

Edible Word: The Lord's Supper in the Light of the Doctrine of Scripture

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Summary: This article argues that the Lord's Supper as a visible (or better, edible) word of God may fruitfully be considered in the light of the doctrine of Scripture. Although the Bible and Communion should not be confused, God's visible word to us shares characteristics of his written word in important ways. In a sense, the Supper may be said to be true, authoritative, necessary, and sufficient. Both Supper and Scripture present Christ to us to be received by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Visible Word

It has been traditional at least since Augustine to think of the Lord's Supper¹ as a 'visible word',² and this is a well-established part of the Reformed tradition.³ Indeed, B. A. Gerrish argues that the category of word is central to a Reformed understanding of the sacraments: 'The key to a Calvinistic interpretation of the sacraments is, in short, to construe them as essentially word, promise or proclamation'.⁴

Even if 'visible word' is not the first or the only thing one might want to say about the Supper, and even if the phrase has some weaknesses⁵, if, as the Reformed have always thought, it is a valid way of speaking about the Supper, it seems likely that it will be helpful to compare and contrast the Scriptures, God's written word, with the Supper, a visible word that God gives. That is what this article seeks to begin to do. We will take a Reformed understanding of the doctrine of the word of God written (and to a lesser extent preached) and ask in what ways and to what extent these doctrinal affirmations might validly and fruitfully be applied to a Reformed understanding of the Supper (drawing especially on Calvin). I offer a very brief summary of a Reformed doctrine of Scripture⁶ and use that,

¹ One could also consider baptism as a visible word but for the sake of space and simplicity I focus here on the Supper. There is a case for this since the Supper, like the Scriptures, has a regular place in nourishing the ongoing life of the believer in the Lord's Day service, whereas baptism is a one-off sacrament of initiation.

² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book 2, Chapter 3, available at: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/ddc2.html>.

³ John Calvin uses the phrase 'visible word'. For example, see *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.14.4.

⁴ B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 108

⁵ James B. Jordan rejects the term 'visible word' in *The Liturgy Trap: The Bible Versus Mere Tradition in Worship*, 3rd ed. (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2008), arguing that since human beings alone are made in the image of God, they are the only true visible words of God. Peter Leithart has also pointed out some potential weaknesses of the term in 'Visible Words', *Credenda Agenda* 15.4. For example, the sacraments are not designed primarily to be looked at, as 'visible words' might suggest. In the passage cited above, Augustine relates the Supper to taste. 'Tangible' or 'participatory' or 'sensory words' might be useful terms. 'Edible word' might be a preferable way of designating the Lord's Supper in contrast to both the Scripture and baptism. Of course, thinking of the Supper as a visible word need not rule out other approaches. For example, the Supper is clearly also a ritual meal.

⁶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, provides a convenient brief summary of the doctrine of Scripture. I have offered a summary of B. B. Warfield's influential doctrine of Scripture in "'What the Bible Says, God Says": B. B. Warfield's Doctrine of Scripture', *Ecclesia Reformanda* 1.2 (2009): 183-210 available at

guided by the headings one might find in a typical systematic theology of Scripture, to consider the Supper. As I proceed, I draw out some details of the doctrine of Scripture that might prove fruitful for this study and introduce some other themes in Reformed reflection on the Scriptures that seem especially pertinent to this consideration of the Supper.

Since God is a God of order (1 Cor 14.3), it would not be surprising to find patterns in the way he works. It is plausible that the visible word, the Supper, would resemble the written word, the Scriptures.

As evangelicals have often emphasised when articulating a doctrine of Scripture, words reflect the character and nature of their speaker. If the Supper is a word of God, we would expect it to share characteristics with God's written word that derive from who God is⁷ — for example, to be powerful and truthful, since these are characteristics of the God whose word it is.

Evangelicals are sometimes accused of having a weak doctrine of the sacraments. Carl Trueman⁸ and Peter Leithart⁹ are among those who have commented on contemporary evangelicalism's neglect of the Supper. On the other hand, if Evangelicals are anything, we are Bible people, so it may be that our relatively well-developed doctrine of Scripture can help us to think more deeply than we sometimes have about our doctrine of the Supper, and perhaps even be a resource for the wider church.

Of course, we must not confuse the Scriptures and the Supper. We must be alert to differences as well as similarities and also reflect on how Scripture and Supper are rightly related.

The Reformed doctrine of Scripture

We may briefly sketch out the Reformed doctrine of Scripture, which will form our agenda, as follows:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ecclesia-reformanda/1.2_183.pdf. See also Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Survey* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 111-175. Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009) is perhaps the best short recent treatment of the doctrine of Scripture from an evangelical point of view. Much more detail can be found in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

⁷ E.g., Peter Jensen writes, 'Because of this origin [of Scripture by inspiration] in God and the covenantal function it has been given, we rightly expect Scripture to exhibit two features that reflect God's character: unity, because God is completely consistent, and truthfulness, because God cannot lie' (*The Revelation of God* Contours in Christian Theology [Leicester: IVP, 2002], 179). Or as Timothy Ward (*Words of Life*, 19) sets out the principle, our doctrine of Scripture should in its every aspect be 'shaped from the bottom up by the character and actions of God, and . . . integrally related to God's being and action'.

⁸ Carl Trueman, 'The Incarnation and the Lord's Supper', in David Peterson, ed., *The Word Became Flesh: Evangelicals and the Incarnation – papers from the sixth Oak Hill College Annual School of Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 185.

⁹ Peter J. Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1993), 123.

The Reformed doctrine of Scripture is sometimes summarised with the tag ‘what the Bible says, God says’. According to the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration, all the words of the Bible are breathed out by God the Holy Spirit. The Bible is both a human and divine book, genuinely the work of human writers in ordinary language, but fully and truly God’s word. The human and divine are not in competition in the Scriptures. The mode of inspiration may have varied, but at times the human writers were fully engaged and creative in a process described as concursive operation, as God worked in and through the human authors and all the circumstances of their writing so that in Scripture their words are his words.

In speaking the Scriptures, God has accommodated himself to human need. God intended his canonical word to be preserved in writing. God’s inscripturated word always comes to us by physical means (such as sound waves) and engagement with the Bible often involves a physical book or, more and more, a screen. The Bible is true, inerrant (without error), and infallible in all that it affirms. Like God, it is entirely trustworthy. It serves as the supreme authority and final court of appeal on all issues it addresses. It is necessary, clear (perspicuous), and sufficient. What the Bible says, the Holy Spirit says to the church today.

The claim to inerrancy applies strictly only to the Scriptures as originally given. The autographs are now lost and it is highly unlikely that we possess any entirely inerrant version today, but in the providence of God the Scriptures have been sufficiently and accurately preserved for the church such that we can come to them with confidence that they are the word of God to us. Though the original texts remain authoritative, the Bible can and should be translated.

The Bible is self-authenticating and the Holy Spirit witnesses to his own word. The church did not give Scriptures authority but recognised them as God’s authoritative word. The Bible functions as one of the means of grace (not an end in itself) and is to be read prayerfully in the fellowship of the church using ordinary means¹⁰ and seeking the Spirit’s help in understanding, applying, and living in the light of all that God says. Scripture helps us to interpret Scripture: each text must be read in its canonical context and according its place in salvation-history.

Through his written word Christ is present as speaking the Scriptures to his church for her salvation, blessing, sanctification, and edification. The Bible is God’s voice for all of God’s people. As God speaking, the Bible is powerful and effective (efficacious) either for salvation or judgement. God’s people are to meditate day and night on the Scriptures, but the Bible’s primary role is in the Lord’s Day service where it is normatively read and proclaimed. God has gifted his church with authorised ministers of the word. When received by faith the Scriptures make their hearers wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. It is through the written word that the incarnate life-giving Word is encountered, known, and believed upon.

Authorisation / Institution

¹⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, Section VII commends ‘a due use of the ordinary means’. For example, one might consult a Hebrew dictionary.

Influenced by John Wenham¹¹, evangelicals often defend the authority of the Bible by saying that Jesus accepted our OT¹² and authorised the Apostles to write and supervise the formation of the NT.¹³ Similarly, the Supper exists by Christ's institution and authorisation. As the Bible was written and is ministered at his command, the Supper exists because of Christ's institution and is ministered in obedience to his command. Both Scripture and Supper depend on God's initiative and establishing. The Apostles were of course central to passing on both Scripture and the Supper.

Words of God

For the Reformed, the Supper may be thought of as a word of God. Granted we speak to God in the service of the Lord's Supper. We renew our allegiance to him. But above all the Supper is God speaking to us, preaching the gospel to us, feeding us. We receive from him. This insistence that the primary 'direction' of the Supper is from God to hungry sinners rather than a God-ward sacrifice is one of the key insights of the Reformation.

Truthfulness

The Supper, of course, refers to true events, such as the Last Supper and principally Jesus' death on the cross. Like the Scriptures, it refers to them truly, faithfully, accurately, even inerrantly and infallibly, though of course not exhaustively.¹⁴

As words, both Scripture and Supper are signs that refer (truly) to a reality.¹⁵ If we might say that the 'language' of the Supper, including the bread and wine and what is done with them, is something like metaphorical or figurative language (it is not literally Christ's body and

¹¹ *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (1972; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009). More recently, a brief popular treatment is Andrew Wilson, *Unbreakable: What the Son of God Said About the Word of God* (Leyland: 10Publishing, 2014).

¹² On this point, see Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

¹³ On Jesus' authorisation of the Apostles, see, e.g., John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory: How the Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton: IVP, 2016), 117-124. Christ's promise in John 14.25-26 is important. The NT is either the work of the Apostles or from their circle and likely approved by them. Certainly the church maintains that the teaching of Scripture is apostolic though some NT books were not penned by them.

¹⁴ The 'Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy' (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1978) which is available with bibliographical information at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>, remains helpful in clarifying the doctrine of inerrancy and its limits. E.g., it does not commit one to literalistic interpretation nor to assuming that the Bible always speaks with technical precision or strict accuracy (e.g. it may contain round numbers or phenomenological descriptions).

¹⁵ On semiotics, the study of signs and signification, see, e.g., Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2002). Augustine has been called 'the greatest semiotician of antiquity and the real founder of semiotics', an opinion cited in Winfried Noth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 17. He gave words a prime place amongst signs in *On Christian Doctrine*, book 2, chapter 3. *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, question 163, speaks of the sacraments as including 'an outward and sensible sign'.

blood eaten and drunk), it is worth remembering that arguably in a sense all language¹⁶ and language about God in particular is analogical.

Calvin insists in a further sense that the Supper is truthful. God would never give mere empty signs. God promises truly and offers us what he promises in the Supper. Neither in Scripture nor in the Supper does God deceive us.

For example, Calvin writes,

it is not an empty or unmeaning sign which is held out to us, but those who receive this promise by faith are actually made partakers of his [Christ's] flesh and blood. For in vain would the Lord command his people to eat *bread*, declaring that *it is his body*, if the effect were not truly added to the figure. Nor must it be supposed that we dispute this point, whether it is in reality, or only by signification, that Christ presents himself to be enjoyed by us in the Lord's Supper; for, though we perceive nothing in it but bread, yet he does not disappoint or mock us, when he undertakes to nourish our souls by his flesh. The true eating of the flesh of Christ, therefore, is not only pointed out by the sign, but is likewise exhibited in reality.¹⁷

Speaking of Calvin's doctrine of the Supper, J. N. Tylenda says, 'The sacraments are signs, it is true, but they are not merely signs, they are signs of a present reality'.¹⁸

Normative role

The Supper may also be said to play a central normative role in our theology. Since it was established by the Lord Jesus, it is authoritative. In traditional liturgical churches, much of the celebration of the Eucharist is normally basically in the form of a prayer, and according to the tag *lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of prayer is the law of belief.¹⁹ The Supper may serve as an analogy or rule of faith, reminding believers that Jesus Christ and him crucified

¹⁶ James E. Robson argues that, 'In reality there is always in the use of a word a component of "like" and a component of "unlike". "Univocal" and "equivocal" are labels describing ends of an axis, rather than inhabited locations. Usage of words is always analogical, since no two understandings, no two situations are identical' ('Forgotten Dimensions of Holiness', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 33 [2011]: 128-129).

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*, 209, on Matt 26:26. Similarly, e.g., *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 10:3*, 316; *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:24*, 378; *Institutes* 4.17.10, 21; 'Clear Explanation', *Theological Treatises*, 268; 'Best Method', *Theological Treatises*, 325, 327; 'Second Defence in answer to Westphal', *Theological Treatises*, 274, 276.

¹⁸ J. N. Tylenda, 'Calvin and Christ's Presence in the Supper – True or Real', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 27 (1974): 65.]

¹⁹ In Anglicanism, liturgy is often given a particular prominence in forming doctrine. *The Book of Common Prayer* is one of the 'historic formularies' of the Church of England that, according to the Declaration of Assent that ministers make, bear witness to the faith (*Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England* [London: Church House Publishing, 2000], xi). The Roman Catholic church officially recognises this point: 'When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she confesses the faith received from the apostles – whence the ancient saying: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (or *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, according to Prosper of Aquitaine). The law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays. Liturgy is a constitutive element of the holy and living Tradition' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Vatican: Bishopric of Rome, 1999, 1124]). With qualification, the Reformed could accept something of this approach. Of course, the Supper is narrated in the Scriptures. No separate Tradition is required.

(1 Cor 1.23; 2.2) are central to the church's life. Just as the gospel of Jesus Christ is the interpretative key for the Scriptures, the Supper can serve as a kind of canon within the canon to remind us of the central event of the gospel and to drive home to us the necessity of receiving by faith, in the Spirit, God's gracious gift of the crucified life-giving Christ.

Considered as a true word from God and therefore as a theological norm, possible doctrinal contributions that the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper and reflection on it might make would include the centrality of the sacrificial death of Christ on his people's behalf and the vital necessity of faith union with him, participating in him, benefiting personally from his death. The supper highlights our need and stresses grace since we come to God empty-handed to be filled. The believer's feeding in the Supper suggests that individuals need to appropriate Christ for themselves by faith with thanksgiving. The service dramatizes the fact that Christ is the source of believers' life and health. Arguably, at least, the Apostle Paul also reasons from the specific ritual practice of the Lord's Supper (the use of one loaf) to the unity of the church.²⁰

Clearly for Paul it is possible that reflection on the Lord's Supper, and even perhaps on details of how it is celebrated, will suggest theological truths. The Supper should be a regular reminder of the corporate nature of our Christian life: it is about me and all those who are called to Christ's table, not just me and Jesus. Ideally celebrating the Lord's Supper will bring both joy and seriousness to the life of faith. The shape of the Lord's Day service suggests that Word and Supper are intended to equip us for mission and for Christ's service in the world as we are sent out to live for him.

The Supper as proclamation

The Bible says that whenever believers eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord's Supper they 'proclaim (καταγγέλλετε) the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11.26) – word-language, of course. It seems likely that this means more than that there are words used or sermons preached in the Communion service which proclaim the Lord's death. It would seem that the Apostle Paul regards the very act of the Lord's Supper as itself proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.²¹

'Proclaiming' is clearly a verbal category: it is a common way of speaking of the preaching of the word in the New Testament and subsequently. The Bible says, then, that the Lord's Supper preaches Christ's death ('until he comes', that is, perhaps, with an eschatological orientation and expectation, in hope). The Supper is indeed a word, a sermon even. Enacted in the present and for the sake of ongoing Christian discipleship now, it looks back to the death of Christ and forward to the consummation of all things. In this it is like the Scriptures, which also speak to us now in the light of what Jesus has done and will do.

The Scriptures and Supper as norming the church

²⁰ 1 Cor 10.17, 'Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf'.

²¹ Even if it is objected that this is simply a vivid metaphor this would not destroy the case being made since it is admittedly a metaphor to call the Supper a 'word'. Obviously, it is not literally a word like other words, though it contains words.

The church gathered and listening to the Word of God might be seen as a paradigmatic expression of the church, as at Mount Sinai,²² but this is also true of the Lord's Supper. Eating with God is often part of Old Testament worship, as in the Fellowship / Peace Offerings.²³

The Supper is also norming in the sense that it is the forum for church discipline, which ultimately takes the form of excommunication. Participation in the church's Eucharistic life is intended to provide an authoritative definition of those who are to be regarded as members of the church in good standing. Though the invisible church is not yet perfectly revealed, at the Supper the church is redefined and at least to some extent made visible, even made flesh, we may say. Although it is far from being the only thing to say about the church, the gathered congregation having heard the word now at the Communion table is a powerful expression, perhaps even the clearest and most perfect possible expression until the eschaton, of what the church is and shall be, since our destiny is the Wedding Supper of the Lamb, of which the Supper is a foretaste.

Supper and Scripture as Words of God

The Reformed prioritise the Word of God in Scripture without trading this off against the human author's words. The ultimate interest is not just the words of Paul but the Word of God in and through Paul's words. As Webster puts it, 'Jesus Christ... is its [Scripture's] *auctor primaries* and its *res*'.²⁴

Calvinists also see the Supper as primarily God's word to us. This is a different from Zwingli's understanding of the Supper (at least after 1525), where it is human word, our oath of allegiance to the Christian community, that is emphasised.²⁵ For Calvin, this idea is not entirely excluded,²⁶ but it is secondary to God's word to us in the Supper.

In this respect, the Supper is rather like the book of Psalms. It is a word of God to us that God also invites us to say back to him.

²² Exod 19; Deut 4.10; 9.10; 18.16. Note also Acts 7.38, which speaks of the ἐκκλησίᾳ (church / assembly) in the desert and of Moses receiving the word of God at Sinai. D. Broughton Knox's stress on the church at Sinai has been influential: 'the Old Testament assembly or church was a physical gathering of all the people of God, in the presence of God, first at Mount Sinai' (*Selected Works*, vol. 2, *Church and Ministry* [Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2003], 19, see also 24-29, 86-88).

²³ Lev 3.1-17; 7.11-34; 19.5-8; 22.29-30.

²⁴ John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 18.

²⁵ Alistair E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 175. Zwingli writes, 'whoever in the congregation gives thanks to God in the remembrance or supper testifies to the fact that he rejoices in the death of Christ from the depths of his heart, and thanks him for it' ('On Baptism', *Corpus Reformatorum* [Berlin, Leipzig and Zurich: 1834, 91.217]. See further W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 181-182.

²⁶ See, for example, Calvin's definition of a sacrament in *Institutes* 4.14.1, where he includes the idea that in response to God's word to us 'we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men'.

The human words of Scripture are essential, but the ultimate interest in them is as the words of God. Likewise in the Supper, the elements of bread and wine are essential but we must not be fixated on nor satisfied with the signs. Rather our focus should be on the thing signified, the reality, Jesus Christ.

Concursive operation

Just as God shaped Paul to be a suitable author of the Pauline Epistles, we might say that God so governed history and culture that bread and wine would be suitable elements for the Lord's Supper. Just as the forming of Paul, properly considered, required God's sovereign government of all things, so it is with the creation of bread and wine as appropriate elements in the Supper. This suggests God's wider sovereignty over such things as meteorology, agriculture, cookery, and domestic habits – in other words, creation and culture.

Humanity and Divinity

The words of the Bible are God's word, given by him, and bread and wine are instituted by Christ and God-given.

Just as human language and the words of Scripture are man-made, bread and wine are 'the work of human hands'.²⁷ In Scripture and in the Supper, God makes use of what is genuinely human. The Bible uses ordinary human language, and the Reformed likewise insist on the ordinariness of the created elements. There is no change in them. Ordinary bread and wine remain, as do the ordinary Hebrew and Greek words employed by the Bible writers under inspiration. The word always retains a real creatureliness. It is historical, cultural, and situated, but it is not somehow purely natural, as if its creation could be divorced from its creator. God created all things, holds them in being, and governs them, redeeming them, and so created things are instruments that God can use. As Webster puts it, 'the natural properties of texts' find 'their appointment as creaturely auxiliaries through which God administers healing to wasted and ignorant sinners'.²⁸

This creatureliness tends to suggest that we should avoid a magical or superstitious attachment to the words of the Bible and to the elements in the Lord's Supper.

This pattern of God making use of created things without violating their nature is congruent with the broader theological point that nature and grace are thus not antithetical but that grace renews and perfects nature. Though fallen, the creation is oriented towards its destiny in the new creation. When taken up by God in his redemptive, healing activity, the physical happily mediates the spiritual.

God is the Lord of language and of creation and is powerful enough to use ordinary things for divine purposes.

²⁷ A phrase from the Roman Catholic Mass also included in *Common Worship*, Holy Communion, prayers at the preparation of the Table number 4, 291.

²⁸ Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 6.

The incarnation

The humanity and historical ‘situatedness’ of the language of Scripture and of bread and wine also fits with the doctrine of the incarnation. God gives us the specific and concrete rather than the abstract and ethereal: actual words spoken rather than ideas; tangible bread and wine broken and poured out, not just the idea of nourishment. In the Supper believers are fed with Christ, not merely reminded of his saving work or encouraged to think about it. Carl Trueman is critical of the fact that, as he sees it, ‘in many evangelical churches, the Lord’s Supper becomes an opportunity simply to sit in silence and reflect upon Christ’s death in the service, with the sacramental action itself being entirely accidental to what is going on’.²⁹

Certainly there is no hypostatic union in the Scriptures.³⁰ The Bible is a book not a person: it is the Word of God written, made book, not the Word of God incarnate, made flesh. Nevertheless, Reformed writers have sometimes found the doctrine of the incarnation to be a helpful analogy in explaining how the Scriptures can be both fully human and fully divine. Wallace is confident that the doctrine of the incarnation also helps to shape Calvin’s understanding of the sacraments: ‘There is no doubt that Calvin sees an analogy which at least serves to regulate his thinking on this mystery of sacramental union, in the mystery of the union between God and man in Jesus Christ. . . . His views on it [the incarnation] serve largely to determine his thinking on the sacraments’.³¹

A formulation borrowed from Chalcedonian Christology allows Calvin to present his own doctrine of the Supper as a third way between opposite errors. On the one hand, the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation confuses sign and reality. On the other, the Zwinglians, with their mere memorialism, separate sign and reality.³² His doctrine seeks to preserve a unity between sign and reality without confusing or separating them.

Accommodation

²⁹ Trueman, ‘Incarnation and the Lord’s Supper’, 189.

³⁰ Warfield, ‘The Biblical Idea of Inspiration’, 108; Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God’s Word in Servant-Form: Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson: Reformed Academic Press, 2008), 46; Kevin Vanhoozer, ‘God’s Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today’, in Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright, eds., *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 152; Timothy Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 266; Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 13.

³¹ Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1995), 167.

³² In *Comm. on 1 Cor 10:3*, Calvin charges that papists confound the reality and the sign, and unbelievers separate them, and says, ‘let us preserve a middle position’. Melvin Tinker also comments that ‘there is little doubt that he saw his own position as a *via media* between the Roman view on the one hand and mere memorialism on the other’ (‘Language, Symbols and Sacraments: Was Calvin’s View of the Lord’s Supper Right?’ *Churchman* 112.2 [1998]: 131).

In speaking in human words in Scripture, God accommodates himself to us. As Calvin puts it, 'when God descends to us, he, in a certain sense, abases himself, and stammers with us'.³³ From God's point of view, the Bible is like the speech of an adult to a baby. Calvin says that 'God speaking to us . . . condescends to our ignorance; and, therefore, . . . God prattles to us in Scripture in a rough and popular style . . . on account of the love which he bears us'.³⁴

However, as compared to the word (which is itself accommodated to us), the sacraments might be said to be more fully accommodated to human need. Calvin says,

For seeing we are so foolish, that we cannot receive him with true confidence of heart, when he is presented by simple teaching and preaching, the Father, of his mercy, not at all disdain[ing] to condescend in this matter to our infirmity, has desired to attach to his Word a visible sign, by which he represents the substance of his promises, to confirm and fortify us, and deliver us from all doubt and uncertainty.³⁵

The obviously physical nature of the Supper and its appeal to our various senses suggest that it is particularly adapted to our nature as embodied creatures. Cranmer puts this especially vividly: our Saviour's

intent [was] that as much as is possible for man, [in the sacraments] we may see Christ with our eyes, smell him at our nose, taste him with our mouths, grope him with our hands, and perceive him with all our senses. For as the word of God preached putteth Christ into our ears; so likewise these elements of water, bread, and wine, joined to God's word, do after a sacramental manner put Christ into our eyes, mouths, hands, and all our senses.³⁶

The above quotation from Calvin suggests that he thought that the Word alone ought to be sufficient for us. Our foolishness makes the sacraments necessary. One might ask whether the sacraments are an accommodation to us as weak creatures or whether they are also an accommodation to us as wayward sinners. The fact that Calvin saw the fruit of the Tree of Life as a sacrament³⁷ suggests that he saw a role for the sacramental before the Fall and apart from sin. The sacraments are part of the way in which God condescends to relate to us as embodied creatures not only in particular as sinners.

Authentication

³³ *Comm. on Gen 35:7*. Similarly, 'For we know how God accommodates himself to the ordinary way of speaking, on account of our ignorance, and sometimes even, if I may be allowed the expression, stammers' (*Comm. on John 21:25*).

³⁴ *Comm. on John 3:12*. On the subject of accommodation in Calvin's thought see: Jon Balsarak, *Divinity Compromised: A Study of Divine Accommodation in the Thought of John Calvin*, Studies in Early Modern Religious Tradition, Culture and Society (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006).

³⁵ 'Short Treaty on the Holy Supper', 145.

³⁶ 'Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', *The Works of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Appleford: Sutton Courtenay, 1964), 70.

³⁷ *Institutes* 4.14.18.

The Reformed teach both that Scripture is self-authenticating and that the Spirit authenticates the Scriptures to believers. The Bible has many marks of its divinity,³⁸ but we can be savingly convinced of these only by the Spirit. The Spirit does not provide individuals with additional information (say, about who wrote Hebrews) nor some extra private revelation (a word from the Lord that the Bible is indeed God's word or that Mark's Gospel belongs to the canon).³⁹ Rather, the Spirit works through the words of Scripture as something of their meaning is grasped. The believer whose heart is renewed by the Spirit is enabled to receive the Scriptures as we might receive light with our eyes, sweetness with our taste,⁴⁰ or a fragrance with the sense of smell.⁴¹ We might say that the Spirit enables a faculty for the proper knowledge of God that was rendered dead by (original) sin. It is probably best to think that this authentication takes place as the word is read and proclaimed, rather than through a detached study in which the Christian seeks to evaluate the Bible. By the work of the Spirit, the Scriptures master and nourish the believer. It seems implausible to think that the Spirit works to enable the believer to be the critical scrutineer or judge of God's word. Such an understanding of the authentication of Scripture would seem to fit historically with the process of canonisation: it was as the church lived with these books that, through the voice of the Spirit in them, they revealed and imposed their authority on her. In other words, the Church heard the voice of her Saviour and Lord in these texts.⁴²

It is above all the gospel promises of God that the Spirit communicates, rather than which textual variants are authentic. The verdict of the whole church, rather than private individuals, pastors, councils, or popes, should be consulted when considering which Scriptures are authentic.

We might say that the Supper is also self-authenticating as the believer feeds on Christ in the power of the Spirit. As he receives the Lord's Supper, the believer tastes and sees that the Lord is good.⁴³ Again, right reception is possible only by the work of the Spirit granting the believer faith and creating a spiritual appetite in him.

For almost two thousand years now, with greater or lesser frequency and faithfulness, the church has been receiving the Supper. It seems plausible, then, to say that the Spirit has authenticated the Supper, in the act of communicating, to the whole church. She has found

³⁸ See, e.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Philipsburg: P&R, 1992), 1:63-64.

³⁹ Piper, *Peculiar Glory*, 187, 190-191. See also John Frame, 'The Spirit and the Scriptures', in D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), esp. 228-229.

⁴⁰ We may recall Jonathan Edward's argument: 'He that has perceived the sweet taste of honey, knows much more about it than he who has only looked upon and felt it. . . . [S]piritual understanding primarily consists in this sense, or taste of the moral beauty of divine things' ('Religious Affections', *Works*, 2:272-273).

⁴¹ Turretin (*Institutes* 1:89-90) uses the metaphors of light (Ps 119.105), taste (Ps 19.10; Isa 55.1-2; Heb 5.14), and fragrance (Song 1.3) in speaking of Scripture's self-authentication.

⁴² John Piper's *A Peculiar Glory* deals with the Spirit's work of enabling believers to see the peculiar glory of God in the Scriptures centred on the majesty in meekness of the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen which provides a certain faith which is additional to rationally persuasive arguments.

⁴³ Ps 34.8, in which, Augustine says, Christ speaks openly of the sacrament of his body and blood that he held in his own hands at the Last Supper (*Exposition of Psalm 34*, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801034.htm>).

herself to be fed and sustained through the meal Jesus gave. When the believer reads the Bible or receives Communion he is nourished by the Spirit working in that encounter. What it might feel like or how his conscious experience might vary is hard to say. Yet we can be confident that God the Holy Spirit works powerfully and effectively through word and sacrament. When he eats with faith he is fed even if he cannot give an account of how the nutrition functions.

Preservation

As we do not have the autographs of Scripture, so, in the providence of God, the elements used at the Last Supper have not been preserved for us. We might suspect that had the very first manuscripts of the Bible or the items from the Last Supper been preserved they would be likely to be subject to superstition and idolatry.

Though God has not caused the autographs to be preserved, the Reformed have generally held that the Scriptures have been providentially preserved.⁴⁴

Just as God has caused the Scriptures to be preserved for us, so he has not allowed the Supper to fall out of use or everywhere to be totally corrupted. However, this does not mean that any single manuscript of a Bible book or celebration of the Supper is entirely free from error. Just as we can be confident of at least a sufficiently authentic Bible text, so we can be confident that the Supper is validly and effectively celebrated according to Christ's institution, even if questions remain about how exactly the service should be conducted.⁴⁵ The Word and the sacraments are marks of the church and means by which the church is sustained. Their preservation as ongoing means of grace for the church therefore follows from Christ's promise of Matthew 16.18 that he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Necessity

The Reformed do not hold that Scripture is absolutely necessary. Only the eternal self-existent God, who created and sustains all things, has that kind of total necessity. But if finite sinners are to know God, he must reveal himself. And in God's purpose and wisdom it was necessary for the preserving and propagating of the gospel that the normative revelation of God, which he intended for the universal church for all time, should be wholly committed to writing in the Scriptures. The Scriptures have a necessity consequent upon the plan of God. They are ordinarily necessary in God's economy of salvation.

It is possible to be saved without ever seeing a Bible or hearing one read, or without believing in the canonicity of 3 John, but the whole Bible is necessary to the faith of the church. Every word of Scripture should be treated as indispensable. The Scriptures are

⁴⁴ E.g., Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8: The Hebrew OT and the Greek NT were 'by His [God's] singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical'; Turretin, *Institutes* 1:106-112.

⁴⁵ Opinion differs, for example, over whether there should be separate prayers of thanksgiving for the bread and the wine. The Reformed have differed over whether the bread used should be leaven or unleavened, or whether the wine needs to be red (see further below).

particularly necessary, as the Reformed traditionally believe that God's former way of revealing himself has ceased.⁴⁶

Similarly, it is not absolutely essential to salvation to receive the Lord's Supper. But the Supper is necessary.⁴⁷ God does not ordain the superfluous.⁴⁸ In God's wise plan, the church requires the nourishment of the Supper. Without it she can expect to be deficient, as she would be if, say, she never read the Epistles or the Old Testament.

Having said that, I think the Reformed would generally concede that the Scriptures are more necessary than the Supper. As we shall see, the Supper depends on the word in a way in which the word does not depend on the Supper.

Sufficiency

The sufficiency of Scripture does not, of course, mean that it is all that you need for the Christian life. As is often said, *sola Scriptura* (the post-Reformation cry of "Scripture alone" as the supreme authority) does not mean *solo Scriptura*.⁴⁹ For example, prayer and the fellowship of other believers are needed. So, too, the sufficiency of Scripture does not make the Supper superfluous.

Like the Scriptures, the Reformed teach that the sacraments exist because of the command and promise of God.⁵⁰ As the church is not to add to the Scriptures, so it is not for the church to add to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Calvin writes, 'Apart from these two, no other sacrament has been instituted by God, so the church of believers ought to recognize no other; for erecting and establishing new sacraments is not a matter of human choice'.⁵¹ Similarly, he says, 'Let the Christian church be content with these two sacraments, therefore. And let the church not only refuse to admit and acknowledge any third one for the present but also not desire or expect any, even to the end of the age'.⁵²

The Supper is sufficient as the ongoing sacrament of the church. Contrary to the teaching of the Roman Catholic church, no additional sacraments are needed, just as extra biblical traditions and revelations are not needed.

⁴⁶ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, section 1: 'It pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church, and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased'.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of the necessity of the Supper in the Reformed Tradition along these lines, see Trueman, 'Incarnation and the Lord's Supper', 199-200.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Comm. on Isa 7:12*.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), esp. 237-253, 'A Critique of the Evangelical Doctrine of Solo Scriptura'.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.19.1.

⁵¹ *Institutes* 4.18.19.

⁵² *Institutes* 4.18.20.

As the Scriptures have a completeness and perfection to them, so does the Supper. We are given bread and wine, food and drink (symbolically a complete meal) – the ordinary, bread (not cake) and the special, wine (not water). Bread might be said to be food suitable to the morning to give strength for the day; wine is an eschatological drink for the evening, when work has been finished and is celebrated and rest is enjoyed.⁵³ Bread and wine, then, point to the church militant as she pilgrims through the world and to the church triumphant as she enjoys all that God has done.

Just as *sola Scriptura* does not mean to exclude the work of the Spirit or other authorities or means of grace, so to call the Supper sufficient does not of course mean that it is all that is needed for the Christian life. A sufficient Supper does not make baptism, the sacrament of initiation, unnecessary. The Supper, like the Scriptures, and indeed like baptism, is sufficient for the purposes for which God has given it within the economy he has ordained.

Clarity

The Reformed do not claim that every Scripture is immediately and perfectly clear to everyone. Rather the claim is that all things necessary for salvation and godliness are sufficiently clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures and can be understood adequately by the church with the diligent use of ordinary means. To say that the Bible is clear is not to deny its depth and profundity. Of course, the God whom the Bible clearly reveals is infinitely mysterious and though we can really know him, we can never fully grasp his inexhaustible being and ways.

The Supper is a profound mystery, but there is also a simplicity and a clarity to it.

The symbolic and ritual actions of the Supper might be thought to be opaque and open to a variety of perhaps contradictory interpretations, but, as we shall see below, for Calvin the Supper is never (properly) without the words of institution and consecration and the Word read and proclaimed which serve to explicate it.

Strikingly Calvin calls the sacraments the ‘clearest promises’ of God and says, ‘they have this characteristic over and above the word because they represent them for us as painted in a picture from life’.⁵⁴ Calvin says that in the sacraments God ‘attests his good will and love towards us *more expressly* than by the word’.⁵⁵

As Thomas J. Davis comments, Calvin believes

that the true celebration of the Eucharist brings to the believer knowledge of the power of union with Christ, that is ‘for you’. Calvin thinks the Eucharist exhibits God’s love in its most personal, most intense, most experienced form. Thus, Calvin has set

⁵³ Some of these reflections draw on Peter Leithart, *Blessed Are The Hungry: Meditations On The Lord’s Supper* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 20000,) 175-177, and Jeffrey J. Meyers, ‘Concerning Wine and Beer’, *Rite Reasons* 48-49 (1996-1997), <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-48-concerning-wine-and-beer-part-1/> and <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rite-reasons/no-49-concerning-wine-and-beer-part-2/>.

⁵⁴ *Institutes* 4.14.5.

⁵⁵ *Institutes* 4.14.6 (emphasis added).

the Eucharist up not as just a 'bare knowledge' of union with Christ, as simply information. Rather, Calvin views the Eucharist as a type of knowledge that works alongside Christ's union with the believer to mould the believer's life.⁵⁶

Clearly for Calvin there is a sense in which the Lord's Supper makes a stronger and clearer impression on the Christian than the Bible does. It would seem best to think that Calvin has in mind here not that the Supper speaks more precisely and fully than the Word but that it speaks more vividly or strikingly and personally. The Supper is an especially emphatic or pointed expression of God's promises applied to the individual. It is particularly clear in the Supper that a response, personal appropriation, receiving by faith are required. The Word also of course requires this same response, but this is not so obvious as a congregation sits listening to the Bible as when the bread and wine are held out and the believer must take them and eat and drink. The Supper is clearer to us not because of some defects in the written Word, since the Word itself is clear, but because the Supper, appealing more strongly to our various senses, is more adapted to our need as embodied creatures.

Effectiveness

The Scriptures are always effective and achieve the purpose for which God sends them (Isa 55:10-11). They come with the power of God himself. Whenever God's word is read and proclaimed, Christ is speaking. This results in blessing to those who respond with faith, but to those who persist in unbelief, the result is hardening of heart and judgement. To hear the Word increases one's opportunity and responsibility, and those who fail to believe are culpable.

For Gerrish, 'The sacraments are efficacious precisely as a form, though not the only form, of a word'.⁵⁷

Like the Word, the Supper is always a participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10.16). It is effective to blessing or judgement (1 Cor 11.27-30). Christ is always offered. God never promises falsely.

The presence of Christ

Physically, Christ is in heaven but, by the Holy Spirit, Christ is present as the speaker of the Scriptures, in the preaching of the gospel.⁵⁸ As Webster puts it, 'God speaks as in the Spirit Jesus Christ speaks. The eternal Word made flesh, now enthroned at the right hand of the Father, is present and eloquent. . . . This address takes the form of Holy Scripture'.⁵⁹ Or as Bavinck says, the word of God 'is always his word; he is always present in it; he constantly

⁵⁶ Thomas J. Davis, *The Clearest Promises of God: The Development of Calvin's Eucharistic Teaching* (New York: AMS Press, 1995), 213.

⁵⁷ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 163.

⁵⁸ J. Mark Beach, 'The Real Presence Of Christ in The Preaching of the Gospel: Luther and Calvin on the Nature of Preaching', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 77-134,

<https://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/10-beach.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 8.

sustains it by his almighty and omnipresent power. It is always God himself who . . . brings it to people and calls them by it'.⁶⁰

Bavinck argues that there is no difference between the sacrament and the word at this point: 'In the Word, Christ is truly and essentially offered and granted to everyone who believes. And he is just as really communicated to believers in the sacrament. The sacrament grants the same full Christ as the Word and in the same manner, that is, a spiritual manner by faith, even though the means differ'.⁶¹

Ralph Cunnington has argued that what Brian Gerrish⁶² calls Calvin's 'symbolic instrumentalist' view of the presence of Christ in the Supper also applies to the Spirit's presence in the preaching of the Word.⁶³ Christ's presence is not in paper and ink or sound waves or bread and wine but through the means of the Word and Supper by the power of the Holy Spirit. God has promised to be present to his people through Word and Supper.

Just as Warfield was more concerned with the result rather than the mode of inspiration,⁶⁴ Calvin similarly stressed that the Supper communicates Christ, rather than seeking to explain quite how this could be so. The facts of inspiration and the presence of Christ are more important than the means.

As Warfield was at pains to avoid mechanical accounts of inspiration, similarly Calvin was concerned to avoid crudely physical understandings of Christ's presence in, with, or under the bread and wine.

Calvin was emphatic that Christ is offered to the believer in the Supper: 'in receiving the sacrament in faith, according to the ordinance of the Lord, we are truly made partakers of the real substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ'.⁶⁵ In a way that might surprise many evangelicals today, Calvin is very specific that the human body of Christ is offered to believers in the Supper since the one true Christ is eternally God and man. It is not just the divinity or benefits of Christ nor his power or virtue that are communicated but the whole Christ himself. Calvin believes that 'in the Supper our souls are nourished by the real body of Christ, which was crucified for us, and that indeed spiritual life is transferred into us from the substance of his body'.⁶⁶

Davis suggests that the term 'substantial fellowship' 'probably gets at what Calvin means by true partaking better than does the eating language; the term "substantial fellowship" at

⁶⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:459. Bavinck speaks in this passage both of the Scriptures and of the word of God taken from them in the form of proclamation, personal admonition, or writing.

⁶¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:483.

⁶² Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*.

⁶³ Ralph Cunnington, *Preaching with Spiritual Power: Calvin's Understanding of Word and Spirit in Preaching* (Fearn: Mentor Christian Focus, 2015).

⁶⁴ Warfield, *Works*, 1:397.

⁶⁵ 'Short Treatise', *Theological Treatises*, 166.

⁶⁶ 'Clear Explanation', 263.

least presents the notion of true partaking as a type of union with Christ that Calvin seems to have at the heart of his theology (not just his eucharistic theology).⁶⁷

Calvin claims that both the Word and the Lord's Supper communicate the same Christ to the believer. Yet, there is something particular about the Supper since Christ is offered there in a special manner.

Gerrish puts it like this: 'The difference between word and sacrament is simply that the sacraments picture what the word declares: namely, the content of the promises in Jesus Christ, or simply Christ himself, who is the matter or substance of the sacraments'.⁶⁸ Calvin writes, 'God gives no more by visible signs than by his Word, but gives them in a different manner, because our weakness stands in need of a variety of helps. . . . [W]hat is offered to us by the gospel outside the Supper is sealed to us by the Supper, and hence communion with Christ is no less truly conferred upon us by the gospel than by the Supper'.⁶⁹ Again: 'believers have outside the Supper the very thing they receive in the Supper. . . . It is true that to help our infirmity a visible testimony is added, the better to confirm the thing signified; and not only so, but to bestow in greater truth and fullness what we receive by the faith of the gospel even without any external action'.⁷⁰

It might be said that by making good use of the Supper, weak creatures may receive 'more of' the same Christ who is offered in the gospel. Calvin says, 'The communion with Christ is conferred upon us in different degrees, not merely in the Supper but independently of it'.⁷¹

In a category borrowed from the Word, for Calvin the Lord's Supper itself is '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'.⁷²

Over and above the Word, the Supper may thus make a special contribution to strengthening faith and to assurance.⁷³ As Thomas Davis argues, the Lord's Supper strengthens and confirms union with Christ in a distinctive way.⁷⁴ Calvin says that in the Supper, God 'attests his good will and love toward us more expressly than by word'.⁷⁵ In the Supper, Christ 'reveals himself in a special way'.⁷⁶

To be received spiritually by faith, in the power of the Spirit

⁶⁷ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 207. It is always important to remember that Christ's substance is not in the elements and that the fellowship is by faith in the Spirit, a point that Davis's terminology does not bring out.

⁶⁸ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 107, citing *Institutes* 4.14.15-7 and *Comm. on Gal 3:1* – preaching too depicts Christ.

⁶⁹ 'Clear Explanation', 281. There is no disagreement with Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:483, where he argues that Christ is given in the same manner (by faith, spiritually) but by different means (visibly not audibly).

⁷⁰ 'Clear Explanation', 291.

⁷¹ 'Clear Explanation', 292.

⁷² *Institutes* 4.17.38.

⁷³ Trueman, 'Incarnation and the Lord's Supper', 185-208.

⁷⁴ Davis, *Clearest Promises*, 214.

⁷⁵ *Institutes* 4.14.6.

⁷⁶ *Institutes* 4.17.30.

Some Christians have erred towards a magical or superstitious view of the Scriptures and their effect, which the Reformed would repudiate. Our response to the Bible's message is crucial. For example, William Whitaker takes issue with Origen, who apparently thought that 'the mere words of scripture may have a beneficial effect, after the manner of a spell, upon the man who reads them, through certain spiritual powers which he supposes to be in intimate contact with our souls'.⁷⁷ Whitaker argues that in John 5.39, Christ sought 'to excite the Jews, and all of us also, to investigate the true sense of scripture. For the scripture consists not in the bare words, but in the sense, interpretation and meaning of the words'.⁷⁸

Similarly, the Reformed have rejected an *ex opere operato* view of the Supper, according to which it might have some mechanical or magical effect merely from the work worked. At least a measure of understanding and right reception is crucial.

It is possible to receive the word and the Supper without any benefit. As Bavinck points out, one might hear the word and even accept 'it as historically factual' without receiving Christ.⁷⁹ Similarly, to eat the bread and the wine is not the same as receiving Christ.

Both the Scriptures and the Supper call for the same response. As Bavinck puts it: the word and sacrament 'are even the same in mode and instrument of reception, for also in the sacrament Christ is enjoyed spiritually, not physically, by faith, not by the mouth'.⁸⁰ They are to be received with a humble, thankful faith that is resolved to live in the light of all that it knows of God and his ways. Knowledge of the Scriptures is given to be put into practice (Jas 1.22-27) as wisdom for life, and similarly the Supper is food for the Christian journey.

The Word of God is received via the eyes or ears,⁸¹ but ultimately it is received by the mind, soul, spirit, or heart, by the whole person, in the Spirit, not merely outwardly. Similarly, the bread and the wine of the Supper are received in the hands and in the mouth, but it is receiving Christ by faith in the Spirit, inwardly, that really matters. The Holy Spirit thus plays a vital role in our receiving Christ in connection with both the Scriptures and the Supper.

When Calvin says that believers partake in Christ spiritually in the Supper, the idea is that the participating is in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁸² As has already been seen above, Calvin does not mean to imply that believers participate only in the Spirit, energy, power or virtue of Christ. Believers participate in the true whole Christ, who is God and man, in both his human and divine natures. But they do so spiritually (in the Spirit), not physically, carnally, or materially. Thus, believers do not press Christ with their teeth. The bread and the wine are received by the hands and mouth, and so on. Christ himself is received by the soul or spirit or in the heart.

⁷⁷ Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, n. 1, 266. Citing 'Philocalia, c. 12, p. 40, ed. Spencer and Huetius' Origen, T. 1. P. 27. C.'

⁷⁸ Whitaker, *Disputation on Holy Scripture*, 402.

⁷⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:487. Bavinck is speaking particularly of "the word of the gospel" here.

⁸⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:479.

⁸¹ Rom 10.14-17 especially emphasises hearing the preached word.

⁸² Speaking of Calvin's comments on Jesus' bread of life discourse, Gerrish (*Grace and Gratitude*, 131) says, 'The word (*sermo*) is called "spiritual" because it summons us upwards to seek Christ in his heavenly glory, under the leading of the Spirit, by faith, not by carnal perception'.

As B. A. Gerrish explains, spiritual presence or eating 'should not be taken to mean that Christ is present only in spirit, or only in the believer's imagination. . . . In Calvin's view, it is precisely the body and blood of Christ that are made present to the believer by the secret power of the Spirit'.⁸³ Calvin writes, 'When we say that it is spiritual, they roar out as if by this term we were making it not to be what they commonly call real. If they will use the term real for true and oppose it to fallacious and imaginary we will rather speak barbarously than afford material for strife . . . according to us the spiritual mode of communion is such that we enjoy Christ in reality'.⁸⁴

Christ and his Ministers

Christ is the ultimate speaker of all the Scriptures. He is our supreme prophet and teacher. He speaks to us, above all, of himself, since all the promises of God find their yes and amen in him. Similarly, Christ is the host at his Supper. He offers us himself. At lectern, pulpit, and table, ministers act on his behalf, in his place, as his agents. Better, Christ speaks and acts through them as they are enabled by the Spirit and to the extent that pastors are faithful to as under-Shepherds serving the chief Shepherd.

The ordained ministry is a ministry of Word and Sacrament to which one should be lawfully called, not self-appointed. It is part of the minister's vocation to publicly read and preach the Scriptures (1 Tim 4.13) and to provide at the Lord's Table.

Calvin argues that the administration of the sacraments is 'the proper function of those to whom the public office of teaching is entrusted. For the two things, feeding the Church with the doctrine of salvation and administering the sacraments, are joined to each other by a lasting tie'.⁸⁵ For Calvin, the notion of lay-presidency would not have seemed ontologically impossible but inappropriate. It would have sounded more like the dangerous anarchic innovations of the Radical Anabaptists than the good order of the church God desires.⁸⁶

Inscription and Translatability

The doctrine of Scripture assumes that God's word could be and was adequately inscripturated, preserved in writing.

The Reformed would defend the importance of the original language manuscripts very strongly, for example, in preference to the Latin Vulgate which the Council of Trent favoured.⁸⁷ But they would also urge the translation of Scripture. There is a marked difference here between the Islamic view of the Quran and the Christian doctrine of Scripture.

⁸³ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 136.

⁸⁴ 'First answer to Westphal', 239-240; 9.32.

⁸⁵ 'Catechism of the Church of Geneva', *Theological Treatises*, 139.

⁸⁶ See Robert C. Doyle, "'Lay Administration" and the Sixteenth Century', *Churchman* 113.4 (1999).

⁸⁷ William Whitaker's *Disputation Concerning Holy Scripture*, for example, devotes 100 pages to the inferiority of the Vulgate.

The Reformed argued that translations of the Scriptures are possible and necessary in the sense that God expects all his people to live according to his Word and translations are suitable to be used by Christians. They effectively communicate the Word of God even though they are not exactly, strictly speaking God's Word as originally given.⁸⁸

At a very basic level, it is necessary for Christians to believe that the Lord's Supper is fundamentally transmittable and translatable, since no believers today are able to be present at the original Last Supper physically as such, however much some may maintain that celebrations of the Eucharist today somehow participate in that first Eucharist or the sacrifice of Christ which it signifies. Similarly, of course, it is not possible to use the same elements of bread and wine that Christ used in the Upper Room, nor is it possible to use bread and wine precisely like those which Christ used. It is not possible to be certain quite what sort of bread and wine Jesus used. Presumably Christ used unleavened bread since the meal which he and his disciples shared was a Passover meal,⁸⁹ yet Christians have differed over whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used and whether or not it even matters.⁹⁰ Calvin thought that 'whether the bread is leavened or unleavened; the wine red or white – it makes no difference'.⁹¹

Sometimes it has been impossible or nearly impossible for Christians to obtain bread and wine for the Supper. Herman Witsius said that of necessity, for example, in America other food and drink may be used.⁹²

Missiologists also sometimes discuss whether the elements of bread and wine used in the Supper ought to be 'translated' when the Supper is celebrated in other cultures. For example, what sense can be made of bread and wine in a culture in which they are largely unfamiliar? Would rice and tea be more suitable Eucharistic elements in parts of South East Asia?

As with Bible translation, the issues involved here are complex. How does one work out what we might call the semantic range of bread and wine in the context of the Lord's Supper? Do they have an obvious, universal meaning, or is their significance tied to their use in their original first century, ancient-near eastern context? Further, how important is their biblical background and in particular the Passover context of the Last Supper? Similar questions of course apply to the interpretation of the Bible: what relative weight is given to the biblical and extra-biblical background?

It may seem simple and without theological consequence to substitute one foodstuff for another, but rice, for example, will have rather a different meaning from bread when understood against the background of the whole Bible, where wheat and bread and much

⁸⁸ See, for example, *The Westminster Confession*, chapter 1, section VIII.

⁸⁹ Though there is some question over the day on which it was eaten.

⁹⁰ See the brief discussion in Robert Letham, *The Lord's Supper: Eternal Word in Broken Bread* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 53-55.

⁹¹ *Institutes* 4.17.43.

⁹² Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man comprehending A Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank (London, 1822), 450. It was first published in Latin in 1677. See the Introduction by Joel Beeke, http://www.wtsbooks.com/common/pdf_links/9781601780959.pdf, 9.

that is associated with them occurs frequently, whereas rice does not. If we substitute something else for bread, we risk losing something since, for example, yeast is a not insignificant biblical theme. Whether bread is leavened or not can be important in the Bible. Obviously this would be irrelevant to rice!

Do those who wish to substitute rice for bread in the Eucharist wish to revise the Scriptures to reflect this change? Perhaps some would go so far as to translate Matthew 26.26 to say, 'Jesus took a basic foodstuff, gave thanks and broke it' and so forth. Indeed, rice presents another difficulty as a Eucharistic element when compared to bread in that it cannot easily be broken as the bread is in representation of Jesus' broken body. Similarly, the Bible specifically makes the point that believers participate in one loaf representing their unity (1 Cor 10.17). Believers cannot all realistically participate in one grain of rice, and perhaps eating from one rice bowl does not quite have the same force.

If what might be called a dynamic equivalence translation approach is followed,⁹³ one would need to make decisions about why Jesus chose bread and wine in the first place in order to find suitable equivalents. For example, as mentioned above, did Jesus use red wine and did he choose this because it and blood are both red liquids?⁹⁴ Should a red liquid be used? Is it important that the drink chosen was alcoholic? Is wine especially a celebratory drink or was it merely a common one? Just as words in different languages do not have exactly parallel semantic ranges, so foodstuffs do not correspond straightforwardly and come with all sorts of complex associations.

Perhaps it is part of Christian discipleship that newly converted people groups should, if possible, take up baking and wine-making so that they might as faithfully as possible obey Jesus' command to 'do this in remembrance' of him (1 Cor 11.24-25). Whilst we would not require all converts to learn the biblical languages, we would hope that indigenous Bible-scholars and translators would be raised up over time so that each national church might be as faithful as possible to the Scriptures.

The Proper Recipients of Scripture and Supper

I grant an important distinction here, but it seems to me that Bavinck overstates the case when he says that the Word directs 'itself to believers and unbelievers alike; but the sacrament says nothing to, nor contains anything for, unbelievers'.⁹⁵

⁹³ Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 188n63 notes that 'Calls have been made to find local "dynamic equivalents," for example, to bread and wine in the eucharistic celebration' and cites Anscar J. Chupungco, 'Inculturation', in *The SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 244-551. See also Phillip Tovey, *Inculturation of Christian Worship: Exploring the Eucharist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 45- 47, 137-138. Tovey writes, 'At the Last Supper Jesus took bread, his followers use qurban, gonja [banana], biscuits, bread, kyavati and wafers. Jesus took wine, his followers use the juice of steeped raisins, musibi [banana juice], wine, Tree Top, Ribena, coffee, Fanta, honey and water', 47.

⁹⁴Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 488: 'And it seems we should not altogether overlook the similitude there is between the blood of the grape, by which name red wine is chiefly intended, and the blood of Christ'.

⁹⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:479.

The Bible is primarily the Word of God for the people of God. Although the Old Testament king was to give himself daily to the study of the Law,⁹⁶ the Bible as the Book of the Covenant⁹⁷ addresses God's people corporately. Arguably this is especially obvious in the case of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament Epistles to churches, but it seems likely that for the most part the gathered covenant community is primarily in view as the intended recipients of the Word. This seems to be the case even with the Pastoral Epistles, which are formally addressed to individuals. The letter to Philemon is also addressed to others and to 'the church that meets in your home' (Philem 2). After all, at the time of writing and for much of church history, the lack of availability of copies of the Bible text and illiteracy levels would mean that access to the Bible would be primarily through listening to it read in church. The canonisation of the books of the Bible shows that they are intended permanently for the whole church, not just for their first recipients. First Timothy 4.13 suggests the importance of the public reading of the Scriptures. The paradigmatic and central reception of the Bible is as it is read and proclaimed in the Lord's Day service. As Ward suggests, individual believers' private reading of Scripture is 'derivative of, and dependant on, the corporate reading and proclamation of Scripture in the Christian assembly'.⁹⁸ The Reformed insist that the same Word of God addresses people and pastors alike, even if it is taught differently in the universities and more popularly in the church.⁹⁹ As Tyndale would have it, the Bible is as much for the ploughboy as for the prelate.¹⁰⁰

Of course, it is good for the unbeliever to read the Bible, but as an unbeliever it offers him no nourishment or comfort. It calls upon him to receive it by faith, to become a believer.

Like the Scriptures, the Supper is intended for the people of God. For the Reformed, the Lord's Supper is not a converting ordinance that all are encouraged to receive, whatever their spiritual state.¹⁰¹ It is for the baptised people of God alone and must be received by faith. But the celebration of the Supper is also a powerful testimony to any unbelievers who are present.¹⁰² Something of the gospel is enacted in the Supper. Indeed, the unbeliever's very exclusion from the blessing of the Supper should lead him to repent and believe so that he might be invited in to the family meal.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Deut 17.18-20. One might argue he does so as the head / representative of the people, maybe in some way on their behalf so that he can lead their national life.

⁹⁷ Timothy Ward (*Words of Life*, 56) suggests the book of the covenant as a fundamental description of the Bible citing Exod 24.7 and 2 Chr 34.30. Peter Jensen (*The Revelation of God*, 74-83, 153-156) also reflects on the implications of viewing the Bible as the book of God's covenant promise, through which he means to relate to his people.

⁹⁸ Ward, *Words of Life*, 173.

⁹⁹ William Whitaker, *Disputation Concerning Holy Scripture*, 670-671 citing Ephesians 4:5, and 673-674.

¹⁰⁰ Tyndale famously said to a clergyman that 'If God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did' (John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs = The Acts and Monuments* [1563-1583], ch. 12 available at <http://www.ccel.org/f/foxe/martyrs/fox112.htm>).

¹⁰¹ This was part of Jonathan Edwards' controversy with the half-way covenant approach of his predecessor and grandfather Solomon Stoddard. Edwards' writings on the subject are 'Humble Enquiry', 'Misrepresentations Corrected', 'Narrative', all in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 12, *Ecclesiastical Writings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957-).

¹⁰² Paul mentions the presence of an unbeliever in gathered worship in 1 Cor 14.24 and has discussed the Supper in ch. 11.

¹⁰³ Excommunication has a similar goal (1 Cor 5).

In the view of the Reformers, the Roman Catholic Church erred in withholding both the Scriptures and the Supper from the people, both by making actual communion infrequent and by withholding the cup from the laity.¹⁰⁴

Frequency

The prime place for the reading and preaching of God's Word is every Sunday in the Lord's Day service of Covenant renewal.

Regarding the Eucharist, Calvin says, 'the Supper could have been administered most becomingly if it were set before the church very often, and at least once a week'".¹⁰⁵

Similarly, he says,

It would be well to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ be held every Sunday at least as a rule. . . . In fact, it is not instituted by Jesus for making a commemoration two or three times a year, but for a frequent exercise of our faith and charity, of which the congregation of Christians should make use as often as they be assembled.¹⁰⁶

Following Acts 2.42, Calvin says, 'Thus it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Supper, and almsgiving'.¹⁰⁷ Although he was never able to implement weekly communion in Geneva, he urges that 'the Lord's Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually. . . . All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast'.¹⁰⁸

It is of course good for Christians to read their Bibles daily, alone and with others. The Bible exemplifies and commands continual meditation on God's Word (e.g., Ps 1.2). There is a difference here between Bible reading and Communion, since one can be private and the other is essentially corporate. Having said that, of course for many believers at many times and places in church history private Bible reading would be impossible because of illiteracy or lack of access to the Scriptures. Personal meditation on the Scriptures would take the form of recalling and reflecting on what had been heard on a Sunday.

Calvin sometimes preached daily, and the quotations above suggest he would be open to Communion more frequently than once a week. Daily communion has sometimes been practised in the church and Communion for the sick and housebound are of course

¹⁰⁴ The Council of Trent (1545-1563), session 21, chapter 2, describes and defends this practice, which had been common for some centuries. The Council of Lambeth (1281) had directed that consecrated wine was to be received only by the priest.

¹⁰⁵ *Institutes* 4.17.43.

¹⁰⁶ 'Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and Worship of Geneva', *Theological Treatises*, 49.

¹⁰⁷ *Institutes* 4.17.44.

¹⁰⁸ *Institutes* 4.17.46.

common, but the Supper might best be kept for the Lord's Day service of covenant renewal where, as far as possible, the whole church congregation gathers together.

Perhaps recalling the connection between God's Word written and the Supper might remind us of the priority of the communal over privatised observance.

The physical object

The Bible always comes to us by physical means, whether it is as words that we look at or as sound waves that we hear. But this physical element is much more obvious when it comes to the Supper. The elements are not only seen but also touched and eaten.

The Reformed have tended to avoid venerating the physical object of the Bible and the elements of bread and wine, errors of which they would accuse the Church of Rome.

Means of Grace

It is not surprising to find similarities between the Bible and the Supper because they are both means of grace. It is vital to remember that they are means not ultimate ends. We risk a kind of bibliolatry if we treat the Bible as an ultimate end in itself rather than as a means by which we might come to Christ and have life (John 5.39-40).

On a Reformed critique, the Roman Catholic church with its doctrine of transubstantiation fell into idolatry over the Mass by confusing the signs (bread and wine) with the things signified (the body and blood of Christ). Evangelicals risk a similar error if they fail to move from the words of the Bible, which they rightly regard as inspired and take very seriously, to Jesus, the Incarnate, Living Word. Neither with the Scriptures nor the Supper should we be satisfied with the signs, but we must look to the thing signified, not merely to the elements but to the substance which they mediate.

Purpose

Both Scripture and Supper are intended to do more than inform. The Reformed are clear that the Supper is not just a visual aid or a reminder. Calvin insisted that the work of the Supper does not just take place in the imagination. Similarly, God's Word does more than communicate information: it warns, promises, encourages, challenges, and so on. It is also a means of God's operative presence.¹⁰⁹ Timothy Ward argues that 'Scripture makes the point quite clearly that God's words in some way convey his presence'.¹¹⁰ Further:

the human words in which the covenant is given expression and enacted, are the means by which God elects to be God in relationship with us. It is the very means by

¹⁰⁹ See Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (1853; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 363-405, Discourse VII, 'On God's Omnipresence'. Garry Williams discusses this in his lecture 'Everything is Ordinary: Pragmatic Minimalism and the Presence of God', given at the John Owen Centre conference 2015. http://johnowencentre.org/sites/default/files/audio/%285%29%20Pragmatic%20Minimalism%20and%20the%20Presence%20of%20God%20-%20Garry%20Williams_0.mp3

¹¹⁰ Ward, *Words of Life*, 32.

which he comes to be God for us. . . . To trust God's covenant promise is not to enter into an agreement with an absentee God; it is to trust the God who has come to you. There is, then, a complex but real relationship between God and his actions, expressed and performed, as they are, through God's words. In philosophical terms, there is an ontological relationship between God and his words. It seems that *God's actions, including his verbal actions, are a kind of extension of him.*¹¹¹

When God's word is read, God is with his people not only by his omnipresence but for the sake of a particular work, in a particular way. He is speaking to his church for her edification, encouragement, or correction. Through his word he is personally relating to his people.

Likewise, through the Supper God is also operatively present, feeding his people, nourishing them with Christ. The Reformation debates about Christ's presence in the Supper might have been helped by remembering this distinction between God's essence and his action.

Scripture, Speech Acts, and the Supper

Some writers¹¹² have suggested that the Bible has a Speech-Act¹¹³ view of itself. Timothy Ward makes the bold claim that 'a speech-act view of the Bible is the most appropriate overall description of the Bible's nature and function – especially so, if we want to encourage Bible-reading which seeks above all to encounter God through that reading'.¹¹⁴ Contrary to criticisms by John Webster that Speech-Act theory is an unbiblical intrusion into dogmatics, Ward argues, 'It is important to note that the use of "speech-act" as a controlling concept for the Bible does not represent the illicit importation of a non-theological category into theological description. Instead, it gives us the conceptual apparatus to discern more clearly the view of language to which the Bible regularly bears witness'.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Ward, *Words of Life*, 33. Emphasis original.

¹¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, Timothy Ward, Brevard S. Childs, Kevin Vanhoozer, Richard S. Briggs, Anthony C. Thistleton, Gordon McConville, James Robson, and others have suggested the usefulness of Speech-Act theory for the doctrine or interpretation of Scripture. Briggs provides a survey in 'The Uses of Speech-Act Theory in Biblical Interpretation', *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 9 (2001): 229-272.

¹¹³ The Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin is usually correctly credited with founding Speech-Act theory with his 1955 William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University and published posthumously as *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Speech Act theory was further developed and systematized by John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1995), *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), and the volume he edited, *The Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). Vanhoozer comments that 'If Austin is the Luther of speech act philosophy, John Searle may be considered its Melanchthon – its systematic theologian' (*Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Leicester: Apollos, 1998], 209).

¹¹⁴ Ward, 'The Bible, Its Truth and How It Works' (pp17-42), in Gardner, Paul, Wright, Chris and Green, Chris (ed.s), *Fanning The Flame: Bible, Cross & Mission – meeting the challenge in a changing world, NEAC 4 2003*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2003) , 33.

¹¹⁵ Ward, *The Bible*, 41n32. Vanhoozer says, 'Of course the idea that humans do things in speaking was well known to the very earliest biblical authors, even without the analytic concepts of speech act philosophy' (*First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* [Leicester: Apollos, 2002], 161).

According to evangelicals who want to make use of this approach, the Bible writers are aware that speaking is a kind of doing; it is a way of acting in the world. Speakers do more than state propositions or convey information. We do things with words, and in certain situations to say something is to do it—for example, in naming a ship or making a bet or making a will or making marriage promises. One gets married by saying things (and this is subsequently registered in writing). Since God is omnipotent and his words are effective, he is especially able to achieve his purposes by speaking. For example, in Genesis 1 he speaks creation into existence.

Lack of space prevents a more detailed treatment here, but we can say that Speech-Act theory provides a useful means of analysing utterances that can remind us to think about what the Bible says, what it intends to do, and what it in fact achieves, that is, the results that it brings about. It brings to the fore the intentions and effects of God's Word.

Some writers have applied Speech-Act theory to liturgy¹¹⁶ and in particular to the Lord's Supper considered as a Word.¹¹⁷

Speaking of Calvin's view that the sacraments are efficacious signs, B. A. Gerrish suggests that one may borrow a term from J. L. Austin and call them 'performative' signs.¹¹⁸ That is, they are signs that do things.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has also argued that 'the best model for understanding how Calvin was thinking about the sacraments is the model of speaking proposed by speech-act theory'.¹¹⁹

Melvin Tinker has argued that 'the Lord's Supper (and the same would apply to baptism) can be conceived of in the same way as Austin's and Searle's speech acts, while recognizing that the Supper itself is also composed on individual speech acts'.¹²⁰

For Tinker, 'In the first place, as a whole, the Lord's Supper is equivalent to Austin's *locutionary* act, that is, it has a referential basis – the historic Cross-work of Christ and all

¹¹⁶ David Hilborn, 'From Performativity to Pedagogy: Jean Ladriere and the Pragmatics of Reformed Worship Discourse', in Stanley E. Porter, ed., *The Nature of Religious Language: A Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 173. Arthur Brookes, for example, provides a 'discourse analysis with an emphasis on speech act theory of the section in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* service of Evening Prayer beginning "Dearly beloved brethren"' in T. R. Burnham Hodgson, *Saying The Services* (Worthing: Churchman Publishing, 1989). See also, e.g., M. M. Kelleher, 'Hermeneutics in the Study of Liturgical Performance', *Worship* 67 (1993): 292-318; J. J. Schaller, 'Performative Language Theory: An Exercise in the Analysis of Ritual', *Worship* 62 (1988): 415-432; J. H. Ware, *Not with Words of Wisdom: Performative Language and Liturgy* (Washington: University Press of America, 1981); Jean Ladriere, 'The Performativity of Liturgical Language', *Concilium* 2.9 (1973): 50-62, 51-52; Richard S. Briggs, 'Getting Involved: Speech Acts and Biblical Interpretation', *Anvil* 20, no. 1 (2003): 29.

¹¹⁷ See, e.g., David Crystal, 'Liturgical Language in Sociolinguistic Perspective', in David Jasper and R. C. D. Jasper, eds., *Language and the Worship of the Church* (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), 120-146; A. P. Martinich, 'Sacraments and Speech Acts I and II', *Heythrop Journal* 16 (1975): 289-303, 405-17.

¹¹⁸ Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 140n50.

¹¹⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Sacraments as Action, not Presence', in David Brown and Ann Loades, eds., *Christ: The Sacramental Word: Incarnation, Sacrament and Poetry* (London: SPCK, 1996), 120-146.

¹²⁰ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 145.

the benefits that flow from that'.¹²¹ Although a great deal might be included in that statement, it risks being a little narrow if it is thought to exhaust what the Lord's Supper might say.

Exactly what the Lord's Supper might say would, of course, be open to debate. I made some suggestions above. Nevertheless, it is important merely to emphasise that the Lord's Supper says things: it is a word that speaks. It has a propositional content, even if that content cannot be stated exhaustively with confidence and might be disputed. On an Evangelical Reformed view, the historical basis of the Lord's Supper and what it says are the essential foundation of it. They are not the whole, but they cannot be denied and must not be overlooked. The same could be said of the historical and propositional content of Scripture from an evangelical point of view: they are essential even if the Bible is more than a history book or a series of pieces of information. In the case of both Scripture and Supper, there are twin dangers of neglecting or obsessing about the propositional aspects.

Tinker points out, however, that the locution of the Lord's Supper does not exhaust its meaning:

It is important, in relation to the Lord's Supper, to stress the functional view of language in order to guard against the common tendency to conceive of it as being solely referential, which would lead in two equal and opposite directions. The first would be to think of the elements as 'the body and blood of Christ' in terms of identity, the other would be to see the elements as simply referring to Christ's death on the Cross as a memorial. Words (and . . . symbols) can have a function which is more varied than referential, they can be vehicles whereby something is imparted to the hearer and certain states of affairs are established.¹²²

This points to the consideration of the illocutionary and performative aspects of the Supper.

Tinker argues that 'Holy Communion in its entirety is also an *illocutionary* act, the Lord by his Spirit *does* things. In the *giving* of the bread and wine and through the accompanying words, the correlated aspects of divine love, forgiveness and eschatological hope (all of a deeply personal nature) are not merely attested but imparted'.¹²³

Wolterstorff similarly emphasises the action of God in the Supper and argues that the illocutionary effect of the Supper is to assure believers here and now that God will keep the promises made in Christ – that promise remains in effect.¹²⁴

Wolterstorff is emphatic that God acts in the Supper:

By the appointed minister of the Church uttering the words and performing the actions of the sacrament, God presents the promise made in Jesus Christ and assures

¹²¹ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 145.

¹²² Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 134.

¹²³ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 145.

¹²⁴ Wolterstorff, 'Sacraments as Action', 112.

us that the promise remains in effect. The minister does not do it; God does it. God is the agent. With hammering insistence the Reformed confessions assert that *God* is the one who signifies and seals the promises.¹²⁵

For Tinker, part of the purpose of the sacramental act of the Lord's Supper is to heighten the illocutionary force of the meaning of the cross, 'thus conveying through the bread and wine together with the interpretive words something more than merely saying the words "Jesus loves you and died for you"'.¹²⁶

Tinker explains:

The symbolic gesture of the breaking of bread and subsequent distribution with the accompanying words are informative – conveying the truth of Christ's sacrificial death; evocative – drawing believers to praise and gratitude; cohesive – promoting unity and communal solidarity as 'one body', as well as performative – constituting the illocutionary act of conveying the divine love with the consequent perlocutionary acts of thankfulness, including obedient Christian service.¹²⁷

Employing John Searle's category of the 'performative' uses of language, Leithart argues that

Just as words are 'performative,' so the sacraments as visible words actually do things. They not only remind us and teach us about Christ's death, but confirm, sustain, and nourish our relationship with the Triune God. Through sacramental 'words,' we make promises, receive warnings, establish or renew covenants. Sacraments are indeed 'words' from God, but not so much visible as performative words.¹²⁸

This analysis gives a very helpful model of the sacraments as effectual rather than 'merely' symbolic.

On a Roman Catholic view, the words of consecration ('This is my body') would be seen as performative of transubstantiation. Even on a Reformed understanding, it is possible to believe in an act of consecration which, while not affecting the substance of the bread and the wine, sets them apart for a special use in the context of the service of the Lord's Supper.

To speak of the performative outcomes of the Supper is another way of discussing its results. What might it do in believers and unbelievers and, more controversially, in God? Is it possible for a traditional Reformed theologian to speak of the Supper as affecting God without compromising his sovereignty or immutability or losing sight of the Supper as primarily God's gracious word to man, rather than man's attempt to appease or manipulate God? It would seem so. God has voluntarily tied himself to the Supper in the same way that

¹²⁵ Wolterstorff, 'Sacraments as Action', 114.

¹²⁶ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 146.

¹²⁷ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 136.

¹²⁸ Leithart, 'Visible Words'.

he has to his Word. He is bound by what they say. Or, to put it another way, he speaks them and is faithful to what he says in them. God chooses to keep his promises. This surely highlights his power and freedom rather than limiting them. It would be no more problematical to say that God is affected by the Eucharist than it would be to say that he answers prayer. This does not compromise his sovereignty since he continues to act voluntarily and prayers and the Lord's Supper are all part of his plan.

According to Tinker the perlocutionary act, what is achieved by the Lord's Supper, depends on apprehension of the locution and illocution: 'For the promise to be grasped, assurance attained, unity achieved, loving obedience elicited, as Austin says, "illocutionary uptake" must be secured'.¹²⁹ The force must be grasped: the sacrament must be received as promise, persuasion, assurance, and unification. Tinker argues that illocutionary uptake is achieved by faith. 'That is, there is the element of *assensus*, recognising things to be true regarding the person and Cross-work of Christ and the meaning of Holy Communion, as well as *fiducia*, that personal trusting in the one who conveys his promises and presence through the sacramental act'.¹³⁰

Austin argued that if certain performative utterances are to be effective, then appropriate circumstances and conditions must be fulfilled. For example, to name a ship one must have the authority to do so. The felicitous conditions necessary for the performance of the Lord's Supper may be considered. These could include the saving work of Christ, which provides the essential basis for the Lord's Supper. His command constitutes it a rite to be repeated by the church. Bread and wine would also seem to be essential elements.

At least since the Donatist controversy, it has been usual to think that the scandalous character of a celebrant would not lead to a 'misfire', Austin's term for a void speech-act that does not result in the purported act. One might ask what might cause a celebration of the Supper to misfire and be void.

Speech-Act theory also allows for infelicities which do not void a speech act. There are all sorts of ways in which a celebration of the Lord's Supper might be defective whilst still being a true celebration of the Supper, though an imperfect one. For example, the minister might stumble over his words, the sermon may be poor, minds may wander during the prayers, but the Lord's Supper would still be received.

Scripture and Supper as food

The Bible sometimes speaks of God's Word as food and through both Supper and Scripture believers are to feed on Christ in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

Prayer

¹²⁹ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 146.

¹³⁰ Tinker, 'Language, Symbols and Sacraments', 147. The *assensus / fiducia* distinction is standard in Reformed thought. See for example, Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 115-116.

It is common practice for evangelicals to pray before the preaching of the Word for God's blessing and for his Spirit to be at work. This might be thought to be akin to an epiclesis at Communion.¹³¹ When a Reformed minister prays like this, he is not asking for a change in the elements of bread and wine nor in the words of Scripture, but that God the Holy Spirit would use the Communion and the reading and preaching of his Word for the edification of his people.¹³²

The principle of edification

Since one purpose of the Lord's Day gathering is that the people might be built up, it follows that the reading and preaching of the Bible should be in a language that the people understand. Similarly, the Lord's Supper should be celebrated audibly and in a language which the people know.

Word and Supper

I have suggested that the Scriptures and the Supper are similar and that they belong together as indispensable elements of the Lord's Day service and are vital to the Christian life. The Supper is an edible Word of God that shares some characteristics with God's written Word.

However, it is necessary to add that Calvin sees a particular order between the written and preached Word and the sacrament. The biblical Word – Jesus' words of institution, promise and command, but especially the preached Word – makes the sacrament and is essential to it. For Calvin, 'the sacraments take their virtue from the Word, when it is preached intelligibly'.¹³³ Calvin thought that the Word without the Supper was undesirable, as we saw above, since the Supper seals the Word,¹³⁴ but he would have thought the Supper without the Word impossible.¹³⁵

Both Supper and Word are necessary, but the Reformed tradition has clearly prioritised the Word. Bavinck plainly states that 'the sacrament is subordinate to the Word. . . . The Word, accordingly, is something, even much, without the sacrament, but the sacrament is nothing

¹³¹ For a discussion of the epiclesis in the Eucharistic Prayers of Common Worship from an Evangelical perspective see David Peterson, 'Holy Communion in Common Worship', *The Theologian* (at <http://www.theologian.org.uk/church/communion.html>).

¹³² Robert Strivens has argued that this earnest prayer for the power of the Spirit in preaching is neglected on some understandings of preaching. Robert Strivens, 'Preaching – "ex opera operato"?', in *The Truth Shall Make You Free – Papers read at the 2007 Westminster Conference* (n.p., 2007), 57-74.

¹³³ 'Short Treatise', 161.

¹³⁴ Calvin writes, 'A sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in a sense ratifying it' (*Institutes* 4.14.3). Similarly, Calvin repeatedly speaks of the sacraments as seals (e.g., *Institutes* 4.14.20; 'Clear Explanation', 281).

¹³⁵ We should remember the context of Calvin's polemic. One thing he is opposing is the Roman practice where the priest might mumble his way through the Latin service with the people as far away spectators who perhaps cannot hear or understand what is being said. The Reformed stress edification and right reception as vital to a proper Communion service. See, for example, *Institutes* 4.17.39.

without the Word and in that case has neither value nor power'.¹³⁶ And, as we have seen, both written and edible Word serve the incarnate Word. As Bavinck goes on to say, 'they both serve to direct our faith towards Christ's sacrifice on the cross as the sole ground of our salvation'.¹³⁷

Mystery

All theology is ultimately mysterious, and we do well both to strive to think God's thoughts after him and also to confess that his ways are higher than our ways. Webster comments that, 'As in sacramental theology, so in bibliology: even after strenuous conceptual exercises, it is not easy to advance much further than reiterating what God does, in fact, do'.¹³⁸ Bavinck also says that 'the manner in which God uses the Word and the sacraments in distributing his grace remains a mystery'.¹³⁹ Calvin's words regarding the Supper might equally be applied to the Scriptures:

. . . if one may reduce to words so great a mystery, which I see that I do not even sufficiently comprehend with my mind. I therefore freely admit that no man should measure its sublimity by the little measure of my childishness. Rather, I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within 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 to express. Nevertheless, I shall in one way or another sum up my views; for, as I do not doubt them to be true, I am confident they will be approved in godly hearts.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

In a sense, we might say that God's edible Word is true, authoritative, necessary, sufficient, and clear. God's edible word is powerful and effective. As by the written Word, Christ is present in and through the Supper and feeds his people for their pilgrimage when they receive him by faith with thanksgiving in the Spirit.

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¹³⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:479, similarly 480.

¹³⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:480.

¹³⁸ Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 12.

¹³⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:484.

¹⁴⁰ *Institutes* 4.17.7.