

*(Please note that no bibliography is attached to this paper.)*

## **Calvin and the Holy Spirit**

I grew up in a Pentecostal church in the days before the charismatic movement really took off. And a common mantra heard in those circles at that time was that the Holy Spirit was the forgotten member of the Trinity. The understanding was that most churches talked about God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son, but that in the majority of churches there was little reference to the Holy Spirit. Apparently the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit was overlooked by mainstream Christianity in general and by evangelicalism in particular. And Pentecostal churches, by giving a more central role to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in their preaching and worship, were trying to redress the imbalance. It was from its beginnings in the Azusa Street Revival in the early years of the 20th century that there was a new interest in the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Welsh evangelist, George Jeffreys, came to Ireland in 1915 and, as a result of his ministry, Elim Pentecostal Churches were planted, firstly in Monaghan, and then in a number of towns and villages across the North of Ireland.

The good people who attended these meetings were aware of a reality and an enthusiasm that they had not seen elsewhere. And they rejoiced in a new sense of God's presence in their worship. Then in the 1960s, people in the mainline denominations developed an interest in the gifts and ministry of the Holy Spirit, many of them claiming to have a new experience of the Holy Spirit and to have known the Spirit's work in their lives in new and wonderful ways. I remember as a teenager attending meetings here in Belfast where Presbyterians and Anglicans were worshipping together with their Pentecostal brothers and sisters and where the so-called revelatory gifts of the Spirit were in evidence.

Things have moved on at a fast pace since then. Today, charismatic churches and fellowships dominate the ecclesiastical landscape, and the growth of the church in Africa and Asia and South America is characterized by all the features we associate with charismatic churches. In his important book on world Christianity, Philip Jenkins, points out how that Christianity will continue to expand in the global south, but the question that remains unanswered is whether it will be Catholic Christianity or Charismatic Christianity. We need to recognise that we now live in a world where many Christians rejoice in the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

When I came to an understanding of reformed theology, and began reading some of the older reformed writers, I discovered that the original claim about the Holy Spirit being the forgotten member of the Trinity in non-Pentecostal and reformed churches was largely untrue. It may have been true that traditional reformed worship lacked the energy and the vitality (and the excesses!) of Pentecostal or charismatic worship, but a careful look at the theology of the reformation revealed a very clear and profound appreciation for the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. That understanding of the person and work of the Spirit is seen very clearly in the thinking and theology of John Calvin. And I would go further and say that even now the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that is believed and taught in reformed churches is richer and deeper than that which is found among those who profess to emphasise the importance of the Spirit's work and ministry.

In fact, those who think that the Holy Spirit has only been discovered in the 20th century are guilty, at best, of historical short-sightedness, and, at worst, of the heresy of modernity. They have forgotten that it was with good reason that John Calvin was described as "the theologian of the Holy Spirit". While his work has been recognised, the Spirit himself remains to many Christians an anonymous, faceless aspect of the divine being. Perhaps it would be better to say that the Holy Spirit is the "unknown" rather than the "forgotten" person of the Trinity. And that is why a return to the theology of John Calvin can be so helpful and necessary for the church today.

While John Calvin may be best known for his doctrine of predestination and election – although Augustine and Luther wrote more than he did about that subject – he was even more committed to the theology of the Holy Spirit.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), who was an outstanding churchman and politician in the Netherlands, becoming its prime minister, credited Calvin with being one of the greatest commentators on the Holy Spirit.

"The doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is a gift from John Calvin to the Church of Christ," Kuyper said in 'The Work of the Holy Spirit'. "He did not, of course, invent it. The whole of it lay spread out on the pages of Scripture with a clearness and fulness of utterance which one would think would secure that even he who ran should read it; and doubtless he who ran did read it, and it has fed the soul of the true believer in all ages."

Kuyper added, "Luther rose to proclaim justification by faith, and Calvin to set forth with his marvelous balance the whole doctrine of the work of the Spirit in applying salvation to the soul."

I believe that the theology of John Calvin has a contemporary relevance for Christians and for the church today. And I want to point out a number of areas where we need to listen to Calvin again, and how that by listening to what he said and wrote, some of our current confusion and ignorance with regard to the Holy Spirit can be clarified and we can come to an enriched understanding of our faith.

I want to look at the following areas: Calvin's understanding of the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit in salvation, in the doctrine of assurance, in our understanding of Scripture, and finally with regard to the sacraments.

### **1. The work of the Spirit in salvation**

The title given to Book 3 of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion is this: "The Way in Which we Receive the Grace of Christ: What benefits Come to Us From it, and What Effects Follow." In the latter half of Book 2 of the Institutes, Calvin has dealt with the finished work of Christ, the once-for-all accomplishment of salvation. Now in Book 3 he understands himself to be concerned with the application or the personal appropriation of salvation. It's about "the grace of Christ", its "benefits" and "consequent effects", and the way, or the mode, or the manner, in which believers receive this grace, the manner in which this salvation is appropriated.

With that concern restated in the opening words of Book 3, the very next sentence reads like this: "First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us."

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of that sentence for Calvin's doctrine of salvation as a whole. Positioned as it is at the opening of Book 3, it expresses what is most fundamental for him, the consideration that underlies all other considerations within the application of redemption. This most deeply decisive consideration, put negatively here, is that Christ not remain "outside us", that we are not to be "separated from him". Or if we are to express it positively, as Calvin presently does, that "we grow into one body with him".

It is interesting and noteworthy that as his point of departure for all that he will say in Book 3, he begins by bringing into view and highlighting the union that exists between Christ and believers. So central and pivotal is this union for the application of redemption that, again expressing it negatively, he can even say that without it the saving work of Christ "remains useless and of no value".

This union, he immediately goes on to make clear, is "obtained by faith", as it does not exist apart from, or prior to, faith, but is given with faith and is inseparable from faith. This mention of faith, and the key role accorded to it, prompts Calvin, still within this opening section, to touch on what would become a central question in subsequent discussions about the *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation. That question was about the origin of faith, and eventually gave rise in Reformed theology to the doctrine of regeneration in the narrower sense. We observe, says Calvin, "that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel".

Why is that? Why is it that some people respond in faith to the gospel and others do not? It is not because of some differentiating factor on our side. The answer is not to be found by looking into ourselves or contemplating the mystery of human freedom and human willing. Rather, consistent with his uniform teaching elsewhere about the total inability of the human will because of sin, we must, says Calvin, "climb higher" and consider "the secret energy of the Spirit". When he writes like that, talking about the secret energy of the Spirit, he almost sounds charismatic! For Calvin, you see, faith is Spirit-worked, sovereignly and efficaciously. It is dependent on the energy and dynamic work of the Holy Spirit.

Union with Christ, then, is forged by the Spirit's working faith in us, a faith that puts on Christ, as he quotes Galatians 3:27. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." It is a faith that embraces Christ as he is offered in the gospel. Faith is the bond of that union seen from our side. "To sum up", he says, "the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself." Subsequently, Calvin will categorise this union as both "spiritual" and "mystical".

So this, at its core, is Calvin's *ordo salutis*: union with Christ by Spirit-worked faith. And from that overall vantage point at the beginning of Book 3, we come to understand that justification is by faith alone because union with Christ is by faith alone, and it is that union which brings with it justification.

This union is one of the gospel's greatest mysteries. One commentator points out that there at least seven instances in the Institutes where Calvin uses the Latin word *arcanus* or *incomprehensibilis* to describe union with Christ. This doctrine of union with Christ shapes Calvin's understanding of regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, assurance, election and the church. He could scarcely speak of any doctrine apart from union and communion with Christ.

Union and communion with Christ is realized only through Spirit-worked faith. It is actual union and communion, not because believers participate in the essence of Christ's nature, but because the Spirit unites believers so intimately to Christ that they become flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. Indeed, the spiritual union with Christ that the Holy Spirit forges within us is even closer than physical union. Calvin puts it this way:

"Let us know the unity that we have with the Lord Jesus Christ; to wit, that he wills to have a common life with us, and that what he has should be ours; nay, that he even wishes to dwell in us, not in imagination, but in effect; not in earthly fashion, but spiritually; and that whatever may befall, he so labours by the virtue of his Holy Spirit that we are united with him more closely than are the limbs with the body."

The culmination of this complete and entire union with Christ in both body and soul will be fully realized in our resurrection from the dead on the judgment day.

Thus Christ and the Holy Spirit work together for our salvation. Though distinct, they are inseparable. Calvin moves easily from saying "The Spirit dwelling in us" to "Christ dwelling in us". (3.2.39). Jesus Christ is the unique bearer and bestower of the Spirit. Every action of the Spirit is, in essence, the action of Christ. The Spirit bestows nothing on us of a saving nature but through the Spirit. That is clear from his title of chapter 1 of Book 3: "The Things Spoken concerning Christ Profit Us by the Secret Working of the Spirit." Christ works salvation through the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit works salvation for Christ in sinners' hearts.

Calvin quotes I Peter 1:2. We "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood."

Calvin says, "By these words he explains that, in order that the shedding of his sacred blood may not be nullified, our souls are cleansed by the secret watering of the Spirit." (3.1.1). The Holy Spirit is thus the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.

Calvin says that the Holy Spirit is the root and the seed of heavenly life within us. That's why, he says, when the prophets and apostles look forward to the advancement of Christ's kingdom and the fact that God will make disciples of those who were previously destitute and empty of heavenly doctrine, they describe it in terms of a richer outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The events of Pentecost, when the gospel breaks out from the small group of disciples gathered in the Upper Room and people from every nation hear the praises of God in their own language, that happens as a direct result of the fulfillment of Joel's prophesy where God promises "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." It is the Spirit who separates us from the world and gathers us unto the hope of the eternal inheritance.

That's why in discussing the whole question of salvation, Calvin says it is useful to note what titles are applied to the Holy Spirit in Scripture. These titles help us to understand the importance of the role of the Spirit in our salvation.

The Spirit is called the Spirit of adoption because he is the witness to us of the way God the Father has embraced us in his Son, Jesus Christ in order to become a father to us. And so when we come to God in prayer, we come with out fear, because it is the Spirit who supplies us with the very words that we may use. We may cry "Abba, Father" because of the work and ministry of the Spirit.

The Spirit is also called the seal and guarantee of our inheritance. In our pilgrimage through this world, the Spirit assures us that our salvation is safe in God's unfailing care. And Calvin is eager to refer to the Spirit by the Bible's own words. The Spirit is water and the spring. The Spirit is oil and fire. By his secret watering, the Spirit makes us fruitful, enabling us to bring forth the fruits of righteousness in our lives. And the image of water is also appropriate because of his power to cleanse and purify us. As fire, the Spirit enflames our hearts with the love of God and with zealous devotion for Christ.

“For by the inspiration of his power he so breathes divine life into us that we are no longer actuated by ourselves, but are ruled by his action and prompting. Accordingly, whatever good things are in us are the fruits of his grace; and without him our gifts are darkness of mind and perversity of heart.” (3.1.3).

So with regard to the application of redemption, the Spirit has an enormous role, according to Calvin. As personal comforter, seal, and earnest, the Holy Spirit assures the believer of his adoption. Commenting on Romans 8:16, Calvin says,

“The Spirit of God gives us such a testimony, that when he is our guide and teacher our spirit is made sure of the adoption of God; for our mind of itself, without the preceding testimony of the Spirit, could not convey to us this assurance.”

So Calvin reasons along these lines:

1. The purpose of election embraces salvation.
2. The elect are not chosen for anything in themselves, but only in Christ.
3. Since the elect are in Christ, the assurance of their election and salvation can never be found in themselves, or even in the Father apart from Christ.
4. Rather, their assurance is to be found in Christ. So it follows that communion with him is vital.

## **2. *The Spirit's role with regard to assurance***

When it comes to the doctrine of assurance of salvation, and how believers may know that they are truly united to Christ, Calvin's answer again centres on the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who applies Christ and his benefits to the hearts and lives of guilty, elect sinners, assuring them that Christ belongs to them and they to him. The Holy Spirit especially confirms within them the reliability of God's promises in Christ. So personal assurance is never divorced from the election of God the Father, the redemption of the Son, the application of the Spirit, and the instrumental means of saving faith.

The Holy Spirit's work underlies all assurance of salvation, without detracting from the role of Christ, for as the Spirit of Christ he assures the believer by leading him to Christ and his benefits, and by bringing those benefits to fruition in the believer (3.2.34).

The unity of Christ and the Spirit has sweeping implications for the doctrine of assurance. Some recent scholars have minimised Calvin's emphasis on the necessity of the Spirit's work in assuring a believer of God's promises. The ground of assurance supposedly is God's promises, in Christ and/or in the Word of God, whereas the cause of assurance is the Spirit who works in the heart. But others have argued that this distinction is too simplistic, since the Spirit always works as the Spirit of Christ. Hence the objective and subjective elements in assurance cannot be so readily separated. Objective salvation in Christ is bound to subjective sealing by the Spirit. So it is Christ, in and through his Spirit, who is the ground of our faith.

For Calvin, a believer's objective reliance upon God's promises as the primary ground for assurance must be subjectively sealed by the Holy Spirit for true assurance. The unbeliever or reprobate may claim God's promises without experiencing the feeling or consciousness of those promises. The Spirit often works in the reprobate, but in an inferior manner. They may be momentarily illumined so that they seem to have a beginning of faith; nevertheless, Calvin says that they “never receive anything but a confused awareness of grace” (3.2.11).

On the other hand, the elect are regenerated with incorruptible seed (3.2.41). They receive subjective benefits that the reprobate will never taste. They alone receive the promises of God as truth in the inward parts. They alone receive the testimony that can be called “the enlightening of the Spirit”. They alone receive experiential, intuitive knowledge of God as he offers himself to them in Christ. (1.4.1; 2.6.4,19). Calvin says that the elect alone come to be “ravished and wholly kindled to love God; [they] are borne up to heaven itself [and] admitted to the most hidden treasures of God” (3.2.41).

“The Spirit, strictly speaking, seals forgiveness of sins in the elect alone, so that they apply it by special faith to their own use.” (3.2.11).

The elect alone come to know special faith and a special inward testimony.

When distinguishing the elect from the reprobate, Calvin speaks more about what the Spirit does in us than what Christ does for us. That's because it is here that the line of demarcation is sharper. He speaks much of inward experience, of feeling, of enlightenment, of perception, and even of "violent emotion". This may sound surprising to some of us within the reformed family. Calvin may even sound a bit too charismatic or Pentecostal for our liking, but I think we need to recognise the intensely experiential nature of Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance. He is aware of the dangers of excessive introspection, but he also recognises that the promises of God are only efficient when they are brought by the Spirit within the scope, experience and obedience of faith (3.1.1).

If we were to summarise Calvin's position on the believer's assurance of faith, then it is a case of all three members of the Trinity being involved. The election of the Father, the work of Christ, and the application of the Holy Spirit are all complementary. Christ is an overwhelming, foundational and primary source of assurance for the believer precisely because of the Spirit's application of Christ and his benefits to him as one elected by the Father. No one can ever be assured of Christ without the Spirit (3.2.35). The Holy Spirit reveals to the believer through his Word that God is a well-disposed Father, and enables him to embrace Christ's promises by faith and with assurance.

### **3. The role of the Holy Spirit in our understanding of Scripture**

Another area which continues to be relevant in the contemporary church is the relationship between Scripture and the Holy Spirit. Calvin's understanding of the Holy Spirit was far different from how many Christians use that phrase today. He believed in an inextricable connection between Scripture and the Spirit; i.e., that the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, did not contradict or embellish the Bible. Nonetheless, he insisted, Scripture could be understood only by a Christian whose mind and heart had been subdued by the Spirit, in accordance with Scripture. Calvin deals with those whom he calls fanatics who separate the Spirit of God from the Word of God, and elevate the former in their experience over the latter. He writes in Book 1 of the Institutes:

"I would like to know from them what this spirit is by whose inspiration they are borne up so high that they dare despise the Scriptural doctrine as childish and mean ....by a heinous sacrilege these rascals tear apart those things which [Isaiah 59:21] joined together." (1.9.1)

He goes on: "We ought zealously to apply ourselves both to read and to hearken to the Scripture if indeed we want to receive any gain and benefit from the Spirit of God." (1.9.2)

"The Holy Spirit so inheres in his truth, which he expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power ....By a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God's grace, shines." (1.9.3)

So Calvin argues in this section that the Spirit without the Word is a delusion, and the Word without the Spirit is dead. So Word and Spirit ever belong together and must never be separated.

The Holy Spirit speaking in Holy Scripture is the believer's final and ultimate authority in all matters of belief and behaviour. But the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, working by and with the Word in his heart, Calvin argued, confirms to the believer that the Bible is God's Word. That is to say, the Christian's confidence in Holy Scripture as the Word of God is produced by the Holy Spirit who graciously bears witness in the believer's heart at regeneration to the truthfulness of God's Word being proclaimed to him. Calvin writes that the "credibility of doctrine is not established until we are persuaded beyond doubt that God is its Author. Thus the highest proof of Scripture derives in general form from the fact that God in person speaks in it."

He continues:

"If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences – that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smaller quibbles – we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reason, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit." (1.7.4)

Calvin said it was pointless (the word he used was "backward") to attempt to prove Scripture's authority "through disputation". He forsook what he called "dexterity or eloquence" even though he believed that the "clamorous voices" of sceptics could be easily silenced. His reasoning was that even with superior debating ability, until God

“imprinted on their heart that certainty that piety requires” unbelievers would “stand by opinion alone”. Calvin argued that...

“...the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men’s hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit therefore who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.” (1.7.4).

Calvin believed that it was not ...

“...right to subject [Scripture] to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit. For even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. Therefore illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own or by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men.” (1.7.5)

In short, Calvin’s view relates the Spirit’s testimonial work directly to the authority of the Word of God and not to its proofs. Robert Reymond argues that this is different from B.B. Warfield’s understanding of Calvin. He says that Warfield understood Book 1, Chapter 8 of the Institutes as setting forth a list of evidentiary proofs by which the witnessing Spirit leads us to conclude that the Bible is divine. So he takes up these proofs into a “probability argument” and makes them become the direct ground of our faith in Scripture. So Warfield relates the Spirit’s testimony directly to these characteristics of Scripture as proofs and not to the divine authorship of Scripture.

The data that Calvin presents in 1.8 to establish the credibility of the Bible is almost entirely drawn from the Scripture itself. He writes about “the very heavenly majesty”, the “beautiful agreement of all the parts”, the “incontestable miracles”, and the “confirmed prophecy of the Old Testament”. He also mentions evidences not drawn directly from Scripture, such as the indestructibility of Scripture throughout the ages, its wide acceptance by the nations, and martyrs willing to die for it. But these are by no means the primary thrust of the chapter. It is the Holy Spirit who illumines the human mind, and brings conviction to it, directly by means of the Word of God, with the proofs being “secondary aids to our feebleness”.

Here is how he puts it in 1.8.13:

“ There are other reasons (than the ones mentioned in 1.8) neither few nor weak, for which the dignity and majesty of Scripture are not only affirmed in godly hearts, but brilliantly vindicated against the wiles of its disparagers; yet of themselves, these are not strong enough to provide firm faith, until our Heavenly father, revealing his majesty there, lifts reverence for Scripture beyond the realm of controversy. Therefore Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit.”

In short, Calvin’s view relates the Spirit’s testimonial work directly to the authority of the Word of God and not to its proofs. here is how Louis Berkhof explains it:

“The testimony of the Holy Spirit is simply the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the sinner by which he removes the blindness of sin, so that the erstwhile blind man who had no eyes for the sublime character of the Word of God, now clearly sees and appreciates the marks of its divine nature, and receives immediate certainty respecting the divine origin of Scripture.....The testimony of the Holy Spirit is therefore ...not so much the final ground of faith, but rather the means of faith. The final ground of faith is Scripture only, or better still, the authority of God which is impressed upon the believer in the testimony of Scripture.....But the testimony of the Holy Spirit is the moving cause of faith. We believe Scripture, not because of, but through the testimony of the Holy Spirit.”

So Calvin understood that we come to receive the Scriptures as the Word of God that has authority through the work and testimony of the Holy Spirit.

#### **4. The role of the Spirit in the sacraments.**

The role of the Holy Spirit is so vital in understanding the sacraments, and especially the Lord’s Supper. Only by appreciating fully the work of the Spirit can we avoid falling into the mistakes that have dogged both Catholic and

evangelical misunderstandings of the Supper. I am very grateful to my friend and colleague Sinclair Ferguson for the way in which he describes this in his excellent book on the Holy Spirit.

It is not by the church's administration, or merely by the activity of our memories that we enjoy communion with Christ. It is through the Spirit that we are brought into communion with the crucified, risen and exalted Christ. Christ is not localised in the bread and wine, as Catholic theology teaches. Nor is he absent from the Supper so that our highest activity is remembering Him, which is the memorialist view. Rather, Christ is known through the elements by the Spirit. There is a genuine communion with Christ in the Supper. Just as in the preaching of the Word he is present, not in the Bible locally, or by believing, but by the ministry of the Spirit. So he is also present in the Supper, not in the bread and wine, but by the power of the Spirit. The body and blood of Christ are not enclosed in the elements, since Christ is at the right hand of the Father. But by the power of the Spirit we are brought into his presence and he stands among us. I think that it is in this context that we should understand Revelation 3:20, "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." John, in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, believed that this is the kind of fellowship that the church might enjoy with her Saviour.

No theologian has sought to understand this presence of Christ by his Spirit in the sacrament more thoroughly than Calvin. And yet, even in his strongest expressions of the meaning of the Supper, an admission of mystery remains.

"Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such 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 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 that 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." IV,17,10

Such thinking permeates Calvin's teaching. Christ comes to his people in the very body in which he was incarnate, crucified, buried, resurrected, ascended and is now glorified. Life is thus "infused into us from the substance of his flesh". IV,17,4

Calvin's language has evoked radically different reactions within the reformed family. Charles Hodge, R.L.Dabney and William Cunningham all reacted negatively to his teaching in this area. They questioned it as seriously mistaken or simply incomprehensible. While others have greeted it as his deepest sacramental insight.

There is no doubt that Calvin's language is much more realistic than much evangelical teaching on the Lord's Supper has been accustomed to be. And as a result his exposition is thought to be excessively material. But then, as Sinclair Ferguson says, the same could surely be said of the language of John 6:51-58, or for that matter, I Corinthians 10:16. If we are uncomfortable with Calvin's language, then that may mask a discomfort with the language of Scripture itself.

What is often overlooked in this discussion is the role and power which Calvin attributes to the Holy Spirit. Fundamental to his thinking about the Lord's Supper is the outworking of the correlation between Christ ascending the Spirit descending. The Spirit descends in order to raise us up into fellowship with Christ. Similarly in the Supper, the Spirit comes, as it were, to close the gap between Christ in heaven and the believer on earth, and to give communion with the exalted Saviour.

But the other question which Calvin is asking is this: With what Christ does the believer commune at the table? His answer is: Christ clothed in the humanity in which he suffered, died and was buried, rose again, and is now ascended in glory. There is no other Christ than the enfleshed Word. In the Supper, we commune with the person of Christ in the mystery of the hypostatic union. We do so spiritually, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Calvin does not need to be interpreted as saying more than this, and we should not say less than this, otherwise we deny the reality of the fellowship of which the NT speaks. Or we may risk denying the continuing reality of the humanity of the glorified Christ. Once we take seriously the truth of the bodily resurrection and ascension of Christ, Calvin's theology of the sacrament becomes less puzzling. Although, as Calvin himself admits it, the truth it represents remains mysterious. But the mystery is no greater than it is with other aspects of the Spirit's work.

What then is the role of the Spirit in the Lord's Supper? It can be described in the words of John 16:14. The Spirit will take from what is Christ's and make it known to his disciples. He does this fundamentally through apostolic revelation. Nothing is revealed in the Supper that is not already made known in the Scriptures. But in the Supper there is visual representation and a simple and specific focus on the broken body and poured-out blood of Christ. This takes us to the heart of the matter and to the centre of the Spirit's ministry. It is to illumine the person and work of Christ. No new revelation is given. No other Christ is made known. We do not get a different or a better Christ in the Supper from the Christ we get in the Word. But we may well get the same Christ better as the Spirit ministers by the testimony of the physical emblems being joined to the Word.

Basing their thinking on an allegorical understanding of the Song of Solomon, Christian writers in the past have spoken of the "kiss" of Christ. This is the secret ministry of the Spirit. Just as the action of a kiss communicates and symbolises love, so the physical emblems which point to a crucified and risen Saviour are employed by the Spirit working in the heart to communicate to Christ's people the love he has for them. The Supper is used in the hands of the Spirit to minister peace, joy, love and assurance. There can be a foretaste of the fullness of the presence of Christ which the believer anticipates as he proclaims Christ's death until he comes. When Christ comes, the regenerating work of the Spirit will be fully consummated and the full reality expressed by the symbols will be present.

So here is a brief snapshot of Calvin's doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who unites us to Christ by faith and who grants us assurance of salvation. It is the Spirit who authenticates the Bible as the Word of God and who in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper makes Christ's presence real to us. This doctrine of the Spirit is full and rounded and nuanced. No one can ever say that with regard to John Calvin the Holy Spirit is the forgotten or unknown member of the Trinity.

***Rev Stafford Carson***

***March 21st, 2009***