

A SPRINT THROUGH CALVIN’S INSTITUTES

The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ

I. Review of Calvin, the “Reformer”

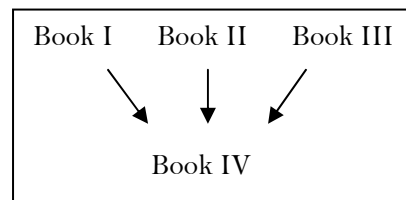
“William Farel detained me in Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful imprecation, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid His mighty hand upon me to arrest me... [A]fter having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies...he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw...”

- John Calvin, *Preface to the Psalms*, 1557.

“We are taught here that any mode of worship which is based on human inventions is false and contrary to God’s command. Because God gives us instructions that everything is to be done according to His instruction, it is unlawful for us to do anything different.” - Calvin on Hebrews 8:5 (‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain’)

II. Book IV of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* – “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein”

- A. Chapter 1-2 – The True and False Church
- B. Chapter 3 – Church Officers
- C. Chapter 4-11 – Church Government
 - 1. Ancient Church (Ch. 4)
 - 2. Papal Church (Ch. 5-11)
- D. Chapter 12 – Church Discipline
- E. Chapters 13 – Vows
- F. Chapters 14-19 – Sacraments
 - 1. True Sacrament [Baptism and the Lord’s Supper] (Ch. 14-17)
 - 2. False Sacraments [the mass and five other “ceremonies”] (Ch. 18-19)
- G. Chapter 20 – Civil Government



III. The Role of the Church

As explained in the previous book, it is by the faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation and eternal blessedness brought by him. Since, however, in our ignorance and sloth (which I add fickleness of disposition) we need outward helps to beget and increase faith in us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness. And in order that the preaching of the gospel might flourish, he deposited this treasure in the church. He instituted “pastors and teachers” [Eph 4:11] through whose lips he might teach his own; he furnished them with authority; finally, he omitted nothing that might make for holy agreement of faith and right order. First of all, he instituted sacraments, which we who have experienced them feel to be highly useful aids to foster and strengthen faith. Shut up as we are in the prison house of our flesh, we have not yet attained angelic rank. God, therefore, in his wonderful providence accommodating himself to our capacity, has prescribed a way for us, though still far off, to draw near to him. (4.1.1)

1. What are the internal means by which God draws us into the “society of Christ”? Where is this found in Calvin’s *Institutes*? What does Calvin say are the external means by which God draws us? Why do we need them?
2. What does Calvin mean when he says, “Although God’s power is not bound by outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching” (4.1.5)? How should this affect us when we hear a boring preacher?

IV. The Definition and Role of Sacraments

“We have in the sacraments another aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel...First, we must consider what a sacrament is. It seems to me that a simple and proper definition would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men...[Augustine] teaches that a sacrament is ‘a visible sign of an sacred thing,’ or ‘a visible form of an invisible grace’...Now from the definition that I have set forth we understand that 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... Yet, properly speaking, it is not so much needed to confirm his Sacred Word as to establish us in faith in it. For God’s truth is of itself firm and sure enough...But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped up on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and at last gives way. Here our merciful Lord...condescends to lead us to himself by these earthly blessings...” (4.14.1, 3)

1. According to Calvin, in what sense is a sacrament a “sign”? In what sense is it a “seal”?
2. What important point does Calvin make about God’s Word when he describes a sacrament as an “appendix”?

V. Calvin’s View of The Lord’s Supper

“Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such a great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space. Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises. And truly he offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart.” (4.17.10)

1. Would you say that, according to Calvin, Christ is really present at the Supper? Why or why not?
2. What is the role of faith in the Supper? What should we learn from this as we take the Supper?

“But the sacrament properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, that inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in.” (4.14.9)

3. How is there a “twofold eating” at the Lord’s Supper, one physical and one spiritual?

*“The heart of the Supper is the broken bread and outpoured wine, which serve as symbols of Christ’s body and shed blood...Christ is not localized in the bread and wine (Catholic view), nor is he absent from the Supper as though our highest activity were remembering him (the memorialist view). Rather, he is known through the elements, by the Spirit. There is a genuine communion with Christ in the Supper.” —Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 200-201.*

Four Views on the Lord’s Supper

	Roman Catholic View	Lutheran View	Zwingli (Memorialist)View	Calvin/Reformed View
How is Christ present at the Supper?	Christ’s flesh and blood are <i>physically</i> present in the substance of elements (‘transubstantiation’)	Christ is present “in, with, and under” the elements (‘consubstantiation’)	Christ is physically located in heaven and as the believer apprehends him by faith.	Christ is physically located in heaven, but is spiritually present by the power of the Spirit
What’s the logic?	“This is my body.”	“This <i>accompanies</i> my body”	“Do this in memory of me.”	“This is my body” (spiritually or symbolically)
What does the communicant consume?	The body and blood of Christ (though the elements appear as bread and wine)	Bread/wine AND the body and blood of Christ (Christ’s body is ubiquitous)	Bread and wine only (Christ is physically present in heaven)	Bread and wine only (Christ is physically present in heaven)
How is grace conferred on the communicant?	Grace is conferred <i>ex opera operata</i> (‘ by the working of the work performed’) in the eating, faith or no faith	Grace is conferred to true believers by faith (though some lean to Rome)	Grace is conferred to true believers by faith (but weak emphasis)	Grace is conferred to true believers by faith