacrament, than we could have before.\(^\text{285}\)

Bruce is clearly proposing in both sermons that Christ is received better in the Lord’s Supper than in the preaching of the Word apart from the Sacrament.

**An Explanation of Robert Bruce’s Statements**

These statements, when taken out of context, might seem unorthodox for those who hold to the primacy of the Word in relation to the sacraments. Nevertheless, when taken in context, these statements are to be understood as acceptable explanations of the Reformed view of the function of sacraments, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate.

It is appropriate to begin, then, by asking what precisely does Bruce mean when he teaches that “The Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word”?\(^\text{286}\) In order to answer this question, it is best first to address what Bruce does not mean. Bruce does not mean that the Word is in any way faulty or deficient. He states that “God on His part is under no necessity either to swear or to

\(^{285}\) Ibid., 84-85.  
\(^{286}\) Ibid., 64.
confirm by seals, the thing that he has spoken. His Word is as good as any oath or seal."^{287}

One might wonder, then, why Bruce refers to the Word as the “simple Word”^{288} if he really believes that it is not deficient. His repeated use of this phrase almost seems to imply that he views the Word as incomplete without the Sacrament. Yet a cursory reading of Bruce reveals that he does not hold this view at all. Bruce suggests that the Word is like a document that is given a seal for confirmation.^{289} A seal does not belittle a document; rather it confirms and authenticates its importance. So by using the phrase “simple word,” Bruce is in no way belittling the Word. Rather, he is referring to the Word without the seal of the Sacrament annexed to it. He is referring to the Word standing on its own. Therefore Bruce, rather than compromising the primacy of Word, actually affirms it.

When Bruce teaches that believers “get a better hold of Christ than [they] got in the simple Word,”^{290} he does mean the following: First, while God’s Word is not faulty or deficient, God’s people are. Though God offers himself to his people in the hearing of the Word, they are inherently dull. Thus Bruce maintains that the Sacraments are given “to help our belief, our inherent weakness and inability” and “to help this astonishing weakness in which we are ready to distrust God in every Word.”^{291}

Second, rather than something separate from the Word, the Sacrament is to be thought of as a seal which is annexed to the Word. Bruce argues, “I do not call the Seal

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^{287} Ibid., 66.
^{288} Ibid., 39, 40, 54, 63, 64, 84, 139.
^{289} Ibid., 64.
^{290} Ibid.
^{291} Ibid.
Therefore, in his mind, it is a false dichotomy to say that the Sacrament is somehow better than the Word. For the Sacrament is the Word—signified and sealed.

Third, Bruce believes that partakers get the *same thing* in the Sacrament as in the Word, only better. He points out that Roman Catholics think that in order to benefit from the Sacrament, there must be *something new* offered in it—specifically, the local and carnal presence of Christ. For to merely receive Christ in the Sacrament as one receives him in the Word would make the Sacrament superfluous. Against this thinking, Bruce argues,

> Try to imagine to yourself what new thing you would have. No matter how much the heart of man conceives, imagines and wishes, he will never dare to think of such a thing as the Son of God. He could never presume to pierce the clouds, to ascend so high, to ask for the Son of God in His flesh to be the food of his soul. If you have the Son of God, you have Him who is the heir of all things, who is King of heaven and earth, and in Him you have all things. What more, then, can you want? What better thing can you wish for? He is equal with the Father, one in substance with the Father, true God and true Man. What more can you wish? Therefore I say, we get no other thing in the Sacrament than we get in the Word. Content yourself with this. But if this is so, the Sacrament is not superfluous.

Bruce maintains that there is no new or better aspect of Christ offered in the Sacrament, but only a better reception of him. The signified and sealed Word in the Sacrament gives believers “a surer apprehension” of Christ and his benefits.

Fourth, though not necessary for salvation, the Sacrament is necessary if believers want their faith to be nourished and if they want to receive better Christ and all his

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292 Ibid., 41.
293 Ibid., 84.
294 Ibid.
295 Ibid.
296 Ibid., 85.
benefits. Bruce insists that “the Sacrament is very necessary, if only for the reason that we get Christ better, and get a firmer grasp of Him by the Sacrament, than we could have before.”

All in all, Bruce’s statements about receiving Christ better in the Sacrament are in no way outside of the Reformed tradition. By declaring them “better,” he does not promote sacramentalism, nor does he detract from the primacy of the Word. Rather, he merely elaborates on the signifying and sealing functions of the Sacrament in relation to the Word.

**Similar Statements Made by John Calvin**

Bruce is not alone when he proposes that Christ is received better in the Sacrament than in the simple hearing of the Word. Calvin makes very similar remarks in his writings. In his “Short Treatise on the Holy Supper,” he states that “It is indeed true that this same grace is offered us by the gospel; yet as in the Supper we have a more ample certainty and fuller enjoyment.” Similarly, in his *Institutes*, Calvin writes that “The term ‘sacrament’...embraces generally all those signs which God has ever enjoined upon men to render them more certain and confident of the truth of his promises.” Calvin, like Bruce, maintains that the Sacrament delivers the promises of God in a clearer and surer way than the preached Word.

The fortitude with which Calvin holds to this truth is apparent as he expresses it in a variety of ways throughout his *Institutes*. For example, in 4.14.5 he argues,

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297 Ibid., 84.
298 Ibid., 84-85.
300 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.18; emphasis added.
For the clearer anything is, the fitter it is to support faith. But the sacraments bring the clearest promises; and they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as a painted picture from life.\textsuperscript{301}

Again, he teaches, “The sacraments, therefore, are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word.”\textsuperscript{302}

In another place, Calvin compares believers’ faith to a building which rests on the foundation of God’s Word and the surer foundation of the Sacrament: “For as a building stands and rests upon its own foundation but is more surely established by columns placed underneath, so faith rests upon the Word of God as a foundation; but when the sacraments are added, it rests more firmly upon them as upon columns.”\textsuperscript{303}

In yet another place Calvin similarly argues that the application of Christ and his benefits is “done through the gospel but more clearly through the Sacred Supper, where he offers himself with all his benefits to us, and we receive him by faith.”\textsuperscript{304} And finally, he writes, “The Lord also intended the Supper to be a kind of exhortation for us, which can more forcefully than any other means quicken and inspire us both to purity and holiness of life, and to love, peace, and concord.”\textsuperscript{305}

Therefore, when Bruce speaks of receiving Christ better in the Sacrament than in the hearing of the Word, he is in good company with John Calvin. For Calvin consistently maintains that the signifying and sealing functions of the Sacrament bring the message of the gospel more clearly and forcefully, so God’s children can believe his promises with greater certainty and confidence.

\textsuperscript{301} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xiv.5; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{302} Ibid., IV.xiv.6; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{303} Ibid.; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{304} Ibid., IV.xiv.4; emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., IV.xvii.38; emphasis added.
Conclusion

B. A. Gerrish summarizes the theology of Bruce and Calvin well:

[Sacraments] do not distract faith from the word but, quite to the contrary, make faith rest on the foundation of the word even more firmly. To be sure they are not absolutely necessary additions of the proclaimed word. But they are gracious concessions to our physical nature and therefore not to be neglected. Word and sacrament, correctly understood, fit naturally together.\(^{306}\)

Understood in this context, Robert Bruce’s statements about receiving Christ better are orthodox expressions of the signifying and sealing nature of the sacraments as taught in Reformed theology, particularly by John Calvin.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to examine the eucharistic theology of Robert Bruce. In so doing, the first objective was to determine the orthodoxy of Bruce’s theology—especially his statements about “receiving Christ better” in the Sacrament than in the Word—as it relates to that of John Calvin. The second objective was to consider the relevancy of Bruce’s theology for the modern Reformed church.

Regarding the first objective, this thesis demonstrated that Bruce’s theology should be considered Calvinistic in the following three ways: First, Bruce is to be interpreted in light of the historical context of his day. This context included influences such as John Knox, Andrew Melville, and the Calvinistic confessions and catechisms to which Bruce was subject in his day.

Second, upon comparison, Bruce’s eucharistic theology is essentially the same as that of Calvin. Though the two theologians do emphasize different aspects of the Sacrament, which is to be expected in light of cultural, time-period, genre, and audience differences, they agree in the most significant matters—namely the relationship between the sign and the thing signified, and the relationship between the Sacrament and the Word.

Third, Bruce and Calvin both believe that Christ is “received better” in the Sacrament than in the mere hearing of the Word. Their language simply affirms the signifying and sealing functions of the Sacrament in relation to the Word.
Regarding the second objective, this thesis established that the Symbolic memorialist view is the predominate view of the Supper in modern Reformed churches. Further, it argued that Robert Bruce’s eucharistic theology is a healthy corrective to the Zwinglian tendencies of the modern Reformed church. In particular, it highlights the importance of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, it reveals the continuing influence of Catholicism and Zwinglianism on Reformed churches, and it brings to the forefront the debate regarding the Word-Sacrament relationship.

For further consideration of the relevance of Bruce’s thought, see the appendix which discusses the implications of his theology which can help the local church return to and embrace a more biblical understanding and practice of the Lord’s Supper, particularly in the following areas:

(1.) Teaching about the Lord’s Supper in the local church

(2.) Considering which elements ought to be used during the Supper

(3.) Determining the frequency of the Lord’s Supper

(4.) Considering the nature of self-examination

(5.) Establishing the requirements necessary for communing membership

May the church today truly receive Christ better by embracing her Lord and all his benefits as given to her in the Lord’s Supper.
APPENDIX

SOME PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS

RELATING TO BRUCE’S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY
Having examined the eucharistic theology of Robert Bruce, it is appropriate to consider the pastoral implications of his theology, particularly within the context of the modern Reformed church. This appendix will consider the pastoral implications of Bruce’s theology in the following five areas: (1) teaching about the Lord’s Supper in the local church, (2) considering which elements ought to be used during the Supper, (3) determining the frequency of the Lord’s Supper, (4) considering the nature of self-examination, and (5) establishing the requirements necessary for communing membership. Even when these considerations depart from Bruce’s beliefs, his views will still serve as a useful point of reference and as a point of contrast.

**Teaching about the Lord’s Supper**

Chapter 1 stated that Zwinglianism can be thought of in two senses. First, it is the teaching that the Lord’s Supper is merely a symbolic memorial. Second, it is the general tendency for churches to downplay the significance and efficacy of the sacraments. These two senses are not completely unrelated. That is, if a church actually holds to a symbolic view of the Lords’ Supper, it would be natural for the congregants to downplay the significance of the Supper. For according to this view, believers are not actually feeding on Christ and all his benefits, but merely remembering Christ. Likewise, when a church holds to a Calvinistic view of the Supper, yet functionally acts like memorialist, congregants by default may begin holding to a symbolic view of the Supper. In other words, if the church never teaches or preaches about the significance and efficacy of the Lord’s Supper, the congregants will come to assume that it bears little significance. In whichever situation a church finds itself, it can learn much from the theology and
example of Robert Bruce. The following is a list of six practical ways in which a church can ward off the Zwinglian tendencies of evangelicalism while promoting a robust view of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

**Churches should preach and teach regularly on the Lord’s Supper**

When Bruce discerned that the Roman Catholic view of the Lord’s Supper was influencing Scotland, he addressed it from the pulpit. The result was that his sermons helped to shape the Scottish Reformed tradition of the Lord’s Supper. In a similar way, modern Reformed pastors in America ought to discern the presence and influence of another faulty doctrine of the Eucharist, namely, Zwinglianism. While pastors most likely will not shape the Reformed tradition in America with a single sermon series, they will shape the tradition of their own congregation. Therefore, churches can learn from Bruce by taking opportunities to preach and teach on the topic of the Lord’s Supper.

**Churches should emphasize “communion with Christ”**

Second, churches should emphasize “communion with Christ” in their preaching, teaching, and practice of the Lord’s Supper. In his book *Blessed are the Hungry*, Peter Leithart argues, “Defining the substance of the elements and their relation to the natural body of Christ—especially, defining that relation, according to a kind of *via negativa*, over against Roman Catholic doctrine—is the alpha and the omega of evangelical eucharistic theology.” In other words, when churches do teach on the Lord’s Supper,

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307 David F. Wright, David C. Lachman, and Donald E. Meek, eds., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 104.
308 Peter J. Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry: Meditations on the Lord’s Supper* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 159-160.
they often focus on the metaphysics of the Supper and critique the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. While the Reformers—including Bruce—strongly oppose the Catholic view of the Supper and address the relationship between the elements and the natural body of Christ, they also emphasize the reason why Christ instituted the Lord’s Supper. In this regard, Gerrish points out that

From the first, Calvin shows his anxiety that all the wrangling over the Real Presence might push aside what is actually, for him, the main point. He deplores the frightful controversies over how Christ’s body is present in the bread, and how the body is swallowed by us. The question is why, and to what end, there is a Lord’s Supper at all.\(^{309}\) According to Ligon Duncan, the thrust of Calvin’s teaching is not the nature of Christ’s presence in relation to the elements, but the benefit of participating in the Lord’s Supper. Duncan writes, “It is vital to understand…that Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper is not about real presence but about true communion.”\(^{310}\) Similarly, Bruce’s primary concern is that believers are aware of the great communion they share with Christ—a communion which the Lord’s Supper symbolizes and facilitates. He thus opens his first sermon in \textit{The Mystery}, declaring,

There is nothing in this world, or out of this world, more to be wished by everyone of you than to be conjoined with Jesus Christ, and once for all made one with Him, the God of glory. This heavenly and celestial conjunction is procured and brought about by two special means. It is brought about by means of the Word and preaching, and it is brought about by means of the Sacraments and their ministration. The Word leads us to Christ by the ear; the Sacraments lead us to Christ by the eye.

In keeping with these Reformers, today’s pastors would do well not merely to address the different eucharistic views of the Supper, especially from just the


\(^{310}\) Duncan, “True Communion,” 444.
metaphysical perspective. Instead, their teaching, preaching, and practice of the Lord’s Supper should emphasize its glorious end—communion with Christ.

**Churches should use engaging language when teaching about the Lord’s Supper**

Chapter 2 pointed out that Bruce’s sermons in *The Mystery* continue to be engaging and inviting to modern readers, because Bruce is clear, illustrative, and vivid in his teaching on the Lord’s Supper. Certainly all preachers and teachers should strive to communicate in this manner. In *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chapell submits that “With rare exceptions the most valued preaching throughout history has consistently relied on the inner eye.”

That is, people can often hear ideas better if they can visualize them. Similarly, in *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, John Pipers contends that “Experience and Scripture teach that the heart is most powerfully touched, not when the mind is entertaining ideas, but when it is filled with vivid images of amazing realities.”

If illustrative and vivid language is necessary as a general rule in preaching and teaching, how much more necessary is it when the subject is the Lord’s Supper? Sadly, Communion is a subject which theologians have a tendency to describe by “employing philosophical concepts—derived from Aristotelian or existential-personalist or some other philosophical tradition.” With a matter that can so significantly affect the personal growth of believers as well as their church body, this tendency should not

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313 Peter Leithart, *Blessed are the Hungry*, 12.
prevail. Christians will appreciate to a greater degree that which they can at least begin to understand.\textsuperscript{314}

\textit{Churches should use communing membership classes to teach on the Lord’s Supper}

There were a variety of ways employed to prepare youth for Communion in Scotland during Bruce’s day.\textsuperscript{315} However, one of the primary ways to prepare the youth for the Sacrament was through the use of catechism—at church and at home.\textsuperscript{316} In fact, the First Book of Discipline instructs ministers to use the Geneva Catechism,\textsuperscript{317} which explains the benefit of receiving Christ and all his benefits in the Sacrament.\textsuperscript{318}

In a similar way, churches today can use a catechism or other relevant teaching aids as part of a communing membership class to prepare their youth for the great privilege of partaking in the Lord’s Supper. This process affords churches the opportunity to communicate to parents, members, and visitors just how significant the Lord’s Supper is.

\textit{Churches should practice “informed worship”}

According to Robert Bruce, the minister ought not merely teach and preach on the subject of the Lord’s Supper, but he ought also explain the Lord’s Supper while administering it. He argues that the minister should explain how the people ought to receive the Body and the Blood of Christ signified in the bread and wine. Moreover, he ought to teach them how they should come with

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{314} The author says, “at least begin to understand” because as Calvin points out, the Lord’s Supper is to a large degree incomprehensible. See Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.6.
\textsuperscript{315} Burnet, \textit{Holy Communion}, 46.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{317} Knox, \textit{History of the Reformation}, 252.
\textsuperscript{318} For example, see Calvin, “The Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” in \textit{Calvin: Theological Treatises}, 136-137.
\end{footnotesize}
great reverence to the Table and communicate with the precious Body and Blood of Christ. This he ought to do in a familiar language, that the people may understand and hear him, that they may perceive and take up in their hearts the things he speaks.\textsuperscript{319}

In other words, those administering Communion ought to clearly and simply explain the meaning of the Supper and the posture in which it is to be taken.

Such an explanation is important because believers partaking in the Supper ought to be informed why they are taking the Sacrament and how they can most truly worship during the Sacrament. Thus in keeping with Bruce’s counsel, today’s ministers ought to take the opportunity during the Sacrament to promote informed worship at the Lord’s Table.

**Elements Used During the Supper**

Having considered some ways to effectively teach and preach on the Lord’s Supper in the local church, another pastoral consideration to address is, Which elements ought to be used in the Lord’s Supper? This issue is extremely relevant and controversial, especially for churches within Reformed denominations. Presently, the author’s own church is in the process of considering whether it should switch from serving grape juice to serving wine and/or both during Communion. Discussions on the issue are sure to be very heated and emotional. For example, several Christians at RMCC are presently abstaining from drinking the grape juice during Communion because they believe that it is a sin. On the other hand, there are those who believe that it is a sin to partake of wine during Communion. This camp includes recovering alcoholics, who believe that it would be wrong to partake of wine in light of their weakness. It also includes people who think

\textsuperscript{319} Bruce, *The Mystery*, 113.
that drinking wine is wrong altogether. Certainly, these polarized views reveal the magnitude of the issue.

Robert Bruce does not explicitly address the issue of serving unleavened bread or leavened bread and wine or grape juice. He just speaks of bread and wine as the elements. That he did not mention something other than wine as an element is to be expected since grape juice did not begin replacing wine until the nineteenth-century as a result of the Temperance Movement in America.\(^{320}\) Thus, as Keith Matthison rightly notes, “Until the middle of the 19th century, the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper in accordance with Christ’s institution was a non-issue.”\(^{321}\)

Nevertheless, Bruce clearly believes that wine and bread (he does not specify whether leaven or unleaven) ought to be used in the proper administration of the Lord’s Supper. He declares,

> Every ceremony which Christ instituted in the Supper is as essential as the bread and wine are, and you cannot leave out one jot of them without perverting the whole institution; for whatever Christ commanded to be done, whatever He spoke or did in that whole action, is essential, and must be done. You cannot omit an iota of it without perverting the whole action.\(^{322}\)

Again he states,

> It is His institution that must be kept. If you leave undone one jot of what He commanded you to do, you pervert the institution, for there is nothing in the register of the institution but what is essential. Thus in the celebration of Christ’s institution, we must pay careful attention to whatever He said, did or commanded to be done. We must first say whatever He said, and then do whatever He did, for the administration of the Sacrament must follow upon the Word.\(^{323}\)

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\(^{322}\) Bruce, *The Mystery*, 43.

\(^{323}\) Ibid., 110.
According to Bruce, the Sacrament is perverted if one does not do all that Christ did, or say all that he said. The use of wine and bread is essential.

It is necessary to take issue with Bruce about having to do everything Christ did and said at institution of the Lord’s Supper. The fact is, it is simply impossible to do *everything* that Jesus did at the institution. Bruce himself did not hold to everything that Jesus said and did. For example, the practice in the Church of Scotland during Bruce’s day was for the minister and parishioners to partake of the Supper while sitting down in chairs at a table.\(^{324}\) The Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus and his disciples *reclined* at the table.\(^{325}\) In addition, Bruce’s church used many chalices; Jesus used one cup on the night he instituted the Supper.\(^{326}\) Furthermore, Bruce’s congregants drank considerably more than one might suspect the disciples did on the night of Jesus death. Burnet notes, “The amount of wine consumed at most Communions [in Scotland during Bruce’s time] was colossal.”\(^{327}\) So even Bruce had difficulty carrying out perfectly his own view.

Bruce’s view is also problematic because it opens up the door to a plethora of debates about how to administer Communion in the purest fashion, including the following: (1) Should the wine be poured in front of the congregants? (2) Should the wine be cut with water? (3) Should congregants receive the elements directly from the minister, from the elders, or from other parishioners? (4) Should the bread be unleavened?

Thus, Bruce over-emphasizes the ceremonial aspect of a sign in the Sacrament. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the other extreme—which states that it does not

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\(^{324}\) Hughes Oliphant Old, *Guides to the Reformed Tradition*, 140.


\(^{327}\) Ibid., 30-31.
matter which elements are used in the Sacrament—is also wrong. That is, it would be imprudent to suggest that because it is impossible to repeat *everything* Jesus did at the institution of the Supper that therefore churches are to repeat *nothing*. One must not conclude that the use of bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper is inconsequential.

At this point, it is helpful to consider Calvin’s approach to the elements, which is more moderate than that of Bruce. First, Calvin teaches that the elements are an essential part of the Sacrament because they have physical properties which represent spiritual truths. In relation to the use of bread and wine, he states,

Thus, when bread is given as a symbol of Christ’s body, we must at once grasp this comparison: as bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ’s body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul. When we see wine set for as a symbol of blood, we must reflect on the benefits which wine imparts to the body, and so realize that the same are spiritually imparted to us by Christ’s blood. These benefits are to nourish, refresh, strengthen, and gladden.\(^{328}\)

Calvin holds that there is an important and essential relationship between the sign and the thing signified. Clearly churches are not free to randomly substitute whatever elements they see fit (i.e. cheeseburgers and milkshakes) at the Lord’s Supper.

Second, Calvin, while maintaining the importance of adhering to the elements of institution, allows for a certain flexibility in the *exact* nature of both the ceremony of the Supper as well as the actually elements of the Supper. He states,

But as for the outward ceremony of the action—whether or not believers take it in their hands, or divide it among themselves, or severally eat what has been given to each; whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person; whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white—it makes no difference. These things are indifferent, and left at the church’s discretion.\(^{329}\)

Calvin’s comments here are helpful for churches working through decisions related to the issue of the elements, particularly in the following two areas:

\(^{328}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.3.
\(^{329}\) IV.xvii.43
First, Calvin allows a considerable amount of freedom in determining the ceremony of the Lord’s Supper. Instead of stating that everything Jesus did at the institution of the Supper is a command, Calvin holds that much of it “makes no difference.” Things like how many cups there are and how the elements are distributed are nonessential matters, and thus they are left to discretion of the local church.

Second, Calvin also allows considerable freedom in determining the exact nature of the elements in the Lord’s Supper. He does not care whether the bread is leavened or unleavened. Nor does it matter to him if the wine is red or white.

Granted, Calvin maintains that the elements should be bread and wine. He allows for different kinds of bread—but the food must be bread. In a similar way, he allows for different kinds of wine—but the drink must be wine.

One might speculate that since Calvin allowed for white wine—a symbol which does not clearly depict the red blood of Christ shed on the cross, he too might have allowed for grape juice or “non-alcoholic” wine—symbols which do not clearly depict the gladdening effect of the gospel. Yet such a speculation can remain only a conjecture at best.

The Frequency of the Lord’s Supper

Many Reformed churches wrestle with the issue of how often the Lord’s Supper ought to be celebrated. Some celebrate it every week, while others celebrate it quarterly. Throughout the last five years, the author’s church has gradually gone from celebrating the Supper quarterly to monthly. Presently, the elders are considering celebrating it weekly.
The issue of frequency is not only pertinent, but interesting, especially as one begins to compare the eucharistic theologies of Robert Bruce and John Calvin. Based on the First Book of Discipline, the Church of Scotland was to celebrate Communion at least quarterly.\(^{330}\) Even so, many churches in Scotland failed to meet this expectation, as some celebrated it only once or twice a year, and others failed to observe it altogether.\(^{331}\) In fact, the Church of Scotland became so characterized by its infrequency, that many contemporary Reformed scholars point to its influence to explain the infrequent observance of the Lord’s Supper in American Reformed churches.\(^{332}\)

There were, however, some good explanations for this infrequency in the Church of Scotland. The two primary reasons were (1) a lack of ministers to administer it and (2) bread and wine were not always readily available to a community.\(^{333}\) In this regard, MacLeod observes that infrequent Communion in Scotland “was never a matter of principle. It was a matter of circumstances. In the sixteenth century there simply were not enough ministers to administer the sacrament as often as John Knox wanted and this set an unfortunate precedent.”\(^{334}\) Thus, in light of the practice of his day, it is likely that Bruce celebrated the Supper anywhere from quarterly to monthly.\(^{335}\) Even so, Bruce never addresses the issue of frequency in his sermons in The Mystery.

Calvin, on the other hand, makes a case for the Lord’s Supper to be administered at least once a week. He writes, “The Lord’s Table should have been spread at least once

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\(^{331}\) Ibid., 14.


\(^{333}\) Ibid.


\(^{335}\) Macnicol, *Robert Bruce*, 75.
a week for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually.”\(^{336}\) The City Counsel of Geneva, however, did not accept Calvin’s recommendation to celebrate the Supper weekly.

Though Calvin himself argues for weekly Communion, the fact remains that “the New Testament does not give us a binding statement as to how often the Lord’s Supper should be held.”\(^{337}\) Nevertheless, one can make a strong argument from the implications of Bruce’s and Calvin’s eucharistic theology that the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated at least weekly. For as Michael Horton points out, “One’s view of the nature of the Lord’s Supper plays no small part in determining frequency.”\(^{338}\) Robert Godfrey concurs, noting, “The frequency of administration may say something about what we expect to find at that table (or maybe I should say, whom we expect to find at that table) and what the blessing of meeting Jesus Christ there really is.”\(^{339}\)

As this whole thesis has demonstrated, both Calvin and Bruce have an extremely high view of the Table, because they truly understand Who and what it represents. Specifically, both argue (1) that the Sacrament is a sign that seals the promises of God’s Word; (2) that the Sacraments does not in any way point to a deficiency in God’s Word, but rather is a mark of man’s weakness in the flesh and of God’s goodness in grace;\(^{340}\) and (3) that the gospel is presented to sinners with greater clarity and certainty in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Particularly with regards to this last point, Bruce claims, “The Sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got

\(^{336}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.46.
\(^{337}\) Lethem, *The Lord’s Supper*, 57.
\(^{340}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xiv.3.
Similarly, Calvin contends, “It is indeed true that this same grace is offered us by the gospel; yet as in the Supper we have a more ample certainty and fuller enjoyment.”

If what they argue is really true, then the question is, Why not? Why not celebrate the Lord’s Supper weekly in order to provide believers with a clearer and surer presentation of the gospel? In light of the eucharistic theology of Bruce and Calvin, it is most consistent and most beneficial for church leaders (especially those in the Reformed tradition) to opt for a weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

**The Nature of Self-Examination**

One can draw still further pastoral implications from Robert Bruce’s eucharistic theology, particularly regarding how administers of the Sacrament ought to instruct partakers to prepare themselves for the Table. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 11:28-31 that Christians are to “examine” (δοκιμάζω) themselves (v. 28), to be “discerning (διακρίνω) the body of the Lord” (v. 29), and to “judge” (διακρίνω) themselves (v. 31). Bruce interprets these commands as opportunities for the Christian to “try and examine himself strictly” and to “scrutinize” his conscience in order to see what assurance he has of his salvation. The issue of assurance was one of the major theological debates in Scotland during Bruce’s day, particularly in regard to the nature of faith and whether to what degree one can know that Christ’s promises of salvation have been applied to him.

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341 Bruce, *The Mystery*, 64.
342 Calvin, “Short Treatise,” 145.
344 Bruce, *The Mystery*, 170.
345 MacLeod, *Scottish Theology*, 27-31.
Most likely Bruce was using his sermons on the Sacrament to “weigh in” on the debate about assurance. The result is a set of five sermons on the Lord’s Supper, which have a disproportionate amount of space devoted to issue of examination.

Further, the nature of examination called for by Bruce in preparation for the Lord’s Supper is not in view in the 1 Corinthians 11 pericope. Addressing the 1 Corinthians passage, Gordon Fee writes,

This paragraph has had an unfortunate history of understanding in the church…. [The table] has been allowed to become a table of condemnation for the very people who most truly need that assurance of acceptance that this table affords—the sinful, the weak, the weary. One does not have to “get rid of the sin in one’s life” in order to partake. Here by faith one may once again receive the assurance that “Christ receiveth sinners.”

In other words, the emphasis of preparation does not include calling on members of Christ’s body to scrutinize their consciences to determine their assurance of salvation. Rather the emphasis of examination is to see one’s need for Christ.

Calvin further critiques the idea that preparation for the Supper consists of intense introspection. He compares it with Roman Catholicism when he writes, “The Papists…order all those who are about to receive the Supper to examine their lives carefully and anxiously, so that they may unburden all their sins in the ear of a priest. That is their method of preparation!” In contrast, Calvin proposes that

…the holy examination of which Paul is speaking is far removed from torture. Those people think that they are clear after they have tortured themselves with their thoughts for a few hours, and have let the priest into the secret of their shamefulness. It is another kind of examination that Paul requires here. This is the quickest and easiest method of preparation for you. If you want to derive proper benefit from this gift of Christ, you must bring faith and repentance. Under repentance I include love, for there is not doubt that the man, who has learnt to

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deny himself in order to devote himself to Christ and His service, will also give himself whole-heartedly to the promotion of the unity which Christ has commended to us.\footnote{Ibid.}

Thus Calvin steers away from intense introspection, and argues that one must come to the Table with faith and true repentance for his sin. This process includes seeking reconciliation with others.

In light of Bruce’s and Calvin’s differing views with respect to self-examination before Communion, there are two pastoral implications to consider. First, the emphasis of preparation should be on Christ’s invitation for repentant sinners—not on the exercise of rigorously trying one’s conscience. While Bruce at one point does call believers to “go forward boldly” even if they have faith in only a small degree,\footnote{Bruce, \textit{The Mystery}, 198.} his two sermons (sixty pages worth of material) devoted to testing the fitness of one’s faith surely clouds the invitation. An overemphasis on scrutinizing one’s conscience has often caused doubtful Christians to think that they are not worthy to participate in the Lord’s Supper. Calvin argues that, in contrast, pastors ought to invite believers to the Table in the following manner: “As being poor, come to a kindly giver; as sick, to a physician; as sinners, to the Author of righteousness; finally, as dead, to him who gives us life.”\footnote{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.42.} He goes on to say, “We shall think that the worthiness, which is commanded by God, consists chiefly in faith, which reposes all things in Christ.”\footnote{Ibid.} In other words, administers of the Sacrament ought to invite those who, by faith, see their spiritual poverty and thus their great need for Christ.

\footnotetext[348]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[349]{Bruce, \textit{The Mystery}, 198.}
\footnotetext[350]{Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xvii.42.}
\footnotetext[351]{Ibid.}
A second pastoral implication is that churches ought to emphasize the peacemaking aspect of examination prior to administering the Sacrament. Calvin stresses that part of coming to the Table is that a man “give himself whole-heartedly to the promotion of the unity” in the church.\footnote{Calvin, \textit{First Corinthians}, 253.} Bruce on the other hand, in his emphasis on assurance, seems to miss the importance of this aspect of Communion. In fact, when he does mention living at peace with others in the body, it is only in the context of providing assurance of salvation to one’s conscience.\footnote{Bruce, \textit{The Mystery}, 185, 194.}

Yet Paul calls on Christians to partake of the Lord’s Supper in a worthy manner, which includes “discerning the body of the Lord.”\footnote{1 Cor. 11:29, \textit{English Standard Version}.} In this light, Gordon Fee well explains the horizontal nature of preparation for the Lord’s Supper:

> The Lord’s Supper is not just any meal; it is \textit{the} meal, in which at a common table with one loaf and a common cup they proclaimed through the death of Christ they were one body, the body of Christ; and therefore they are not just any group of sociologically diverse people who could keep those differences intact at this table. Here they must “discern/recognize as distinct” the one body of Christ, of which they all are parts and in which they all are gifts to one another. To fail to discern this body in this way, by abusing those of lesser sociological status, is to incur God’s judgment.\footnote{Fee, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, 564; emphasis original.}

Thus, far from scrutinizing one’s conscience for assurance, Fee argues that preparation for Communion is about peacemaking—about the members of Christ’s body seeking to live in unity by being reconciled with one another.

Alfred Poirier communicates this idea well in his forthcoming book \textit{The Peacemaking Pastor}:

> The Lord’s Supper is [an] opportune time in the life of the church to remind your people of the reconciliation we have with God and with one another through Christ’s peacemaking blood. The Corinthians had not only forgotten this blood-

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{352} Calvin, \textit{First Corinthians}, 253.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{353} Bruce, \textit{The Mystery}, 185, 194.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{354} 1 Cor. 11:29, \textit{English Standard Version}.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{355} Fee, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, 564; emphasis original.}
bought reconciliation represented by the wine and the blood, but they were also defiling the Lord’s Supper by their peace-breaking! Thus Paul admonishes them for their blatant misconduct, and he warns them as to the manner in which they should take Communion.

Paul specifically warns the Corinthians to examine themselves and to recognize “the body of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:29). Thiselton argues persuasively for understanding the phrase “recognizing the body” as referring to us Christians discerning our distinctive life as one body and “not as individuals.” He calls that distinctive life the recognition that we are “the having-died-and-being-raised-one-body-of-Christ” people. In other words, our social identity rests upon and arises out of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. And the sacrament, as a visible expression of his death and resurrection, marks our life as conformed to the crucified and risen Christ.

Therefore, as pastors, we should use the Lord’s Supper to remind our people that if we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, we cannot carry on socially as the world does. We cannot look only to our own interests. We cannot think too highly of ourselves while looking down on others. And we cannot refuse either to confess our faults or to grant forgiveness.

One way I hold out this reminder is by guarding the table. I encourage my people not to partake of the Sacrament if they are unwilling or have not yet taken steps to be reconciled to a brother or sister with whom they are presently at odds. I remind them of our Lord’s own words in Matthew 5:23-24: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

What is interesting in this passage is that Jesus pictures us “remembering” the conflicts in our lives during worship—true worship. Worship in Spirit and truth should result in remembering those with whom we are not yet reconciled. For we cannot worship the God of peace and hate our brother, nor can we eat from the Lord’s Table when our heart and mouth are full of bitterness. And true worship should encourage us that the God of peace will be “with us” if we need to go and get reconciled.356

As Poirier exhorts, the church should continually remind believers that the Supper is a meal summoning God’s children to live as peacemakers.

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In conclusion, preparation for Communion is more about recognizing the need to come to the Table to receive Christ and his assurance than it is about discerning to what degree one has assurance. And it is more about examining one’s heart in relation to the church than it is about examining one’s heart individually.

The Age of Communing Members

A final pastoral implication of Robert Bruce’s eucharistic theology has to do with the age of communing members. Neither Bruce nor Calvin were paedocommunionists. In his Institutes, Calvin argues that “the Supper is given to older persons who, having passed tender infancy, can now take solid food.” Additionally, he asks, “If only those who know how to distinguish rightly the holiness of Christ’s body are able to participate worthily, why should we offer poison instead of life-giving food to our tender children?” In other words, Calvin maintains that is a criteria, which infants are unable to meet, for participating in the Lord’s Supper. Along similar lines, Bruce reasons that “a child cannot examine himself—therefore [he] ought not to come to the Lord’s Table.” So neither Calvin nor Bruce believes that it is right for infants to come to the Table.

Interestingly, though, neither sets a specific age at which it is appropriate for a youth to partake in the Sacrament. Robert Macnicol, a biographer of Bruce, notes “We might have been astonished, had we looked into St. Giles, at the youth of some of the celebrants. The evidence tends to prove that the custom of coming at an early age to communion was common in the Reformation Church.” As proof, Macnicol mentions

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357 Calvin, Institutes, IV.xvi.30.
358 Ibid.
359 Bruce, The Mystery, 198.
360 Macnicol, Robert Bruce, 75.
Robert Blair, who partook at age twelve, and James Melville, who partook at age thirteen.\(^{361}\)

And while Bruce and Calvin rightly hold that there is no specific age at which one is ready to participate in the Supper, Calvin does offers some helpful guidelines to church leaders as they seek to examine prospective communing members:

> If you want to derive proper benefit from this gift of Christ, you must bring faith and repentance. Under repentance I include love, for there is not doubt that the man, who has learnt to deny himself in order to devote himself to Christ and His service, will also give himself whole-heartedly to the promotion of the unity which Christ has commended to us. Indeed it is not perfect faith or repentance that is asked for. This is said because some people, by being far too insistent upon a perfection which cannot be found anywhere, are putting a barrier between every single man and woman and the Supper forever. But if you are serious in your intention to aspire to the righteousness of God, and if, humbled by the knowledge of your own wretchedness, you fall back on the grace of Christ, and rest upon it, be assured that you are a guest worthy of approaching this table. By saying that you are worthy, I mean that the Lord does not keep you out, even if in other respects you are not all you ought to be. For faith, even if imperfect, makes the unworthy worthy.\(^{362}\)

Thus, while there is no specific age requirement for participation in the Lords’ Supper, faith and repentance, imperfect as they may be, are the primary prerequisites church leaders ought to be looking for as they assess young people who desire to take Communion. Specifically, these prerequisites ought to serve as a guide for those developing the curriculum for communing membership classes, as well as a standard for those interviewing young people for communing membership.

All in all, there are many positive and practical pastoral implications for Bruce’s eucharistic theology. Modern Reformed churches, while perhaps not agreeing with every point of implementation recommended in this appendix, would do well to develop

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\(^{361}\) Ibid., 76.

\(^{362}\) Calvin, *First Corinthians*, 253.
strategies which enhance the understanding and appreciation of the Lord’s Supper in their congregation.
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