JOHN CALVIN, THE WESLEYS, AND JOHN WILLIAMSON NEVIN ON THE LORD’S SUPPER

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“The Lord’s Supper of the Founder of Christianity was a service in which the ‘pure in heart see God;’ the Lord’s Supper of the postapostolic and later days was a ceremony reserved for those ‘who have been duly admitted into the society by certain ritual acts controlled by a sacerdotal succession’. With the rise of Protestantism the trend of interpretation concerning the Lord’s Supper turned back toward that of the New Testament. Luther took a middle ground.... Methodists have been inclined to follow Zwingli, rather than either Luther or Calvin, in this matter.” (Robert Goodloe, *The Sacraments in Methodism* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1953), 67, 69.

The opinion which Goodloe expressed is common among average church-going Protestants in general and Methodists in particular. It runs as follows:

• There are two approaches to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, Roman Catholic and Protestant.
• The Roman Catholic approach holds, in contrast to the New Testament, that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ.
• The Protestant approach (with the exception of Luther, who receives a dispensation for his other more Protestant opinions) captures the New Testament idea and is characterized by a simple, spiritual religion in which the elements are not related to Christ’s presence in the believer.
• Despite Luther, there is really no middle ground.

What is ironic about this commonly held opinion is that, leaving transubstantiation aside, there is a relatively coherent Protestant doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament, though not localized in the elements. It is a doctrine forcefully articulated by three Protestant theologians: John Calvin, John Wesley, and John Williamson Nevin. Even more ironically, it is a view that not only has seldom been fully recognized by their followers, but was not fully recognized by Wesley and Nevin in each other. Wesley’s opinion of Calvinists and Nevin’s opinion of Methodists were equally low, and Nevin never realized that in the depth of the Wesley brothers’ eucharistic doctrine he could have had a great ally against the Protestant memorialist “Puritanism” he so detested. This paper will develop the doc-

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1 Nevin’s use of the term “Puritanism” to denote the revivalistic, memorialistic Protestantism he disliked is not, strictly speaking, historically accurate. Yet it served for him to indicate in one word a whole stream of American religious tendency. Whenever the word appears in quotation marks in this paper, it should be understood as being used in Nevin’s sense, rather than as a historical description of a religious and political party in Anglo-American religious history.
trine of the Real Presence in Calvin’s *Institutes*, John and Charles Wesley’s *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, and Nevin’s *The Mystical Presence*, arguing in the end that although Wesley and Nevin were two able interpreters of a Calvinistic eucharistic theology of the Real Presence, the ironic unfolding of history has pushed American Protestant eucharistic doctrine in other directions.

I

Calvin was clear that whatever view of Christ’s presence in the sacrament he held, it was not Roman Catholic: “We must not dream of such a presence of Christ in the Sacrament as the craftsmen of the Roman court have fashioned—as if the body of Christ, by a local presence, were put there to be touched by the hands, to be chewed by the teeth, and to be swallowed by the mouth.” Calvin devoted the first and greatest part of his discussion of the eucharist to challenging the doctrine of transubstantiation and associated views and abuses. However, he also rejected views (associated with Carlstadt and Zwingli) that gave the Supper too little significance—though he spent much less time arguing against this second problem:

I now pass over those who would have the Supper only a mark of outward profession. ... Moreover, I am not satisfied with those persons who, recognizing that we have some communion with Christ, when they would show what it is, make us partakers of the Spirit only, omitting mention of flesh and blood. As though all these things were said in vain: that his flesh is truly food, that his blood is truly drink; that none have life except those who eat his flesh and drink his blood; and other passages pertaining to the same thing.

Calvin stated his own understanding of the sacrament several times in the *Institutes*. He first discussed it as part of his attack on those who do not admit of a real presence of Christ in the sacrament:

Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow; he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by preserving a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises. And truly he offers and shows the reality there signified unto all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone.

He tied the spiritual receiving of Christ’s body to the physical receiving of the elements: “By the showing of the symbol, the thing itself is also shown.... When we have received the symbol of the body, let us no less surely trust that the body itself is also given to us.”

Later, after attacking the opposite (Roman Catholic) view, which he felt

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3Calvin, IV. XVII. 12-18, 22-25, 35-37, 47-49, and all of IV.XVIII.
4Calvin, IV. XVII. 6, 7.
5Calvin, IV.XVII.10.
6Calvin, IV.XVII.10.
was unscriptural and riddled with strange and unnecessary philosophical subtleties, he made another attempt at answering the question of how we are to think of Christ’s presence while remaining true to an orthodox view of his human nature. If the “absurdities” of binding Christ’s heavenly glory to “earthly creatures” and ascribing inappropriate behavior to his human nature are “set aside,” Calvin was willing to go quite far indeed:

I freely accept whatever can be made to express the true and substantial partaking of the body and blood of the Lord, which is shown to believers under the sacred symbols of the Supper—and so to express it that they may be understood not to receive it solely by imagination or understanding of mind, but to enjoy the thing itself as nourishment of eternal life. 7

Finally, after arguing with the Lutheran doctrine of the ubiquity of Christ’s body and stating instead that believers are drawn up to heaven rather than that Christ’s body is brought down to them (IV.XVII.31), he made this admission:

If anyone should ask me how this takes place, I shall not be ashamed to confess that it is a secret too lofty for either my mind to comprehend or my words to declare. And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it... He declares his flesh the food of my soul, his blood its drink. I offer my soul to him to be fed with such food. In his Sacred Supper he bids me take, eat, and drink his body and blood under the symbols of bread and wine. I do not doubt that he himself truly presents them, and that I receive them. 8

However clear and “plain” Calvin thought these statements of the presence of Christ in the eucharist were, others found them less so, both in his day and later. He was especially involved in debates with the Lutherans over this matter. They “accused Calvin of professing a doctrine as vacuous and vain as that of Zwingli.” 9 The Formula of Concord attacked Calvin’s sacramental view as being “the most injurious of all,” since the “gross Sacramentarians [i.e. Zwinglians]... declare in plain, clear words as they believe in their hearts, that in the Holy Supper nothing but bread and wine is present,” but the,

subtle Sacramentarians... speak very speciously in our own words, and pretend that they also believe a true presence of the true, essential, living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, however, that this occurs spiritually through faith. Nevertheless they retain under these specious words precisely the former gross opinions, namely that in the Holy Supper nothing is present and received with the mouth except bread and wine. 10

7 Calvin, IV.XVII.19, italics mine.
8 Calvin, IV.XVII.32. B.A. Gerrish, Grace and Gratitude (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) terms Calvin’s eucharistic theology “symbolic instrumentalism,” where the sign and symbol of the eucharist points to a reality that is actually, instrumentally brought about by the sign (167).
10 Formula of Concord, Epitome, VII. 2-5.
How Calvin’s view of predestination could be compatible with a strong sacramental system was also at issue with the Lutherans.\textsuperscript{11} If the sacraments had such power, how could they effect what they signified only in the elect? And, “if the sacraments effect what they signify only in the elect, sign and reality are not, after all, so joined together that they cannot be separated.”\textsuperscript{12} Brian Gerrish, although no great admirer of how Calvin dealt with the doctrine of election, recognizes that Calvin never meant to open the full benefits of the eucharist to all; in the elect the sacraments are part of the way God actually conveys to them the grace he has already predestined and elected them to receive, whereas in the reprobate they effect only judgment.\textsuperscript{13} Calvin’s doctrine of Christ’s body has also been found problematic. Some later critics have felt that Calvin made, two distinct affirmations that it is difficult to reconcile: on the one hand he maintained that the body of Christ is present in the Supper... On the other hand, he declares that the body of Christ has no local or spatial relationship with the material elements of the Eucharist.\textsuperscript{14}

Calvin’s “obscurities” on this subject are for all these writers, “only imperfectly masked by an exegesis that is often peculiar, and by the appeal to mystery.”\textsuperscript{15}

Others are more sympathetic, but recognize the ambivalent nature of Calvin’s language in many places. Kilian McDonnell roots some of this ambiguity in the vocabulary Calvin inherited, a “spiritualist tradition having Augustine as its inspiration,” which shied away from an overly materialistic interpretation of the local presence of Christ in the elements, but was not intended “to overthrow the reality of the presence in the Eucharist”\textsuperscript{16} This ambiguity also arose because Calvin was not willing to go as far as the Lutherans (let alone the Roman Catholics) in spelling out precisely how that presence was to be conceived of. “The controversy with us is not as to the reception but only as to the mode of reception,” he wrote; “rather than denying the real presence,” comments McDonnell, “as he has been accused of doing, he presupposes it”\textsuperscript{17} In the end, supporters argue, Calvin was most concerned with restoring to God the sovereignty he felt was threatened by a materialistic interpretation of the eucharist: “the immediate imperative was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Gerrish, 169.
\item[13] Gerrish, 172, citing Institutes IV.XIV.15, IV.XVI.15, and IV.XVII.34.
\item[14] Wendel, 350.
\item[17] McDonnell, 224, citing Corpus Reformation IX: 74.
\end{footnotes}
not sacramentality but union with Christ." 18

Compromises worked out among the Reformed on eucharistic doctrine tended more towards Zwinglian conceptions, at least in some historians' views. 19 The fact remains that, for both historical and theological reasons, Calvin's eucharistic doctrine did not dominate the Reformed tradition, where predestination, not a Protestant doctrine of the Real Presence, became the characteristic feature of Calvinism in the popular mind—and where the Enlightenment eventually dulled supernatural ideas of God's presence and manifestation. 20 The Wesleys, drawing on their Anglican heritage, however, would try to emphasize the supernatural and mysterious in the eucharist.

II

It has become a commonplace among Methodist (and some non-Methodist) liturgical historians that the revival sparked by the Wesleys and their friends was sacramental as well as evangelical. 21 Wesley preached the eucharist as a means of grace, proclaimed "The Duty of Constant Communion," 22 partook of the eucharist himself on an average of every four or five days, and urged his followers to attend the sacrament frequently in their parish churches. Sometimes Anglican churches were swamped by large numbers of Methodists clamoring for the sacrament, and Wesley himself often administered it to groups numbering in the thousands. 23 His view of what transpired in the Lord's Supper was high enough that late in life he even insisted, when confronted with the situation in America after the Revolution, that the dearth of elders to administer the sacraments be resolved, not by allowing the lay preachers to administer, but by ordaining more elders—a development that has helped mystify American Methodist views of the relationship between ordination and conference connection ever since.

Despite his pragmatic emphasis on partaking of the eucharist, Wesley's

18McDonnell, 363. Continuing in the same vein: "Christ...cannot be commanded, nor con-
tained, nor condensed, nor reduced to material physical accessibility...What man has to do with in the Eucharist is not a domestic, attendant God, who is conjured up in this place and that place...conjured with a formula, summoned by clerical command and dismissed by digestion."

19Gerrish, 141-142, 167-168.


22This sermon, originally preached in 1732, was re-published and re-affirmed by Wesley in 1788 (Rattenbury, 5).

23Rattenbury, 3. Rattenbury cites here an Anglo-Catholic author who made a study of attendance at Eucharistic services as reported in Wesley's Journal from 1780-90. The number of communicants estimated by Wesley ranges anywhere from 600-1700.
actual teaching on eucharistic doctrine is somewhat sparse. It is best discovered by examining the hymns on the subject issued by John and Charles in 1745, the majority of which were written by Charles.24 Prefaced to the hymns was an edited extract from an otherwise little-known treatise by Daniel Brevint, Caroline-era Dean of Lincoln, called, The Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice.25 The hymns in the Wesleys’ own language outlined the argument of Brevint’s treatise, which considered the Eucharist a memorial of Christ’s passion, a sign and means of present grace, a pledge of heaven, and a sacrifice-both of Christ’s person and of ours.26

Wesley was as anxious as Calvin to proclaim his distance from Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, like Calvin, that distance did not include retreating to a memorialist concept of the sacrament. Hymns on the Lord’s Supper as a “sign and a means of grace” (section II) and “as it implies a Sacrifice” (section IV) show that the Wesleys held a doctrine of the Real Presence. Examples abound:

The sacred true effectual Sign
Thy Body and thy Blood it shows,
The glorious instrument Divine
Thy Mercy and thy Strength bestows. (28, stanza 2)27

The Cup of Blessing blest by Thee,
Let it thy Blood impart;
The Bread thy Mystic Body be,
And cheer each languid Heart. (30, stanza 5)

’Tis not a dead external Sign
Which here my Hopes require,
The living power of Love Divine
In Jesus I desire. (55, stanza 1)

And, perhaps more famously,

Come, Holy Ghost, thine Influence shed,
And realize the Sign,
Thy Life infuse into the Bread,
Thy Power into the Wine.
Effectual let the Tokens prove,
And made by heavenly art,
Fit Channels to convey thy Love
To every Faithful heart. (72)

26 Rattenbury, 13-14.
27 John and Charles Wesley, Hymns on the Lord’s Supper. Hymns will be cited by number, not page, as the book exists in several different modern editions.
However, also like Calvin, the Wesleys rejected a systematic explanation of how this can be possible—other than that it does not involve transubstantiation. Instead, they asserted in one of their most important hymns on the subject that the bread and wine remain bread and wine, yet convey a real grace:

O the Depth of Love Divine,
The Unfathomable Grace,
Who shall say how Bread and Wine
GOD into Man conveys?
How the Bread his Flesh imparts,
How the Wine transmits his Blood,
Fills his Faithful People’s Hearts
With all the Life of GOD!
...Feeble Elements bestow
A Power not theirs to give:
Who explains the Wondrous Way?
How through these the Virtue came?
These the Virtue did convey,
Yet still remain the same.
...Sure and real is the Grace,
The Manner be unknown.... (57, stanzas 1,2,4)

One writer calls this “Anglican agnosticism,” but besides the direct Anglican influence, there is also a hint here of Calvin’s ultimate bowing before mystery. The hymns are heavy with mystery language, seen in such lines as:

O Thou, who this Mysterious bread
Didst in Emmaus break... (29, stanza 1)

...a Table spread
Furnished with Mystic Wine
And everlasting Bread... (40, stanza 1)

But none like this Mysterious Rite
Which dying Mercy gave
Can draw forth all his promised Might
And all his Will to save. (42, stanza 3)

Savior, Thou didst the Mystery give
That I thy Nature might partake... (54, stanza 3)

By faith we see thy Sufferings past
In this Mysterious Rite brought back (123, stanza 3)

Among the most famous Wesleyan eucharistic hymns is, “Victim Divine, thy Grace we claim” (116), which clearly connects the Lord’s

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Wakefield, 188.
Supper to Christ’s sacrifice, not through repetition of that sacrifice (as Protestants claimed Catholics believed), but through breaking down temporal barriers:

Thou standest in the Holiest Place,
As now for guilty Sinners Slain,
Thy Blood of Sprinkling speaks, and prays
All prevalent for helpless Man,
Thy Blood is still our Ransom found,
And spreads Salvation all around. (116, stanza 2)

In addition, “Victim Divine” actually uses the term “Real Presence:”

Thou dost even Now thy Banquet crown,
To every faithful Soul appear,
And show thy Real Presence here. (116, stanza 5)

Later critics have pointed out that the eucharistic doctrine of the Wesley was basically Calvinist in its dual emphasis: on one hand, a “spiritual real presence” which is truly there, and connected in some real way with the receiving of the elements—the Wesleys were actually more forceful in their language than Calvin on this point—but on the other hand, not to be confused with the Roman Catholic view. Rattenbury thought the Wesleys believed that, “the Lord’s Supper, while rejecting Roman abuses, can preserve Catholic truth.”

Davies agrees, but points out that, though the Wesley “approximate” Calvinism in [the] emphasis on the Holy Spirit being the agent in the Eucharist who ‘seals’ or confirms the benefits of Christ’s Passion to the believers, there is, however, “an additional emphasis on Sacrifice, on Christ as the Priest-Victim who presents God to man and man to God in his divine-human nature.”

The Wesleyan Calvinistic emphasis was not taken directly from Calvin, of course, since Wesley’s antipathy to all things Calvinistic (by which he usually meant all things predestinarian) was well known. Instead, his ideas about the Real Presence came indirectly through the Anglican tradition and his reading of Anglican divines such as Brevint—and more directly from his own lifelong interest in the early church and youthful Nonjuror forma-

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29Rattenbury, 28.
30Davies, 208.
31In fact, the brothers critiqued what they apparently knew of Calvin’s doctrine in such lines as, from “Victim Divine,” “We need not now go up to heaven/ To bring the long-sought Savior down...” (116, stanza 5) (see White, 81).
32Wakefield, 188. According to James White, Cranmer’s doctrine as expressed in the post-1549 editions of the Book of Common Prayer was on the whole more Zwinglian than Calvinistic (White, 80).
Although Calvinism was a strong religious force in America, the depth of Calvin’s sacramental theology remained largely hidden until the coming of the “Mercersburg theology”—an attempt by theologian John Nevin and his colleague, historian Philip Schaff, to return the American religious landscape to a greater awareness of the Incarnation, the sacraments, and the church catholic. On the whole, their effort was a dismal failure in terms of its influence on American religion, but in the process Nevin articulated one of the best modern explanations of Calvin’s sacramental doctrine in his book *The Mystical Presence*.

Nevin was as anti-Roman Catholic (although more moderate in his language) as Calvin and Wesley, being sure to guard his doctrine from,

> the figment of transubstantiation.... This theory was rejected as a gross superstition, even by the Lutheran Church, and of course found still less favor in the other section of the Protestant communion. The Reformed doctrine admits no change whatever in the elements. Bread remains bread and wine remains wine.

Nevertheless, he argued that something actually happened in the eucharist and, furthermore, that Calvin taught the Real Presence: “Even the term real presence, Calvin tells us he was willing to employ, if it were to be understood as synonymous with true presence; by which he means a presence that brings Christ truly to communion with the believer in his human nature as well as his divine nature.”

Nevin saw the presence of Christ in the sacrament as giving the eucharist an objective force, one that was not “simply suggestive, com-

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33 Davies outlines Wesley’s main Nonjuror beliefs: the mixed chalice (wine and water), the necessity of a prayer of oblation “as appropriate for the re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice,” the need for an explicit epiclesis, and the use if prayers for the dead—all of which were in the 1549 BCP but fell out of later ones (Davies, 187). Rattenbury explains how a number of hymns focus particularly on the meaning and symbolism of the mixed chalice (Rattenbury, 33-34). Although Wesley was not without Puritan influence, he does not seem to have imbibed his views of the Eucharist from that quarter (Davies, 189-191).

34 Heitzenrater, 11-17.

35 John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (New York, Lippencott, 1846; republished Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 54-55. He also rejected the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation and the ubiquity of Christ’s body: ‘The Reformed Church taught that the participation of Christ’s flesh and blood in the Lord’s supper is spiritual only, and in no sense corporal. The idea if a local presence in the case, was utterly rejected. . . The manducation of it is not oral, but only by faith” (55).

36 Nevin, 56.
memorative, or representational.” This objective force had its root in the doctrine of the Incarnation, by which Christ’s divine and human natures were united, and passing over this “true HUMAN life” to his people who constituted the body of the Church. It was because of the Incarnation that Christ’s Passion, and therefore the representation of his passion in the eucharist, had the benefit of saving us, most particularly our own human nature:

The VALUE of Christ’s sufferings and death, as well as of his entire life, in relation to men, springs wholly from the view of the incarnation now presented... The atonement as a foreign work, could not be made to reach us in the way of a true salvation. Only as it may be considered immanent in our nature itself, can it be imputed to us as ours.

He took pains to trace these ideas historically in order to show that they were truly Calvinistic and Reformed and not, as he had been accused, “in unsafe contiguity with Rome.”

Why was the doctrine of the Real Presence criticized as a Catholic superstition? Nevin claimed it was because of the “Puritanism” and rationalism of American religion, “where the tendency to undervalue all that is sacramental and objective in religion, has become unhappily so strong.” That tendency was rooted in American religion’s individualistic and sectarian character, which he had criticized in previous writings:

In proportion as the sect character prevails [as distinguished from “the true spirit of the Christian church”], it will be found that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are looked upon as mere outward signs, in the case of which all proper efficacy is supposed to be previously at hand in the inward state of the subject by whom they are received.

For Nevin, Methodists and Baptists were the chief offenders. He was fond of criticizing the “baptistic” principle, and added that, “Methodism, in this

37Nevin, 57.
38Nevin, 155-167.
39Nevin, 157
41Nevin, 100.
way [its “unsacramental feeling”], may be said to wrong the Sacraments, (as also the entire idea of the Church), almost as seriously as the Baptist system itself.”\textsuperscript{43} Methodism was closely related in Nevin and Schaff’s mind to the “New Measures” revivalism which Nevin had excoriated in \textit{The Anxious Bench}.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, as Charles Yrigoyen has characterized Nevin and Schaff, they thought that John Wesley was, “not much of a theologian. In contrast to the giants of the Reformation he was a theological lightweight.”\textsuperscript{45} Nevin and Schaff felt that American Protestantism was lacking in a proper Christology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology—and revivalistic Methodism (including the United Brethren and the Evangelical Association) led the way.

Obviously, Nevin had a limited understanding of Methodist theology—and perhaps even of earlier Methodist practice, if recent observations regarding the fervor of 18th-century and early 19th-century American Methodists for the sacrament have merit.\textsuperscript{46} Just as Wesley was not greatly acquainted with Calvin’s writings, Nevin seemed not to have been greatly acquainted with Wesley’s. It is unlikely from his characterization of Methodism that Nevin had read the \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, which was never published in an American edition, although some of the hymns appeared in American Methodist hymnals.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, it is probably true that the Methodists of Nevin’s era had a limited understanding of their own founder’s theology and had never read \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper} either. The quarterly meeting, site of the most fervent Eucharistic piety of early Methodism, had died out by the 1810s and was only recalled nostalgically in Nevin’s era by old Methodist preachers.\textsuperscript{48}

\section{IV}

Despite the fact that Wesley and Nevin did not recognize the similarities between their Wesleyan and Reformed sacramental theologies, enough similarities can be drawn from these three explanations of Christ’s presence in the eucharist to begin to outline a Protestant doctrine of the Real Presence. Some major themes include the following.

The Real Presence is not transubstantiation. This doctrine avoids localizing the presence of Christ in the elements, cautious that the bread and wine might be considered to be the body and blood of Christ in a way that

\textsuperscript{43}Nevin, \textit{The Mystical Presence}, 101.
\textsuperscript{44}Yrigoyen, Charles, Jr. “Mercersburg’s Quarrel with Methodism.” \textit{Methodist History} 22 (October 1983), 11-12.
\textsuperscript{45}Yrigoyen, 10.
\textsuperscript{46}White, 82. See Lester Ruth, \textit{A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings} (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000), chapter 4, “Private Worship at Quarterly Meetings: Love Feast and Lord’s Supper,” 103-155.
\textsuperscript{47}Wesley, \textit{Hymns on the Lord’s Supper}, xi-xiii.
\textsuperscript{48}Ruth, 183-208.
approaches transubstantiation. This means that the elements are not treated in the same way during and after consecration as in the Roman Catholic tradition, i.e. by being elevated, reserved, and adored. Wesley and Calvin both specifically condemned adoration of the elements and other behaviors which might imply that Christ physically remained in the elements after the service was over. Calvin asserted, "We must establish such a presence of Christ in the Supper as may neither fashion him to the element of bread, nor enclose him in bread, nor circumscribe him in any way." And the Wesleys wrote,

No Local Deity  
We worship, LORD, in Thee:  
Free Thy Grace and unconfined,  
Yet it here doth freest move (63, stanza 2).

Interestingly, the insistence that the elements are not transformed into Christ's body seems sometimes to be a historical function of the polemical context rather than a necessary corollary of the doctrine itself. With a strong insistence (particularly in the Wesleys and Nevin) that believers (and in the Wesleys' case, unbelievers) are objectively receiving the human body of Christ, it seems the main reason that these writers insist so strongly that the elements are not transformed into that body is a fear of Roman Catholic theology, or at least their understanding of it.

*There is a Real Presence. not merely a memorial remembrance.* Nevertheless, the elements serve as a special means or instrument to convey Christ's grace to the believer in a way that makes it clear that the supper is not merely a memorial meal. Calvin asserted that the aim of the Lord's Supper is a real union with Christ, "a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is his may be called ours." He reflected that the benefits of Christ's death are applied to believers "through the gospel, but more clearly through the Sacred Supper, where he offers himself with all his benefits to us, and we receive him by faith." The Wesleys have a short selection of hymns concerning the memorial aspects of the eucharist, but they also write such petitions as:

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49*Institutes*, IV.XVII.35-37; United Methodist "Articles of Religion, "XVIII (The Book of Discipline of the UMC 2000, §103). Wesley, of course, did not actually write the Articles of Religion, but adapted 24 articles for American Methodists from the 39 Articles of Religion which were established as standards of doctrine in the Anglican tradition and *BCP*; they have remained unchanged as American Methodist standards of doctrine ever since (Heitzenrater, 5-8, 289-290).

50*Institutes*, IV.XVII.19.

51*Institutes*, IV.XVII.2.

52*Institutes*, IV.XVII.5. Nevin interpreted Calvin's doctrine somewhat more clearly than Calvin did himself: "We affirm that Calvin's spiritual manducation was intended by himself to include full as much, in the case of believers, as was involved in the Lutheran hypothesis itself, that is a true participation of the substantial life of Christ's body and blood, according to the faith of the universal Church from the beginning" (Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 69).
John Calvin, the Wesleys, and John Williamson Nevin... 171

O Thou paschal Lamb of God,  
Feed us with thy Flesh and Blood,  
Life and Strength thy Death supplies,  
Feast us on thy Sacrifice (35, stanza 26).

They ask and answer their own question regarding the necessity of receiving the eucharist:

Why did my dying LORD ordain  
This dear Memorial of his Love?  
Might we not all by Faith obtain,  
By Faith the Mountain-sin remove....?  
It seemed to my Redeemer good  
That faith should here his Coming wait,  
Should here receive Immortal Food,  
Grown up in Him divinely great,  
And filled with Holy Violence seize  
The Glorious Crown of Righteousness. (54, stanzas 1 and 2)

Finally, they expressly critiqued a “memorialism-only” interpretation:

Is the Memorial of your LORD  
A useless form, an Empty Sign,  
Or doth He here his Life impart?  
What saith the Witness in your heart?...  
In Confidence we ask the Grace,  
Faithful and True appear, appear  
Let all perceive thy Blood applied,  
Let all discern the Crucified  
‘Tis done; the LORD sets to his Seal,  
The Prayer is heard, the grace is given,  
With Joy unspeakable we feel  
The Holy Ghost sent down from heaven,  
The Altar streams with sacred Blood,  
And all the Temple flames with GOD! (89, stanzas 1, 3-4)

Nevin not only expressed his own view that the Eucharist is a specific, mysterious, objective avenue of communion with Christ which “includes a real participation in [Christ’s] person” in both his divinity and humanity,53 but vehemently attacked the memorialist doctrine. Given his historical location in the middle of revivalistic America, Nevin was the least concerned of these writers about being mistaken for a Roman Catholic and the most concerned to exterminate memorialism. He contrasted what he saw as the true

53Nevin, The Mystical Presence, 111-117. He wrote later, ‘The paschal lamb must be eaten, physically incorporated with the life of the worshipper, to give him part in the covenant of which it was the seal’ (The Mystical Presence, 238).
Reformed doctrine to a “modern Puritan doctrine” which is “constitutionally rationalistic...” and has its root in the Enlightenment era when, religion ran out into sheer subjectivity; first in the form of Pietism, and afterwards in the overflowing desolation of Rationalism... too spiritual to make much account of outward forms and services of any sort in religion.... The sacraments of course become signs, and signs only. Any power they may have is not found in them, but altogether in such use merely as a pious soul may be able to make of them.54

Against this rationalism (and its accompanying individualism and sectarianism, which were never far behind for Nevin) he set the faith of the early church, the Reformers (particularly Luther and Calvin), and pre-Enlightenment Anglican divines.55 He was angry that those with a “Puritan” idea of spiritualism and sectarianism professed to know more about the spiritual life than the whole tradition of the church and, “show the same utter disregard [as the atheistic Enlightenment] to the authority of a previous history, and affect to construct the whole theory of the Church, doctrine, sacraments, and all, in the way of independent private judgment, from the Bible and common sense.”56

The Real Presence is a feature of the whole service of the Sacrament, including the proclamation of the Word, and is not chiefly brought about by the Words of Institution. For Calvin, this meant that there needs to be preaching: “Whatever benefit may come to us from the Supper requires the Word: whether we are to be confirmed in faith, or exercised in confession, or aroused to duty, there is need of preaching. Therefore, nothing more preposterous could happen in the Supper than for it to be turned into a silent action, as has happened under the Pope’s tyranny.”57 He wanted the congregation to hear the promises from God’s Word, since,

those promises by which consecration is accomplished are directed not to the elements themselves but to those who receive them. Certainly Christ does not say to the bread that it shall become his body.... We should not imagine some magic incantation, supposing it enough to have mumbled the words, as if they were to be heard by the elements, but let us understand that these words are living preachings.... 58

In less polemical settings, the Wesleys and Nevin were less specific about the necessity of preaching (though the Wesleys’ respect for preaching is certainly well known). They did, however, characterize the whole service

54The Mystical Presence, 133-134.
55The Mystical Presence, 133-134. This argument takes up a great part of the book and is found in Chapter I, Section II (“Historical Evidence”), which focuses on the European and English Reformations, and Chapter II, Section III (“Faith of the Early Church”).
56The Mystical Presence, 145. He added sarcastically, “Whole Christendom may have been wrong, not only in the form, but in the very substance of its faith, with regard to the sacraments, for more than fifteen hundred years; till this modern view began to reveal itself in the Protestant world, partly in the form of infidelity [his view of the Enlightenment], and partly in the form of a claim to superior evangelical piety” (145).
57Institutes, IV.XVII.39.
58Institutes, IV, XVII.39.
and various actions of the eucharist as a means of grace as well as tying grace specifically to the reception of the elements. For the Wesleys, this is particularly obvious in Section I ("As It Is a Memorial of the Sufferings and Death of Christ"):

Come to the Supper come,
Sinners there still is Room;
Every Soul may be his Guest,
JESUS gives the general Word;
Share the Monumental Feast,
Eat the Supper of your LORD. (8, stanza 1)

They also frequently used the words "banquet," "meal," and "feast," which can be applied to the whole service of the sacrament as well as the actual receiving of the elements. Nevin focused especially on receiving the elements rather than their consecration and spoke of Christ's grace coming to believers in "the sacrament" in a way that is general enough to incorporate the entire action of the meal: "The presence of which we speak is not in the bread and wine materially considered; but in the sacramental mystery as a whole."59

The Real Presence is primarily received and discerned by believers. Here, not all of these writers are in agreement. Calvin and Nevin were quite firm that this is the case. Calvin spent several sections of the Institutes refuting this claim which he felt was one of the chief evils of Roman Catholic doctrine. Quoting Augustine, he asserted, "In the elect alone do the sacraments effect what they symbolize."60 Unbelievers "communicate only in a visible symbol" and do not receive the accompanying invisible grace.61 Nevin was equally firm in his systematic explication of the proper Reformed sacramental doctrine: "The object of the institution is to confirm and advance the new life, where it has been already commenced. It has no power to convert such as are still in their sins."62

However, he added that it is not the exercise of believers' faith which gives the sacrament its force and makes Christ present. Rather, faith is required for us to benefit: "The force of the sacrament is in the sacrament

59The Mystical Presence, 172. He did, however, agree with Puritan divine John Owen, whom he quotes as saying that Christ is apprehended in the Sacrament as he is nowhere else. Compare the Wesleys: "...through this choicest Instrument/ Doth all his Blessings give.... This is the richest legacy /Thou hast on Man bestowed. . . / Here all thy Blessings we receive. Here all thy Gifts are given..." (42, stanzas 1, 4, 5). See also 42, stanza 3, as quoted above.

60Institutes IV.XVII.34. XVII.33-34 are devoted to refuting the doctrine of the valid reception of Christ's body and blood by unbelievers. However, this does not have to be read in either Calvin or Nevin as a denial of the objective nature of the Real Presence. As McDonnell notes, "seldom is sufficient attention given to those declarations of Calvin's which assume an objective character to the Eucharist by asserting that the body is offered to all [emphasis mine]. The gift is given, but it is not received because of the lack of faith" (277).

61Institutes. IV.XVII.34.
62The Mystical Presence. 172.
63The Mystical Presence. 173.
itself. Our faith is needed, only as the condition that is required to make room for it in our souls.”

The Wesleys, somewhat surprisingly, were more willing to open the effects of the eucharist to nonbelievers (not necessarily unbaptized unbelievers, however, since most of those the Wesleys converted had been baptized as children). They saw it as a means of prevenient and converting grace as well as a means of grace which strengthened and sanctified those who were already converted and justified. This is implicit in some of the eucharistic hymns, such as 8 (cited above), and others:

Come hither all, whose groveling Taste
Enslaves your Souls, and lays them waste,
Save your Expense, and mend your Chear....
Come hither all, whom tempting Wine
Bows to your Father Belial’s shrine,
Sin all your boast, and sense your GOD;
Weep now for what ye’ve drank amiss,
And lose your taste of Sensual Bliss
By drinking here your Savior’s Blood.
Come hither all, whom searching Pain,
And Conscience’s loud Cries arraign,
Producing all your sins to View;
Taste, and dismiss your guilty fear;
O taste, and see that GOD is here....
Come hither all, whose Idol-love,
While fond the pleasing Pain ye prove,
Raises your foolish Raptures high... (9, stanzas 1-3)

Burst our Bonds, and set us free,
From all Iniquity release... (20, stanza 2)

Hearts of Stone, relent, relent,
Break by JESU’s Cross subdued... (23, stanza 1)

Sinner with Awe draw near,
And find thy Savior here,
In his Ordinances still,
Touch his Sacramental Clouds,
Present in his Power to heal, Virtue from his body flows. (39, stanza 1)

The explicit statement of this belief is found in Wesley’s journals: “Many

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63 The famous, though perhaps apocryphal, story is that Susanna Wesley herself had experienced forgiveness of sins and converting grace through reception of the eucharist (Rattenbury 7). (The reference to the incident in Wesley’s journal does not mention the woman’s name). In another journal entry, Rattenbury cited Wesley as preaching on the subject “that the Lord’s supper was ordained by God to be a means if conveying to men either preventing, or justifying’ or sanctifying grace, according to their several necessities” (Journal, June 28, 1740, cited in Rattenbury, 7-8).
present now know, the very beginning of your conversion to God (perhaps, in some, the first deep conviction) was wrought at the Lord's Supper."

Because the Wesleys considered salvation as something that could be repeatedly gained or lost, as opposed to the Reformed view of election and eternal security, it makes sense that they would see in the eucharist an aid, not only to strengthening believers, but to assisting those who were for whatever reason outside the fold.

**The Real Presence is ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible.** In the end, whether it is Calvin asserting, "I rather experience than understand it" or Charles Wesley writing, "Sure and real is the Grace/ The Manner be unknown," there is a tendency to skirt the issue of how exactly Christ is really present in the eucharist—given that for these writers (a) he undoubtedly is and (b) no one wants to sound Roman Catholic in saying so. Nevin comes the closest to setting the doctrine in its "proper scientific form," as he calls it. He developed a theory of human nature, organically united to Adam and fallen in both body and soul and therefore needing to be organically united with Christ in both his human and divine persons in order to be saved—an organic union inaugurated with the Incarnation and strengthened in individual believers by grace received through the channel of the sacraments. Even so, by refusing to localize the presence in the elements he ultimately left unanswered the question of precisely how this reception of grace is accomplished.

**IV**

Although sensitively thought out and poetically expressed, the doctrine of the Real Presence as enunciated by Calvin, the Wesleys, and Nevin has several major problems which need to be addressed before the doctrine can claim the attention of either Protestant memorialists or Roman Catholic debunkers of Protestantism. Among them are the following.

1. The doctrine of the Real Presence is easier to spiritualize than one which focuses more directly and precisely on Christ's presence in the ele-

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65 John Wesley, Journal, June 27, 1740, cited in Rattenbury, 7. "The Duty of Constant Communion" alludes to this indirectly when Wesley names the benefits of the Eucharist as "the forgiveness of our past sins, the present strength and refreshing of our souls.... The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon if our sins, and enables us to leave them" ("The Duty of Constant Communion," section L2-3).

66 Nevin, *The Mystical Presence*, 147. See Chapter III.

67 *The Mystical Presence*, Chapter III. Sect. I and II, and all of Chapter IV.


69 On the one hand there is Goodloe, writing, "The whole ceremony suggests Jesus to the worshipper.... We break the bread and pour the wine as symbols of the physical experiences of the Master, marking the significance of his action on our behalf" (Goodloe, 55). On the other, Gregory Dix has written in *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London, A & C Black, 1945), 639, "Apart from the specific situation which gave it such terrific emotional force at the close of the Western middle ages, the protestant idea has never had in itself sufficient content to embrace either the whole essence of the Christian religion or the whole complexity of human life."
ments. Because the language of these theologians is often ambiguous and focuses on mystery, it is possible to bend their words—particularly Calvin’s—into a form more suited to a memorialist and purely spiritual interpretation. The Wesleys avoided this somewhat through the concrete nature of their poetic language.

But even in their case—to take a noticeable example—the phrase “the altar sanctifies the gift” became well-known in the American holiness movement as an expression of self-sacrifice leading to sanctification, without an acknowledgment that the self-sacrifice referred to was in a eucharistic context:

Ye Royal Priests of JESUS, rise,
And join the Daily Sacrifice,
Join all Believers in his name
To offer up the Spotted Lamb...
Ourselves we offer up to GOD,
Implunged in his atoning Blood
Mean are our noblest Offerings,
Poor feeble unsubstantial Things,
But when to him our Souls we lift,
The Altar Sanctifies the Gift....
Mixt with the sacred Smoke we rise,
The Smoke of his Burnt Sacrifice.... (137, stanzas, 1, 4-5, 7, italics mine)\(^7\)

The ambiguity of these theologians about exactly how Christ’s presence is exercised and discerned stems directly from another problem with this doctrine—its refusal to explain itself fully because of a fear of explaining away Protestantism in the process.

(2) The fear of Roman Catholicism hampers a robust statement of the doctrine. Because all of these writers were interested in distancing themselves from Roman Catholicism and the idea of transubstantiation, they did not push the edges of the envelope in terms of their statements of how Christ was present in the sacrament. It may be that it would have been impossible for them to attribute everything to the eucharist that they wished to attribute without slipping into transubstantiation. However, they did not fully try. Furthermore, given their historical locations, none of them really grasped what the Roman Catholic doctrine actually was and how close they may have come to it in some cases—Wesley’s idea of eucharistic sacrifice, for instance. Instead, they reacted against a distortion of Roman Catholic beliefs.\(^7\) Partially because of the influence of that distortion, another force

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\(^7\)And, particularly in Calvin’s case, their reaction helped to create the form of that distortion that would continue to dominate the Protestant imagination: distant, heavily ornamented priests mumbling words that falsely claimed to effect a magic transformation and re-sacrifice Christ on their altars.
was launched in Protestantism whose power is somewhat underestimated by proponents of a Protestant Real Presence.

(3) This doctrine and its proponents underestimated the extent to which memorialism would take root in the Protestant psyche—particularly the American Protestant psyche. Calvin, of course, was writing before memorialism had taken root. Yet both his ideas on predestination (which became the defining feature of his doctrine for many, whether or not he had intended so) and the general Reformation representation of Roman Catholicism created a ground in which an emphasis on the purely spiritual and purely memorial could thrive. The Wesleys did not attack memorialism strenuously, having enough other controversies to keep them busy, but even a simple counting of the number of hymns in the different sections of *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* shows where their sympathies lay.\(^72\) Yet the forces within Methodism which led to its becoming a separate denomination, especially in America, led to an over-emphasis on the evangelical heritage of Methodism and a devaluation of its sacramental side.\(^73\)

Nevin, of course, was fully aware of the problems of memorialism when allied with sectarianism and individualism, and his critiques of it still ring true 150 years later. Yet, in *The Mystical Presence* and his other writings on the Eucharist, even he seems to feel that this tendency in American religion could be reversed if only someone would clearly present the doctrine of the Real Presence and the objective nature of the eucharist with abundant historical and biblical evidence. However, all he got for his pains were heresy charges from his own denomination,\(^74\) an argument with uber-fundamentalist Charles Hodge, and eventual semi-obscurity among Protestants.

Why has memorialism won, at least temporarily? Why are these three great statements of Protestant eucharistic doctrine relatively obscure—even from each other, given Wesley’s ignorance of Calvin and Nevin’s of Wesley? Why have American Methodists and Reformed been, in Goodloe’s words, “inclined to follow Zwingli in this matter?” Calvin’s anti-Catholic polemicism and Nevin’s account of the antisupernatural bias of the Enlightenment provide some clues. Perhaps the strenuous call to a sacramental holiness—even in the face of emotional and spiritual barrenness—of the Wesley

\(^72\) The memorialist section contains 27 hymns, 64 hymns deal with the Eucharist as a sign and means of grace, 22 with it as a pledge of heaven, and 40 with sacrifice in some form.

\(^73\) Some of those forces might include the emphasis on personal conversion—which became separated from the Church context—and the divorcing of bureaucratic order from sacramental order.

Eucharistic hymns provides another:

And shall I let Him go?
If now I do not feel
The Streams of Living Water flow
Shall I forsake the Well?...
He bids me eat the Bread,
He bids me drink the Wine,
No other Motive, LORD, I need
No other Word than Thine...
Let Others ask a Reason why,
My Glory is t'obey. (86, stanzas 1, 4-6)

The combination of theological and sociological factors which obscured this doctrine may always remain—like the doctrine itself—a mystery. The question, now that modern scholarship and theological reflection have begun to uncover the riches of Protestant Eucharistic doctrine, is—what are we going to do about it?