

THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY REFORMATION INFLUENCES OF
JOHN CALVIN'S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY

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Scholars of John Calvin's theology have noted the reformer's reverence for the church fathers¹ and his reliance upon them in constructing his eucharistic theology.² Relatively less attention, however, has been granted to the influence of medieval and early Reformation era sources upon the Genevan's thought. As evidenced by his respect for the church fathers, Calvin viewed the Protestant Reformation not as an attempt to detach the church from its historic theological roots, but on the contrary, to return the church to such roots, something that he felt that the late medieval church had tragically obscured. Given Anthony Lane's observation that "there was no one fall of the church" but rather, in Calvin's view, "but rather a progressive decline from primitive purity to contemporary darkness,"³ it would seem logical for Calvin to build on his engagement with the church fathers in his eucharistic theology by drawing from medieval and early Reformation theologians who wrote on the subject. And in light of the recent increasing interest that Evangelicals have exhibited in medieval theology,⁴ studying Calvin's medieval and early Reformation influences on his theology of the Lord's Supper would appear to be a worthwhile project.

1. See, for example, Lane, *John Calvin*.

2. For two recent examples, see Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority*, and Butler, "This Mystical Blessing."

3. Lane, *John Calvin*, 42–43.

4. Here one might consider Craig A. Carter's work on precritical exegesis and Matthew Barrett's monograph on the catholic nature of Reformation theology. See Carter, *Interpreting Scripture*, and Barrett, *Reformation as Renewal*.

“More and more,” David J. Davis writes, “scholarship demonstrates that the reformers, as much as they rebelled against certain aspects of medieval thought, relied upon medieval sources for their own insights and innovations.” He contends, “Medieval theology was as formative for the Reformation as the classics were, because so often it was through the Middle Ages that the reformers read the classics.”⁵ Davis even claims that Calvin’s sacramental theology would not have developed if not for the influence of medieval writers whom he both affirmed and critiqued at various points.⁶ In order to explore further such a claim, this paper will study Calvin’s engagement with the eucharistic theology of the medieval church, discussing his assessment of Peter Lombard, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and several others. It will subsequently make note of Calvin’s engagement with Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Heinrich Bullinger to explore how Reformation sources that preceded Calvin influenced the development of his thought. The study will, in short, probe to what extent Calvin’s eucharistic theology was formed substantially in conversation with medieval and early Reformation theologians.

Medieval Theology

The first section of this paper will study Calvin’s assessment of medieval theologians whose writings either clearly influenced or may have influenced the Genevan’s eucharistic theology. The following survey will include those individuals whom Calvin held in high esteem, those whom he criticized, and those whom he failed to engage altogether.

Champions of Truth

At first glance, one can observe the Genevan reformer foregoing engagement on the Eucharist with figures that he relied upon heavily when he approached other doctrinal issues. Among the omissions that Calvin makes, perhaps the most surprising is his

5. Davis, “Rethinking the Reformation Reliance.”

6. Davis, “Rethinking the Reformation Reliance.”

failure to cite directly Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century mystic who commanded Calvin's admiration more than any figure since Augustine. He, along with pope Gregory the Great, was esteemed by Calvin as "the two great champions of the truth in the Middle Ages,"⁷ so much that entire monographs have been penned on Bernard's influence upon the reformer.⁸ There is no denying Bernard's influence upon Calvin's theology overall; Brian Gerrish points out that "comparison of Calvin's language with the language of such medieval mystics as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) reveals a striking affinity."⁹ Although the omission of direct references to Bernard in Calvin's eucharistic theology is striking, the fact that no explicit mention of Bernard is made does not mean that his influence upon Calvin was negligible.

For example, Calvin was aware, through his engagement with Bernard, of the relative novelty of transubstantiation. He charges that "in Bernard's time, although a blunter manner of speaking (about the Supper) had been adopted, transubstantiation was not yet recognized. And in all ages before, this comparison flitted about on everybody's lips, that the spiritual reality is joined to bread and wine."¹⁰ Rather than speaking of receiving Christ's corporeal flesh, as Calvin's Roman contemporaries did, Bernard's theology highlighted the union believers shared with Christ through the Supper, likening it to the union between a husband and wife.¹¹ Given that the notion "of the carnal and local presence was stated most crudely in the eleventh century,"¹² Bernard's alternate means of viewing the Lord's Supper would have attracted Calvin, who characteristically stressed a real communion with Christ in the Eucharist while denying the belief in a

7. Lane, *John Calvin*, 43. See also Littke, "Calvin's Appreciation."

8. See Lane, *Calvin and Bernard*, and Tamburello, *Union with Christ*.

9. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*.

10. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.17.15 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1014–15 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]). All English translations of Calvin's work have been taken from McNeill's version of the *Institutes*.

11. Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 81.

12. Lane, *John Calvin*, 85.

local presence, the theology ascendant in both his and Bernard's eras.¹³ Their common ground is further highlighted by Bernard's readiness to criticize the papacy and bishops of his time, which criticism earned him the admiration of the reformer.¹⁴

Calvin's relative neglect of Bernard, in comparison to the way he frequently cites the church fathers, may be in part because the medieval mystic did not address the Eucharist with nearly the same frequency as Reformation era theologians. The relative neglect of the Supper in Bernard's time compared to Calvin's also helps explain the Genevan's relative neglect of Gregory on this question, despite holding a favourable view of this pope. However, Bernard did help reinforce the foundation on which Calvin built. As Dennis Tamburello explains, Bernard did not make union with Christ the basis for his eucharistic theology to the extent that Calvin did.¹⁵ However, the Genevan's increasing emphasis on the elevation of God's people to heaven by the Holy Spirit's power in the Eucharist "aligns quite clearly with Calvin's slow adoption of more and more of Bernard's theology, particularly of Bernard's imagery of a mystical marriage between Christ and the body of Christ in the celebration."¹⁶ Therefore, even if Calvin did not grant the same weight to Bernard that he did to the church fathers, the monk's contribution to Calvin's theology should not be disregarded. In Calvin's opinion, Bernard "preserved Augustine's doctrine from medieval error, especially that of scholasticism and papal canon law," even if he "often erred and is not completely on Calvin's side."¹⁷

Apparent Adversaries

Calvin's criticisms of medieval figures appear far more frequent than those of the church fathers; while he appeals to over a dozen immediately recognizable theologians from the patristic era, out of the Middle Ages, he recognizes but two praiseworthy figures

13. Lane, *John Calvin*, 93–94.

14. Calvin, *Calvin*, 296. All English translations of Calvin's work have been taken from Reid's translations of the reformer's tracts and treatises.

15. Tamburello, *Union with Christ*, 81.

16. Davis, "Rethinking the Reformation."

17. Bell, "Calvin and Luther," 372.

in Gregory and Bernard. Readers of the *Institutes* will quickly notice that Calvin, again and again, attacks the “Schoolmen”—medieval scholastics who were, in the reformer’s estimation, unduly beholden to Aristotelian philosophical categories and employing them to defend the theology of Rome. One of his preferred foils among the schoolmen was the Bishop of Paris, Peter Lombard.

A contemporary of Bernard, Lombard is charged by Calvin with perpetuating the very error that the former rejected: a corporeal presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Lane notes an apparent inconsistency here; Calvin, on one hand, claims, “The doctrine not yet recognized by Bernard’s age was that of the absence of the bread and the wine in the sacrament.” At the same time, “Peter Lombard . . . is charged with teaching precisely this doctrine.”¹⁸ Calvin assailed the scholastic for contending that the sacraments were “causes of righteousness and salvation,”¹⁹ dismissing his extensive attempts to defend transubstantiation as absurd.²⁰ Calvin also attacks Lombard for the latter’s assertion that unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ during the mass—a logical consequence of transubstantiation.²¹ Because Calvin sometimes referred to the reception of Christ in the Lord’s Supper in terms of “spiritual eating,” his Roman opponents charged him with rejecting the doctrine of “true and real eating.” The reformer countered by asserting that Rome’s position left no room for the Holy Spirit, “the bond of our union with Christ,” and accused Lombard of perverting the minds of his contemporaries by inventing the notion that Christ’s flesh was the substance of the eucharistic bread.²² “Hence,” from

18. Lane, *John Calvin*, 85.

19. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.12 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1010–11 [*Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

20. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.12 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1010–11 [*Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

21. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.33 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1033–34 [*Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

22. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.33 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1033–34 [*Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]). Calvin charges Lombard with being the “*autor*,” the originator of carnal eating.

Lombard's error, Calvin charges, there emerged "their false interpretation of the sacramental eating. For they supposed that even the impious and the wicked eat Christ's body, however estranged from him they may be."²³ Further intensifying Lombard's dilemma, in Calvin's opinion, was the inability of those who accepted his eucharistic theology to explain how long Christ's flesh remains in one's body after partaking of the sacrament.

Calvin likewise saw the danger to genuine faith that Lombard's mistakes perpetuated. Because the scholastic viewed the eucharistic bread as "nothing but a mask to prevent our eyes from seeing the flesh" of Christ,²⁴ Lombard devalued—whether intentionally or not—the necessity of faith for anyone to experience genuine fellowship with Jesus. The idea that the physical flesh of Christ was enclosed in the eucharistic bread, whether communicants in the mass recognized him there or not, diverted the people's attention away from seeking Christ by faith, a characteristic concern of Calvin's eucharistic theology and, indeed, of his spirituality overall.

Outstanding Omissions

Perhaps the most surprising feature of Calvin's engagement with the medievals is neither whom he engages nor what he makes of their writings but whom he fails to discuss at all. Surprisingly, given the influence Thomas Aquinas has exerted upon both the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, Calvin essentially ignored the most influential theologian in the former's history. Scholars have highlighted Calvin's relative ignorance of Aquinas compared to other medieval figures such as Bernard, Gregory, or even the *théologiens Sorboniques*—French nominalists whom the reformer assailed relentlessly. Charles Raith, perceiving Calvin's surprising lack of attention to Thomas, writes that the reformer "only mentions Aquinas by name twice, and on one oc-

23. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.33 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1033–34 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

24. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.13 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1003–4 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

casation Calvin (tellingly) misinterprets Aquinas' thought; his engagement . . . reflects the judgments of Calvin's more immediate opponents rather than Aquinas himself."²⁵ On one hand, it would seem that modern interpreters need not guess what Calvin would have said in response to Aquinas's doctrines of eucharistic sacrifice or transubstantiation; he wastes little opportunity to condemn such teachings when he engages other proponents. Nevertheless, given that some scholars, such as John Colwell, are "increasingly more impressed by the similarities than by the dissimilarities of their thought,"²⁶ it is unfortunate that Calvin did not engage substantially with Aquinas's eucharistic theology, even if he voiced opposition to several of his key commitments. Given Colwell's observation that Aquinas tended to employ the term "grace" in a similar manner to the way Calvin invoked the power of the Spirit in his eucharistic theology, a criticism of Aquinas's failure to appreciate the pneumatological dimensions of the sacrament might have been expected from the reformer.²⁷ For Aquinas, the believer, "born and nourished in the sacraments, is ontologically transformed by grace and so reportioned to the supernatural end."²⁸ Through "infused virtues" obtained via participation in activities such as the Eucharist, grace transforms the soul.²⁹ Although Calvin does not deny that sanctification is utterly and singularly a gift of grace on God's behalf, the Genevan never uses the language of infused virtues, and a critique of Aquinas's position would not have seemed out of place in Calvin's many writings on the Supper.

If Calvin's failure to cite directly Bernard in support of his eucharistic theology is surprising and his neglect of Aquinas noteworthy, it is perhaps even more puzzling that Calvin never once cites Ratramnus of Corbie, the ninth-century French monk, in any of his writings on the Supper—particularly given the distinctly Augustinian shape of the latter's theology. In his response

25. Raith, *Aquinas and Calvin on Romans*, 10.

26. Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 9.

27. See Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 10.

28. Spezanno, "Aquinas," 670.

29. Spezanno, "Aquinas," 669.

to Paschasius Radbertus, a fellow monk who claimed that the bread and wine of the communion meal literally became the body and blood of Christ, Ratramnus posited that believers received Christ in a spiritual, rather than a carnal, manner. Willemien Otten notes:

Ratramnus' treatise not only showed a remarkable simplicity, its figurative reading of the eucharist going seemingly against the doctrine of transubstantiation, but by virtue of its use of earlier patristic material it also seemed to be closer to the position of the Church Fathers.³⁰

Calvin and Ratramnus came to similar conclusions regarding the meal, and it also appears they even used similar texts to reach them, such as Augustine's *Tractates on the Gospel of John*.³¹

Calvin scholars have noted the reformer's omission of Ratramnus with surprise; Lane, noting that Ratramnus's *De corpore et sanguine Domini* was published in Geneva in 1541, claims, "This work can at the very least, be made to appear to support Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper."³² He finds it "remarkable both that Calvin never cites him and . . . his work was not to be found in the Genevan library."³³ We can only speculate as to why Calvin does not engage Ratramnus; appealing to a ninth-century figure who vehemently denied transubstantiation but remained in good standing with the church of his era would have reinforced Calvin's argument that transubstantiation was a recent invention on Rome's part. Perhaps, given that Ratramnus's view is largely a reworking of Augustine's, Calvin felt that citing a later figure like him was unnecessary. It is also possible, despite Lane's observation that Ratramnus's work was published in the prime of Calvin's career, that the reformer never heard of him. Whatever the reason for Calvin's omission of Ratramnus, the availability of this early medieval figure to the modern reader allows the latter to recognize Ratramnus's resemblance to Calvin. The noted resemblance testifies to the historical

30. Otten, "Between Augustinian Sign and Carolingian Reality," 138.

31. Other scholars have made this observation in the past; see Otten, "Between Augustinian Sign and Carolingian Reality," 140.

32. Lane, *John Calvin*, 45.

33. Lane, *John Calvin*, 45.

legitimacy both of the reformer's theology and his reading of Augustine.

Calvin's omission of John Wycliffe is also somewhat surprising; although the English scholastic "did not insist on any specific theory of (Christ's) presence" in the Lord's Supper, his rejection of transubstantiation made him an additional authority to which Calvin could have appealed.³⁴ There are also minor theologians whom Calvin does not cite, despite close resonances with his view. Petr Chelčický, a Czech Hussite who challenged the doctrines of transubstantiation and infant baptism,³⁵ also held that faith was critical to participants' receiving the blessing of Christ in the Supper.³⁶ Hugh of St. Victor is also never cited, despite expressing sentiments resembling Calvin's convictions concerning the sacramental framework of *signum* and *res*. The lack of a corresponding outward sign or a physical element led Hugh to deny penance as a sacrament, in contrast to his contemporary Lombard.³⁷ One can only speculate as to why Calvin omitted such writers from his appeal to history. However, the fact that "Calvin's references to the fathers occur most frequently in his polemical writings,"³⁸ as Esther Chung-Kim notes, provides an indication. Calvin's theological opponents regarded the church fathers with deep respect. Conversely, they regarded several of the medieval figures whom Calvin omits with outright contempt.

Conclusion

In terms of substance, Calvin read medieval theologians similarly to the way he read the church fathers—as valuable yet not normative—even if he granted more weight to the latter group. Men such as Bernard and Gregory, he claims, resemble the church fathers, in that they all built on the foundation laid by Christ even

34. Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 58.

35. Wagner, *Petr Chelčický*, 115–16.

36. Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 58. It is worth noting, however, that Chelčický went a step further than Calvin, teaching that the Supper was of no effect if the elements were received from an individual with no faith (93–94).

37. See Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 76–77.

38. Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority*, 37.

if they “often turned away from the right method of building.”³⁹ That said, the extent to which he cites them is unlike his engagement with the patristic figures; Calvin cites medieval figures much more sparingly in comparison, even failing to cite major figures from that era altogether. The same cannot, however, be said of early Reformation figures.

Forerunners of Reform

Calvin’s relative youth, when contrasted against fellow Reformation giants, deeply affected the development of his eucharistic theology. Not only was Calvin able to study Martin Luther’s view in a critical light, but Michael Horton argues, “Martin Bucer also left a decisive imprint on Calvin . . . Heinrich Bullinger, John Knox, Jan Laski (John a Lasco), Girolamo Zanchi, and Peter Martyr Vermigli were also among the many contemporaries of Calvin” who left an imprint on him and the Reformed tradition at large.⁴⁰ No analysis of the historical antecedents to Calvin’s eucharistic theology, therefore, would be complete without considering the force of such figures upon his theological development.⁴¹

Martin Bucer

Insofar as sacramental theology is concerned, Bucer might be considered an unsung hero of the Reformation; Keith Mathison argues, “His impact on Calvin and on Reformed Protestantism as a whole was considerable, although, because much of it was mediated through Calvin, it has often been unrecognized.”⁴² Amid

39. Calvin, *Comm.* 1 Cor 3:15 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 49:356–57 [*Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 21]).

40. Horton, *For Calvinism*, 29.

41. Much literature has already been produced concerning the influence of major Reformation era theologians such as Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli upon John Calvin’s eucharistic theology. This study, therefore, will concentrate on the influence of lesser-known Reformation era figures who, while often underappreciated, exerted a clear impact upon the development of Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper.

42. Mathison, *Given for You*, 50.

the numerous ways the more obscure reformer influenced Calvin, Bucer's influence is perhaps most notable in the Genevan's doctrine of the Eucharist. Mathison is not the first scholar to notice the profound influence he exerted on Calvin; Francois Wendel notes that the parallel Calvin draws "between the receiving of the elements and the nourishment of the soul by the body and blood of Christ"—a vital component of Calvin's case against a carnal reception of Christ—"is already to be found in Bucer's *Evangelical Commentary*."⁴³

Bucer's documented influence upon Calvin begins with the latter's 1537 *Confession of Faith Concerning the Eucharist*. This document was penned by Calvin, with the support of Bucer and Wolfgang Capito, to dispel the notion that the Strasbourg Protestants had ceded too much ground to the Lutheran understanding of Communion.⁴⁴ The statement denies that "Christ our Lord . . . (is) diffused locally or ubiquitously in the Holy Supper" but rather "presents himself to us as we are by faith exalted to heaven with him, so that the bread we break and the cup through which we show Christ forth may be for us really the communion of his body and blood."⁴⁵ Bucer and Calvin, even from this early stage in the latter's career, rejected any sort of eucharistic relocation on Christ's part. Believers on earth, not the Lord's body in heaven, undergo relocation. When Calvin, along with his associate William Farel, were forced out of Geneva in 1538, they took refuge in Bucer's city.⁴⁶

The fact that Calvin's time in Strasbourg with Bucer profoundly influenced his eucharistic theology was not lost on his opponents; Calvin's "stay in Strasbourg at the end of the 1530s," Amy Nelson Burnett explains, "would place him in the Strasbourg camp, at least in the eyes of the Zürichers, through most of the 1540s."⁴⁷ Like the elder reformer, Calvin's trajectory during and following his time in the city was to suggest that the

43. Wendel, *Calvin*, 332 (cited in Mathison, *Given for You*, 6).

44. Calvin, *Calvin*, 167.

45. Calvin, *Calvin*, 169.

46. Mathison, "Sacraments," 494.

47. Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 314.

eucharistic divide between Lutherans and Zwinglians was largely due to a misunderstanding of each other, which was evidenced in his 1541 *Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper*.⁴⁸ Mathison argues that Bucer tirelessly attempted to construct a theology of the Lord's Supper that both Lutherans and Zwinglians could agree to, and Calvin followed him in that 1541 *Treatise*.⁴⁹ Although Bucer is not cited directly in the document, his mediating approach is evident in Calvin's text. By this time in his career, Bruce Gordon explains, "Like Bucer, Calvin saw the dispute between Luther and Zwingli as a disfigurement of God's reform of the Church, the human folly of preferring contention to conversation."⁵⁰ His *Treatise*, written in his native French, dismisses clearly and concisely the notion that the elements of the Supper are mere symbols: "Christ gives us in the Supper," Calvin insisted, "the real substance of his body and his blood, so that we may possess him fully, and, possessing him, have part in all his blessings."⁵¹ Nevertheless, he just as clearly disavows any concept of the local presence; in an obvious strike at Roman Catholic and Lutheran views, he claims that "to enclose Jesus Christ fantastically under the bread and wine, or so to join him to them as to amuse our understanding there instead of looking at him in heaven, is a pernicious fancy."⁵² The reformer's characteristic position bears the imprint of Bucer. At this juncture in Calvin's career, Mathison says, "Bucer's influence on Calvin is almost universally acknowledged"⁵³ and was expressed not only through their individual friendship but in the three years Calvin spent in Strasbourg's confessional context.

The influence of Bucer upon Calvin was not restricted to the Genevan's treatises on the Supper alone, however. "The Zwinglian influences detectable in the 1536 *Institutes*," Gordon claims, also "evaporated during Calvin's stay in Strasbourg be-

48. Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments*, 309.

49. Mathison, "Sacraments," 495.

50. Gordon, *Calvin*, 161.

51. Calvin, *Calvin*, 148.

52. Calvin, *Calvin*, 159.

53. Mathison, "Sacraments," 495.

tween 1538 and 1541,”⁵⁴ and the defining features of Calvin’s mature theology were enhanced through his close contact with Bucer. They were united in the conviction that the people of God should celebrate the Supper weekly⁵⁵ and agreed that ecclesial leadership had the right—even the responsibility—to deny the impenitent admission to the Table.⁵⁶ The charismatic Roman Catholic theologian Kilian McDonnell even suggested that the Genevan’s conception of union with Christ, the doctrine without which Calvin’s eucharistic theology collapses, developed in large part as a result of Bucer’s influence.⁵⁷ So strong was Bucer’s influence upon the younger Calvin that the Genevan explicitly had to address it amidst his dialogue with Heinrich Bullinger lest he be characterized as a mere duplicate of his elder.⁵⁸ As both a friend and mentor to Calvin, Bucer’s relationship with the younger reformer shaped Calvin in such a way that few figures were privileged to.

Peter Martyr Vermigli

Bucer was not the only Reformation figure with connections to the city of Strasbourg who influenced Calvin’s eucharistic theology. In his refutation of Lutheran contemporary Tileman Heshusius, Calvin indicates that he viewed the Reformation’s recovery of the Lord’s Supper as a gradual project, with numerous theologians representing successive achievements. Zwingli’s companion Oecampadius “showed that the figment of a local presence was unknown to the ancient Church. He was succeeded by Bullinger, who performed the task with equal felicity. The whole was crowned by Peter Martyr, who left nothing more to be done.”⁵⁹ Born in Florence, Italy, in September 1499,⁶⁰ and roughly ten years Calvin’s senior, Vermigli worked closely with Bucer and Calvin during the latter’s 1538–1541 exile in

54. Gordon, *Calvin*, 167.

55. Mathison, *Given for You*, 50.

56. McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 177.

57. McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 187.

58. Gordon, *Calvin*, 173.

59. Calvin, *Calvin*, 292.

60. Corda, *Veritas Sacramenti*, 9.

Strasbourg but did not move to the city until his later appointment as professor of Old Testament.⁶¹ He and the Genevan's eucharistic theologies bear similarities; Salvatore Corda observes that Vermigli's "mature doctrine shows a striking affinity with that of Calvin and his environment, is more elaborate but nevertheless very close to that of Bullinger, (and) differs in terminology, emphasis, and internal coherence, though not much in basic thrust, from that of Bucer."⁶² Mathison's appraisal is similar; Vermigli's doctrines of the Incarnation, union with Christ, and the Supper are inextricably linked, as they were for Calvin. Both were held that "the divine life is mediated through the human nature of Christ to all who are in union with Christ,"⁶³ an articulation so similar to Calvin that one could be excused for thinking it belonged to him.

In his 1555 correspondence with Vermigli, Calvin speaks as if they are one on the Supper, writing, "The secret communication we have with Christ . . . between ourselves can be suitably defined in a few words." He says that Christ engrafts "us into his body, so as to communicate to us all that is his . . . we draw life from his flesh and blood, so that they are not undeservedly called our 'food.'"⁶⁴ Notably, Calvin ends this part of his correspondence by surmising, "I adore the mystery rather than labor to understand it," a statement strikingly similar to how he concludes a discussion of union with Christ and the Eucharist in his final edition of the *Institutes* four years later.⁶⁵ Naturally, given the similarities between their eucharistic theologies, Calvin and Vermigli shared several ecclesiological commitments. John Tweeddale writes that both men "believed that God gave to the church external means like preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper to summon and sustain his people in union and communion with Christ."⁶⁶ Vermigli also held, with Calvin and Bucer, that church

61. Corda, *Veritas Sacramenti*, 16.

62. Corda, *Veritas Sacramenti*, 190.

63. Mathison, *Given for You*, 52–53.

64. Cited in Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 72.

65. See Calvin, *Inst.* 4.17.32 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:1032–33 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

66. Tweeddale, "Church as Mother," 475.

leadership held the authority to bar unrepentant persons from the Table.⁶⁷ Even their written works bore structural similarity; Vermigli's *Loci Communes* was edited specifically to imitate the form Calvin gave to his 1559 *Institutes*.⁶⁸

Calvin's positive references to—and even friendship with—Vermigli do not imply that no differences existed between them. Scholars of Vermigli place him closer to Rome than Calvin would have wanted to be. Donald Fuller, for example, argues, “Vermigli's Supper doctrine is an extension of Aquinas' earlier Word-centered reform of Lombard's doctrine of God as found in *Summa Theologia*.”⁶⁹ Joseph Donnelly goes further, labelling Vermigli's understanding as “Calvinism perfecting Thomism.”⁷⁰ Calvin himself appeared to have little difficulty with Vermigli's thought; however, Mathison does explain that Vermigli “deals with the issue of eucharistic sacrifice more than Calvin,”⁷¹ and the Genevan would not have wanted to be associated with the sacramental theology of Aquinas or Lombard. Indeed, Calvin sharply criticized the latter in his work on the Lord's Supper.⁷² Thus, despite their ample common ground, subtle differences in their theologies have yielded different interpretations.

Heinrich Bullinger

Bullinger was merely five years older than Calvin, and therefore the Genevan engaged him as a contemporary as much as a predecessor. As Bullinger was a vital figure in the development of the Second Helvetic Confession that helped cement Swiss Reformed theology, Calvin respected him as a friend and confidant, writing to him when facing disputes within his congregation over issues such as church discipline and pastoral care.⁷³ The Züricher is not cited freely by Calvin as were the church fathers, given that

67. McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 187.

68. McDonnell, *John Calvin*, 187.

69. Fuller, “Sacrifice and Sacrament,” 215.

70. Donnelly, “Calvinist Thomism,” 441.

71. Mathison, *Given for You*, 55.

72. Calvin, *Inst.* 4.14.16 (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 30:953 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 2]).

73. Nichols, “Call to Geneva,” 51.

Bullinger's apologetic value would have been nil. His impact upon Calvin can, however, be observed in the development of the Genevan's eucharistic theology. As Zwingli's successor in Zürich, Bullinger's doctrine of the Lord's Supper held much in common with "God's Armed Prophet," as Gordon labels Zwingli.⁷⁴ Recall that Calvin lauded Bullinger, alongside Oecampadius and Vermigli, for rejecting a corporeal presence,⁷⁵ claiming that he "performed the task" of showing that doctrine's relative novelty. It was Bullinger who first directed Calvin's attention to the attacks upon Reformed eucharistic theology by Heshusius; Bullinger himself refused to engage the Lutheran, yet he and Calvin shared a rejection of the physical presence that Heshusius defended vehemently.⁷⁶ Bullinger also spoke of the Supper as a testament confirming the Holy Spirit's work, a vital feature of Calvin's eucharistic theology.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, Calvin's engagement with Bullinger highlights several differences. Most of the letters exchanged between them either kept the latter abreast of developments in the French and Genevan Reformations or discussed points of unity and difference on the Lord's Supper; "when Bullinger was unhappy with the criticisms Calvin had sent him on his Treatise on the sacraments," Robert Godfrey says, "Calvin replied that he wanted harmony and agreement."⁷⁸ Although the Lutherans considered Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper as essentially Zwinglian, Bullinger was initially worried that Calvin's views were little different from not only Lutheranism but even Roman Catholicism since the Genevan considered the Supper a means of grace.⁷⁹ Calvin's response to such criticisms, Paul Rorem ex-

74. Gordon, *Zwingli*. Subtle differences exist between the eucharistic theologies of the two men, however. Mathison explains that although "it has often been claimed that Bullinger's theology of the Lord's Supper was the same as Zwingli's . . . more thorough research has demonstrated this to be an inaccurate view" (*Given for You*, 62).

75. Calvin, *Calvin*, 292.

76. Calvin, *Calvin*, 167.

77. Batlajery, "Ecumenical Activities," 235.

78. Godfrey, "Calvin and Friends," 140.

79. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 3.

plains, was “to persuade Bullinger of his sincerity in pursuing (harmony), yet without equivocating on his basic position.”⁸⁰ In his June 1548 reply to Bullinger, Calvin expresses no desire to debate “points with regard to which we are most nearly at one,” suggesting that a basis of unity between himself and Bullinger might be discerned in that

We neither bind up the grace of God with (the sacraments), nor transfer to them the work or power of the Holy Spirit . . . We expressly declare that it is God alone, who acts by means of the Sacraments; and we maintain that their whole efficacy is due to the Holy Spirit.⁸¹

Calvin's ecumenical ability is on full display in these correspondences as he expresses hope for unity with the Reformed churches in Zürich: “Although, however, I differ from you in opinion,” he wrote to Bullinger, “that does not imply the least severance of affection; just as I cultivate the friendship of Bucer, and yet am free to dissent occasionally from his view.”⁸² Even if the finer points of their eucharistic theologies were never fully reconciled, Calvin saw no reason to inhibit cooperation with Bullinger or the churches who held his understanding.

Calvin and Bullinger's core commitments were publicly presented in the 1549 formulation of the *Consensus Tigurinus* (or the Zürich Consensus) that provided a basis of unity among Swiss Protestants.⁸³ Although Calvin stressed to Bullinger the importance of publishing the document for the benefit of the Reformed churches across central Europe,⁸⁴ it should be noted that to read the *Consensus* as a concise summary of what Calvin or Bullinger believed is highly inadvisable. Properly understanding the limited intentions of the *Consensus* “is important,” for understanding correctly the Genevan's theology, Mathison avers, “because later Reformed theologians did rest their interpretations of Calvin heavily upon the *Consensus Tigurinus*,” thus misinter-

80. Rorem, *Calvin and Bullinger*, 29. Consult Rorem's volume for a detailed study of Calvin and Bullinger's eucharistic theologies in parallel.

81. Calvin, *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 224.

82. Calvin, *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 235.

83. Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 189.

84. Calvin, *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, 275.

preting both him and Bullinger.⁸⁵ Therefore, Calvin's interactions with Bullinger are not good sources for discerning everything which the Genevan affirmed regarding the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, they are solid guides to discerning what he refused to compromise. Through the *Consensus* and their personal correspondences, Bullinger is one of the last in a long line of figures who influenced the development of Calvin's eucharistic theology.

Conclusion

How does Davis's claim that "it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for a sacramental theology like Calvin's to have developed in the sixteenth century without the direct influence of the Middle Ages, which Calvin both drew upon and heavily critiqued"⁸⁶ appear given the above survey of the Genevan's engagement with his medieval and early Reformation predecessors? In one sense, Davis is clearly correct that Calvin was indebted deeply to the medieval church insofar as shaping his own thoughts. Moreover, Davis correctly observes that Calvin both drew upon and heavily critiqued the theologians from the Middle Ages. However, one might expect more explicit engagement with them given his proximity to them relative to the church fathers.

Calvin clearly did not regard either patristic or medieval figures as normative in the way the Roman Church of his era did. However, he clearly believed that the Reformation boasted the support of the tradition, claiming that the "Papists" would "find no more hostile enemies than the holy doctors of the Church, whom they falsely claim on their side."⁸⁷ In light of his notable yet critical use of medieval and early Reformation sources, Calvin offers a worthy example to contemporary Protestants who desire a richer engagement with the great tradition, without com-

85. See Mathison, *Given for You*, 62.

86. Davis, "Rethinking the Reformation Reliance."

87. Calvin, *Comm. John 5:45* (Baum et al., eds. *Corpus Reformatorum* 47:128–29 [*Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, Volume 19]).

promising the distinctives they hold dear. “Far from rejecting the ancient Christian tradition,” Philip Cary acknowledges, “Protestant theologians were convinced that they had a more accurate grasp of its revered teachings than the papists.”⁸⁸ The reformer’s problem with Rome, ironically, is that it was, in fact, not truly catholic enough in his eyes.

That said, Calvin’s engagement with the medieval church was, clearly, not near as thorough and determinative as his reading of the church fathers or even his reading of earlier Reformation era figures. In light of scholarship that has discerned certain parallels between Calvin’s eucharistic theology and that of Thomas Aquinas,⁸⁹ it is particularly unfortunate that the former did not engage explicitly the latter. Given the rather vicious tone of Reformation era debates surrounding the Supper, and the failure of the Protestants in that era to find sufficient common ground on the subject to ensure ecclesial unity with each other, let alone Rome, one wonders how greater engagement with medieval theologians—Aquinas, in particular—by Calvin might have altered the course of ecumenical discussions surrounding the topic throughout the church’s history. Consequently, further research on how Calvin might have engaged Aquinas, given what we now of the former’s eucharistic commitments, might make a worthwhile subject for further research.

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88. Cary, *Outward Signs*, 213.

89. See Salkeld, *Transubstantiation*, 154.

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