

## A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE ON THE SACRAMENTS AND HOW IT CAN STRENGTHEN OUR JOURNEY TOWARDS CHURCH UNITY

### INTRODUCTION

At its most fundamental, Christian worship, according to the Reformed tradition, is an encounter between God and the human being, which reveals the identity of both and the relation between the two (G Wainwright). From a Reformed perspective, the “true church” is found where the Word is faithfully proclaimed, and the sacraments are “rightly administered” (J de Gruchy).

In Word and sacraments, the living triune God is at work; their “content” is not so much the human actions but rather what God does through them by way of grace, what he offers and gives to us in terms of promise and fidelity. Through baptism it is confirmed and sealed to us that we are “incorporated” into Christ, and through the Supper we are increasingly “one with Christ” in what Calvin will call a “mystical union”.

In this summary of a Reformed perspective on the sacraments the focus will be mainly on the Eucharist. The reason is partly because the understanding of the Eucharist, and not in the same way, Baptism, has been a divisive aspect in the endeavor for the unity of the Church. Much emphasis will be put on the views of John Calvin as a representative of the Reformed Theology, because of his focus on church unity.

In formulating his views on the sacraments over many years and in conversation with the Lutherans and Rome, Calvin was more than willing to accommodate, to make compromises, to accept and support formulations that would not have been his own choice, because he was convinced that the gift of unity of the church should also visibly manifest by reaching agreements in formulations concerning the sacraments.

Calvin’s ecumenical passion has often been documented by scholars. Calvin based it on his ecclesiological conviction that there is only one church. This unity is based on the communion of believers with Christ and with one another, and the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist, play a crucial role as the visible expression of that communion. For Calvin, this implied that believers who participate in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper should also love one another. These views of Calvin present a continuous challenge to South African churches in the Reformed tradition and to the work and endeavors of the CUC.

### A REFORMED PERSPECTIVE ON THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist cannot be understood apart from its relation to what Jesus said and did when he shared the peace, took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples with the words: “This is my body given for you.” As such, the Eucharist is a sacramental celebration of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of our hope for the transformation and reconciliation of all things in him. The Eucharist is a celebration of God’s redemptive love for the world in Jesus Christ. Therefore, what we do in the liturgy is directly linked to how we participate in God’s mission in the world.

Christ is truly present and operative in the sacraments, but not in a material or substantial through in the water or in the elements of bread and wine. Rather, He is present in a personal, social, spiritual manner, serving through his Spirit as the Host at his table, the resurrected and living God.

The view of the Eucharist that follows from this has been most contentious in the history of Christianity ever since the Reformation. The question was always: How do we understand the “real presence” of Christ in the sacramental “bread and wine”? This is, after all, the stumbling block that divided the Church both prior to and since the Reformation. In this view, the “*praesentia realis*” cannot be narrowed down to the elements of the wine and the bread. Christ is truly present in the Word proclaimed, in the community of faith that is “his body”, in the bread and wine, and in the neighbour or “other” through whom He encounters us.

Dirkie Smit, the well-known Reformed systematic theologian from Stellenbosch, developed Calvin’s teachings concerning the Eucharistic presence in seven propositions:

1. First the Lord’s Supper is a gift that God gives, and that we receive.
2. Second, the gift is Jesus Christ himself.
3. Third, the gift is given through the signs.
4. Fourth, the gift is given by the Holy Spirit who is himself the “bond of union” between the worshippers and the life-giving flesh of Christ.
5. Fifth, the gift is given to all who partake for its truth.
6. Sixth, the gift is received by faith.
7. Seventh, the sacrament evokes gratitude and thankful self- sacrifice.

From a Reformed perspective, the Eucharist thus requires a cosmic understanding of Christ as the “real presence” of the mystery of God through the Spirit in history and in our midst.

At its core, the Lord’s Supper is about Christ himself. It is the proclamation of and communion with the crucified, living and coming Lord. Christ is present through the Spirit and the Word throughout the world just as He is truly present in the community gathered in his Name through the bread and the wine. The proclamation and communion take place in the form of a meal.

If the meal is seen in its connection with the past, it becomes clear that it has the character of remembrance. It must be seen within the horizon of the understanding of various Old Testament motifs including the covenant, the sacrifice, and the Passover.

If the meal is seen in its connection with the present, it becomes clear that its emphasis is on *koinonia*. Fellowship is established and practiced both with Christ and with one another. From the perspective of communion with Christ, matters such as the *praesentia realis*, Christ’s role as the host of the meal, the spiritual nourishment of the believers and the character of the celebration as seal or guarantee come into play. The certainty of forgiveness and salvation is established here. From the point of view of the community with each other, issues such as the unity of the church and mutual connection and responsibility come into play. From both points of view, the appeal to the sanctification of life comes into play. Communion with Christ excludes any other idolatrous loyalties. It also excludes communion with one another without love.

If the meal is seen in its connection with the future, it becomes clear that it is a joyful celebration, a continuation of the earthly communion of Jesus with tax collectors and sinners and a foreshadowing of the eschatological wedding feast of the Lamb. As a foreshadowing of the kingdom, it gives reason for hope and expectation.

Sacramental praxis, which embraces both theological understanding and liturgical practice, is therefore, central to the identity of the Reformed church. God's grace may not be contingent on our having a sound theology of the sacraments or being liturgically adept. However, if the right administration of the sacraments is a mark of the "true church", then good sacramental praxis can never be a matter of indifference (J De Gruchy).

Pope John Paul II helps us to understand the point of it all in a way that is surely beyond all controversy. In a letter to his fellow bishops in 1980 he wrote: "The sense of the Eucharistic Mystery leads us to love for our neighbour, to love for every human being". That is the ultimate end of sacramental praxis: discovering the mystery of the real presence of Christ in the "other". To that Calvin would undoubtedly have added a loud "Amen".

#### THE EUCHARIST AND THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

There is only one church. The church cannot be divided or fragmented. The unity, or the communion, of the church is – in the words of WARC (2008) – a gift, and therefore a given; a reality; the point of departure.

In the strongest possible terms, Calvin draws this implication of the unity with Christ in the Eucharist for our mutual unity. For him, because of what happens in the sacrament, we can no longer love Christ without loving our brothers and sisters and we can no longer harm our brothers and sisters without also harming Christ.

For Calvin, the unity of the visible church does not consist in uniformity – and he is remarkably open and accommodating in his views of the legitimate and valuable role of complexity, locality, contextuality, custom, needs, and diversity in the one body of Christ. This is characteristic of Calvin and abundantly clear in the 1559 Institutes. The diversity involves interpretation, formulation, confessions, order, the ministries, the forms of local worship, and much more – in short, a remarkable freedom and a complete lack of uniformity.

Calvin's ecumenical spirit and practical strivings are motivated by ecclesiological views, which in turn are determined by his central Christological conviction, and, according to some at least, even his most central conviction. It is the conviction that believers are one with Christ and therefore one with one another, that they truly and really participate in Christ, that they share some mystical fellowship with Christ.

It is not possible to hide behind the invisible church as the true church – also the truly one church – thereby justifying the divisions, the schisms, the heresies and the lack of love and fellowship of the visible church. The confession that only God knows who belong to the church – the invisible church – serves rather as reminder and call that the visible church should long, pray and work for the visible manifestation the unity.

In reflecting on the importance of Calvin's understanding of the sacraments for his views on the unity of the church, it may also be instructive to consider some of his thoughts on its "ecclesiological-ethical" implications. When Calvin discusses the church as the communion of saints, he underlines their unity in fellowship and the need to share their blessings in mutual love.

The central notion behind Calvin's views of the church polity and practical order, concentrated around the Lord's Supper, is the motif of reconciliation. Precisely based on this conviction that the Lord gives his body so that He may become one with us, we are exhorted to charity, peace, concord, and unity without division.

In harsh, almost cynical words Calvin describes the actions of those believers who celebrate the Supper, feeling that Christ is their life and claiming that they are united with Him, while they show no zeal for charity and live alienated and estranged from their brothers and sisters. They bear witness against themselves, he says, and they rent and tear Christ's body to pieces.

The issue of church unity is the core business of the CUC and in this regard the views of Calvin on the Eucharist can make an important contribution.

#### AGREEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES ON THE EUCHARIST IN THE JDDJ

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification states in Paragraph 43 that there are still questions of varying importance which need further clarification between the churches. Among other topics the Declaration mentions for example ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, and the sacraments.

On the character of the Eucharist, Lutherans and Catholics have found they have reached a fundamental consensus on two old controversial topics, namely: on the understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and on the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. The journey forward must emphasize these agreements.

Lutherans and Catholics agree that in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ himself is present: He is present truly, substantially, as a person, and he is present in his entirety, as Son of God and a human being.

Catholics and Lutherans agree that Eucharistic worship is the memorial of Jesus Christ, present as the one crucified for us and risen, that is, in his sacrificial self-giving for us in his death and in his resurrection, to which the church responds with its sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.

However there is still differences that need to be addressed.

#### CONCLUSION

From a CUC point of view, the temptation may be to focus our attention on the exegetical and historical debate about the sacraments. Most of the ecumenical discussions between the mainstream church traditions consist almost entirely of exegetical and historical expositions. This, however, will not help our cause. It is evident that a theologically correct discussion of the validity of the sacraments has not yet said anything about their relevance.

The exegetical and historical argumentation is of course of great importance in the ecumenical debate. Nevertheless, it would be an underestimation of our ecumenical task if we engage only in an exegetical and historical debate. This would not in any way succeed to demonstrate the relevance of the church as sacrament of the kingdom in our present-day culture. In the eyes of many people, the sacraments have been reduced to clerical instruments of power.

There is no doubt that this negative image of the sacraments is closely related to the fact that the discussion about the sacraments has often been narrowed down to the questions of purity and validity. However, very often divisions amongst denominations and within denominations, were in fact expressed and experienced as divisions around the sacraments, both baptism and the Eucharist. For example, divisions based on race and social status within the Dutch Reformed Church family ironically had their symbolic beginnings in a separation at the table, in 1857. Sacramental praxis became the bone of contention when the Dutch Reformed synod at the Cape allowed segregation at the Lord's Table.

The relevance of the Church can only be demonstrated when the sacraments clearly express the meaning of the central message of the church for modern humanity in its concrete situation, and when the form of the sacraments as ritual symbols in the culture in which we live retains, or regains, its power of expression (Brinkman).

There is a growing desire amongst many Reformed Christians for a more meaningful and frequent celebration of Holy Communion. Many have moved beyond the polemics of the past and have discovered that there is much to treasure in traditions other than their own. The agreements achieved between various confessional families, alongside the liturgies that have evolved in concert with them, are all evidence of a convergence in Eucharistic celebration. This movement towards a more meaningful celebration of the Eucharist and learning from each other should be applauded and embraced. It is an important steppingstone towards unity.

Receptive Ecumenism(RE) is a reassessment of the ecumenical process, in light of the remaining challenges and difficulties faced by ecumenists. In this regard the CUC invited prof Paul Murray a few years ago. He is a well-known figure in the ecumenical world and promotes the idea of RE. RE recognizes that ecumenism might need to adjust to the complex diversity of the Christian church today, especially amidst a culture that no longer sees diversity as a negative thing. The goal of traditional ecumenism, visible unity through theological and ecclesiological convergence, is put aside in favor of an ecumenism of mutual enrichment.

Gustav Claassen