

THE WAY DOWN IS UP: CHARLES TAYLOR,  
JOHN CALVIN, AND SACRAMENTAL  
WORSHIP IN “A SECULAR AGE”

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Recent years have seen the rise of a growing diversity within Protestant worship in North America.<sup>1</sup> For most traditions, gone are the days where one could assume that the Sunday morning worship of a downtown Presbyterian church in South Carolina would be largely identical to that found in a similarly Reformed congregation in suburban Southern California. Instead it is safer to assume that these different contexts would produce differing “styles” of worship. Sometimes these differences are the result of a careful consideration of context as pastors and worship leaders attempt to communicate the message of the Gospel to a culture that finds it less plausible than as in previous generations. But worship has not only been changed in recent years because of those who have directed their focus on the culture outside of the church’s walls. At the same time many (and sometimes those very same pastors and worship leaders) have reconsidered and reconfigured their gathered worship as the result of a careful study of the church’s tradition and practice of worship through the ages.

One result of both this consideration of changing context and study of ecclesial tradition has been a reclamation of the place of the sacraments and “sacramentality” in worship. Congregations in traditions that have historically given sacraments and the aesthetics of “sacramentality” minimal attention have begun practices such as the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper as well as giving thought to the embodied nature of corporate worship. But for many traditions—and perhaps in particular those Reformed Christians who have embraced a more robust understanding of the sacraments and the “sacramental”—this movement has more often than not provided only the vaguest definitions of “sacramental” while also failing to give close scrutiny to the specific resources their tradition brings to this discussion.

Enter James K.A. Smith, chair of Applied Reformed Theology and Worldview at Calvin College, and his recent “cultural liturgies” project.

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*Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom* represent two-thirds of this project, which intends to “communicate... a vision of what authentic, integral Christian learning looks like, emphasizing how learning is connected to worship and how, together, these constitute practices of formation and discipleship.”<sup>2</sup> Implicit in a discussion of “cultural liturgy” is a claim about the kind of thing that “culture” is, something that Smith expands upon from time to time in the course of his project. By “culture,” I take Smith to mean creation and materiality as human beings make use of it, taking the resources of God’s creation and forming, combining, and cultivating them for particular purposes in the world. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith makes a particular claim about what kind of thing creation is, proposing a sacramental understanding of the world.<sup>3</sup> In this sacramental understanding, Smith means no more than that “the physical, material stuff of creation and embodiment is the means by which God’s grace meets us and gets hold of us.”<sup>4</sup> In choosing this term, Smith is moving self-consciously against the grain of the conceptual preferences of the greater evangelical,<sup>5</sup> and his own Reformed<sup>6</sup>, tradition, and does so for a number of well-informed reasons. In what follows, I will first examine the influence of Charles Taylor upon Smith, asking what particular concerns fund the proposal of a sacramental understanding of the world, giving particular attention to Taylor’s critique of John Calvin. Next I will examine John Calvin’s own thought to understand better the way in which worship, idolatry, and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper are understood within Calvin’s own theology. Finally, Calvin’s thought will be evaluated and in particular its usefulness for Smith’s project and in illuminating other concerns related to the concepts discussed.

#### SMITH, TAYLOR, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALITY<sup>7</sup>

Smith’s presenting concern for an understanding of the sacramentality of the world is the importance of the embodied nature of worship. “Behind and under and in all of this is a core conviction, an implicit

<sup>2</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 139-154.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 141.

<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, many notable exceptions within the evangelical tradition.

<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, there are particular reasons within the Reformed tradition for eschewing the language of “sacramental.”

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that there is more than one way to an affirmation of the material in modern theology. The Radical Orthodox project, with its presentation of the “suspension of the material,” and its polemic against the Scotist turn in theology, is another path. Indeed, Smith has engaged with this way forward in two important publications [James K.A. Smith, ed., *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); James K.A. Smith, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005)]. See also Hans Boersma’s *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). While the concerns presented in these publications are related to Taylor’s own work, for the purposes of this study we will need to constrain our study to the argument we find in Taylor’s work.

understanding that God inhabits all this earthy stuff, that we meet God in the material realities of water and wine, that God embraces our embodiment, embraces us in our embodiment.”<sup>8</sup> We can think of this conviction in two, concentric ways. In the broader sense Smith is working with the framework of the “social imaginary” that he finds compelling in the work of Charles Taylor. In the narrower sense Smith is concerned with the kind of implications that flow from foundational doctrines such as the incarnation and the resurrection.<sup>9</sup> Without the conceptual piece of the importance of the materiality of existence and worship in place, there is the very real possibility that the the inertia of modernity’s intellectual conditions would move Christians away from taking seriously the important claims Smith makes.

As I have noted, Charles Taylor provides some valuable pieces of the intellectual framework of Smith’s project, particularly the concept of the social imaginary as a way of making sense of how human persons are formed and inhabit the world, and as a partial account of the nature of Christian corporate worship. What is of note concerning Taylor’s account of the social imaginary (particularly as we consider Smith as a thinker within the Reformed tradition whose work is being appropriated by a wide range of Protestant evangelicals) is that for Taylor the social imaginary is one aspect of an account of the emergence of “A Secular Age” which lays a fair share of blame for the new contested conditions of religious belief at the doorstep of the Protestant Reformation and specifically John Calvin.

In *A Secular Age* Taylor tells the story of how we in the West moved from “a society in which it was impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.”<sup>10</sup> Taylor’s account of how this new kind of society emerged steers clear of the popular simplistic accounts of the advance of “secularism.” Instead, Taylor traces the conditions of modern belief and unbelief back to a series of interconnected but distinct events which, more often than not unintentionally, created new understandings of the self, the self in community, and the observable and unobservable world. This complex story is told at length in *A Secular Age* and also in Smith’s introduction to and summary of that work, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on one significant contributor to Western society’s movement toward “a secular age”: the Protestant Reformation and in particular John Calvin.

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<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 140.

<sup>9</sup> “There is a performative sanctioning of embodiment that is implicit in Christian worship, invoking the ultimate performative sanctioning of the body in the incarnation—which itself recalls the love of God that gave birth to the material creation—its reaffirmation of the resurrection of Jesus, and looks forward to the resurrection of the body as an eschatological and eternal affirmation of the goodness of creation” (Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 140).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

## TAYLOR'S CRITIQUE OF JOHN CALVIN

For Taylor, Calvin's theology, and particularly his theology of worship and idolatry, is a significant contributor to the "disenchantment" of the natural world which took place in Western society around the time of the Reformation. The movement from the "enchanted" world of the pre-modern era to the "disenchanted" world that is definitive of the Western mind is the move from a world in which the natural world is understood to be an arena in which all kinds of spiritual and "magical" activity took place—"spirits, demons, and moral forces."<sup>11</sup> The enchanted world is a world of "charged" things, and "charged things can impose meanings, and bring about physical outcomes proportionate to their meanings."<sup>12</sup> Taylor gives examples of how this was imagined in the pre-modern world: demon possession, the influence of gods and goddesses such as Aphrodite, holy relics, the Eucharistic Host, etc.<sup>13</sup> Taylor's description of relics and the Host in the pre-modern age is particularly notable:

Power ... resided in things. For the curative action of the saints was often linked to centres where their relics resided; either some piece of their body (supposedly), or some object which had been connected with them in life ... And we can add to this other objects which had been endowed with *sacramental* power, like the Host, or candles which had been blessed at Candlemas, and the like. These objects were loci of spiritual power; which is why they had to be treated with care, and if abused could wreak terrible damage.<sup>14</sup>

Of particular note here is Taylor's use of the word "sacramental," a use that emphasizes how "we meet God in the material realities of water and wine, that God embraces our embodiment, embraces *us* in our embodiment."<sup>15</sup>

To inhabit this kind of world—a world that also mediated God's presence through its "natural"<sup>16</sup> and social realities<sup>17</sup>—is to live in a world

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30-37.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 32, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 140. Note the similarity to Smith's description in *Desiring the Kingdom*.

<sup>16</sup> "The natural world they lived in, which had its place in the cosmos they imagined, testified to divine purpose and action; and not just in the way which we can still understand and (at least many of us) appreciate today, that its order and design bespeaks creation; but also because the great events in this natural order, storms, droughts, floods, plagues as well as years of exceptional fertility and flourishing, were seen as acts of God, as the now dead metaphor of our legal language still bears witness" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25).

<sup>17</sup> "God was also implicated in the very existence of society (but not described as such—this is a modern term—rather as polis, kingdom, church, or whatever). A kingdom could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than mere human action in secular time" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25).

where “one could not but encounter God everywhere.”<sup>18</sup> But as we well know, that world no longer exists. And among the contributing factors in the creation of the new, disenchanted world, is the theology of John Calvin and the societies formed in the wake of his thought and the social imaginary in which it is embedded. Taylor understands Calvin’s “disenchanted” impulse to emerge from two complementary sources: God’s ultimate sovereignty in the work of salvation and the accompanying danger of idolatry. With respect to the fact that “God’s honour and glory is paramount,”<sup>19</sup> Taylor writes that because of this “we disenchant the world; we reject the sacramentals; all the elements of ‘magic’ in the old religion. They are not only useless, but blasphemous, because they are arrogating power to us, and hence ‘plucking’ it away ‘from the glory of God’s righteousness.’”<sup>20</sup> Summarizing Taylor’s argument (while also noting that it is not an uncontroversial rendering of Calvin), Smith writes, “If anything of salvation is under our control, then God’s sovereignty and grace are compromised. This leads Reformers like Calvin to reject the ‘localization’ of grace in things and rituals, changing the ‘centre of gravity of the religious life.’”<sup>21</sup> The centrality of God’s sovereign activity in creation carries with it an anaphylactic to idolatry. Thus Taylor writes, “We must reject everything which smacks of idolatry. We combat the enchanted world, without quarter. At first, this fight is carried on not because enchantment is totally untrue, but rather because it is necessarily ungodly. If we are not allowed to look for help to the sacred, to a ‘white’ magic of the church, then all magic must be black.”<sup>22</sup>

What Taylor’s account identifies in Calvin is a nervousness about and perhaps even resistance to the importance of materiality in worship. And it is important to note that in interpreting Calvin this way, Taylor is in line with other serious interpreters of the Genevan Reformer and Reformation history more generally. Carlos Eire’s *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* makes similar claims about Calvin’s theology and its effect upon Western society. Eire also identifies in Calvin a significant break with the medieval conception of the world, and locates the source of this break in two principles which guided Calvin’s theology of worship: *solī Deo gloria*—similarly to Taylor’s own analysis of Calvin—and *finitum non est capax infiniti* (“the finite cannot contain the infinite”).<sup>23</sup> Eire argues that embedded deeply in Calvin’s thought is

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25. Of course we would want also to say that in one sense it is impossible not to “encounter God everywhere.” But Taylor’s statement refers to the fact that it was almost impossible for the pre-modern man or woman to conceive of their world but in relation to God. And this is certainly not the world that we inhabit in modernity.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 79.

<sup>21</sup> James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 38-39.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> “Calvin’s attack on Roman Catholic ‘idolatry’ is a condemnation of the improper mixing of spiritual and material in worship—an affirmation of the principle *finitum non est capax infiniti*. It is also an indictment of man’s attempt to domesticate God and to rob him of his glory—an affirmation of the principle *solī Deo gloria*” (Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against*

a sharp distinction between the spiritual and the material realms. While Eire does not follow his argument to the same conclusions that Taylor makes about the advent of the secular age, he nonetheless believes that this move by Calvin is a significant innovation in the history of ideas.

Thus for Eire, just as for Taylor, Calvin is given an inauspicious place in the West's movement from the pre-modern social imaginary to the modern, secular world and the contested nature of modern belief. A world in which materiality is viewed with suspicion by the spiritually serious, a world in which *finitum non est capax infiniti*, is a world well on its way to the kind of unbelief that had previously been unimaginable. Taylor calls the process of evacuating the material of spiritual significance "excarnation." For Taylor, excarnation is understood as "the transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice, so that it comes more and more to reside 'in the head.'"<sup>24</sup> In Taylor's estimation, Calvin's religion is at the beginning of this movement of excarnation. Before we turn to Calvin himself, the following quote from Smith in *How (Not) to Be Secular* reminds us of how problematic this account of the world and God's relation to it is:

We might describe this as "deistic" religion—if it didn't look so much like contemporary Protestantism. And we might be tempted to identify this with the "liberal" stream of Protestantism—if it didn't sound like so many "progressive" evangelicals. Taylor sees this [excarnation] as an open door for exclusive humanism and atheism; it is a pretty straight line from excarnation to the vilification of religion—which raises important questions for Christianity in the new millennium."<sup>25</sup>

If indeed this not just a description of contemporary Protestantism, but a description of a Protestantism that finds its roots in the theology of John Calvin, then Taylor's argument represents a significant criticism of the Reformed tradition and raises serious questions about Calvin's ongoing usefulness for those who live in a secular age.

#### CALVIN: THE LORD'S SUPPER, IDOLATRY, AND THE ASCENSION OF JESUS CHRIST

The argument thus far has painted a bleak portrait of John Calvin as an unintentional harbinger of modern secularism. According to Taylor, Calvin is a necessary, though not singular, figure in the process of "excarnation," the movement of religious life from embodiment and materiality to the mind and the mind alone. Smith, however, is not in agreement with this analysis of Calvin—he notes at multiple points in various works the possibility that Calvin has been misread, whether by

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*the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 197-198).

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 613.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *How Not to be A Secular*, 58-59.

his immediate predecessors or by Taylor himself.<sup>26</sup> In what follows, I will allow Calvin speak for himself to the issues that Taylor and Eire have raised so that Smith's hesitations about their account can be evaluated according to Calvin's own thought. For the scope of this paper, it will be necessary to limit the discussion. I will not argue that there is in fact continuity between Calvin and the pre-modern, medieval world which came before him. Nor will I attempt to defend the Reformed tradition which followed Calvin of the claims which Taylor makes against it. Instead, I will examine how Calvin understood the relationship between God and the world, with particular attention given to a particular object of Taylor's criticism—Calvin's understanding of the sacraments, and in particular the Lord's Supper. How does Calvin understand God's activity and the presence of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper? What informs Calvin's understanding? And what picture does this give us of the way that Calvin understood God's presence and activity in the world?

Perhaps the best way forward is to understand what Calvin identified in Roman Catholic religious practice as idolatrous, and in particular what he thought was idolatrous about the Mass. Though Calvin dealt with the issue of idolatry and the Mass throughout his theological career, we can locate three distinct summaries of his thought in "The Necessity of Reforming the Church,"<sup>27</sup> "On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly, and Preserving the Purity of the Christian Religion,"<sup>28</sup> and chapters 17 and 18 of Book IV of the *Institutes*.<sup>29</sup> I will focus on the *Institutes* because there we find his critique of the Mass in clearest connection to his own doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

Calvin states two central concerns with the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass. The first concern, common in Protestant critiques of Roman Catholicism, is focused upon the Mass as a sacrifice, or in Calvin's words as "a kind of appeasement to make satisfaction to God for the expiation of the living and the dead."<sup>30</sup> Calvin's second concern, again common in the Reformation period, is that the Mass is idolatry, a concern which Calvin describes at various points in Book IV, chapter xvii. But what is distinctive about Calvin's understanding of idolatry in comparison to many of his Reformation contemporaries is how he consistently connects his reflections on idolatry with Christ's ascension. For example, in a section where he takes up the issue of the adoration of the Eucharistic Host, Calvin writes:

Those who have devised the adoration of the Sacrament have not only dreamed it by themselves apart from Scripture, where no

<sup>26</sup> See for example Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 39 n.10.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin: *Theological Treatises*, ed. and trans. J.K.S. Reid (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 184-216.

<sup>28</sup> *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters, Volume 3*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 360-411.

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1359-1448. Hereafter referenced as *ICR*.

<sup>30</sup> *ICR* IV.xviii.1 (1429).

mention of it can be shown ... but also, with Scripture crying out against it, they have forsaken the living God and fashioned a God after their own desire. For what is idolatry if not this: to worship the gifts in the place of the Giver himself?"<sup>31</sup>

What is remarkable about this critique is that it is grounded upon the importance of Christ's ascension. Calvin continues:

Scripture itself also not only carefully recounts to us the ascension of Christ, by which he withdrew the presence of his body from our sight and company, to shake from us all carnal thinking of him, but also, whenever it recalls him, bids our minds be raised up, and seek him in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. According to this rule, we ought rather to have adored him spiritually in heavenly glory than to have devised some dangerous kind of adoration, replete with a carnal and crass conception of God.<sup>32</sup>

For Calvin, the ascension is not only an event that takes place in the witness of Scripture but also serves as a kind of rule that superintends a proper understanding of worship, which by implication inoculates against humanity's idolatrous tendencies.

The ascension is a theme that runs throughout Calvin's thought on the Lord's Supper. It determines how he understands the nature of Christ's presence at the meal and thus the nature of the communion that takes place in the sacrament. For Calvin, the Lord's Supper parallels the movement of our union with Christ: his descent and our ascent with him. Elsewhere in the *Institutes*, Calvin writes against those who hold to some form of bodily presence in the elements: "They think they only communicate with [the body of Christ] if it descends into bread; but they do not understand the manner of descent by which he lifts us up to himself."<sup>33</sup> Central to true worship, then, is this movement of elevating the heart and mind to heaven where the ascended Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father. Without that movement, worship, and in particular the worship that takes place at the Lord's Supper, becomes idolatry as it fails to lift attention to the true object of worship—by which is to be understood not simply "God," but specifically the risen Jesus who is clothed in our humanity—by focusing attention merely on the elements.

Does this confirm Eire and Taylor's accusations? Has Calvin evacuated materiality of its meaning, locating Christian faith merely in heaven, and by implication the mind and the mind alone? Is Calvin guided by the philosophical principle *finitum non est capax infiniti*? While we can certainly understand the claims of Taylor and Eire, particularly within their narrative of the journey from pre-modernity to modernity, closer attention to Calvin's thought and its subtle contours demonstrates that their argument falls short. To begin with, there is a fundamental misconception of what is guiding Calvin's thought at this juncture. While *soli Deo gloria* may be a fitting description of a guiding principle in

<sup>31</sup> ICR IV.xvii. 36 (1413).

<sup>32</sup> ICR IV.xvii. 36 (1412-13).

<sup>33</sup> ICR IV.xvii. 16 (1379).



Calvin's thought, Eire's cognate concept of *finitum non est capax infiniti* is not. The failings of the concept *finitum non est capax infiniti* have been pointed out by a number of scholars who have given sustained attention to Calvin's christology.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Heiko Oberman suggests that a more accurate summary of Calvin's thought actually inverts this claim: "We not only cannot be satisfied by the 'non capax' thesis, we also have to go much further, coming to a complete inversion: '*infinitum capax finiti*.'"<sup>35</sup> Calvin's thought at this juncture is not predetermined by an abstract philosophical principle. Instead Calvin's concerns about the relation between the spiritual and the material in the ordering of the communion which takes place at the Lord's Supper and his corresponding emphasis upon the ascension of Jesus Christ are based upon his careful construction of the union of Christ's two natures and in particular upon the *extra Calvinisticum*.

Recall the following statement made by Taylor about Calvin: "What he can't admit is that God could have released something of his saving efficaciousness there into the world, at the mercy of human action, because that is the cost of really sanctifying creatures like us which are bodily, social, historical."<sup>36</sup> The alternative to this, one imagines, is an understanding of the Eucharist which posits the "givenness" of Jesus' body and blood in the elements of the Eucharist over and against Calvin's so-called immaterial spirituality. But a close reading of Calvin's discussion of the Lord's Supper reveals that Calvin is not in fact governed by the impossibility of the material mediating spiritual realities, but rather by a consideration of the hypostatic union and the integrity of Christ's two natures. Central to Calvin's discussion of the Lord's Supper in the *Institutes* (and central in the Reformed disputes over the Lord's Supper with his 'Lutheran' contemporaries) is a concern about how an understanding of the ubiquity of Christ's human nature damages the integrity of the hypostatic union. Calvin's concern about the kind of understanding of the Lord's Supper which Taylor appears to be advocating is not first and foremost that it gives human agents control over salvation, but that it conflates the two natures of Christ by way of a particular rendering of the *communicatio idiomatum* in which some attributes of the divinity of Christ are improperly communicated to the humanity. For Calvin this improper communication of attributes makes Christ's humanity something other than truly human and thus fails to honor the concrete reality of Jesus' bodily presence—on earth during his ministry and now in heaven as he is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Taylor and Calvin are both concerned with how it is possible to speak of God's continuing activity in creation, with Taylor seeing in Calvin's thought a downplaying of materiality that has deleterious consequences. Calvin also understands that it is important to be able to speak of and

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), 61-100; Heiko A. Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 21/1, 43-64.

<sup>35</sup> Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," 62.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 79.

recognize Christ's activity in the world, not only in the event of the incarnation but after the resurrection and the ascension. But, in his analysis, the Lutheran proposal with which he was contemporary—and by extension the proposal that could be extrapolated from Taylor—proves fatal to the integrity of Christ's human nature by attributing to the humanity the properties of the divinity, a proposal which makes Christ's humanity something other than fully *human*. "As if that union compounded from two natures some sort of intermediate being which was neither God nor man! ... But from Scripture we plainly infer that the one person of Christ so consists of two natures that each nevertheless retains unimpaired its own distinctive character."<sup>37</sup>

How then does Calvin maintain God's continuing activity in the world? To begin with we must note that Calvin's sacramental thought is robust and he does not hesitate to affirm the presence of Christ at the Supper:

Therefore, if the Lord truly represents the participation in his body through the breaking of bread, there ought not to be the least doubt that he truly presents and shows his body. And the godly ought by all means to keep this rule: whenever they see the symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be persuaded that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there.<sup>38</sup>

Following Calvin's logic of the hypostatic union and of Jesus' ascension, we cannot say that the elements become body and blood—Christ's body and blood are in heaven, at the right hand of the Father. But we can nonetheless affirm that the materiality of the Supper is an essential means of grace in the Christian life, a means that is mediated irreducibly through materiality. "The Lord's Table should [be] spread at least weekly for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually. None is indeed to be forcibly compelled, but all are to be urged and aroused... All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast."<sup>39</sup> Far from evacuating the material of meaning, Calvin's theology seeks to affirm the material as a means of grace while properly ordering the relation between the two in relation to other doctrines such as the hypostatic union.

Moreover, Matthew Meyer Boulton has argued convincingly that essential to Calvin's pastoral work in Geneva was the creation of a way of Christian formation which far from ignoring the material, involved the Christian in a "suite of practical disciplines."<sup>40</sup> Life in Geneva was to be ordered in such a way that God's presence, through spiritual disciplines, was constantly inscribed in the lives of the faithful, reminding them of His presence, character, and mercy.

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<sup>37</sup> *ICR* IV.xvii.30 (1402).

<sup>38</sup> *ICR* IV.xvii.10 (1371).

<sup>39</sup> *ICR* IV.xvii.46 (1424).

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Meyer Boulton, *Life in God: John Calvin, Practical Formation, and the Future of Protestant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 221.

Calvin argued that in Reformed Geneva, worship services should be frequent, and should include the Lord's Supper at least weekly; prayer should be both continual and punctuated by a daily office and a weekly day of prayer on Wednesdays; psalm singing should be pervasive, in church, at home, and in the fields; catechesis should be rigorous and grounded in both the home and the Sunday services; moral and spiritual life should be accountable, ultimately overseen by the city's consistory; and engagement with Scripture ... should be the discipline that founds and forms all others.<sup>41</sup>

This kind of spirituality is, in its own way, material in its attention to the body. As Smith himself notes, Calvin's practices resonate with the kind of formation for which *Imagining the Kingdom* argues, a formation that "tap[s] into our incarnate significance" and "pluck[s] the strings of our embodied attunement to the world."<sup>42</sup>

Beyond the irreducible importance of the material in Calvin's sacramental theology and the importance of spiritual disciplines as postures which facilitate a receptivity to the Spirit's work, there are also underdeveloped aspects of Calvin's thought which can be explored further. Calvin's understanding of the relation between the material and the spiritual in the Lord's Supper, as we have already noted, is guided by his christology. A distinctive element<sup>43</sup> in Calvin's christology is his claim that the humanity of Christ did not enclose or restrict his divinity, but that even while he was in the flesh Christ continued to reign in heaven. "Here is something marvelous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, he willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about the earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet he continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning!"<sup>44</sup> This description of the two natures of Christ, which Willis neatly summarizes as the idea "that the Eternal Son of God, even after the Incarnation, was united to the human nature to form One Person but was not restricted to the flesh,"<sup>45</sup> later became known as the *extra Calvinisticum*.

In the same way that the ascension guides Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper, the *extra Calvinisticum* allows Calvin to conceive of Christ's continuing activity and power in the world while also protecting the integrity of his human nature. In their studies of the *extra Calvinisticum* both Willis and Oberman have noted how the doctrine also implies "*etiam extra ecclesiam*"—Christ's active rule not only over the Church but over all of creation. Thus, for Calvin, Christ's place in the economy of salvation is not limited simply to his role as the Mediator, but

<sup>41</sup> Boulton, *Life in God*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 159.

<sup>43</sup> Distinctive with respect to his contemporaries. E. David Willis has demonstrated convincingly that at this juncture Calvin's position resonates with Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria (Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 26-60).

<sup>44</sup> *ICR* II.xiii.4 (481).

<sup>45</sup> Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 1.

extends to Christ's active kingship as he sits as the ascended one at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, Oberman says of Calvin's thought: "The function of the King extends beyond that of the Mediator insofar as the majesty and power of God extends beyond the *iustificatio impii*. God's concern is not only over the rule of the hearts of the faithful, but also, in wider scope, the rule of the whole earth."<sup>46</sup> Thus the doctrine of the *extra Calvinisticum* informs Calvin's reading of Scripture in such a way as to place Jesus Christ and His continuing work at the very center of history. Calvin's sermons on 2 Samuel are evidence of this in his preaching and theological imagination.<sup>47</sup> The *extra Calvinisticum* preserves an understanding of God's presence and activity in the world as Jesus rules providentially over human history, preserving his church.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

My argument began by noting an important aspect of Smith's cultural liturgies project. A sacramental understanding of the world gives a way of affirming the importance of materiality in an account of the Christian life. It also explains how men and women are formed, and can make use of the material in the unique kind of formation that takes place in corporate worship. I then noted Charles Taylor's account of the loss of this understanding of materiality and detailed how he assigns blame to John Calvin for this loss. Next, I examined Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper, giving particular attention to the role of the ascension and by implication the union of Christ's human and divine natures. I finished my evaluation of Calvin's thought by noting the importance of the material in Calvin's thought, and the way the *extra Calvinisticum* helps to explain how God continues to be at work in creation. What conclusions can we draw?

First, we must simply note that Taylor's account of Calvin is lacking. This is not in any way fatal to Taylor's larger argument about the advent of the modern secular age, the contested conditions of modern religious belief, or the haunted nature of the immanent frame. But the way which Taylor included Calvin as a part of this larger narrative fails. There is a danger in the kind of grand, meta-narratives of which *A Secular Age* is a kind. They are important and necessary kinds of intellectual work, and *A Secular Age* still lays claim to being one of the most important books of the early twenty-first century, but in giving this kind of geography of the wilderness of modernity Taylor's account of Calvin has the very real danger of labelling Calvin's theology as the badlands when it may in fact be an oasis.<sup>48</sup>

Second, and more importantly, there are very real and robust resources within Calvin's theology for an account of the importance of the material in the Christian life and its practice. While Calvin is clearly against "mixing" the spiritual and the material in worship, this does not

<sup>46</sup> Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," 47.

<sup>47</sup> Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," 46.

<sup>48</sup> A similar argument is made by Laura Smit in "The Depth behind Things': Toward a Calvinist Sacramental Theology," in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, Smith and Olthius, eds., 205-227.

mean that he refuses the possibility of a relation between the two. In fact, Calvin continually affirms that they *must* be related to one another, but simultaneously affirms that this must be done in coordination with other doctrines—in this case, the hypostatic union and the ascension. Calvin’s understanding of the so-called *extra Calvinisticum* is demonstrative of other resources within Calvin’s thought which provide a framework for God’s continuing activity within creation.

Third, we would do well to listen closely to the reasons for Calvin’s rejection of the kind of account of materiality which the Roman Catholic Church of his time, and those who are sympathetic to Taylor today, might attempt to construct upon his thought. Calvin perceptively identifies the dangers of idolatry as created things become confused with their Creator. Additionally, there is possibility that the “localization of grace” in certain means of salvation might lead to the Church to understand itself as wielding the keys of the Kingdom in a way that is too loosely connected to the ascended and active Jesus Christ. This is not to say that Calvin’s position is not without its own perils. Reformed Christians must ask themselves hard questions about how Calvin’s robust sacramental theology failed to reproduce itself in subsequent generations. But the arguments Calvin made were well-considered and pastorally appropriate to his context.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Calvin’s reasoning with respect to the relation of the material and the spiritual is guided by a perceptive clarity of thought that is typical of his work, and therefore helpful for those addressing similar issues in the context of modernity. In his rejection of an improper mixing of the spiritual and the material, we find Calvin thinking theology out from its living center, the person of Jesus Christ. The Lord’s Supper is to draw our gaze upwards because that is where Jesus is now, his humanity and divinity united together at the right hand of the Father. In doing so, it fixes our eyes on the only place where we can find the “promise of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith,”<sup>49</sup> the incarnate Son and his finished work of redemption. Moreover, Calvin’s understanding of the sacraments generally and the Lord’s Supper specifically is supplemented by a robust pneumatology worked out in the application of the promises and benefits given in Jesus Christ. “The sacraments properly fulfill their office only when the Spirit, the inward teacher, comes to them, by whose power alone hearts are penetrated and affections moved and our souls opened for the sacraments to enter in.”<sup>50</sup> There is a compelling Trinitarian grammar and logic to Calvin’s thought that is of a whole with his doctrine of God and his understanding of union with Christ.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *ICR* IV.xiv. 1 (1277).

<sup>50</sup> *ICR* IV.xiv. 9 (1285).

<sup>51</sup> For two (somewhat different) accounts of this, see Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The language of a “sacramental understanding of the world” is anachronous to Calvin, and we might find Calvin hesitant to adopt it. This is not because the concerns of such a project are unknown to Calvin, as I hope I have demonstrated, but because the terminology obscures that a sacrament should point us to the only place where we can find assurance and trust in God’s promises: the person of Jesus Christ. Those promises *can only be* mediated through the material, but for Calvin they can only find their meaning in the ascended Christ. Thus for Calvin, you cannot begin by affirming materiality as a way of moving toward transcendence. The way up is not down. Instead, we can only affirm the material by fixing our gaze upon the ascended Lord. The way down is up.