

Luther and Calvin on the Role of Faith in the Sacraments: A Catholic Analysis¹

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WHAT IS THE CAUSAL ROLE of faith in the sacraments as understood by the Protestant Reformers? The Catholic might think that this question is simpler than a parallel question addressed to Catholic understandings of sacraments. After all, Protestants generally affirm only two sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist,² or even (the Catholic might say) only one-and-a-half, since the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist is uniformly denied by Protestants (or, on occasion, affirmed in a way that pushes it to the margins). The field to be explored is thus significantly smaller. But the initial glance is deceiving for two reasons.

First, the rejection of Scholasticism by the Reformers meant that the conceptual resources available for discussing the causal role of faith (or anything else) in the sacraments are less precise than those available within Catholic discussions.³ Figuring out just what is the

¹ This essay began as a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Academy of Catholic Theology in May 2016. It has been only lightly revised and retains a somewhat oral style. Sources are given for quotations, but English translation is cited, not original language texts. Other footnotes have been kept to a minimum.

² Luther wavered on the sacramental status of confession or penance. For Luther's final reduction of penance to a return to one's baptism, see his *Large Catechism*, nos. 74–86, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 465–67.

³ The scholastic understanding of sacramental causality and debates over its details is summarized in Bernard Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology* (London: Longmans, 1960), 283–381.

causal role of faith in the sacraments for the Reformers is a complex interpretive task. Second, there is no shared Protestant understanding of the role of faith in the sacraments. In fact, the role of faith in the Eucharist became a central topic of Lutheran–Reformed dispute, with the Lutherans accusing the Reformed of making faith a cause of Christ’s presence, in the sense of efficient cause, and the Reformed accusing the Lutherans of bypassing faith, in ascribing an inappropriate power to the material elements of baptismal water and Eucharistic bread and wine. While disputes over baptism were less prominent, Lutherans and Reformed did take significantly different positions on baptism and faith, leading to differences in practice, notably the Lutheran tendency to baptize infants in danger of death and a Reformed reluctance to do so. Thus, any attempt to understand the causal role of faith in relation to the sacraments must at least take up the different strands of Protestant theology separately.

In order to make my task manageable, I will deal here with only the two most important theologians of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, who represent two of the three most important strands of classical Protestant theology. I will thus not address those theologians, few in the sixteenth century but of increasing importance in later Protestant history, who may be described as simply nonsacramental—who denied that sacraments are divine actions that in some way communicate grace, instead understanding them as human actions attesting to or calling to mind a reality independent of the sacramental rite itself. For such theologians, Zwingli being the most important from the sixteenth century, the question of sacramental causality takes a quite different form.

This article will be something of a cross-border exploration. The question of sacramental causality as it has been discussed in Catholic theology was not discussed in such terms by Protestants, although the underlying issues that gave rise to the Catholic discussion were present for Protestant theologians as well, at least for those who can be called sacramental. I will thus be asking a Catholic question of Protestant theology: what sort of causal or cause-like role does faith play in the sacraments? My hope is that this cross-border excursion will cast a different light both on Protestant discussions and, by reflection, on how Catholics understand faith and the sacraments.

Cross-border trips can be messy and hobbled by misunderstanding. Matters are made more complicated by the less than perfectly clear accounts of faith and the sacraments offered by both Luther and Calvin. I will thus need to make some summary claims about each

that would not be universally accepted by all interpreters, and I will not have space here to defend them. I will offer extensive quotations from both, but I know that quotations that seem to point in a different direction can also be found.

Faith

A preliminary comment needs to be made about one of the central terms being employed, faith, and the role of faith in salvation and the Christian life. The word “faith” almost always carries a different range of reference and a different set of connotations for Protestant theologians than it does for much Catholic theology, although the overlap between the two linguistic uses is also significant. Catholic theology typically understands faith in the context of Paul’s triad of faith, hope, and love in 1 Corinthians 13. The interpretive task, most famously carried out by Aquinas in the opening sections of the *secunda secundae* of his *Summa theologiae*, is to understand these three theological virtues in their difference and in their unity. Together, the three theological virtues are at the core of the Christian life; they are the concrete means God uses to elevate the Christian to participation in the communion of the Trinity. While distinct from one another, the theological virtues function together, at least when they function aright. Faith, even supernatural faith, can exist without love, but unless formed by love, it is frustrated; it does not justify.

Within that triad, faith has most often been understood within Catholic theology in terms of Hebrews 11:1, as the assurance or substance of things hoped for, the conviction or evidence of things not seen. That passage is usually taken to imply that, within the triad of faith, hope, and love, faith plays a primarily intellectual role. While influenced by the will, it finds its primary home in the intellect.

The triad of 1 Corinthians 13 is not the context within which Luther, Calvin, or most other Protestant theologians understand “faith.” If there is a biblical passage that is definitive of faith, it is more likely to be Romans 1:17: “The just shall live by faith” (King James Version). Faith is what the Christian lives by, a comprehensive attitude of the self, of both intellect and will, by which the self turns away from itself and relies entirely on God, or more specifically, on God’s saving act in Christ. If sin is the self *incurvatus in se*, faith is its opposite, the self turned utterly toward God. For both Luther and Calvin (but more explicitly for Calvin), faith has a strong component of understanding. The sinner must hear, minimally understand, and believe the truth of God’s promises and the fulfillment of those

promises in Christ (hence Calvin's polemic against "implicit faith").⁴ But faith is not only *notitia* but also *assensus* and, decisively, *fiducia*. Faith is a reliance on Christ, a handing over of the self to Christ. As Luther says in his *Large Catechism*: "[Faith is] that one's whole heart and confidence be placed in God alone, and in no one else. . . . You lay hold of God when your heart grasps him and clings to him. To cling to him with your heart is nothing else than to entrust yourself to him completely."⁵

For both Luther and Calvin, the believer is united with Christ through faith. Luther uses various images for this union, for example, that Christ and the believer are baked together in one cake. He often used nuptial imagery, most famously in *On the Freedom of the Christian*: "[Faith] unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh." Within this marriage, the "happy exchange" can occur: "The believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. . . . Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's."⁶ Faith thus plays a role that, in Catholic theology, is usually ascribed to the triad of theological virtues, with love at the center.

Because faith is that by which the redeemed receive redemption and by which the believer is united with Christ, faith is always the proximate or immediate target or point of orientation for any mediation of salvation. Christ, grace, or the Holy Spirit may strengthen love, help curb unruly desires, or inspire good works, but faith is the hand that initially receives the gifts, the door through which help must enter. For any action that seeks to mediate salvation or grace—any preaching of the Gospel, any sacramental rite, and so on—the proximate final cause, one might say, is eliciting or strengthening or exercising faith in the comprehensive sense noted.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. III, ch. 2, no. 3, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), 545–46.

⁵ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, nos. 13–15 (*Book of Concord*, 388).

⁶ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, trans. W. A. Lambert and Harold J. Grimm, in *Luther's Works* [hereafter, *LW*], ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown, 55 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955–1986), 31:351.

A question naturally arises: why put faith and not love in this central location, especially since Paul seems to prioritize love over faith in 1 Corinthians 13? Scholarship over the last fifty years has stressed the way Luther's understanding of faith correlates with the understanding of Gospel as fundamentally promise.⁷ A promise is received not by loving the promiser, but by trusting, relying upon, the promise. If you promise to pick me up at 5 p.m., then I trust the promise by not calling a cab at 4:45, just in case you forget. Love may accompany or follow such trust and reliance, but it is not the act by which the promise is received.

I would make a more general point. The Reformers see faith as more directly attuned than love to the primarily receptive character of the believer's relation to God. The self receives Christ through a radical openness in which the self has nothing positive to offer and can only receive. Love receives but also gives; faith simply receives—it does not contribute to what is received. Thus, while Luther will say that faith is active, doing things in the Christian's life, he insists that, at the moment of reception, the emphasis must fall on faith as passive. Reception as a human action tends to remain unspoken in Luther's discussions of the reception of salvation.⁸

This silence about the act of reception has a reason. Faith justifies by what it receives, which is Christ. As a human disposition or action, faith is always more or less imperfect, a trust and dependence that is less than complete. As a human disposition or act, faith is no better than love or hope—partial, conflicted, subject to temptation. Faith is only the earthen vessel containing the treasure. Calvin states: "Faith is said to justify because it receives and embraces the righteousness offered in the gospel."⁹

This sharp distinction between faith and what it receives is pastorally important for the Reformers. As noted, for the Reformers, faith is a looking away from the self and a looking toward Christ. If the

⁷ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*: "For anyone can easily see that these two, promise and faith, must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith" (trans. A. T. W. Steinhäuser, Frederick C. Ahrens, and Abdel Ross Wentz, in *LW*, 36:42).

⁸ See the excellent discussion of faith and love in Luther's theology in Berndt Hamm, "Why Did Luther Turn Faith Into the Central Concept of the Christian Life?" in *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 59–84.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. III, ch. 11, no. 17 (p. 746).

faithful self were to look back at itself, the temptation would inevitably arise of either despair because faith is weak or pride because one falsely perceives faith as stronger than it is. For the Reformers, and especially for Luther, faith is understood in such a way that self-reference becomes difficult. Faith can talk of almost anything but itself. Faith must be, by its very nature, self-forgetful.

This understanding of faith, shared (with some variations) by Luther and Calvin, sets the context for all they say about the sacraments. It gives a much sharper anthropological focus to any discussion of sacramental causality. If one were to ask how extreme unction mediates grace, any answer would have to concentrate on how the rite addresses faith. Even if the aid given by the anointing extends beyond faith, it would need to be received by faith. As this example indicates, this general understanding of faith and the sacraments forms an important aspect of the background for the insistence that only baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments (although, for the most part, it did not play a foreground role).

Luther

Contemporary interpreters for the most part agree that Luther's understanding of sacraments changed not only in the late 1510s, as he developed a Reformation understanding of justification, but again in the mid-1520s, when his debate partners expanded beyond his Catholic critics to include also the Swiss and Upper German advocates of a significantly less "realistic" understanding of the sacraments, such as Zwingli in Zürich, Oecolampadius in Basel, and Bucer in Strasbourg.¹⁰

In the late 1510s and early 1520s, Luther's emphasis fell almost entirely on the sacraments as, quite strictly, visible words, as the communication of the Gospel by symbolic means. Sacraments are signs and seals of the promise contained in the Gospel. "In all his promises, moreover, in addition to the word, God has usually given a sign, for the greater assurance and strengthening of our faith." To Noah, he gave the rainbow; to Abraham, circumcision; to Gideon, dew on the ground and the fleece. "This is what Christ has done in this testament [i.e., the mass]. He has affixed to the words a powerful

¹⁰ See, e.g.: Gordon A. Jensen, "Luther and the Lord's Supper," in *Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 322; Dorothea Wendebourg, "Taufe und Abendmahl," in *Luther Handbuch*, ed. Albrecht Beutel, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 415.

and most precious seal and sign: his own true flesh and blood under the bread and wine.”¹¹ In three 1519 texts on baptism, the mass, and penance, Luther says that every sacrament has three aspects or parts: the sign, the significance of the sign, and the faith that receives the significance of the sign.¹²

We seem to have here a clear picture of sacramental causality; sacraments are signs that communicate in a physical way the same content that preaching communicates, the promise of the Gospel. Put crudely, they seem to be divinely mandated audio-visual aids. Luther can, at this point in his career, give the impression that such is his understanding of sacrament: “The mass was instituted to preach and praise Christ, to glorify his sufferings and all his grace and goodness, so that we may be moved to love him, to hope and believe in him, and thus, in addition to this word or sermon, to receive an outward sign, that is, the sacrament; to the end that our faith, provided with and confirmed by divine words and signs, may thereby become strong against all sin, suffering, death, and hell, and everything that is against us.”¹³

A crucial aspect of Luther’s views at this point should, however, be noted. As is stated in the above quotation, the sign in the mass is not simply the bread and wine (in the language of Catholic theology, the *sacramentum tantum*); the sign is the body and blood of Christ under the bread and wine (in Catholic terms, the *res et sacramentum*). The body and blood of Christ under the bread and wine that we consume is a sign of the unity with Christ which is our justification.

In his 1519 treatise on “The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism,” Luther says: “A baptized person is therefore sacramentally altogether pure and guiltless. This means nothing else than that he has the sign of God: that is to say, he has the baptism by which is shown that his sins are all to be dead, and that he too is to die in grace and at the Last Day is to rise again to everlasting life, pure, sinless, and guiltless.”¹⁴ The sign in baptism is something like a permanent character, a sign of God’s saving work in which the Christian may trust throughout his or her life.

In the mid-1520s, Luther encountered theologians—Zwingli and his associates—who understood sacraments as signs in a more reduc-

¹¹ Martin Luther, *A Treatise on the New Testament, That is, the Holy Mass*, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann, at *LW*, 35:86.

¹² See, e.g., Martin Luther, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann, at *LW*, 35:30.

¹³ Luther, *New Testament, That Is, the Mass*, at *LW*, 35:105.

¹⁴ Luther, *Sacrament of Baptism*, at *LW*, 35:32–33.

tive sense. Sacraments point to a reality truly independent of the rite. In response, Luther came to stress what had remained unemphasized earlier: the sacraments directly confer grace or Christ. Thus, in 1528, he says about the Supper: “For the new testament [in the cup] is promise, indeed, much more: the bestowal of grace and the forgiveness of sins, i.e., the true gospel.”¹⁵ The Supper is not merely a sign of grace; it is a means of grace: “Therefore, he who drinks this cup really drinks the true blood of Christ and the forgiveness of sins or the Spirit of Christ, for these are received in and with the cup.” The body and blood are given and consumed not only by those with faith, those who trust in the sign, but also by “Judas and the unworthy.”¹⁶ The Christian should “believe firmly what baptism promises *and brings*—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts.”¹⁷

Luther still insists, with unchanged vehemence, that only faith receives unto salvation the grace bestowed. Judas eats the body of Christ unto judgment. An adult who is baptized “deceitfully and with an evil purpose” (Luther says “a Jew”) is validly and truly baptized—and under no condition is to be rebaptized—but is not thereby redeemed.¹⁸

Although faith receives grace through the sacraments, that does not mean that only faith in a narrow sense benefits. Christ is now, through his body and blood given in the Supper, in the believer, who is body and soul. As the soul benefits from spiritually feeding on Christ: “Similarly, the mouth, the throat, the body, which eats Christ’s body, will also have its benefit in that it will live forever and arise on the Last Day to eternal salvation. This is the secret power and benefit which flows from the body of Christ in the Supper into our body, for it must be useful, and cannot be present in vain.”¹⁹

Faith remains strictly receptive in this sacramental mediation. For the later Luther, this receptive character appears in his insistence that faith or its absence has no effect on the validity of baptism or the Supper—that is, that they truly bestow grace. Faith only determines whether that grace is fruitfully received. Again, a pastoral motive

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, trans. Robert H. Fischer, at *LW*, 37: 325.

¹⁶ Luther, *Confession Concerning Supper*, at *LW*, 37:354.

¹⁷ Luther, *Large Catechism*, pt. IV (Of Baptism), no. 41 (*Book of Concord*, 461; emphasis added).

¹⁸ Luther, *Large Catechism*, pt. IV (Of Baptism), no. 54 (*Book of Concord*, 463).

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *That These Words of Christ, “This is My Body,” Etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*, trans. Robert H. Fischer, in *LW*, 37:134.

rooted in the nature of faith is decisive. Faith always looks away from itself. The sacraments, as works of God that are objective and, in a sense, external, are objects to which faith may turn in moments of doubt. "Faith must have something to believe—something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand."²⁰ If faith were to make a contribution to what is given, then faith would be turning to itself in turning to the sacraments; one would be placing faith in one's own faith, which Luther will not allow.²¹

One might think, however, that Luther has a problem. If sacraments are fruitfully received only by faith, then how is infant baptism effective, since, to all appearances, infants do not have faith? Luther's defense of infant baptism is complex and surprising, for he argues from the unanimity of practice. In his *Large Catechism*, he argues that, without valid baptism, one does not receive the Holy Spirit. Through much of church history, almost all Christians were baptized as infants. If infant baptism were not valid, then the Church would at some point have not existed, which is impossible in light of God's promise. Hence, infant baptism must be valid.²² But baptism is effective only when received by faith. The most likely conclusion, Luther believes, is that, in the rite of baptism, faith is created in the infant. He says: "So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible, the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by infused faith."²³ Luther treats this *fides infusa infantium* as a theologoumenon, a likely opinion, not as a firm conclusion. It has always been controversial among Lutherans.²⁴ Nevertheless, it shows his firm commitment both to the power of the sacraments and to their orientation to faith.

In summary, for Luther after the early 1520s, sacraments are both signs and means of grace, oriented to faith as receptive, but having effects in the individual beyond faith.

²⁰ Luther, *Large Catechism*, pt. IV (of Baptism), no. 29 (*Book of Concord*, 460).

²¹ Martin Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism*: "There is quite a difference between having faith on one hand and depending on faith and making baptism depend on faith on the other" (trans. Conrad Bergendoff, at *LW*, 40:252).

²² Luther, *Large Catechism*, pt. IV (of Baptism), nos. 47–51 (*Book of Concord*, 462–63).

²³ Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, at *LW*, 36:73.

²⁴ The most recent comprehensive discussion is Eero Huovinen, *Fides infantium: Martin Luthers Lehre vom Kinderglauben*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz / Abteilung für Abendländische Religionsgeschichte 159 (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1997).

Calvin

John Calvin, Luther's junior by twenty-six years and the leading theologian of the distinct Reformed tradition, shares with his older contemporary his understanding of faith as a comprehensive attitude of the self. He does, however, place a greater emphasis on the intellectual character of faith: "We shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."²⁵ The intellectual character of faith, for Calvin, should not be overdrawn. He adds: "That very assent itself [of faith] . . . is more of the heart than of the brain, and more of the disposition than of the understanding."²⁶ Like Luther, Calvin insists that, through faith, Christ truly dwells in the believer's heart through the Spirit. As Brian Gerrish, perhaps the best recent interpreter of Calvin, put it, Calvin's thinking "culminates in the idea of a 'secret communion' by which Christ-for-us becomes Christ-in-us."²⁷ A crucial word here is "secret." Calvin consistently refers to the inner work of the Holy Spirit and its effect as secret, *arcanus*. The opening chapter of book III of the *Institutes*, which describes faith and justification, is entitled "The Things Spoken Concerning Christ Profit Us by the Secret Working of the Spirit [*arcana operationis Spiritus*]."²⁸

Calvin's understanding of sacraments corresponds to his understanding of faith and its source, the secret working of the Spirit. "A simple and proper definition [of 'sacrament'] would be to say that it is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our conscience the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men."²⁹ They are like a seal on a government document that attests to its trustworthiness.³⁰ The word informs us of that which faith grasps. The sacraments portray the same truth symbolically. The sacraments, however, "have this

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. III, ch. 2, no. 7 (p. 551).

²⁶ Ibid., bk. III, ch. 2, no. 8 (p. 552).

²⁷ B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, pt. III, ch. 1 (p. 537; Latin in John Calvin, *Institutio christinae religionis*, Corpus Refomatorum 30 [Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke u. Söhne, 1864], col. 393).

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. IV, ch. 14, no. 1 (p. 1277).

³⁰ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 14, no. 5 (p. 1280).

characteristic over and above the word because they represent them [God's promises] for us as painted in a picture from life."³¹ Although a covenant among a group of person may be "first conceived, established, and decreed in words," a subsequent handshake is the visible sign that agreement has been reached.³²

The sign is useful not only because of the weakness of words but also because the work of the Holy Spirit and its effect are secret: "Since, however, this mystery of Christ's secret [*arcanae*] union with the devout is by nature incomprehensible, he shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity. Indeed, by giving guarantees and tokens he makes it as certain for us as if we had seen it with our own eyes."³³ A striking feature of Calvin's discussion of sacraments is his repeated use of verbs of seeing to describe our relation to them. The Spirit must be at work in you so that "the sacraments may not strike your eyes in vain."³⁴ Or again, the Lord "nourishes faith spiritually through the sacraments, whose one function is to set his promises before our eyes to be looked upon, indeed, to be guarantees of them."³⁵ Calvin describes sacraments as signs and confirmatory seals of the work of the Holy Spirit and its effect, faith and faith's unity with Christ. Sacraments are directed to that reality of faith to give it a firmer assurance.

Are sacraments for Calvin also means of grace? Do the sacraments communicate what they signify? When one reads Calvin on baptism, the answer seems to be "no." "The first thing that the Lord sets out for us is that baptism should be a token and proof of our cleansing; or (the better to explain what I mean) it is like a sealed document to confirm to us that all our sins are so abolished, remitted, and effaced that they can never come to his sight to be recalled, or charged against us."³⁶ Calvin defends this understanding as in accord with the New Testament: "For Paul did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, . . . but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts."³⁷ Thus, when Ananias urged Paul to be baptized to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 14, no. 5 (p. 1281).

³³ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 17, no. 1 (p. 1361) (*Institutio christinae religionis*, col.1002).

³⁴ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 14, no. 10 (p. 1285).

³⁵ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 14, no. 12 (p. 1287).

³⁶ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 15, no. 1 (p. 1304).

³⁷ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 15, no. 2 (p. 1304).

wash away his sins, “Ananias meant only this: ‘To be assured, Paul, that your sins are forgiven, be baptized.’”³⁸

Baptism seems to be the sign of a reality fundamentally independent of that sign: “Cornelius [in Acts 10], . . . having already received forgiveness of sins and the visible graces of the Holy Spirit, was nevertheless baptized.”³⁹ This independent existence of the reality baptism signs is clear in Calvin’s defense of infant baptism. For Calvin, baptism does not, as it does for Luther, bestow salvation on the child. The children of Christian parents are already within salvation, according to God’s promise to Abraham to bless not only him but also his descendants (Gen 17:7): “God declares that he adopts our babies as his own before they are born, when he promises that he will be our God and the God of our descendants after us.”⁴⁰ Infants are baptized “to testify that they are heirs of the blessing promised to the seed of the faithful, and that, after they are grown up, they may acknowledge the fact of their baptism, and receive and produce its fruit.”⁴¹ Consistent with this understanding, Calvin rejects the baptism by a layperson of an infant in danger of death. The irregularity of lay baptism is not needed, since the reality baptism signs is already present in the infant born of Christian parents.⁴²

I should note that Calvin will at times speak of baptism in different terms: “Through baptism Christ makes us sharers in his death, that we may be engrafted in it.”⁴³ When pressed, however, he falls back on the explanation of baptism as sign.

On the Supper, Calvin clearly affirms a mediation, but his exposition is complex (or perhaps ambiguous).⁴⁴ As Gerrish notes, Calvin on the Supper can lead in more than one direction and it is not easy to harmonize all he says.⁴⁵ The language of “sign” is still central: “The Lord instituted for us his Supper in order to sign and seal in

³⁸ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 15, no. 15 (p. 1315).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 15, no. 20 (p. 1321). Similarly, see John Calvin, *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954), 134–35.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Geneva Catechism*, 135.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. IV, ch. 15, no. 20 (p. 1320–1).

⁴³ Ibid., bk. IV, 15, 5; 1307.

⁴⁴ The best comprehensive discussion of Calvin on the Eucharist is B. A. Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology Of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

⁴⁵ Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New*, 106.

our consciences the promises contained in his gospel concerning our being made partakers of his body and blood; and to give us certainty and assurance that in this consists our true spiritual nourishment; so that, having such an earnest, we might entertain a right assurance about salvation.”⁴⁶

Spurred by the bitter dispute with the Lutherans over Christ’s Eucharistic presence, however, Calvin states consistently and forcefully that the Supper is not only a sign but a means of communing in the body and blood of Christ: “When we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us.”⁴⁷ Famously, however, Calvin insists that the local presence of Christ’s human body at the right hand of the Father in heaven means that the body cannot be locally or substantially present elsewhere. To say that Christ’s body could be locally or substantially present beyond the local presence in heaven is to compromise Christ’s continuing human nature. Rather, through the symbols of bread and wine, received in faith, the Holy Spirit unites us with the body and blood in heaven so that there is a true spiritual eating and drinking of the body and blood. “Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such great 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 wish 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.”⁴⁸

Note that this mutual presence of the recipient of the Supper and the body and blood of Christ occurs only if the recipient has faith. Only by faith is the recipient lifted to heaven to feed on Christ. In fact, faith’s feeding on Christ’s body in the Supper is simply a form of that feeding on Christ that is always open to faith: “There is no communion of the flesh of Christ except a spiritual one, which is both perpetual and given to us independently of the use of the Supper.”⁴⁹ What is offered in the Supper is offered in every proclamation of the Word: “God gives no more by the visible signs than by his Word,

⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord and Only Savior Jesus Christ*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 145.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. IV, ch. 17, no. 10 (p. 1371).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (p. 1370).

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *The Clear Explanation of Sound Doctrine Concerning the True Partaking of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper*, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 295.

but gives in a different manner, because our weakness stands in need of a variety of helps.”⁵⁰ As Gerrish notes, Calvin understands the sign to be less the elements than the action involving the elements, the eating and drinking.⁵¹ The eating and drinking are signs of that feeding on Christ that occurs whenever faith turns to its object, Christ.⁵² Thus, Calvin can say: “It is not, therefore, the chief function of the Sacrament simply and without higher consideration to extend to us the body of Christ. Rather, it is to seal and confirm that promise by which he testifies that his flesh is food indeed and his blood is drink, which feed us unto eternal life.”⁵³

For the Lutherans, Calvin’s view that Christ in the Supper is truly and substantially present only to those with faith was a decisive mistake. Faith appeared to be given a *causal* role in the sacrament. Faith seems to be what *makes* Christ present. This criticism is, I think, at least misphrased. For Calvin, faith is not an efficient cause of Christ’s presence. The cause is strictly the Holy Spirit. Rather, for Calvin, faith is a *conditio sine qua non* of the mutual presence of Christ’s body and the faithful recipient. Without faith, no presence and no feeding on Christ of any sort can occur. For the Lutheran critics, however, cause and condition constitute a distinction without a difference. In either case, the Christian cannot be urged to turn confidently in the Supper to Christ present in his body and blood, for some action or disposition of the self is required for Christ to be truly present to the recipient. For the Lutherans, the argument with Calvin was not a minor dispute about the mode of the presence, but an argument about a theology that, in their view, undercut the evangelical trustworthiness of the sacrament.

Here, I believe the typical categories of Catholic theology can help illuminate the difference. I noted earlier that, even for the Luther of the late 1510s and early 1520s, the sign in the Supper was not simply the bread and wine themselves but also the body and blood of Christ

⁵⁰ Ibid., 281.

⁵¹ Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, 13.

⁵² As Gerrish describes Calvin’s understanding: “This, in short, is what makes the Supper a sacrament: not that it brings about a communion with Christ, or a reception of his body, that is not available anywhere else, but rather that it graphically represent and presents to believers a communion they enjoy or can enjoy, all the time” (*Grace & Gratitude*, 133). A question for further investigation is how far Gerrish is correct in his claim that Calvin reproduces the late-medieval Thomist position that the Eucharist causes by signifying (ibid., 168).

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, bk. IV, ch. 17, no. 4 (p. 1363).

under the bread and wine, something more like the *res et sacramentum*, rather than the *sacramentum tantum*. Similarly, in baptism, a permanent reality, something like a permanent character, comes to typify the baptized person. For Luther, the sacraments create a truly spiritual reality that is given to the recipient, although that reality saves only when received by faith. That spiritual reality exists independently of faith, otherwise faith could not depend upon it in self-forgetfulness. Luther's understanding of faith and its external focus shapes his understanding of the sacraments.

The threefold distinction of *sacramentum tantum*, *res et sacramentum*, and *res tantum* provides a means to distinguish the validity and the efficacy of the sacrament. In any valid sacrament, a *res et sacramentum* comes to be—the body and blood of Christ in union with the species, the baptismal character, and so on. Thus, something happens in the sacrament regardless of the nature of its reception. When the sacrament is rightly received, then the *res tantum* is realized, such as the particular unity with Christ that is the telos of the Eucharist or of baptism. The realization of the *res tantum* is the cash value, so to speak, of saying that the sacrament is efficacious or fruitful.

For a variety of reasons—some having to do with his understanding of faith and the “secret union” faith works between Christ and the believer and some probably having to do with his anthropology—in his understanding of the sacraments, Calvin effectively rejects any reality that is *res et sacramentum*. There is only the *sacramentum tantum*, the created reality that is a sign—the water, the bread, the wine, the human actions involving them—and the *res tantum*, the unity with Christ brought about in faith. Without faith to interpret the sign, the sign is only water, bread, or wine. Calvin makes this point in relation to 1 Corinthians 10:4, that the rock from which the Israelites drank was Christ. For the faith of the Israelites, the rock from which they drank was a sign of the Messiah. For the animals who also drank from that same water, the rock was simply a water fountain.⁵⁴ Without the interpretive act of faith, the sign is not a sign; it is only a material reality. Without some functional equivalent of the *res et sacramentum*, Calvin is left without an effective means for explicating what happens in the sacrament that is not received in faith.

⁵⁴ Ibid., bk. IV, ch. 17, no. 15 (p. 1377). It would be interesting, but beyond the scope of this essay, to compare Calvin here to medieval discussions of the problem of the mouse. It should be noted, however, that Calvin's point extends beyond animals who are incapable of interpretation to include humans who can interpret but do not because they lack faith.

For both Luther and Calvin, faith is the only true receptive instrument by which the Christian can receive the grace offered in the sacraments. Their similar but different understandings of faith, along with other differences in their theologies, produce rather different sacramental theologies, leading to the historic dispute over the relation between faith and Christ's presence to the one who communes in the Supper.

Faith as Passive Reception and as Active Reception

To this point, the focus has been on a detailed analysis of what Luther and Calvin propose about faith and the sacraments, rather than on the traditionally controversial issues between Catholics and Protestants related to these matters. I think such a preliminary focus is ecumenically fitting. We should always first let the other speak and try to understand what they are saying. Sometimes the use of Catholic theological categories can be helpful in that expository task, as I think the threefold analysis of *sacramentum tantum*, *res et sacramentum*, and *res tantum* can be helpful in seeing what differentiates Luther and Calvin. Nevertheless, for the most part, I have tried to understand the internal logic of the Reformers' understandings in something close to their own terms.

Serious ecumenical engagement does not stop with such analysis, however. There are traditional controversial points that cannot responsibly be ignored. In addition, the theologian may see (or think she sees) differing structures of thought that stand in the way of agreement, and these should be indicated.

The traditional issue between Catholics and Protestants in relation to the role of faith in the sacraments has been the Catholic assertion of the efficacy of sacraments *ex opere operato*, by the deed done, if only the recipient places no obstacle in the way of such efficacy.⁵⁵ For Luther and Calvin, this idea undercuts the unique role of faith as the recipient of sanctifying grace.⁵⁶ A variety of related issues come into play here. What are the effects of the sacraments on the self? Is grace, strictly speaking, only sanctifying grace (as both Luther and Calvin would say, but then frequently fudge by referring to graces of various sorts) or does "grace" also include other gifts, such as those that enable ordained ministry or the strengthening in the face of serious illness mediated by the anointing of the ill? If the latter, how do such

⁵⁵ For a recent explanation of this Catholic teaching, see Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, 27–62.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Luther, *New Testament, That Is, the Mass*, at *LW*, 35:102.

graces relate to sanctifying grace? Or what does Catholic theology precisely mean when it speaks of placing an obstacle, an *obex*, that blocks the efficacy of a sacrament? Is such an obstacle different from the absence of faith that Luther or Calvin would see as the decisive block to sacramental efficacy?⁵⁷

My topic in this article is only the role of faith in the sacraments according to Luther and Calvin. I thus will take up only the question of the *ex opere operato* effect of the sacrament within this narrow focus.

For Calvin, almost nothing occurs in the sacrament *ex opere operato*. As noted, he posits no equivalent to a *res et sacramentum* that comes to be in the sacrament regardless of its reception. For those without faith, a sacrament is no different from a sermon preached in a language that its hearers do not comprehend.

For Luther, the issues raised by the *ex opere operato* effect of the sacraments are far more complex. The disagreement over the phrase *ex opere operato*, at least when it is separated from the question of Eucharistic sacrifice, is far narrower than is often thought. It is mostly a holdover from Luther's more strictly sign-oriented sacramental theology of the late 1510s and early 1520s that makes little sense once he himself came to a different set of emphases. Yes, the adult who undergoes baptism hypocritically—without any faith, simply for show—or the recipient of the Eucharist who has rejected the faith is not redeemed by the sacrament, as the Catholic would agree. Luther would agree with the Catholic that, regardless of the faith of the minister of the sacrament or of the recipient, when the Eucharist is rightly performed, the body and blood of Christ are present in connection with the elements (and thus present *ex opere operato*) and that, when a person is baptized, that person is then personally characterized by that baptism and has available to him or her a grace to which they can always later turn in faith.

The receptive character of the faith that functions within any sacrament implies for the Reformers, however, the rejection of more than just certain understandings of the *ex opere operato* effect of a sacrament. The receptive character of faith is also central to the rejection of the understanding and practice of the Eucharist as sacrifice to which the Catholic and Orthodox churches are alike fundamentally committed. If faith in relation to the gift of Christ in the mass is *strictly* receptive, even passive, if faith only receives and is not active

⁵⁷ An *obex* is an “obstacle that arises from the free will of the recipient, such as lack of faith or sorrow for sin” (Leeming, *Principles of Sacramental Theology*, 6).

or giving in the reception of grace, then, as Luther and Calvin both argue, the Mass cannot be a sacrifice in the Catholic sense.⁵⁸ To argue that the Mass is a sacrifice and to celebrate it as sacrifice can then be only a violation of the evangelical character of the Christian message, an implicit affirmation that salvation is not pure gift, that we make our own contribution in addition to God's work, that all is not grace. So Luther stated: "the mass under the papacy has to be the greatest and most terrible abomination, as it directly and violently opposes this chief article" of salvation exclusively through Christ and not our works.⁵⁹

The Catholic response here needs to be careful and precise. Catholic theology affirms no less emphatically than the Reformers that salvation is by grace alone, that we are utterly dependent on Christ and his saving work, that we have nothing to boast of except Christ. The question is about how grace engages the self as it heals and elevates the person to life with God. In particular, how does grace engage the self as agent? For Luther and Calvin, in the area of that which constitutes salvation and its mediation, the self is pure recipient and is not engaged as an agent.⁶⁰ For Catholic theology also, there is a strictly receptive character to the relation of the self to sanctifying grace (and thus grace, in this aspect, is operative, not cooperative). But what does the self receive in grace? In and through grace, the self receives a participation *as a responsible agent* in Christ and, thus, in certain respects, participates in his work. In the Eucharist, the self is taken into Christ's self-offering (passive-voice verb) in such a way that the self truly offers Christ (active-voice verb). There is an oblation by the Church in the Mass that is a participation in the self-obl-

⁵⁸ For an argument along these lines, see Luther, *Babylonian Captivity*, at *LW*, 36:288–89.

⁵⁹ Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles* 2.2.1 (*Book of Concord*, 301).

⁶⁰ I would note, in disagreement with such interpreters as Bishop Charles Morerod, that the motivation for this understanding for Luther and his followers is not philosophical; it is not an inability to think of divine and human agency as noncompetitive and interpenetrating. Luther excludes the human agent from involvement in salvation and justification for religious reasons: any such involvement would compromise faith's trust in the work of Christ and the Spirit. See Charles Morerod, *Ecumenism and Philosophy: Philosophical Questions for a Renewal of Dialogue* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sapientia Press, 2005), and my review: Michael Root, "Review of *Ecumenism and Philosophy: Philosophical Questions for a Renewal of Dialogue*, by Charles Morerod," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 505–8.

tion of Christ. The Church's oblation, as participatory, adds nothing to the perfection of Christ's self-offering.⁶¹ The Catholic-Protestant difference over the sacrifice of the mass is a difference over the way grace engages the self. Is the self receptive and passive (as Luther and Calvin would insist) or receptive and active (as Catholic theology would state)—on the ground, among others, that God perfects the nature we are given and the nature we are given is that of a responsible agent).⁶²

One way of getting at the issue is through a distinction from nineteenth-century German Protestant theology between Christ's exclusive and inclusive representation.⁶³ As exclusive representative, Christ does that which the Christian then does not. Christ's action replaces ours. For Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, Christ endures the depths of hell for me so that I do not then need to do so. As inclusive representative, Christ's does an action in which the Christian then participates: Christ dies and the Christian dies with and in Christ. This participation transforms the reality, since to die with Christ is not dissolution but salvation. For Luther, Calvin, (and most Protestant theology), Christ's exclusive representation is more far-reaching than it generally is for Catholic theology. For Catholic theology, Christ merits and we merit in Christ. Christ offers himself and, in the Eucharist, we participate not only in the benefits he has won but also in his self-offering. The Church offers not only its own praise and thanksgiving; it offers Christ. Especially through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, the self is brought into Christ's work and is not only the recipient of its effects.

⁶¹ See the clear and forceful presentation of "The Relation of the Mass to Our Lord's Offering" in Maurice de La Taille, *The Mystery of Faith*, vol. 2, *The Sacrifice of the Church*, trans. Joseph Carroll (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 186–96.

⁶² For a fuller discussion of these issues, but in relation to merit rather than the Mass, see Michael Root, "Aquinas, Merit, and Reformation Theology After the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*," *Modern Theology* 20 (2004): 5–22.

⁶³ This distinction goes back at least to Philip Marheineke. See Gunther Wenz, *Geschichte der Versöhnungslehre in der evangelischen Theologie der Neuzeit*, Münchener Monographien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie 9 (Munich: Kaiser, 1984–86), 1:317–18.

Conclusion

What has our cross-border excursion taught us? I hope it has laid out in a clear way an aspect of the logic of the sacramental teaching of Luther and Calvin. Their critiques of Catholic theology and practice flowed from an understanding of faith and its role in the Christian life that was in significant ways different from that of the medieval theological tradition. Their concern was not merely with a small range of practices that could be labeled abuses. It addressed fundamental convictions.

More importantly, the role the Reformers ascribe to faith within the sacraments brings into profile important aspects of their understandings of the relation between God and the redeemed. The comprehensive dependency on grace that should pervade all the Christian life implies, on their understanding, a reformation of thought and practice in relation to the sacraments and elsewhere. In the face of that critique, Catholic theology still faces the challenge of clarifying its own equally decisive but differently conceived understanding of a radical dependency on grace. The Reformers should here serve as a spur to Catholic theology. In a time when breakthroughs to ecumenical agreement may be few, Protestant–Catholic engagement should press both sides to greater clarity on fundamental principles. Catholics and Protestants can only gain by such clarity. N&V