"The Best Method of Obtaining Concord, Provided Truth Be Sought Without Contention"

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John Calvin
Tracts and Letters

Volume 2: Tracts, Part 2
Edited and Translated by
Henry Beveridge

The Banner of Truth Trust
hatred or suspicion of my writings, I regard not, nor labour to refute, but rather am pleased that there should exist a notable specimen of the depravity and malevolence with which he is imbued, the stolid pride, and insolent audacity with which he swells. I do not now question his title to assume the office of censor against me. It is enough for me that while I am silent all sensible and moderate men will recognise under the character of the censor one who has the spirit of an executioner; so foully does he adulterate, corrupt, wrest, garble, lacerate, and subvert everything. Had he anything like candour or docility, I would clear myself from his calumnies, but as he is like an untamed bull I leave it to Beza to prune his wantonness, and bring him into due subjection.

THE BEST METHOD OF OBTAINING CONCORD,

PROVIDED THE TRUTH BE SOUGHT WITHOUT CONTENTION.

That no doubt or suspicion may delay and hinder Concord, we must, in the first place, explain what the points are on which we are agreed; for those points which, at the commencement of our contests, chiefly exasperated the minds of both parties, are now undisputed. What produced the greatest hatred was the allegation by one party that the grace of the Spirit was tied down to external elements; and, by the other, that only bare and empty figures resembling theatrical shows were left. This contention has now ceased, because we acknowledge on both sides,—

First, that the Sacraments are not only marks of outward profession before men, but are testimonies and badges of divine grace, and seals of the promises, giving a stronger confirmation to our faith.

That, therefore, their use is twofold—to sustain our consciences before God, and testify our piety before the world.

That God, moreover, as he is true and faithful, performs by the secret virtue of his Spirit that which he figures by external signs, and, accordingly, that on the part of God himself, not empty signs are set before us, but the reality and efficacy at the same time conjoined with them.

That, on the other hand, the grace or virtue of the Spirit is not inclosed by the external signs, because they do not profit all equally or indiscriminately, nor does the effect also appear at the same moment; but that God uses the Sacraments as to him seems good, so that they help forward the
salvation of the elect, and instead of conferring anything on others rather turn to their destruction.

That, in short, the Sacraments are of no avail unless they are received in faith, which is a special gift of the Spirit, not depending on earthly elements, but on the celestial operation of the same Spirit. External helps are only added to meet the weakness of our capacity.

Particularly, in regard to the holy Supper of Christ, it is agreed, that under the symbols of bread and wine an exhibition of the body and blood of Christ is held forth; and we are not merely reminded that Christ was once offered on the cross for us, but that sacred union is ratified to which it is owing that his death is our life; in other words, being ingrafted into his body, we are truly nourished by it, just as our bodies are nourished by meat and drink.

It is also agreed, that Christ fulfils in reality and efficaciously whatever the analogy between the sign and the thing signified demands; and that, therefore, in the Supper communion with the body and blood is truly offered to us, or, (which is the same thing,) that under the bread and wine we receive an earnest which makes us partakers of the body and blood of Christ.

It remains to mention the articles as to which it is not yet clear either what view we are to take or how we are to speak.

Every man who, endued with a sound and correct judgment, possesses also a calm and well-ordered mind, will admit that the only dispute is in regard to the mode of eating. For we plainly and ingenuously assert that Christ becomes ours in order that he may thereafter communicate the blessings which he possesses to us: that his body also was not only once given for our salvation when it was sacrificed on the cross to expiate sin, but is daily given us for nourishment, that while he dwells in us we may enjoy a participation in all his blessings. In short, we teach that it is vivifying, because he infuses his own life into us in the same way in which we derive vigour from the substance of bread. Therefore, according to the different modes of eating adopted, disputes arise. Our explanation is, that the body of Christ is eaten, inasmuch as it is the spiritual nourishment of the soul. Again, it is called nourishment by us in this sense, viz., because Christ, by the incomprehensible agency of his Spirit, infuses his life into us, and makes it common to us, just as in a tree the vital sap diffuses itself from the root among the branches, or as the vigour of the head is extended to the members. In this definition there is no quibble, no obscurity, nothing ambiguous or equivocating.

Some, not contented with this lucid simplicity, insist that the body of Christ is swallowed; but this is not supported by the authority of Scripture, or the testimony of the primitive Church, so that it is wonderful how men endued with moderate judgment and learning contend so pertinaciously for a new invention. We by no means call in question the doctrine of Scripture, that the flesh of Christ is meat indeed, and his blood drink indeed; because they are both truly received by us, and are sufficient for entire life. We also profess that this communion is received by us in the sacred Supper. Whosoever urges us farther certainly overlaps the proper bounds.

Moreover, to insist on the essential expression is not agreeable to reason, since the subject in question is the Sacraments to which Scripture assigns a peculiar mode of expression. Hence it follows, that the words, “This is my body,” and also, “The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ,” ought to be expounded in a sacramental manner. As some are suspicious of danger here, it is easy to obviate their fears. When the mode of expression is said to be sacramental, they think that the reality is overthrown by the figure. But they ought to observe that the figure is not set down as an empty phantom, but is taken grammatically to denote a metonymy; lest any one should suppose that the bread is called “The body of Christ,” as absolutely as Christ himself is called “The Son of God.” The term body is therefore figuratively transferred to the bread, and yet not figuratively as if Christ presented a naked and empty image of his body to our eyes, because the reality is not excluded by the figure, but only the difference is denoted between the sign and the thing signified. This is not re-
pugnant to their union. Let cavilling only be laid aside, as it ought to be, in seeking concord, and it will be seen that there is nothing in this doctrine which ought to be odious or liable to misconception, and that it has ever been approved both by common sense and common usage.

First of all, it is necessary to remove the obstacle with regard to the immensity of the body. Unless it is admitted that it is finite and contained in heaven, there will be no means of settling the dispute. The idea of some, that there is no absurdity in supposing it to be everywhere, in consequence of its being united to the Divinity, is easily disposed of. For although the two natures form the one person of the Mediator, the properties of each remain distinct, since union is a different thing from unity. There was no dispute in ancient times as to this matter, for it was held with universal consent, that as Christ, the Son of God, the Mediator, and our Head, was once received into heavenly glory, so he is separated from us in respect of his flesh by distance of place, but still, by his Divine essence and virtue, and also spiritual grace, fills heaven and earth.

This being fixed, it will be lawful to admit forms of speech, by which, on account of their ambiguity, some are perplexed, viz., that the body of Christ is given us under the bread, or with the bread, because the thing denoted is not a substantial union of corruptible meat with the flesh of Christ, but sacramental conjunction. And there is no dispute among the pious as to the fact, that there is an inseparable tie between the sign and the thing signified in the very promise which makes no fallacious exhibition, but figures what is truly and in reality performed.

Moreover, it is in vain to dispute about a twofold body. There was indeed a change in the condition of the flesh of Christ, when received into celestial glory it laid aside all that was earthly, mortal, or perishable. Still, however, we ought to hold that no other body is vivifying to us, or can be regarded as meat indeed, but that which was crucified for the expiation of sin, as the words import. The same body, therefore, which the Son of God once offered to the Father in sacrifice, he daily offers us in the Supper as spiritual food. Only, as I lately hinted, we must hold in regard to the mode, that it is not necessary that the essence of the flesh should descend from heaven in order to our being fed upon it, the virtue of the Spirit being sufficient to break through all impediments and surmount any distance of place. Meanwhile, we deny not that this mode is incomprehensible to the human mind; because neither can flesh naturally be the life of the soul, nor exert its power upon us from heaven, nor without reason is the communion which makes us flesh of the flesh of Christ, and bone of his bones, called by Paul, "A great mystery." (Eph. v. 30.) Therefore, in the sacred Supper, we acknowledge a miracle which surpasses both the limits of nature and the measure of our sense, while the life of Christ is common to us, and his flesh is given us for food. But we must have done with all inventions inconsistent with the explanation lately given, such as the ubiquity of the body, the secret inclosing under the symbol of bread, and the substantial presence on earth.

After these matters have been arranged there still arises the doubt as to the term substance, to settle which the easy method seems to be to remove the gross imagination as to the eating of the flesh, as if it were similar to corporeal meat which is received by the mouth and descends into the stomach. For when this absurdity is out of the way, there is no reason why we should deny that we are substantially fed upon it, the virtue of the flesh should descend from heaven in order to our being fed upon it, the virtue of the Spirit being sufficient to break through all impediments and surmount any distance of place. Meanwhile, we deny not that this mode is incomprehensible to the human mind; because neither can flesh naturally be the life of the soul, nor exert its power upon us from heaven, nor without reason is the communion which makes us flesh of the flesh of Christ, and bone of his bones, called by Paul, "A great mystery." (Eph. v. 30.) Therefore, in the sacred Supper, we acknowledge a miracle which surpasses both the limits of nature and the measure of our sense, while the life of Christ is common to us, and his flesh is given us for food. But we must have done with all inventions inconsistent with the explanation lately given, such as the ubiquity of the body, the secret inclosing under the symbol of bread, and the substantial presence on earth.

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thing vain or imaginary is denoted. Definition must therefore here come to our aid. Spiritual then is opposed to carnal eating. By carnal is meant that by which some suppose that the very substance of Christ is transfused into us in the same way as bread is eaten. In opposition to this it is said, that the body of Christ is given to us in the Supper spiritually, because the secret virtue of the Spirit makes things which are widely separated by space to be united with each other, and accordingly causes life from the flesh of Christ to reach us from heaven. This power and faculty of vivifying might not improperly be said to be something abstracted from the substance, provided it be truly and distinctly understood that the body of Christ remains in heaven, and that yet while we are pilgrims on the earth life flows and comes to us from its substance.

When some charge us with ignorantly confounding the two modes of eating, we deny that it is through ignorance we omit the notion which they have fabricated for themselves in regard to sacramental eating, which they insist to be an eating of the substance of the flesh without effect or grace. Nothing of the kind is either delivered in Scripture, or supported by the testimony of the primitive Church. For certainly the reality and substance of the sacrament is not only the application of the benefits of Christ, but Christ himself with his death and resurrection. Wherefore, they are not skilful expositors who, on the one hand, make Christ devoid of the gifts of his Spirit and of all virtue, and, on the other, conjoin him with spiritual gifts and the fruit of eating, because he cannot without insult be separated from his Spirit any more than dismembered from himself. Nor is any support given them by the words of Paul, that those who eat the bread of the Supper unworthily are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, (1 Cor. xi. 27;) since the guilt is not ascribed to receiving, nor is it anywhere read, nor is it consonant to reason, that the receiving of Christ is the condemnation of any man. The condemnation is for rejecting him. Let it be agreed, then, in regard to this article, that the body of Christ is eaten by the wicked sacramentally, not truly or in reality, but in so far as it is a sign.

This definition answers the question, What is it to receive the body of Christ in the Supper by faith? Some are suspicious of the term faith, as if it overthrew the reality and the effect. But we ought to view it far otherwise, viz., That the only way in which we are conjoined to Christ is by raising our minds above the world. Accordingly, the bond of our union with Christ is faith, which raises us upwards, and casts its anchor in heaven, so that instead of subjecting Christ to the figments of our reason, we seek him above in his glory.

This furnishes the best method of settling a dispute to which I adverted, viz., Whether believers alone receive Christ, or all, without exception, to whom the symbols of bread and wine are distributed, receive him? Correct and clear is the solution which I have given; Christ offers his body and blood to all in general; but as unbelievers bar the entrance of his liberality, they do not receive what is offered. It must not, however, be inferred from this, that when they reject what is given, they either make void the grace of Christ, or detract in any respect from the efficacy of the Sacrament. The Supper does not, through their ingratitude, change its nature, nor does the bread, considered as an earnest or pledge given by Christ, become profane, so as not to differ at all from common bread, but it still truly testifies communion with the flesh and blood of Christ.