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Language, Symbols and Sacraments

Was Calvin's View of the Lord's Supper Right?

Melvin Tinker

Introduction

In his insightful work on the eucharistic theology contained in the reformed confessions,¹ B A Gerrish postulates that amongst the reformed theologians there was a spectrum of belief about the significance of symbol in the sacraments, which can be reduced to three main varieties of outlook; symbolic memorialism, symbolic parallelism and symbolic instrumentalism. What is held in common between all three positions is the notion that the symbol 'points to something else'. What distinguishes them is the actual reference of the sign, and how the referent relates to the sign. In symbolic memorialism, the heart of Zwingli's sacramental theology, the referent is 'a happening in the past'. In the case of symbolic parallelism – emphasized by Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich – it is to 'a happening that occurs simultaneously in the present' through the work of God *alongside* the sign itself. The third approach, symbolic instrumentalism, represented by John Calvin, stresses 'a present happening that is actually brought about *through* the signs'. This latter position may come as a surprise to many, given Calvin's outright rejection of the Roman Catholic belief in *ex opere operato*. But there is little doubt that he saw his own position as a *via media* between the Roman view on the one hand and mere memorialism on the other. One can take Calvin's comments on 1 Corinthians 10:3 as evidence of this:

When Paul says that the *fathers ate the same spiritual meat*, he first of all gives a hint of what the power and efficacy of the sacrament is; and secondly he shows that the old sacraments of the law had the same power as ours have today. For if manna was spiritual food, it follows that bare forms (*figuras nudas*) are not exhibited to us in the sacraments, but the reality is truly figured at the same time (*rem figuratam simul vere dari*). For God is not so deceitful as to nourish us in empty appearances (*figmentis*). A sign (*signum*) is indeed a

1 B A Gerrish 'Sign and reality: The Lord's Supper in the reformed confessions' *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1982) pp 118-30

sign, and retains its own substance (*substantiam*). But just as the Papists, on the one hand, are ridiculously dreaming of some sort of transformation, so, on the other hand, we have no right to separate the reality and the figure (*veritatem et figuram*) which God has joined together. The Papists confound the reality and the sign (*rem et signum*); unbelievers such as Schwefeld and men like him separate the signs from the realities (*signa a rebus*). Let us preserve a middle position, that is, let us keep the union made by the Lord, but at the same time distinguish between them, so that we do not, in error, transfer what belongs to one to the other.²

The same 'symbolic instrumentalism' is evident in the *Institutes*:

I admit, indeed, that the breaking of bread is a symbol, not the reality. But this being admitted, we duly infer from the exhibition of the symbol that the thing itself is exhibited. For unless we would charge God with deceit, we will never presume to say that he holds forth an empty symbol ... The rule which the pious ought always to observe is, whenever they see the symbols instituted by the Lord, to think and feel surely persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is also present. For why does the Lord put the symbol of his body into your hands, but just to assure you that you truly partake of him? If this is true let us feel as much assured that the visible sign is given us in seal of an invisible gift that his body has been given to us.³

As Gerrish observes about Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper as sacrament, it is '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 represents and presents to believers a communion they enjoy, or can enjoy, all the time'.⁴ It is little wonder that Calvin found himself not only meeting resistance from Lutherans who thought that he did not go far enough in affirming the real presence of Christ under the signs, but also from Bullinger who thought his position too close to that of the papists!

While Bullinger and Calvin were able in some measure to come together through the Zurich Agreement (*Consensus Tigurinus*) of 1549 in a statement which respected both their common concerns and fears – such that by the time Bullinger composed the Second Helvetic Confession in 1562 he understood the sign and thing signified in the Lord's Supper to be simultaneous occurrences – nonetheless he could not accept Calvin's belief that God performs the inward *through* the outward.

2 J Calvin *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980) p 203

3 J Calvin *Institutes of Christian Religion* Book IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983) p 564

4 B A Gerrish *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1993) p 133

For Calvin, the sacrament consisted of both word and external sign and had to be received by faith to be effective,⁵ but what is effected is the receiving not simply of the benefits of Christ, but Christ himself: 'That sacred communion of flesh and blood by which Christ transfuses his life into us, just as if it penetrated our bones and marrow, he testifies and seals in the Supper, and that not by presenting in a vain or empty sign, but by there exerting an efficacy of the Spirit by which he fulfils what he promises.'⁶

Was Calvin wrong to conceive of the relationship between sign and signification in this way?

What is presented in this article is an approach to the nature of the Lord's Supper, drawing upon four areas of study, which, it will be argued, throw light on the nature of the sacramental in such a way that Calvin's theological instincts regarding the sacraments are upheld as being fundamentally correct. While eschewing the Romanist error of transubstantiation on the one hand, he was also right to resist mere memorialism on the other. The four areas we shall be investigating are; the functional approach to language, the nature of symbolism, the doctrine of the Incarnation and the dynamic nature of the sacramental.

The Function of Language in the Lord's Supper

A useful classification of language according to function has been provided by G B Caird⁷ who groups them under five headings. Words are used (a) to talk about people, things and ideas (informative); (b) to think (cognitive); (c) to do things and get things done (performative and causative); (d) to display or elicit attitudes and feelings (expressive and evocative); (e) to provide a means of communal solidarity (cohesive).

Of prime importance to our study is the idea of performatives as fathered by J L Austin⁸ and brought to maturity by John Searle.⁹ Performatives, as the term implies, perform rather than inform. Many statements set out in the indicative mood are not strictly true or false, but are designed to bring about a state of affairs. For example, in the wedding service the officiating minister asks: 'Will you take x to be your lawful wedded wife?' and the response is made: 'I will'. This is not a description of marriage, but part of the action of *getting* married. This type of speech act was distinguished from others which were mainly referential and called 'constatives'.

5 Calvin's *Institutes* IV ch XIV p 493

6 Calvin's *Institutes* IV ch XVII p 563

7 G B Caird *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Duckworth 1980) pp 7-36

8 J L Austin *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961)

9 J R Searle *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: CUP 1969)

Later Austin considered *all* utterances as speech acts to be performatives.¹⁰ Within his general theory there are two other specifications relevant to our study.

First, let us consider the distinction between speech acts in the narrow sense – making referential statements, proclaiming forgiveness, making promises, ie what we *do* with statements – and the *effect* of such utterances on people, in persuading, amusing or annoying them. The former is termed the illocutionary act and the latter the perlocutionary act. Secondly, within the illocutionary act a distinction is made between propositional content (the locutionary act, equivalent to ‘meaning’ in the traditional sense) and the *type* of act, the illocutionary force. One therefore could have several illocutionary acts, all having the same propositional content, but differing in force – eg ‘Do you believe in God?’ (question); ‘Believe in God’ (plea); ‘You will believe in God’ (prediction). Thus in relation to an illocutionary act, when one asks ‘What is meant by it?’ one may mean (a) What type of speech act is it? or (b) What is its propositional content?

It is important, in relation to the Lord’s Supper, to stress the functional view of language in order to guard against the common tendency to conceive of it as being solely referential, which could lead in two equal and opposite directions. The first would be to think of the elements as ‘the body and blood of Christ’ in terms of identity, the other would be to see the elements as simply referring to Christ’s death on the Cross as a memorial. Words (and, as we shall argue below, symbols) can have a function which is more varied than referential, they can be vehicles whereby something is imparted to the hearer and certain states of affairs are established.

At this juncture it is necessary to draw attention to two other points made by Austin in connection with performatives. First, this type of language only functions if certain conventions hold; the shaking of hands by two businessmen to conclude a financial deal is only meaningful in a culture where this functions as a sign of agreement and trust. This point is akin to Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’¹¹ where he states that language functions within particular life settings. The meanings of concepts are in part derived from within the game itself. Thus the function and sense (cf referent) of the speech acts performed within the context of the Lord’s Supper are determined by their place within the life setting of the Christian community. Secondly, Austin claims ‘for a certain performative utterance

10 J L Austin in *Truth* G Pitcher ed (Prentice-Hall 1964) p 28. ‘Can we be sure that stating truly is a different *class of assessment* from arguing soundly, advising well, judging fairly, and blaming justifiably? Do these not have something to do in complicated ways with facts?’

11 L Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell 1958)

to be happy, certain statements must be true'.¹² In other words, performatives in the narrow sense can only function within the wider context of a referential understanding of reality.

This second point is also relevant to our discussion of the nature of Holy Communion, for it underscores the fact that the celebration does not operate *in vacuo* but is grounded in a referential view of the reality of God's action in history in his Son, Jesus Christ. The claim that the body of Christ was 'given for you' makes no sense unless related to the one in history who actually gave his body. This will also set the limits to eucharistic interpretation, so that a New Age 'planetary mass' becomes something else with only a passing similarity to the Holy Communion of the Church.

Symbols and Sacraments

Sometimes the term 'sign' is used interchangeably with 'symbol' but a distinction between the two may be attained by pondering the nature of analogical discourse. Here it is suggested that whereas analogy is dependent upon some intrinsic likeness between itself and that which it illustrates, and is thus to some degree self-interpreting because of the shared core of meaning which acts as the point of correspondence, a symbol requires a greater degree of interpretation for its significance to be appreciated. J Macquarrie states: 'The difference is that the best analogues are almost self-interpreting, whereas symbols frequently require much explanation of background before we begin to see where they are pointing.'¹³ Thus, one may speak of the Cross as a 'symbol' of God's love, but this can only be perceived within the Christian tradition against the background knowledge of the nature of Christ's atoning sacrifice – that he is the Passover Lamb.¹⁴ Those unfamiliar with such a background would be hard pressed to see any such connection between the claim of divine love and the normal method of Roman execution reserved for the worst possible criminal offenders.

A similar process is required when one comes to the symbolism of the Lord's Supper. The points of contact between the elements themselves and that which they signify require some teasing out. Calvin writes: 'By the corporeal things which are produced in the sacrament, we are by a kind of analogy conducted to spiritual things. Thus when bread is given as a symbol of the body of Christ, we must think of this similitude. As bread nourishes, sustains and protects our bodily life, so the body of Christ is the only food to invigorate and keep alive the soul.'¹⁵

12 J L Austin *How to do things with Words* p 45 *et passim*

13 J Macquarrie *God-Talk* (London: SCM 1967) p 196

14 1 Corinthians 5:7

15 Calvin's *Institutes* Book IV ch XVII p 558

How, therefore, might the 'symbolic' function in the Lord's Supper? While it might be argued that symbols are primarily evocative, there is no reason to suppose that they cannot operate at more than one level.

The symbolic gesture of the breaking of bread and subsequent distribution with the accompanying words are informative – conveying the truth of Christ's sacrificial death; evocative – drawing believers to praise and gratitude; cohesive – promoting unity and communal solidarity as 'one body', as well as being performative – constituting the illocutionary act of conveying the divine love with the consequent perlocutionary acts of thankfulness, including obedient Christian service.

Similarly, D M Baillie draws attention to the 'mediatorial' quality of a sacrament.¹⁶ As sensible signs, the material elements and accompanying actions become channels whereby the personal can be conveyed. This happens, he argues, in everyday life by the use of gestures – smiles, handshakes, embraces etc. At one level they are symbolic, and yet they are capable of performing that which they represent, giving approval, creating agreement, conveying affection.

Revelation and Sacrament

Clues as to how we might understand the relation between the symbolic and sacramental may be gained by a consideration of how John handles his material in his Gospel.

The Fourth Gospel is full of symbols as John moves on two levels at once – the material and the spiritual. This is particularly to be seen in the 'I am sayings'.

S S Smalley argues that the 'sacramental' pervades the whole of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁷ He argues that within a Christian context a symbol evokes and represents that which is spiritual and divine, whereas a sacrament conveys through the material elements themselves, that which is spiritual and divine. He cites as an example the saying of Jesus: 'Whoever drinks of the water I shall give will never thirst' (John 4:14). This, according to Smalley, is a symbol of the life-giving power available to the believer through the living Christ.¹⁸ But when Jesus says 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25) and demonstrates this truth by raising Lazarus from the dead (as well as embodying the truth and universalizing it for all believers in his own resurrection), it is maintained that this is part of the sacramental dimension of John's Gospel.

16 D M Baillie *The Theology of the Sacraments* p 49

17 S S Smalley *John - Evangelist and Interpreter* (Paternoster 1978)

18 S S Smalley pp 204-5

Smalley contends that the principle underlying all the signs and which provides the theological basis for John's view of the 'sacramental' is the seminal statement 'The Word became flesh' (1:14). From this point on, history is to be seen in a new light as the potential carrier of the spiritual, and the temporal as the potential mediator of the eternal. Thus John takes a number of ordinary things such as bread, wine, water and light, and 'thinks them through with a truly biblical realism',¹⁹ until they become what they represent. Jesus not only changes water into wine at Cana, but he himself is the source of the Kingdom to which the signs point. Smalley writes: 'whereas the sacramental in John is always symbolic, not every symbol is sacramental'.²⁰

Karl Barth also takes the divine revelation in the Incarnation as foundational to what constitutes the sacramental: 'Revelation occurs in the form of this sacramental reality, ie in such a way that God elevates and selects a definite creaturely subject-object relationship to be the instrument of the covenant between himself the Creator and man as His creature.'²¹ Earlier he writes: 'The humanity of Jesus as such is the first sacrament, the foundation of everything that God instituted and used in His revelation as a secondary objectivity both before and after the epiphany of Jesus Christ.'²² Referring to John 1:14, Barth suggests that the sacraments underline the words *sarx* and *egeneto*, but always have their objective basis in the Incarnation.²³

If Barth is correct that the incarnate Jesus is 'the first sacrament' then a link is immediately forged between revelation and sacrament. 'Revelation means the giving of signs. We can say quite clearly that revelation means sacrament, ie the self-witness of God, the representation of His truth, and therefore of the truth in which He knows Himself, in the form of creaturely objectivity and therefore in a form which is adapted to our creaturely knowledge.'²⁴

None of this is far removed from the thoughts of Calvin:

We are taught by the Scriptures that Christ was from the beginning the living Word of the Father, the fountain and origin of life... hence John at one time calls him the Word of life ... but ever since that fountain of life began to dwell in our nature, he no longer lies hid at a distance from us, but exhibits himself openly for our participation.

19 A phrase attributed to E C Hoskyns *The Fourth Gospel* F N Davey ed

20 Gerrish *Grace and Gratitude* p 209

21 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark) II:1 p 55ff

22 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* p 54

23 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* I:2 p 230

24 Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* I:1 p 52

Nay, the very flesh in which he resides he makes vivifying to us, that by partaking of it we may feed for immortality. 'I', says he 'am that bread of life' ... 'And the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I give for the life of the world'. By these words he declares, not only that he is life, inasmuch as he is the eternal Word of God who came down to us from heaven, but, by coming down gave vigour to the flesh which he assumed, that a communication of life to us might thence emanate.²⁵

He then goes on to draw a direct line to the Lord's Supper as a means whereby 'Christ transfuses his life to us'.²⁶

What are the features that revelation and sacrament have in common?

First, both the revelational and the sacramental mediate that which is personal. Writing in the context of the Holy Communion, J R Lucas states: 'If we, as theists, believe that the universe is fundamentally personal in character, it follows that our ultimate understanding will not be in terms of things, which occupy space and may or may not possess certain properties, but of persons, who characteristically *do* things.'²⁷

Secondly, both revelation and sacrament in order to disclose, paradoxically also hide. The most obvious case is the Incarnation and the *ensarkosis* of the second person of the Trinity. In order for this revelation to occur, some divine attributes were hidden. But far from the material hindering divine disclosure, it facilitates it.

Thirdly, what is mediated in both revelation and sacrament is apprehended by faith. Any personal relationship is based upon the notion of trust – belief in the promises made by one to another, founded upon the character of the one pledging himself. It was this faith in God's promise which was counted as 'righteousness' for Abraham (Gen 15:6) and which Paul takes as a model for all believers (Rom 4 and Gal 4). This faith finds its proper focus in Holy Communion. Writing about the place of faith in Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper, Gerrish states:

The proposition [the gift is to be received by faith] rests on the intimate connection of the sacraments with the word of God, and it is directed, above all, against the impersonalisation of sacramental efficacy in medieval scholasticism. The Schoolmen taught that the sacraments of the 'new law' confer grace provided only that no obstacle of mortal sin is in their way. Calvin detected in this

25 Calvin's *Institutes* Book IV ch XVII p 562

26 Calvin's *Institutes* Book IV ch XVII p 563

27 J R Lucas *Freedom and Grace* (London: SPCK 1976) p 111

‘pestilential’ notion a superstitious attachment to the sacramental sign as a mere physical thing – and, indeed, an implicit denial of the cardinal Reformation doctrine of justification by faith. A sacrament received without faith cannot be a sacrament correctly understood as an appendage to the divine word or promise ... When the word accompanies the sacrament, it must retain its essential character as proclamation ... the sacramental word is not an incantation, but a promise. The eucharistic gift therefore benefits those only who respond with the faith that the proclamation itself generates.²⁸

This is parallel to what Jesus says about receiving the revelation of God in his person. Therefore the risen Lord says to Thomas: ‘Because you have seen me you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’ (John 20:29).

The Character of the Lord’s Supper

In light of the above discussion on the nature of the sacramental, it would be appropriate to use the term ‘sacrament’ to describe the Lord’s Supper as a whole, rather than particular elements within it. This in part stems from the fact that it is a dynamic activity with the emphasis upon actions.

This point is well made by the Hansons²⁹ when writing about the excesses of the medieval mass: ‘All these interpretations of the sacrament are distortions into a different key of the original rhythm of the eucharist, which was communal, dynamic and concerned with an event rather than a thing.’ Similarly, P T Forsyth maintained that the Last Supper was not ‘so much the bread as the breaking, not so much the elements as the actions that are symbolical’.³⁰ A similar claim for the centrality of actions in the Lord’s Supper is made by Gregg.³¹

The Communion is not only dynamic in character but is also multidimensional in that it engages at several sensory levels. The auditory, visual and tactile senses are all brought into play during Communion, providing a broader experience than the spoken word alone.

We now turn to the different temporal aspects signified by the Lord’s Supper.

The Past

Central to the celebration is the retrospective temporal dimension, arising initially from its development out of the Passover meal, with its refocusing

28 Gerrish *Grace and Gratitude* p 139

29 A and R Hanson *Reasonable Belief* (Oxford 1981) pp 232-3

30 P T Forsyth *The Church and the Sacraments* (Independent Press 1947) p 234

31 D Gregg *Anamnēsis in the Eucharist* (Grove Liturgical Study No 5)

upon Christ's sacrificial death.

Two actions figure in the synoptic accounts of the Last Supper and the Lord's reinterpretation of the Passover in relation to his own impending death; the giving of the bread (together with the accompanying explanatory words, 'this is my body given for you') and the giving of the cup (and accompanying interpretation, 'the blood of the new covenant'). Since the cupola 'is' would have been absent in the Aramaic or Hebrew utterance, it is taken that the actions are meant as significations; but of what? E Schweizer suggests that the 'I' refers to the totality of the person – the giving of the complete self.³² The phrase 'given for you' certainly appears to reflect Old Testament sacrificial terminology relating either to the making of a sacrifice or to the death of a martyr on behalf of others.³³ Jeremias posits the reference to Jesus as the eschatological Passover Lamb.³⁴ Marshall draws attention to the close similarity in language between the 'For many/you' in the 'cup saying' of Mark, and Isaiah 53:11ff as being seminal to Jesus' self understanding of his death and its subsequent reflection in his reinterpretation of the Passover meal. However, he goes on to point out that it is possible to combine all of the above suggestions, which would mean that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling several strands of Old Testament types simultaneously.³⁵

Whatever the divergence over details between the Synoptists, there is unanimity that at the most significant moment the actions of Christ were in the following order: (a) he took the bread (or cup) into his hands; (b) he gave thanks; (c) he broke the bread; (d) he gave the bread and cup to his disciples; (e) he said 'This is my body', or (in some form) 'This is my blood of the covenant'. This is important for our understanding of the administration of the Communion and the nature of the sacramental act as we shall see.

Gregg³⁶ pays attention to the meaning of the phrase *Eis ... anamnēsin* (in remembrance) and seeks to determine the corresponding Hebrew root. He argues that this is to be sought in the *zkr* group and more specifically *zikkaron* in the sense of a commemorative *act*. It is proposed that in the *zikkaron* one is not simply engaging in the mental recollection of events, but an embracing of the totality of the event as a single whole, whereby the *zkr* involves revitalizing this total reality. 'There will be in every commemorative act, dynamic consequences, as both God and man grasp the whole act accordingly.'³⁷

32 E Schweizer *The Lord's Supper According to the New Testament*

33 I H Marshall *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Paternoster 1980) p 89

34 J Jeremias *The Eucharistic Words* pp 220-5

35 J Jeremias p 89

36 D Gregg *Anamnēsis in the Eucharist* p 24

37 D Gregg *Anamnēsis in the Eucharist* p 24

How the gap between the 'then' and the 'now' is bridged, according to Gregg is found in the term 'actualize' – quoting Childs: 'A real event occurs as the moment of redemptive time from the past initiates a genuine encounter in the present.'³⁸

Applied to the phrase *Eis ... anamnēsin*, the following interpretation is suggested: 'Take, give thanks, break bread and say the interpretative words, at each weekly festival communal meal, as in the commemorative act you initiate a genuine encounter in the present by means of redemptive time from the past.'³⁹

The term 'you initiate' may be considered rather unfortunate as it creates the impression that we have the power to bring something about in a quasi-mechanical way. However the emphasis on the manward aspect is surely right, that through the Lord's Supper, God's people benefit from Christ's work on the Cross. So Alan Stibbs writes:

The Greek word *anamnesis* expresses the idea of a calling to mind, a recalling or recollection, exactly similar to the way in which the Jews at the celebration of the Passover recalled their deliverance from Egypt. To the Semitic mind thus to commemorate a past event was personally to realise and experience its present operative significance as one event with abiding consequences. So Canon W M F Scott wrote: "Do this in remembrance of me" can now be seen to mean that as we "eat this bread and drink this cup" our Lord's sacrifice becomes here and now operative in our lives.'⁴⁰

The other aspect of the retrospective dimension of the Lord's Supper is that of proclamation: 'As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you do show [proclaim] the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). This is not a showing to God, but to each other, to tell each other that he died for us.

The Future

This naturally leads to the second temporal aspect of the Lord's Supper as anticipatory and future, a looking forward to the Messianic meal. As Marshall writes: '... the Lord's Supper is linked to the Passover in that the Passover is a type of the heavenly banquet while the Lord's Supper is the anticipation of the heavenly banquet'.⁴¹ This is particularly focused in Luke's account of the Last Supper with the idea of fulfilment in the Kingdom of God and Christ's followers 'eating and drinking at my table in

38 B S Childs *Memory and Tradition in Israel* p 84

39 B S Childs *Memory and Tradition in Israel* p 27

40 A M Stibbs *Sacrament, Sacrifice and Eucharist* (Tyndale Press 1961) p 45

41 I H Marshall *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* p 80

the kingdom' (Luke 22:14-30). So the Eucharist is 'an ordinance for those who live between the cross and the End. It looks back to what Jesus did and said "on the night when he was betrayed" (1 Cor 11:23) and recalls his death on behalf of all men. But it also looks forward to the Parousia'.⁴²

What is evident from the above discussion is the dynamic nature of the sacramental act. The movement is primarily manward (corresponding to the movement of divine revelation itself) – the *giving* of the bread, the *giving* of the cup, all to be *received* by man. There are only two points at which there is any movement Godward and these lie either side of the sacramental act itself.

First, there is the giving of thanks to God for the bread and the wine. As we have noted this is clear in the ordering of the events in the synoptic accounts. What is important from a careful observation of the sequence is that at this stage the bread and the wine have not been given any sacramental significance. The interpretative words which give the bread and wine such significance are said *during* the manward administration. To conflate the two – thanksgiving with the interpretative words – tends to lead to an unscriptural understanding of consecration, so that the prayer 'changes' the bread and the wine, if not in terms of substance, then in significance (transignification). However, this is not the way the sequence operates in Scripture. The change in significance is brought about by the interpretative words and corresponding action, not the prayer. Although Cranmer has been criticized as having something of a blind spot at this point,⁴³ he may have been far more aware of this significance than some critics allow. Commenting on the changes made from the 1549 Communion service to that of 1552, MacCulloch observes that:

the sequence of material was thoroughly rearranged, so that the prayers of intercession were completely removed from the former 'canon', and the narrative of the Saviour's words of institution was immediately followed (without even an 'Amen') by the distribution of bread and wine to the communicants, so that they would make their communion with these words still echoing in their minds. The gospel words were there to instruct, not to effect any change in the elements distributed.⁴⁴

Secondly, there is the response of thanks and praise *after* Communion has taken place, when it is appropriate to offer *ourselves* as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1). One may also include within this the sacrifice of

42 A and R Hanson *Reasonable Belief* p 231

43 Cf The 1957 Memorandum of the Church of England Liturgical Commission on *Prayer Book Revision in the Church of England* pp 30ff

44 D MacCulloch *Thomas Cranmer* (Yale 1996) p 507

praise, 'the fruit of lips that confess his name' (Heb 13:15), but again this is something distinct from the sacramental actions themselves.

Given that both items of thanksgiving are a prelude and a consequence of the sacramental act, it follows that the term 'Eucharist' is really a misnomer when applied to the sacrament itself. The 'Lord's Supper' which emphasizes the gracious provision of the Lord manward, or 'Holy Communion' indicating the personal, spiritual intercourse with the Risen Lord are far more accurate indicators of the nature and purpose of the sacrament.

The Present

We must now discuss the third temporal aspect of the Lord's Supper – the present. Before we consider the question of the 'presence of Christ' and how this is to be conceived, brief mention will be made of the other present aspect, that of fellowship with other Christians through fellowship with Christ.

It has long been argued that one of the main expectations of the Messiah was that he would gather around him followers,⁴⁵ who in effect are the 'Church'.⁴⁶ This gathering and the intimacy and acceptance signified is particularly enhanced by a communal meal. At Sinai not only was the Word proclaimed as people were gathered (Exod 19, cf Deut 4), and the covenant ratified by the shedding of blood (Exod 24:4-8) but a meal was held by Moses and Aaron and the seventy elders in the presence of God (Exod 24:9-11). It is not surprising, therefore, that with the establishing of the eternal covenant through Christ, as he gathers a people to himself by the Word of the Gospel, that the new-found relationship with God and consequent relationship between his people should be fostered through a fellowship meal which contains within it symbols, the means whereby that fellowship is secured.

So we find in 1 Corinthians 11 that it is as Christians 'come together' that they are 'church' (1 Cor 11:20) and eat the Lord's Supper. This is the means whereby we 'participate in the body and blood of Christ' (1 Cor 10:16f) and cultivate unity as well as testify to it; 'Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one loaf, for we all partake of the one loaf' (1 Cor 10:17).

We now turn to consider the related and often vexed question of realizing Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper.

45 Cf Rainer Reisner 'Jüdische Elementarbildung und Evangelienüberlieferung in *Gospel Perspectives* Vol 1 R T France and D Wenham Edd (JSOT 1980)

46 Cf M Tinker 'Towards an Evangelical view of the Church' *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis* M Tinker ed (Christian Focus 1995)

From what has been argued about the dynamic nature of the sacramental itself, with the focus on the *actions* and accompanying words, together with the parallels between the sacramental and revelational, it follows that the primary category within which we are to conceive of the nature of the Lord's Supper is a personal one, with the Lord being present not in the elements themselves but through the actions done with them.

A M Stibbs illustrates the force of this principle by referring to baptism:

If the water which is to be used to baptize is previously consecrated this action is not part of the sacrament. Nor ought such water to become a focus of worship as a sphere of the localized presence of the regenerating Spirit. Rather the sacrament of baptism involves a dynamic movement. It only exists as the water is administered; that is, as the appointed deed is done, and the significant words said to accompany and explain it. This means the sacrament cannot be 'reserved'. Its essential character also makes undeniably plain that its movement is wholly manwards.

Similarly, in the other sacrament of the Gospel, Christ's special presence, his promised and active movement towards us in grace, is not associated with static and lifeless elements which are 'changed' by consecration, but rather with the address to us of a movement of administration accompanied by significant words, which indicate its sacramental meaning, and thus confront the recipients with the present opportunity to have dealings with the Lord, and to appropriate by faith His proffered blessing.⁴⁷

Stibbs then uses the illustration of a telephone conversation to a far away friend, and through that conversation the friend's 'presence' is experienced for a few minutes. He goes on to say:

In ways like this, but far more wonderfully and with no make-believe, when I attend an administration of the Lord's Supper, and see and hear the sacramental movement begun, and realize that it is personally and imperatively addressed to me, and to all there present with me, and that it demands corresponding action and response; then it is right to believe that in this movement Christ himself is present and active and offering afresh to give to me, through His death for me, His indwelling presence by His Spirit, and the outworked experience of all the benefits of his passion ... to speak of answering a telephone call is indeed an illustration utterly inadequate and unworthy. For this movement *is like the approach of the*

47 A M Stibbs *Sacrament, Sacrifice and Eucharist* pp 73-4

*bridegroom to the bride. Its proper consummation like the giving and receiving of the ring in marriage. Indeed, it is like the crowning intercourse of love itself.*⁴⁸ (italics mine)

It is these latter illustrations which are highly suggestive of what happens at Holy Communion and which most closely approximate the 'symbolic instrumentalism' of John Calvin. What will be explored below is the way in which we might more readily conceive the 'mediation of the divine' in the dynamic sacramental act by drawing upon what has already been outlined regarding performative utterances.

The Lord's Supper as Performative

It is proposed that the Lord's Supper (and the same would apply to baptism) can be conceived of in the same way as Austin's and Searle's speech acts, while recognizing that the Supper itself is also composed of individual speech acts.

In the first place, as a whole, the Lord's Supper is equivalent to Austin's *locutionary act*, that is, it has a referential basis – the historic Cross-work of Christ and all the benefits that flow from that.

Secondly, Holy Communion in its entirety is also an *illocutionary act*, the Lord by his Spirit *does* things. In the *giving* of bread and wine and through the accompanying words, the correlated aspects of divine love, forgiveness and eschatological hope (all of a deeply personal nature) are not merely attested to but imparted. Stibbs' picture of the groom approaching the bride, or the evocative (even risqué) picture of intercourse itself, underscores the performative, rather than merely informative nature of the event taking place. For just as the physical act of embracing or kissing someone is capable of conveying forgiveness and acceptance (as in the story of the Prodigal Son – Luke 15:20), so the physical act of the giving of bread and wine conveys the forgiveness and gracious acceptance of God. This is not to be thought of in a quasi-magical/mystical way, anymore than we need think of an embrace in a quasi-magical way. Certainly, as with any speech act, for both the meaning and illocutionary force to operate, certain conventions have to be true (in this case the convention established by the Lord himself that the bread symbolizes his body and the wine symbolizes his blood). Similarly we may think of the illustration of the giving of a wedding ring, this does not simply signify love and commitment – its giving *in part brings it about*, establishing the wedding covenant; the same can be said of the sacramental act of the giving and receiving of bread and wine.

Thirdly, we may also consider the *perlocutionary act* of the sacrament,

48 A M Stibbs *Sacrament, Sacrifice and Eucharist* p 75

what is *achieved* by it. This is largely dependent upon the apprehension not only of the meaning of the sacramental action but the illocutionary force. For the promise to be grasped, assurance attained, unity achieved, loving obedience elicited, as Austin says, ‘illocutionary uptake’ must be secured.⁴⁹ What is required is not only an understanding of the meaning of the statement and the sacramental act, ‘My body which is given for you, take and eat this in remembrance of me’ but the force with which the sacrament and statement is to be taken – that it *counts* as promise, persuasion, assurance and unification.

Searle⁵⁰ distinguishes the meaning (propositional content) – that which the act ‘counts as’ – by the formula $F(p)$. F = the illocutionary force and p = the meaning. Searle argues that the *sacramental* act enhances the F dimension, thus conveying *through* the giving of bread and wine together with the interpretative words something more than the mere *saying* of the words ‘Jesus loves you and died for you’.

As with a particular text, the illocutionary force of the Lord’s Supper results from a combination of the meaning and intentions of God and the form he ‘incarnates’, his authoritative voice and presence, which is the dynamic sacramental form itself.⁵¹

As Vanhoozer claims that ‘while proponents of propositional revelation have cherished the (p) of the speech act $F(p)$ ’,⁵² so likewise the ‘symbolic memorialist’ understanding of the Lord’s Supper underplays the F aspect of the sacramental.

In a similar way to Caird’s classification of language according to function, John Searle maintains that we do five basic things with language: ‘We tell people how things are, we try to get them to do things, we commit ourselves to doing things, we express our feelings and attitudes and we bring about changes through our utterances. Often we do more than one of these at once in the same utterance.’⁵³ We would contend *mutatis mutandis* that the same applies to the sacramental act of the Lord’s Supper, with God achieving these five ‘illocutionary points’ manward. Truth is communicated regarding the death of Christ and his benefits, God seeks to get us to do things, to respond in loving Christian service and heartfelt praise, he conveys his feelings and attitudes towards us as well as bringing about the changes he seeks.

49 J L Austin *How to do things with Words* p 117

50 J R Searle *Speech Acts* p 25ff

51 Cf K J Vanhoozer ‘The Semantics of Biblical Literature’ *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* D A Carson and J D Woodbridge edd (IVP 1986)

52 K J Vanhoozer *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* p 91

53 J R Searle *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: CUP 1979) p 29

The question then arises: How is the ‘illocutionary uptake’ achieved in relation to the Lord’s Supper? The answer is, by faith. That is, there is the element of *assensus*, recognizing things to be true regarding the person and Cross-work of Christ and the meaning of Holy Communion, as well as *fiducia*, that personal trusting in the one who conveys his promises and presence through the sacramental act.

Would Calvin Agree?

It is proposed that the insights afforded into the nature and function of the sacramental by the application of speech act theory not only cohere with Calvin’s theology of the sacraments in general and the Lord’s Supper in particular, but that they provide the explanatory framework for which Calvin was striving.

Defining a sacrament Calvin writes: ‘It is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promise of good-will towards us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.’⁵⁴ Within this simple definition we observe the illocutionary nature of the sacrament; God *does* things, ‘*seals* our consciences’, ‘*sustains* the weakness of our faith’, as well as the perlocutionary nature in what is brought about in our response; ‘we in turn *testify* our piety towards him’.

Calvin also recognizes the distinction between the (*p*) and the (*F*) of Searle’s formula $F=(p)$ when he writes:

[Some argue] we either know that the word of God which precedes the sacrament is the true will of God, or we do not know it. If we know it, we learn nothing new from the sacrament which succeeds. If we do not know it, we cannot learn it from the sacrament, whose whole efficacy depends on the word. Our brief reply is: the seals which are affixed to diplomas, and other public deeds, are nothing considered in themselves, and would be affixed to no purpose if nothing was written on the parchment, and yet this does not prevent them from sealing and confirming when they are appended to writings.⁵⁵

Two points are worth observing.

First, Calvin’s use of this illustration of sealing diplomas underscores Austin’s contention that such acts can only operate performatively given certain conventions – recognizing the function of imprinting a document with wax. They are as Calvin says ‘nothing in themselves’ as indeed

⁵⁴ Calvin’s *Institutes* Book IV ch XIV p 492

⁵⁵ Calvin’s *Institutes* Book IV ch XIV p 494

neither are bread and wine anything in themselves in terms of signification (especially when one rejects the physical presence of Christ 'under' the form of the elements), unless one holds to the convention or language-game in which they operate within the setting of the Church.

Secondly, Calvin's whole argument turns upon the understanding that in terms of the propositional content of such documents, the seals add nothing. What is written is sufficient for communication in terms of the truth content about a certain state of affairs – eg a will that relates what has been bequeathed to whom. But what the seal *does* is to give a certain *force* to the document, making it a mandatory legal document having imperative power. The sealing of this *type* of document (and the seal is integral to making it such a document) enables something to be achieved that mere words would not. The same is true of the sacraments. They are instrumental as performatives are instrumental in bringing about that which is intended by the author. Thus: 'We conclude, therefore, that the sacraments are truly termed evidences of divine grace and, as it were, seals of the goodwill which he entertains towards us. They, by sealing it to us, sustain, nourish, confirm and increase our faith.'⁵⁶ The illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of the sacraments are all encapsulated in this conclusion.

Finally, the need for faith as a necessary condition to achieve the 'illocutionary uptake' of the sacraments is also stressed by Calvin:

Wherefore, let it be a fixed point, that the office of the sacraments does not differ from the word of God; and this is to hold forth and offer Christ to us, and in him, the treasures of heavenly grace. They confer nothing, and avail nothing, if not received in faith, just as wine and oil, or any other liquor, however large the quantity which you pour out, will run away and perish unless there be an open vessel to receive it ... but the sacraments do not of themselves bestow any grace, but they announce and manifest it.⁵⁷

By placing the sacraments in the same conceptual category as God's word, the validity of our thesis, that strict parallels exist between speech acts and sacrament acts, is strengthened all the more. One has to pay attention to several factors regarding the sacraments as one has to in approaching the Bible. Four such factors are enumerated by Vanhoozer: Proposition (what is being communicated – meaning); Purpose (the function of the text/speech act); Presence (the form of literature, its particular 'incarnation') – and the Power (the illocution).⁵⁸ It is the

⁵⁶ Calvin's *Institutes* Book IV ch XIV p 496

⁵⁷ Calvin's *Institutes* Book IV ch XIV p 503

⁵⁸ K J Vanhoozer *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* p 91

distinctive form of the sacrament which contributes so decisively to its illocutionary power.

It is clear that if the link forged between speech acts and sacramental acts holds, Calvin was much closer to the nature and purpose of the Lord's Supper as divinely instituted than either Zwingli or indeed Cranmer, if the latter is to be classed as an advocate of 'symbolic parallelism'.⁵⁹ Both undervalue the performative nature of the sacraments, Zwingli more so than Cranmer. Both create too great a separation between the sign and the thing signified, understandably so in wanting to avoid the error of transubstantiation. But, as we have seen, there is an alternative way of understanding the instrumentality of the sacraments which Calvin instinctively pursued, however dangerous the risk he ran of being misunderstood.

The Need for an Evangelical Rethink of the Lord's Supper?

When the idea of propositional revelation came under attack, especially in the nineteenth century, Evangelicals stressed in response the propositional nature of Scripture, possibly to the detriment of other aspects, especially the illocutionary force of the texts. Perhaps a parallel situation has occurred with regard to the sacraments. For fear of holding an unbiblical instrumentalist view, some Evangelicals have lapsed into a form of reductionism, with the Lord's Supper collapsing into an elaborate visual aid. As we have seen in the writings of Stibbs, this need not be the case. A deeper appreciation of Calvin's work on the subject, against the backdrop of the speech act theory, may provide what is necessary to recapture a richer appreciation of this central sacrament of the gospel.

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59 D MacCulloch *Thomas Cranmer* p 614