What is Non-Negotiable in any Theology that wishes to be 'Reformed'? (Part 2)

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II. CHRISTOLOGY AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

A. Christology

Christology became a controversial topic in the sixteenth century as a consequence of debates over the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli's insistence that the body of Christ, once ascended into heaven, was 'locally' present there alone led to Luther's attempt to defend a local physical presence of Christ's body in the elements of bread and wine by means of a Christological novelty — the so-called 'ubiquity' of Christ's body. The further development of the Lutheran idea of 'ubiquity' — its modification in the direction of a presence of the body only where Christ *wills* (the forerunner of later kenotic theories) — need not detain us here. What is important for our purposes is only to comprehend the distinctive features of the 'Reformed' Christology produced by these debates.

Once again, it is Calvin who decisively impacted the Reformed confession in the area of Christology. The decisions made in this area of doctrine fit well with the emphasis placed in his doctrine of justification on the acquired *human* righteousness of Christ. To insist, as Calvin would against the Lutherans, that the two natures of Christ which came together in the hypostatic union remained unimpaired in their original integrity was, at one and the same time, to take the Christological ground out from beneath the Lutheran idea of a real participation in divine attributes on the part of the human Jesus *and* to create the ontic space needed to allow the human Jesus to act in every moment *humanly*. And so, for example, Calvin can insist that the flesh of Christ is real flesh, 'subject to hunger, thirst, cold, and other infirmities of our nature.'[1] Presumably, Jesus could and did experience illnesses. The sheer frankness of these observations occasions some surprise, since for a good many theologians in the centuries preceding, disease, like, death is the effect of the fall. How could one that is without corruption ever become ill, if that were the case? I am not sure how much Calvin thought about such questions. What is clear is that he understood the 'kenosis' of the Son of God to consist in the wholly voluntary act of concealing His divinity (and the 'glory' proper to it) in a 'veil

[1] Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiii.1, p. 475.

of flesh.' The Son 'gave up his right'[2] to be recognized and acknowledged as God through this act of Self-concealment. He could have 'set forth His glory directly to the world'[3] but did not. As was the case with Augustine, this was a kenosis by addition, not by subtraction. Nothing proper to deity is left behind in that the Son becomes incarnate; on the contrary, what happens is that a human nature is added. That and that alone was His 'self-emptying.' What is clear in all of this is the 'flesh' has its own integrity which is in no way compromised or set aside through union with the eternal Word. There could be no *real* concealment, were the flesh of Jesus to have been in any way 'divinized' through its union with the Word.

Calvin makes expansive use of the definition of the 'person' of the Mediator found in the post-Chalcedonian orthodoxy of Leontius of Byzantium, Maximus Confessor, and John of Damascus — i.e. the 'composite person' or, we might say, the 'whole Christ' comprised of both natures. This definition of the 'person' of Christ constituted, when first devised, an addition to the originating equation of the 'person' of the union at Chalcedon with the eternal Logos as such. It was created by the post-Chalcedonians specifically for addressing the problems created for divine simplicity and impassibility by close attention to a *communicatio idiomatum* which, logically, would have required the communication of human predicates to the Logos (as the Chalcedonian 'person' of the union). The solution was to effect a change in the received definition of the 'person.' When treating the 'person' in the context of the *communicatio idiomatum*, the post-Chalcedonians defined the 'person' as the 'composite' Christ — so that a realistic-sounding ascription of human predicates could be made to the 'person' — even though they and all of their readers knew full well that what was meant by 'person' was 'the whole Christ *according to His human nature alone*.' By this device, what amounted to a purely figurative ascription could be treated as though it were realistic. But, of course, it wasn't; not on the side of the relation of the human nature to the 'person' at any rate.[4] John Calvin was completely at home in this sphere of thought, since he (more consistently than they) defined the 'person' of the union as the *consequence* of the uniting of the natures (not as its presupposition, as would be the case if the 'person' were the Logos as such).

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2 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiii.2, p. 476.

3 Ibid.

4 Of course, the 'post-Chalcedonians' still wanted, like their forebears at Chalcedon, to affirm a soteriology of divinization. In practice, that meant they employed the more traditional definition of the 'person' when thinking about soteriology and the 'new' definition when addressing the problem of the 'communication.'

> He who was the Son of God became the Son of man—not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For we affirm his divinity so joined and united with his humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet *these two natures constitute one Christ*.[5]

Had Calvin stopped with the phrase 'by the unity of person', one might have thought he was speaking of the Logos as such. One could, in other words, have read the original Chalcedonian equation of the Logos and the 'person' into this phrase were it a stand-alone phrase. But when Calvin went on to speak of the natures *constituting* one Christ — and when he describes this uniting elsewhere as a 'growing together'[6] of divinity and humanity — we know from such passages that he is working with the 'new' definition of the post-Chalcedonians *and with it alone*. And so: any rhetoric he may employ here and there which is redolent with the tones of early Church soteriology has to be qualified and strictly de-limited by the fact that, for Calvin, God remains God and the human remains human precisely in the hypostatic union.[7] More than that, he really does not want to say.

Throughout his reflections on Christology, Calvin never loses his focus on the attempt to overcome Lutheran sacramentology. His reflections here have a goal; that, namely, of rendering impossible the Lutheran understanding of a communication of the attributes of the divine majesty to the human Jesus. Against all such tendencies, Calvin says, 'Let this then be our key to right understanding: those things *which apply to the office* of the Mediator [the forgiving of sins, the judging of the world, etc.] are not spoken simply of either the divine nature or of the human'[8] but of the whole Christ. And all instances of things proper only to the human

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5 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiv.1, p. 482 (emphasis mine).

6 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xii.1, p. 464.

7 An example of such rhetoric is the following. 'Who could have done this had not the self-same Son of God become the Son of Man, and had not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?' Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xii.2, p. 465. We have already seen that the Son of God 'takes what is ours' by imputation. He goes on in this very passage to describe giving 'what was his by nature' to us as occurring through 'adoption' (a legal metaphor with familial consequences — i.e. a metaphor which retains the distinction of natures but assigns to the adopted the 'rights' of the natural born).

8 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiv.3, p. 485 (emphasis mine).

nature being ascribed to the divine or things proper to the divine nature being ascribed to the human are, he says, figures of speech.[9]

When we turn to Reformed confessions, we find the theological 'values' upheld by Calvin's Christology to be strongly affirmed. Those values are: 1) the rejection of a realistic communication of divine predicates to the human nature (which would mean a real sharing by Jesus in those predicates), 2) a careful preservation of the ontological distinction of God and the human in their union in Christ and 3) a willingness to rest content with an understanding of the Christological 'person' as 'composite' — without exploring its implications. The Reformed confessions uphold the first two values with great zeal. The French Confession's Article XV is worth citing in whole, since it sets forth Calvin's own view in confessional form, thereby telling us what is most important to him.

> We believe that in one person, that is Jesus Christ, the two natures are actually and inseparably joined and united, and yet each remains in its proper character: so that in this union the divine nature, retaining its attributes, remained uncreated, infinite, and all-pervading; and the human nature remained finite, having its form, measure, and attributes; and although Jesus Christ, in rising from the dead, bestowed immortality upon his body, yet he did not take from it the truth of its nature, and we so consider him in his divinity that we do not despoil him of his humanity.[10]

The last phrase could well serve as a motto for 'Reformed' Christology! But notice also that the French Confession equates the 'person' of the union with 'Jesus Christ,' not with the Logos as such. That too, is testimony to a doctrinal distinctive; the third of those mentioned above — which would become increasingly important in the 17th century. The first two values are also upheld in the first two clauses, albeit in the reverse order to that in which I presented them.

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9 Examples of figurative expressions can be in the New Testament, according to Calvin, when Paul says 'God purchased the church with His blood' [Acts 20:28] and 'the Lord of glory was crucified' [1 Cor. 2:8] and 'the Word of life was handled' [1 Jn. 1:1]. An example of the human being spoken of as if divine can be found, he says, in John 3:13. 'No one has ascended into heaven but the Son of man who was in heaven.' Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiv.2, p. 484. In each of the cases, what is proper to one nature alone is said of the other nature — which for Calvin shows clearly that they are figures of speech. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xiv.1, p. 483.

10 *French Confession*, Article XV, Cochrane, pp. 149-50.

The Belgic Confession affirms that the human 'nature' assumed by the 'eternal Son' was 'true human nature, with all its infirmities, sin excepted'.[11] What comes next upholds the emphases of Calvin.

> We believe that by this conception the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; […] [not] two persons, but two natures united in one single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties. As then the divine nature hath always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth, so also hath the human nature not lost its properties, but remained a creature.[12]

Thus far, a re-iteration of the values described above. But then the Belgic gives to them a pointedness lacking to other statements. 'And though he hath by his resurrection given immortality to the same, nevertheless he hath not changed the reality of the human nature'.[13] The bestowal of immortality spoken of here is quite close to the Eastern Orthodox position, since the latter does not entail the bestowal of divine attributes as such. That is what made the Lutheran Christology to be a *novum* — the fact that it was not only immortality that was shared with the human nature but essential attributes of God.

The Second Helvetic Confession is brief but the emphases the same.

> We therefore acknowledge two natures or substances, the divine and the human in one and the same Jesus Christ our Lord (Heb. 2). And we say that these are bound and united with one another in such a way that they are not absorbed or confused, or mixed, but are united or joined together in one person — the properties of the natures being unimpaired and permanent.[14]

The confession is noticeably more alert to the dangers posed by mixture and confusion than by separation or division — though all of the documents we have considered join in condemning Nestorianism. This too is a function of the polemical situation.

Because 'Reformed' Christology was constructed in opposition to the Lutheran Christology, its emphases have a negative character. But it is precisely that feature which allows for further development. The one thing that cannot be done without setting aside the theological values already mentioned is to try to find a foundation here for a more Eastern soteriology of 'divinisation.' Where that occurs, we just have to be honest

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11 *Belgic Confession*, Article XVIII, Cochrane, p. 200.
12 *Belgic Confession*, Article XIX, Cochrane, p. 201.
13 *Belgic Confession*, Article XIX, pp. 201-202.
14 *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter XI, Cochrane, pp. 243-44.

and say: 'not Reformed' — however much we may respect the seriousness of the alternative offered.

B. The Lord's Supper

There is certain breadth in the writings of the early Reformed when it comes to the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. But the confessions are more uniform, reflecting the emergence of a unified perspective, without there having been a competition for supremacy or even, perhaps, an awareness that differences had once existed. That in itself is a testimony to how small the differences were internally and how united the Reformed must have appeared to real opponents like the Catholics and the Lutherans. And that is a point all too easily forgotten or ignored.

In a now classic essay, Brian Gerrish sought to summarize the differences internal to the Reformed in terms of three options which he named: symbolic memorialism, symbolic parallelism and symbolic instrumentalism.[15] The common element in all of these descriptors is denoted by the word 'symbolic', obviously. And it is made necessary by the shared claim that the risen and ascended body of Christ is 'locally' present in heaven and cannot, as a result, be 'locally' present in the elements of bread and wine at the same time. Gerrish understood such symbolization of the elements to take three distinct forms: 'memorialism' (in which the communicant is drawn by the symbols to remember Christ's sacrifice); 'parallelism' (in which the spiritual act of 'feeding by faith' on the body and blood of Christ takes place alongside and at the same time as oral communication but is independent of the latter); and 'instrumentalism' (in which the Spirit so joins body and blood to bread and wine that the elements are made the instruments of the feeding by faith spoken of in the 'parallelism' account). The first view is associated with the name of Zwingli, the second with Bullinger and the third with Calvin.

The problem with Gerrish's typology is that there is no substantive difference at the end of the day between the second and third models. Where the Holy Spirit is made to be the 'bond of participation' who joins together 'things separated in space,'[16] the 'things' in question (the body and blood of Christ) remain where they are ('locally') in the joining. They are still 'separated in space.' So when Calvin speaks of a 'joining', he is speaking, at most, of an act of mediation on the part of the Holy Spirit — which allows the 'things' joined to remain 'separate.' And that has to be

[15] B. A. Gerrish, 'The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions', *Theology Today* 23 (1966-1967), 224-43.

[16] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xvii.10, p. 1370.

kept in mind when we consider some of the more flowery things said in the Reformed Confessions.

The truth is that the authors of the Reformed Confessions always found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Most did not want to be associated with Zwingli's (alleged) 'memorialism.' And so they worked very hard not *to be seen by others* as rendering the sacramental signs 'empty' or 'bare.' The Scots Confession made the point quite forcefully. 'If anyone slanders us by saying that we affirm or believe the sacraments to be symbols and nothing more, they are libelous and speak against the plain facts'.[17]

The problem is that such protestations do nothing to set aside the truly decisive fact that the body of Christ remains in heaven, separated from us 'in space.' A spiritual 'joining' even of 'reality' to 'signs' (which is what Gerrish's third model requires) might rightly be said to be 'real' but it does not result in the *kind* of 'substantial' presence of Christ's body which would enable Catholics and Lutherans to see here anything other than bare and empty signs. And the truth is that most Reformed (including Calvin in some moments) thought of the 'joining' as not to the 'signs' but to the communicant. And they thought of it metaphorically — as giving vivid expression to the fact that faith lays hold of Christ 'clothed in His benefits.'

But there is more. The Belgic Confession says that there is no joining of the body and blood to the signs (or to the communicant) for those who communicate without faith. This, too, is a Reformed distinctive. For the Reformed, 'unworthy communication' is not a communication in Christ (as it would have to be if there were a conversion of the 'substance' of the elements into the 'substance' of Christ's body and blood) but a communication only in the outward elements. It is the absence of faith which, according to 1 Corinthians 11:27ff., leads to condemnation according to the Reformed, not an improper participation in Christ's body and blood. Indeed, an improper (faithless) participation in Christ's body is impossible to conceive. 'Though the Sacraments are connected with the thing signified, nevertheless both are not received by all men [and women]: the ungodly indeed receives the Sacrament to his [or her] condemnation, but he [or she] doth not receive the truth of the Sacrament'.[18] The same point is made by Bullinger in the Second Helvetic.[19]

What all of this adds up to is this: when the Reformed Confessions speak of a spiritual feeding on the 'substance' of Christ's body in the

[17] *Scots Confession*, Article XXI, Cochrane, p. 180.

[18] *Belgic Confession*, Article XXXV, Cochrane, p. 216.

[19] *Second Helvetic Confession*, Article XXI, Cochrane, p. 286.

Supper — as many do after Calvin — the term 'spiritual' is meant to refer to the twofold fact that it is the Holy Spirit who awakens in the communicant the faith by which she lays hold of Christ and His benefits — and the term 'substance' is not a metaphysical term as it is for the Catholics. It is rather shorthand for that which is essential for the sake of our salvation as accomplished in the human obedience of Christ.

The Supper is therefore understood as a visible word. The French Confession puts it this way.

> We believe that the sacraments were added to the Word for more ample confirmation, that they may be to us pledges and seals of the grace of God, and by this means aid and comfort our faith, because of the infirmity which is in us, and that they are outward signs through which God operates by his Spirit, so that he may not signify any thing to us in vain. Yet we hold that their substance and truth is in Jesus Christ, and that of themselves they are only smoke and shadow.[20]

The sacraments provide 'more ample confirmation' of the gospel truths presented to us in the Word written and proclaimed. In putting the matter this way, the French is also relativizing the distinction between that 'feeding by faith' which occurs always and everywhere in the Christian life and the 'feeding by faith' which takes place in the Supper. The two are but relatively differing exemplars of the class 'spiritual feeding.' Faith lays hold of the 'substance and truth' set forth by the signs not only in the Supper but whenever the promises of Christ are believed.

So when we encounter flowerly passages in the confessions which speak of the signs 'setting forth' what they represent or of mystical union, etc., we must not read more into them than the overall theological context will allow. The French Confession can indeed say things like the following: 'we believe that by the secret and incomprehensible work of his Spirit, he feeds and strengthens us with the substance of his body and of his blood. He does this *spiritually*'.[21] And: 'in the Lord's Supper, as well as in baptism, God gives us really and in fact that which he there sets forth to us; and […] consequently with these signs is given the true possession and enjoyment of that which they present to us'[22] But such statements stand in a dialectical tension with all other statements which make sacramental communication solely a matter of faith in the 'substance and truth' of the gospel. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it: 'this spiritual eating and drinking also occurs apart from the Supper of the Lord, and as often

[20] *French Confession*, Article XXXIV, Cochrane, p. 156.

[21] *French Confession*, Article XXXVI, Cochrane, p. 157, emphasis mine.

[22] *French Confession*, Article XXXVII, Cochrane, p. 157.

and wherever a man [or woman] believes in Christ'.[23] To 'eat' is, in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, to 'embrace with a trusting heart the whole passion and death of Christ, and by it to receive the forgiveness of sins'.[24] 'Eating' is believing — and believing is 'eating.'

What is non-negotiable in all of this, above all, is the affirmation of the 'distance' which 'separates' Christ's body and blood in heaven from communicants on earth. Non-negotiable as well is the substitution of a wholly spiritual eating by faith for every metaphysical explanation of 'sacramental union.' These are the basic commitments that cannot be abandoned without detriment to one's standing as 'Reformed.' What is negotiable is whether one chooses to continue to make use of the metaphorical speech touching upon the relation of sign and reality or to dispense with it altogether.

CONCLUSION

It remains to be seen whether any confessional tradition can survive in an age dominated by a highly generic ('one size fits all') evangelical Catholicism. The 'victory' of the latter — if that is what we are witnessing — has come at a price. Questions ignored have a way of re-emerging at some point to unsettle and disturb. And there are any number of significant questions produced by the Reformation which are for now effectively ignored — not least the question of why those who have chosen to create a new theological option to the received wisdom of their forebears did not first try to defend, explicate and correct their own traditions on their own terms. What I have tried to suggest in this paper is that there is nothing wrong with 'Reformed' theology which cannot be fixed with the help of already existing resources found in the received form of that theology. Nothing so drastic as an attempt to get behind the Reformation, to relativize its significance in the light of more highly prized ancient orthodoxies, and finally to engage in a revisionary reading of it so as to bring it completely into line with the ancients (if not simply to declare it 'over') — none of this was ever necessary. The 'need' for such drastic measures was an invention of the theologians who carried it out.

I will close with this thought. The 'Reformed' have not represented themselves well in ecumenical conversations in quite some time. A greater tendency to capitulation, adaptation and assimilation for the sake of a humanly achievable unity exists among us than in other ecclesial traditions. Years ago now, I asked Robert Jenson with whom he would rather

[23] *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter XXI, Cochrane, p. 286.
[24] *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q.76, Cochrane, p. 318.

first achieve 'full communion' — the 'Reformed' (through the Leuenberg Concord) or the Anglicans (through COCU as it was then). His answer was: 'oh, the Anglicans. We can always get the Reformed to agree later. They will agree to anything.' Sadly, that has been my observation too in the years since that conversation took place.