

Paul's Calvinistic Sacramentology in 1 Corinthians 10

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While Paul discusses baptism in several of his letters (at least Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Galatians), he addresses the subject of communion less frequently. His material containing the Last Supper tradition has drawn much attention (1 Cor. 11:17-34), although even there he introduces the subject of the Eucharist in order to correct abuses in the congregation at Corinth. Less familiar are the comments he makes in 1 Corinthians 10 about the “cup of blessing” and the “bread that we break,” which he describes as a fellowship with the blood and body of Jesus (1 Cor. 10:16-17). This follows statements about the “baptism” of Israel in the Red Sea (v. 2) and their sharing in a form of the communion meal in the wilderness (v. 3-4)—all brought into a discussion about food sacrificed to idols. While these comments are secondary to his main concern, they do provide insight into Paul’s theology of communion and of the sacraments in general.

Paul’s intention in this text is not to formulate a systematic sacramentology; however, key statements and underlying assumptions in his argument contain implicit theological principles for doctrinal retrieval. At the risk of anachronism, Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 10 entails an essentially Calvinistic understanding of the sacraments. The following interaction with the passage as well as some of John Calvin’s writings aims to demonstrate this.

Context Considered

Paul’s letter to the congregation at Corinth addresses issues that have come to his attention through oral reports of members of the church (1:11; 5:1; 11:18; 15:12) as well as a letter that they had sent to him (7:1).¹ This is evidently the second correspondence that Paul has written to this congregation (5:9-11), and here he answers questions they have raised and brings

¹ D.A. Carson & Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 421-23.

correction to practices in the church that were out of step with the Gospel. The different topics of the letter are typically introduced with the *περι δὲ* formula (“now concerning...”) and include the matters of factions in the church (1:10-4:21), sexual immorality (5:1-12), lawsuits among believers (6:1-11), marriage and singleness (7:1-40), food sacrificed to idols (8:1-11:1), divisions and disputes affecting the worship gathering (11:2-14:40), and the resurrection of the dead (15:1-58).

Chapter ten of 1 Corinthians is situated in a section of the letter that begins in chapter eight, set apart with the introductory formula: *Περὶ δὲ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων* (“Now concerning food sacrificed to idols,” 8:1). Paul concedes that some in the congregation have accurate doctrinal knowledge about this matter, but warns that knowledge that is not tethered to love can produce pride (v. 1). By “knowledge” he means awareness of the fact that there is only one God, and consequently an idol does not exist in reality (v. 4-6). However, not everyone shares this same conviction, and those who have former association with idolatry may violate their conscience to eat meat that previously has been offered to idols (v. 7). For the Corinthians to ignore the effect that their actions have on their brothers and sisters, all the while claiming their “rights,” disregards the call to love and ultimately sins against Christ (v. 9-12). In this section, Paul also mentions a matter to which he will return in chapter ten—eating in an idol’s temple (v. 10).

He continues the argument in chapter nine by presenting his own example: while he has freedom and rights as an apostle (9:1, listed in v. 4-12), he has gladly surrendered many of these rights so that he would not hinder the ministry of the gospel (v. 12). He finds his reward, not in laying claim to his rights, but in proclaiming Christ freely (v. 17-18). Furthermore, he tempers his freedom and makes himself a slave (*ἐμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα*) to all for the sake of the gospel (v. 19-23).

Therefore, the Corinthian believers should not cling to the principle of freedom absolutely while ignoring the principle of love. Furthermore, there is the principles of self-control and holiness (v. 24-27), which Paul then develops in chapter ten. Christian freedom does

not give us permission to harm our brethren, and it also does not authorize us to participate in idol worship and the festivities that are associated with it. This introduces his example from the Old Testament, the text this essay considers (10:1-22). This stage of his argument is clarified by what follows in his concluding comments in 10:23-33: since everything in the earth is the Lord's (v. 26), one may eat whatever is sold in the marketplace, regardless of its previous use (v. 25)—as long as he is also seeking the good of his neighbor (v. 24). This reiterates his burden in chapter eight. However, this does not mean total freedom to associate with idolatrous worship, from which the Corinthians are commanded to flee (v. 14). N.T. Wright describes the difference between Paul's concerns in chapters eight and ten like this:

In the marketplace all is permitted: once off the idol's turf, the food reverts to the sphere of the God who made it. But to enter an idol's temple, and eat there alongside those who are actually intending to share fellowship with this non-God, this hand-made pseudo-god—this is to invite created powers to have an authority over one which they do not possess, a power which belongs only to the creator-God revealed in and through Jesus the Messiah.²

These concepts of association and “fellowship” are the central ideas behind the sacramental discussion that is introduced in 10:1-22.

Initial Exegesis of the Passage

After describing the “rights” that he has willingly surrendered for the ministry of the gospel, Paul transitions to an ethical argument, sounding a warning against idolatry and illustrating his point from Israel's history. This exhortation is rooted in a theological principle. He does not want those who boast in their “knowledge” (γνῶσις, 8:1) to be “ignorant” (ἀγνοεῖν, 10:1) of this important doctrinal truth that they have evidently ignored.

² N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 134.

Paul grounds (γὰρ) his exhortation about the disqualification that results from a lack of self-control (9:27) by providing a Scriptural example from the wilderness wanderings.³ Like a runner who begins energetically but fails to receive the prize (9:24), Israel experienced the blessing and goodness of God in the Exodus (10:1-4) and yet encountered God’s displeasure in their unbelief and idolatry (10:5-10). They were “baptized” (ἐβαπτίσθησαν) into Moses (v. 2) and ate and drank from Christ himself (v. 4), but that did not prevent them from becoming disqualified by their sexual indulgence and idolatrous play (v. 7-8). Paul comments that “these things happened to them as an example” (v. 11) and warns that similar discipline will befall the one who presumes that he is strong (v. 12).

The imagery of *baptism* probably draws from the picture of the walls of the Red Sea surrounding the people while they are covered by the cloud (v. 1-2).⁴ Paul uses New Covenant sacramental language to describe Israel’s experience, highlighting the typological function of the Exodus generation (τύποι, v. 6 & τυπικῶς, v. 11). *Baptism* draws attention to the initiatory role of their redemption from Egypt and their decision to follow Moses through the waters and into the wilderness.⁵ The experience of the Old Covenant saints is therefore analogous to that of the Corinthian believers, who received baptism as a sign and seal of their redemption and conversion to Christ. “Israel’s baptism into Moses and her subsequent apostasy is a pre-figuration of what is still true and functions as a warning to those who are the recipients of baptism in the New

³ The explanatory γὰρ connects Paul’s argument with what precedes it, a connection that is ignored or minimized by scholars who see chapter 10 as disjointed from the rest of the text. Cf. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 443 n.7. The attempt to argue for multiple sources behind Paul’s supposed “strict” (10:1-22) and “lenient” (8:1-13; 10:23-30) approaches to idol feasts fails to recognize Paul’s distinct concerns and carefully nuanced handling of the subject. Cf. Jerry Hwang, “Turning the Tables on Idol Feasts: Paul’s Use of Exodus 32:6 in 1 Corinthians 10:7,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54, no. 3 (September 2011), 576, n.13-15.

⁴ David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 449. Garland notes that the phrase “baptism into Moses” (εἰς τὸν Μωϋσῆν ἐβαπτίσθησαν) has no Jewish parallels and seems to have been coined by Paul (450).

⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 724-25.

Testament.”⁶ Paul presents an *a fortiori* argument: If this is true for Israel as a type, how much more for New Covenant believers as the eschatological antitype, “on whom the end of the ages has come” (v. 11)!

Israel received not only the benefit of God’s initial work of redemption but also his ongoing provision in the wilderness through the manna from heaven and the water from the rock—“spiritual” (πνευματικός, v. 3-4) food and drink paralleling the communion meal, which will have explicit mention further in the text (v. 16).⁷ The ongoing graciousness of God is illustrated in the fact that the rock “followed them” (v. 4) throughout their wanderings. Paul does not envision a physical object or “moveable well” trailing behind the people but the availability of the divine source of the water journeying with them.⁸ He makes this explicit by identifying the personal presence behind this: “and the Rock was Christ” (v. 4). The identification is symbolic and typological but no less real. Israel had God their Rock with them (Deut. 32:4, 15; Ps. 19:14)—and the present eschatological vantage point reveals this to be Jesus.

However, having the same Redeemer and the same redemptive blessings did not guarantee Israel’s faithfulness.⁹ In verse 7, Paul cites Exodus 32:6 (“The people sat down to eat and drink and rose to play”). This references the worship of the golden calf, located in Exodus in the broader context of covenant establishment and covenant disobedience. Paul is not simply illustrating his point with a generic example of idolatry; the specific actions that are associated with it reinforce his argument. The only other reference in Exodus to “eating and drinking” is

⁶ Mark D. Vander Hart, “The Exodus as Sacrament: The Cloud, the Sea, and Moses Revisited,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 12 (2001), 23.

⁷ Fee notes, “The power of the type lies in the fact that they also had their own form of ‘baptism’ and ‘Lord’s Supper,’ the prefigurement of ours” (442).

⁸ Garland, 456-57.

⁹ While *all* shared in the blessings (v. 1-4), *some* engaged in idolatry (v. 7), causing God’s displeasure to fall on *most* of them (v. 5). Similarly, the Corinthian congregation should not find comfort in the fact that they “*all*” have knowledge (8:1) if *some* of them are flirting with idolatry (8:10).

found in the covenant ratification meal:¹⁰ after Moses read the Book of the Covenant in the hearing of the people, “they beheld God, and ate and drank” (24:11). It is not long before they reject Yahweh and embrace false deities by means of the same ritual actions. The irony has not escaped Paul. He wants the Corinthians to see that, despite God’s gracious provision of spiritual food and water for the people to eat and drink in the wilderness (v. 3-4), that did not stop them from eating and drinking in idolatrous festal worship (v. 8)—disregarding the fact that they had bound themselves to God (and ultimately to Christ, v. 4) through a covenant meal. The believers at Corinth must recognize the application to their own circumstances.

The central imperative in the text comes in verse 14: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” That is Paul’s burden at this point in his instruction about food sacrificed to idols. Those who recognize their freedom of conscience to eat meat are not to think they can associate with idolatrous temple practices without endangering themselves and their community. Paul demonstrates this by appealing to the Lord’s Supper, the Corinthian believers’ own covenant meal: “The cup of blessing¹¹ that we bless, is it not a participation (κοινωνία) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation (κοινωνία) in the body of Christ?” (v. 16). While food, in and of itself, does not amount to anything (v. 19), eating in the context of religious offerings involves a “participation” and union with both the one receiving the offering and the fellow worshippers (v. 18). In the case of the Lord’s Supper, this “fellowship” (κοινωνία) is with the body and blood of Christ (v. 16) as well as with the gathered church, which is one body “sharing” (μετέχω) one bread (v. 17). In the case of offerings made to idols, the partaker

¹⁰ Hwang, 580.

¹¹ The phrase “cup of blessing” underscores the Old Testament allusions as well as Paul’s principle of participation: “The final cup of the Passover meal (and presumably the Last Supper) was called the ‘cup of blessing.’ Just as participation in the Passover celebration entailed participation in the benefits of the Passover sacrifice (cf. Exod. 12:27; 34:25; Deut. 16:2, 5-6; 2 Chron. 35:1, 6, 11), participation in the Lord’s Supper entails participation in the benefits of his sacrifice for us” (Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner, “1 Corinthians,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G.K. Beale & D.A. Carson [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 727).

becomes a “participant” (κοινωνός),¹² not with the non-existent idol, but with demons (v. 20).¹³ Obviously, fellowship with demons and fellowship with Christ are mutually exclusive (v. 21). One cannot eat at Yahweh’s table and feast before a golden calf, any more than a professing Christian can eat at the table of the Lord Jesus and also dine with demons.

Theological Implications

It is clear that Paul’s purpose in 1 Corinthians 10 is not to present a theology of baptism and the Lord’s Supper for its own sake; the sacraments are introduced as supporting principles in an argument for prohibiting the believer’s participation in idolatrous sacrificial meals. Nevertheless, as true premises in an argument they instruct the reader about Paul’s functional sacramentology—and this sacramentology is more consistent with the Calvinist tradition than with Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Zwinglian perspectives. At least two theological implications can be drawn from this text that represent a distinctively Calvinistic understanding of the sacraments.

Paul assumes redemptive and sacramental continuity between the Old and New Covenants. Paul introduces the account of Israel “as an example” (v. 6, 11) for the primarily Gentile congregation at Corinth. However, the Israelites serve not merely as a distant model from which to draw insights; Paul refers to them as “our fathers” (v. 1)—and the Corinthian believers themselves as “brothers.” He sees these Gentile Christians as belonging to the same family and

¹² Throughout this paragraph, Paul uses the terms κοινωνία, κοινωνός, and μετέχω for interchangeable concepts. Communion is a *participation* in the body and blood of Christ (v. 16). The celebrants *partake* of the one loaf (v. 17). In the Old Covenant, those who eat the sacrifice are *participants* in the altar (v. 18). Pagan sacrifices involve becoming a *participant* with demons (v. 20). One cannot *partake* of the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons (v. 24). Thiselton translates the concept as “communal participation” (761).

¹³ The concept of demons as the spiritual reality behind idols has Old Testament support, and it highlights that Paul continues his allusions to the Exodus generation in this paragraph. Richard Hays notes the parallels between 1 Corinthians 10 and Deuteronomy 32: “They stirred him to jealousy [1 Cor. 10:22] with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. 17 They sacrificed to demons that were no gods [1 Cor. 10:20], to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. 18 You were unmindful of the Rock [1 Cor. 10:4] that bore you” (Deut. 32:16-18). Cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 93-94.

people of God as their Israelite predecessors. There is one redemptive community, spanning the Testaments.

In fact, his argument in this section *reasons from* redemptive continuity: since the Old Covenant people of God enjoyed the same benefits and yet became unfaithful, the Corinthian believer must also take heed lest he encounter the same fate (v. 12). Among the blessings that the wilderness generation received are “baptism” (v. 2) and a form of the communion meal (v. 3-4). In fact, they had the personal presence of Christ himself (v. 4). Therefore, they were at no significant disadvantage when they demonstrated their weakness by falling into idolatry. Calvin comments that Paul presents “no point of difference between the Israelites and us, which would put our whole situation in a different category from theirs.”¹⁴

Although there are important differences between the Old and New Covenant administrations that Paul himself describes (2 Cor. 3), there is also pronounced continuity. There is one people of God, spanning the Testaments, with one way of salvation in Christ—and the sacraments of both the Old and New Covenant serve as signs and seals of that same work of salvation. Redemptive history is progressive, moving eschatologically from promise to fulfillment, but that progression is made possible by the underlying covenantal continuity. “Within the fabric of redemptive history, the apostle sees the Exodus-event as not only sacramental but as decisively Christian in its typology, anticipating what was to come.”¹⁵

Calvin sees Paul as explicitly stating that the Exodus generation had the “same sacraments” as New Covenant believers since he writes that “all ate *the same* (τὸ αὐτὸ) spiritual food, and all drank *the same* (τὸ αὐτὸ) spiritual drink” (v. 3-4).¹⁶ However, this probably over-reads the text, since it is likely that Paul has in mind the fact that all of the people shared in the

¹⁴ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 204.

¹⁵ Vander Hart, 15.

¹⁶ Calvin, 200.

same benefits as the rest of the nation. His repeated use of πάντες in the paragraph underscores this: they *all* experienced the *same* blessings, and yet that did not prevent *some* from becoming idolaters (v. 7). Nevertheless, while the formal elements of the sacraments differ between the covenantal administrations, Paul seems clear that the redemptive benefits in Christ that they signify are ultimately identical. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* articulates the Calvinist viewpoint like this: “The sacraments of the Old Testament in regard to the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New” (XXVII.5).¹⁷

Paul presents the Lord’s Supper as a fellowship with the body and blood of Christ. Sacramental traditions differ on the relationship between the sign and the thing signified. Roman Catholicism collapses the two into one, so that the substance of the bread and wine actually *becomes* the substance of the body and blood of Christ. The Lutheran understanding sees a close physical relationship between the two, attributing ubiquity to the human nature of Christ and contending that its substance is contained “in, with, and under” the communion elements. The Zwinglian perspective, at least as it is commonly understood, attributes only symbolic significance to the Lord’s Supper, so that the elements represent and look backward upon the redemption Christ has accomplished in history, without emphasis on the presence of Jesus or union with his human nature.

If the Eucharist is a merely symbolic or memorialist act, then Paul’s contention in this text seems to be emptied of its substance. His central proposition is that real fellowship with Christ excludes fellowship with other supposed deities, who are actually demons. His supporting premise for this identifies a genuine sacramental union that takes place in the Lord’s Supper so that the participant communes with Christ. Paul has no sacramentology that implies the “real

¹⁷ Berkhof makes the same point and cites 1 Cor. 10 as a supporting text: “In 1 Cor. 10:1-4 Paul ascribes to the Old Testament Church that which is essential in the New Testament sacraments” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 619).

absence” of Jesus.¹⁸ So Calvin summarizes, “Paul is not disputing at present merely in reference to a mutual fellowship among men, but as to the spiritual union between Christ and believers, with the view of drawing from this, that it is an intolerable sacrilege for them to be polluted by fellowship with idols.”¹⁹

Moreover, this fellowship is with the whole Christ, which includes his human nature. Paul does not simply draw attention to Jesus’ *person* but to his *body* and *blood*—with which the believers are said to be participants. Accordingly, Calvin does not divorce the sign from the thing signified. The sign is symbolic but through God’s sacramental action genuinely holds forth what it signifies (the human nature of Jesus): “Now, when the cup is called a participation, the expression, I acknowledge, is figurative, provided that the truth held forth in the figure is not taken away, or, in other words, provided that the reality itself is also present, and that the soul has as truly *communion in the blood*, as we drink wine with the mouth.”²⁰ Since Jesus accomplished salvation for us through his human nature, to be united to him and to fellowship with him means to benefit from the completed and ongoing ministry that he exercises through his humanity.²¹

Jesus is genuinely present in the Eucharist, then, not by transubstantiating the elements nor by divinizing the human nature, but through the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ The elements in the Supper are no more “empty symbols” than was the typological symbol of the Rock (v. 4); the Lord Jesus was really present: “Behold, *I will stand before you* there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink” (Ex. 17:6).

¹⁹ Calvin, 210.

²⁰ Calvin, 210.

²¹ Ronald Wallace articulates Calvin’s thinking here: “Since Christ has thus worked out our salvation in and through his human body and human nature, it follows that the benefits of His work are not available for us, unless we ourselves are brought into some kind of communion with the human nature, and indeed with the body, in which all the work of our salvation was performed. ... Participation in the blessings which Christ died and rose to win for us is inseparable from communion with His person, and Calvin insists that this union can be attained only through participation in the ‘flesh’ of Christ” (Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* [Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997], 145-46). Baptism is a sign of the initiation into this union, and the Lord’s Supper a sign of continuation in this union.

It is the Spirit who connects the believer to the whole Christ that we might spiritually feed upon him and enjoy his saving and sanctifying graces. “Ingrafted into the body of Christ by the secret agency of the Spirit we have life in common with Him.”²² Keith Mathison describes this view:

“While those who adhere to Calvin’s understanding of the mode of Christ’s presence agree that Christ’s human body is real and therefore limited in space to one location—at the right hand of God during the present era—they reject the idea that the Holy Spirit does not facilitate communion with his body and blood during the observation of the Eucharist.”²³

While Paul’s contention that there is a real fellowship between the believer and Christ in the Supper is consistent with the Calvinist tradition, the analogy of participation with demons through sacrificial meals does not fit well with the Transubstantiation or Consubstantiation views of the sacraments.²⁴ Paul has a “real presence” demonology here, but he does not envision the sacrificial meal *becoming* the idol it represents or the demonic presence behind it. Likewise, to partake of Christ’s Supper is ultimately to feed on “spiritual food” (πνευματικὸν βρῶμα, v. 3)—by faith, in the power of the Holy Spirit. No transformed substances nor ubiquitous humanity is necessary for this.²⁵ So the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states:

“Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally but spiritually, receive and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of His death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the

²² Calvin, cited in Wallace, 146.

²³ Keith A. Mathison, *Given For You: Reclaiming Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 264.

²⁴ Of course, it is possible to push the analogy too far (although the situations are intended to be analogous at key points). It is the task of the systematician to draw from not only this text but from *all* the Biblical data when formulating a consistent sacramentology. For additional problems with the Roman Catholic and Lutheran views, see Berkhof (644-658) and Mathison (239-268).

²⁵ It is also noteworthy that, while having a high view of the sacraments, Paul does not hold to their *ex opere operato* efficacy. This is implicit in 1 Corinthians 10 (where unbelief and idolatry place the participant outside of the blessings that the sacraments signify), as well as earlier in the letter where Paul prioritizes Gospel preaching (which saves) over baptism (which does not, in and of itself, save): “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17).

faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses” (XXIX.7).

Conclusion

Faithful systematic theology requires more than the analysis of one particular Biblical text, but it involves no less than this. To attempt to present a fully developed sacramentology from Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 10 misreads his intentions; nevertheless, evangelical systematic theology operates with the conviction that Scripture is true not only in its main points but in its supporting arguments, and these secondary premises deliver true theological principles that contribute to doctrinal formulation. The effort here to read Paul’s statements in their context to discern his sacramental understanding has shown that Paul’s theology is broadly consistent with the Calvinist tradition.

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