

Herman Bavinck's Understanding of John Calvin on the Lord's Supper

The Development of Bavinck's Understanding of the Lord's Supper is Focused on John Calvin

Calvin's View as Bavinck's Starting-Point

Between Zürich and Wittenberg

Bavinck regarded the controversies surrounding the doctrine of the Lord's Supper among the Reformers as a truly saddening conflict.¹ The struggles that accompanied the doctrine of the Lord's Supper—the nature of the presence of Christ in the Supper, the *communicatio idiomatum*, the use of the little word, “is,” in our Lord's words of institution, and other related concerns—concentrated themselves and embodied in themselves, in the clearest manner, the substantial and essential differences between Wittenberg and Zürich.²

In Bavinck's assessment, it was neither Luther nor Zwingli who would explicate the true meaning of the Lord's Supper, but the Frenchman, John Calvin.³ Such was Bavinck's evaluation of the importance of Calvin for understanding the true doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

In this chapter, the essential elements of Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper as interpreted by Bavinck will be examined. Due to the immense amount of material on the topic of Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper, the focus will be on an article Bavinck wrote

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Kennis en leven*, (Kok: Kampen, 1922), p. 165.

² Ibid. “In de leer over het avondmaal concentreerde en belichaamde zich op de duidelijkste wijs en voor aller bewustzijn het diepgaand verschil, dat de Reformatie in Wittenberg van die in Zürich onderscheidde.”

³ KL, 167. “Niet Duitscher of Zwitser, maar Franschman van geboorte, begaafd met eene buitengewone scherpte van verstand, en kracht van wil, onvermoeid in het leeren en verdedigen, in het vermanen en bestraffen, in het regeeren

early on in his theological development (1887) which evaluated Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper.⁴

The Development within the “Gereformeerde Dogmatiek”

The first edition of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* appeared in 1895.⁵ The four-volume work went through successive changes and printings, with the notable exception of the chapter on the Lord's Supper. The only changes that were made to that section were purely “cosmetic” in nature. It is clear that Bavinck had formulated his view on the Lord's Supper in dependence on Calvin—as he states in the first edition—and did not change his position throughout his theological development, as far as I have been able to ascertain. He does bring the rest of his theology into an organic relationship with this doctrine, however. Bavinck's theology was not fragmented, but each *locus* was brought into unity with the others by means of listening to the Word of God.

A qualification needs to be made at this point. The dependence of Bavinck upon Calvin should not be understood in terms of a mere slavish following of the Reformer. Bavinck was a theologian who allowed himself to be taught by many other theologians without slavishly following them.

A rather classic case in point is Bavinck's elder contemporary, Dr. Abraham Kuyper. As much as Bavinck was deeply indebted to Kuyper for many things theologically, he

en leiden van schier heel de reformatorische beweging, heeft hij de *diepte* der reformatie van Luther met de *breedte* van die bij Zwingli vereenigd.”

⁴ The article, “Calvijn's leer over het avondmaal,” first appeared in the Dutch church newspaper, “De Vrije Kerk” and was later included in the book *Kennis en leven*. All the quotations in this work will be taken from the book.

⁵ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Vol. I, (Kampen: Bos, 1895). The volumes II, III, & IV appeared in 1897, 1898, & 1901, respectively, by the same publisher.

remained an independent thinker and, when he deemed it necessary, would not hesitate to criticize Kuypers.⁶

An example of Bavinck's attitude towards his theological development is found in the preface of the first edition of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. He says, "This Dogmatics is most closely connected with that type that was received in the Christian religion and theology in the 16th century, especially in Switzerland. This is not because it is the only true expression (of Christian religion and theology), but because in the conviction of the author it is the relatively purest expression of the truth."⁷

To further dispel the notion of slavish reproduction of a theologian or theological system, Bavinck continues in the preface of the first edition of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* and states, "To praise the old simply because it is old is neither Reformed nor Christian. And Dogmatics does not describe what was valued, but what must be valued. It is rooted in the past, but it labors for the future."⁸

A Crisis in the Doctrine of the Sacraments

One of the important facets of Bavinck's ideas concerning the Lord's Supper is what I shall call the "two-pronged" approach. G.C. Berkouwer wrote on what he called "the crisis in the doctrine of the sacraments."⁹ This crisis expresses one of Bavinck's concerns as well. One aspect of that crisis presents itself in the relationship between the Word of

⁶ Cf. Bremmer, *HBD*, 13-64. Also see Bavinck's work, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903). This work repudiated Kuypers then somewhat popular notion of "presupposed regeneration" in baptized infants of the covenant of grace. In essence, Kuypers taught first regeneration followed by calling with a view to the *ordo salutis* in infants of believing parents. Bavinck, correctly—as is evidenced by the title of his book—reversed the procedure.

⁷ *GD1*:iv. "Het nauwst sluit echter deze dogmatiek zich aan bij dat type, hetwelk de christelijke religie en theologie in de zestiende eeuw door de Reformatie, bepaaldelijk in Zwitserland, ontving. Niet omdat dit de eenig-ware, maar wijl het naar de overtuiging van den schrijver der relatief-zuiverste uitdrukking der waarheid is."

⁸ Ibid. "Het oude te loven alleen omdat he oud is, is noch gereformeerd noch christelijk. En dogmatiek beschrijft niet wat gegolden heeft, maar wat gelden moet. Zij wortelt in het verleden, maar arbeidt voor de toekomst."

⁹ G.C. Berkouwer, *De Sacramenten*, (Kampen: Kok, 1954), pp. 11-28. Hereafter *Sacramenten*.

God and the sacrament.¹⁰ Berkouwer reminds the reader that in the Reformed view the Word and the sacraments were not placed on the same plane. There was a true sense in which the sacraments formed an *appendix doctrinae*.¹¹

For example, the Second Helvetic Confession (*Confessio Helvetica Posterior*) makes a strong point of what the elements *become* through the Word.¹² This approach has the advantage of showing the dependence of the sacraments on the Word of God, but manifests some of the difficulties the Reformed—as well as others—have in describing with precision what the exact relationship is between the Word and sacraments. Bavinck will touch on this relationship and its importance to the whole debate in his explanation of Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper.

The Sacraments: No Separate Grace imparted!

In addition to the notion of the sacraments as *appendix doctrinae*, there is unanimity concerning the Augustinian position that the sacraments do not impart a special grace that is different from the grace imparted by the Word of God. The preached and read Word gives an “invisible” grace while the sacraments—connected to the Word of God—impart a “visible,” tangible grace.

Yet in all of this—and this is now the second “prong”—, there is what can rightly be called a “primary/secondary” relationship between the Word and the sacraments. This “secondary” aspect of the sacraments should not be thought of as of “unimportant.” “The secondary sacrament, is, by means of its complete reliance upon the primary Word, *absolutely important.*”¹³

¹⁰ Berkouwer, *Sacramenten*, 49.

¹¹ Ibid., 49-50.

¹² Müller, *Bekenntnis*, 207. “Nam verbo Dei fiunt, quae antea non fuerant, sacramenta. . . . Consecrantur enim verbo et sanctificata esses ostenditur ab eo, qui instituit.”

¹³ Berkouwer, *Sacramenten*, 57.

With these preliminary remarks in mind, we now turn to the article that Bavinck wrote on Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper. First, I shall delineate seven “theses” present in the article, and then discuss each of the theses in turn.

The theses are as follows: First, God has brought the believer into the Church (that is, into his “house”) by means of baptism.¹⁴ Baptism is our initiation into God’s household of love.¹⁵

Second, Christ is the “substance” and “material” of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁶ The question raised here is this: how is Christ *for us*? This thesis will deal with that question.

Third, the centrality of the *unio mystica* is indispensable to the Lord’s Supper.¹⁷ This will form a key theme in this dissertation. We shall observe the central place of the *unio* for both Bavinck and Calvin.

Fourth, the relationship between the fellowship with Christ’s person and his benefits is seen as inseparable.¹⁸ If Christ is offered in the proclamation of the gospel, how does he benefit the recipient in the Lord’s Supper?

The fifth thesis is the explanation of the *præsentia realis* for a proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁹ Throughout the history of the church, there has been controversy surrounding the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. This thesis will draw out Bavinck’s and Calvin’s views.

¹⁴ *KL*, 169.

¹⁵ Comp. *Inst.4.15.1*. “Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children. Now baptism was given to us by God for these ends (which I have taught to be common to all sacraments); first, to serve our faith before him; secondly, to serve our confession before men.”

¹⁶ *KL*, 170.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

Sixth, the fellowship between God and man, as it is brought about by the Holy Spirit, is integral to a proper understanding of the Lord's Supper.²⁰ Since the Lord's Supper is a fellowship meal, the question will be asked concerning the nature of that fellowship.

Seventh, the *promissio* and the seals of the covenant are inextricably bound together. The notion of God's promises to his people will be the focus of this thesis as well as the manner in which those promises are actualized in the life of the Christian.

All of these "theses" were taken by Bavinck from Calvin's work entitled *Petit Traicté de la Saincte Cene de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ*.²¹

Thesis 1: God has brought the Believer into the Church by Means of Baptism

Bavinck's first thesis is more completely stated in this fashion, "The starting point of Calvin in his discussion of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is simply this beautiful thought: God has received us into his church, that is, into his house, through Baptism."²² Thus, Calvin begins with the fatherhood of God in the covenant of grace.²³ Being received into the Church of Jesus Christ through the sacrament of Baptism precludes the notion of servanthood and declares clearly to us that we are children of God.²⁴ The fatherhood of God has a very practical, spiritual value for God's people. For, "the Lord is the good Father of this household of faith who feeds his children and pours out upon them whatever they need in this life."²⁵ God brings man into His household of love through the gift of faith and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Comp. W. Balke, *Omgang met de reformatoren*, (Kampen: de Groot-Goudriaan, 1992), pp. 145-157.

²² *KL*, 169.

²³ Comp. Bavinck's article, "De Huishouding Gods," in *KL*, 98-105, where he discusses the notions of "ontological" and "economical" Trinity and emphasizes God's "economical" plan of salvation.

²⁴ Comp. B.A. Gerrish, *Grace & Gratitude*, The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 20, where he writes, "What becomes clearer in the final edition of Calvin's *Institutes* is that the father's liberality and his children's answering gratitude, or lack of it, is not only the theme of the Lord's Supper but a fundamental theme, perhaps the most fundamental theme, of an entire system of theology. It conveys, as nothing else can, the heart of Calvin's perception of God, humanity, and the harmony between them that was lost by Adam and restored by Christ."

²⁵ *KL*, 169.

through Baptism as initiation into the Church. “Baptism is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.”²⁶ One of the purposes of the sacrament of Baptism is to “fasten our minds upon Christ alone.”²⁷ Commenting on 1 Corinthians 1:20,²⁸ Calvin declares,

As, however, in these words he means simply that he preached a gospel that was genuine, and not adulterated by any foreign additions, let us keep in view this general doctrine, that all the promises of God rest upon Christ alone as their support—a sentiment that is worthy of being kept in remembrance, and is one of the main articles of our faith. It depends, however, on another principle—that it is only in Christ that God the Father is propitious to us. *Now the promises are testimonies of his fatherly kindness towards us. Hence it follows, that it is in him alone that they are fulfilled.*²⁹

These words present the essence of this thesis. The promises of God come to us through the covenant of grace. In that covenant, God declares that he will be our God and we shall be His people. He supplies all of our needs; he brings us into His Church; and He desires that we respond to Him in true faith and thanksgiving for all His manifold kindnesses towards us. The immediate connection to the Lord’s Supper is made when Bavinck says that the Father has given us the holy meal so that He could shower upon us a spiritual meal, where Christ is the life-giving bread that feeds our souls into true and salvific immortality.³⁰ So then, one detects the importance of God’s Fatherly love to His children and His spiritual “feeding” of them. Connected to this concept of the loving Father, who cares for His people is Bavinck’s second thesis that Christ is the “substance” and “material” of the Lord’s Supper.

²⁶ *Inst.4.15.1* (all references are to the Battles-McNeill edition). *OS*, 5:285. “Baptismus signum est initiationis quo in Ecclesiae cooptamur societatem, ut Christo insiti, inter filios Dei censemur.”

²⁷ *Ibid. 4.15.2.*

²⁸ ὅσαι γὰρ ἐπαγγελίαι τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἐν αὐτῷ τὸν ναῖν, καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τὸν ἀμήν, τῷ Θεῷ πρὸς δόξαν δι' ἡμῶν.

²⁹ Calvin, *Comm.*, Vol. XX, part 2, 137. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ *KL*, 170.

Thesis 2: Christ is the “Substance” and “Material” of the Lord’s Supper

Christ is the substance and matter of the Lord’s Supper.³¹ What Bavinck intends to convey by this statement is the truth that Christ is the substance of the Lord’s Supper as He is *for us*, that is, crucified and given over to death.³² In this thesis, Bavinck touches on a delicate, yet beautiful, balance in Calvin’s sacramentology. Bavinck interprets Calvin’s meaning regarding Christ as “apprehending the total Christ in the totality of our human, Christian existence.”

In order to explain further what is meant, we shall listen to Bavinck first and then to Calvin as they offer their explanations. “We eat Christ, first, as is appropriate for salvation, when we eat Him as the Crucified One and as we apprehend the working of His death on the cross with living feeling.”³³ Noteworthy here is the balance in Bavinck’s theology between objective and subjective; between objectivity and existentiality.³⁴ In other words, he is not only concerned with the objective life of the believer, but also the subjective appropriation of Christ’s person and work in our lives.

That is why he says, “the material and substance of the Lord’s Supper is Christ in His death and resurrection.”³⁵ Herein lies the balance between doctrine and life: By identifying Christ as the Crucified One who feeds us with His body and blood, we come to a clearer understanding of how the Father sets such a bountiful table before us. Christ is the food of our spiritual life.³⁶ Notice the similarity to what Calvin has say:

³¹ Ibid. “En Hij (Christ—RG) is de substantie en de stof van het avondmaal.”

³² Ibid. “Maar Christus niet zoo maar op zichzelf, maar bepaald als hij voor ons gekruisigd en in den dood is overgegeven. In de woorden der instelling: dat voor u gegeven wordt, dat voor u vergoten wordt, ligt de voornaamste en bijna de geheele kracht van het Sacrament.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cf. Meijers, *OE*, 37.

³⁵ *KL*, 170.

³⁶ Ibid. “Christus ware voor ons niet het brood des levens geweest, als Hij niet voor ons ware geboren en gestorven; en Hij zou het nu niet zijn, als niet de werking en vrucht van zijn geboorte, dood en ostanting eene eeuwige en onsterfelijke ware. Ja, juist daarom gaf Hij zijn lichaam voor ons over in den dood, opdat het voor ons tot een brood, tot voedsel voor ons geestelijk leven worden zou.”

I am accustomed to say that the matter and substance of the sacraments is the Lord Jesus Christ, and the efficacy of them are the gifts and blessings which we have by means of him. Now the effect of the Supper is to confirm for us the reconciliation which we have with God through his death and passion; the washing of our souls which we have by the shedding of his blood; the righteousness we have in his obedience; in short, the hope of salvation which we have from all he has done for us. It is necessary, then, that the substance should be joined with these, otherwise nothing would be firm or certain. Hence we must conclude that two things are presented to us in the Supper: Jesus Christ as source and substance of all good; and second, the fruit and efficacy of his death and passion.³⁷

In short, Calvin emphasizes the total Christ as the matter and substance of the Lord's Supper.³⁸ The believer must be fed by both His humanity and deity unto eternal life. We are to possess everything in Christ; all of his treasures and benefits are to accrue to us.

To this point, however, Bavinck has merely explained the *what* of Calvin's view of the Supper. That *what* is important in terms of *totus Christus*. One brief quote from Calvin must suffice for now. "When speaking of the free mercies of God, I invariably begin with Christ; and rightly so, for until he has become ours we must be completely devoid of all the gifts of grace which are wholly enclosed in him."³⁹ The pressing question is this: How does the believer partake of the humanity and deity of Christ unto eternal life? The answer is found in one of the most central notions of both Bavinck's and Calvin's theology, namely the *unio mystica*.

Thesis 3: The Centrality of the "Unio Mystica" is Indispensable to the Lord's Supper

It has been observed that the thought of the mystical union is of fundamental significance for all of Calvin's theological thought.⁴⁰ Following Calvin, Bavinck

³⁷ Reid, *CTT*, 146.

³⁸ For an overview of Calvin's use of the term "substantia," see D. Willis, "Calvin's Use of Substantia," in W. Neuser (hrsg.), *Calvinus Ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984), pp. 289-301.

³⁹ *CO*, 9:88.

⁴⁰ P.J. Richel, *Het kerkbegrip van Calvijn*, (Franeker: Wever, 1942), p. 56. "Voor Calvijn is deze gedachte der *unio mystica* van fundamentele betekenis voor heel zijn theologisch denken." Comp. D. Willis, *Substantia*, 291.

envisages a special, intimate, personal union of the believer with Christ.⁴¹ This union is not something that “happens” during our participation in the Lord’s Supper and then is over. Rather, it is an “abiding” reality because our union with Christ through faith is permanent. Interestingly, one of Calvin’s most prominent discussions of the mystical union is found in the discussion of justification in the *Institutes*. This is what he says about the nature of the union of the believer with Christ:

Now, lest Osiander deceive the unlearned by his cavils, I confess that we are deprived of this utterly incomparable good until Christ is made ours. Therefore, that joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him.⁴²

This statement is not only important for Calvin’s doctrine of justification by faith alone, but also for his sacramentology. As we noted earlier, one of the points of contention for the Reformers was that the sacraments did not add anything new to the Word and, at the same time, the sacraments were nothing without the Word.⁴³ It is at this point that we encounter a slight “tension” in Bavinck’s thinking, which emerges in the quotation that follows:

The Word already offers and grants Christ to us, but the Lord’s Supper does this more clearly (*illustrius*). In the Lord’s Supper the fellowship with Christ is established and increased. For—and this is what we read in the Genevan Catechism—even though Christ is given to us both in Baptism and in the Gospel, yet we do not receive him *totally*, but only *partially*.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *KL*, 174. “De mystieke unie, de verborgen gemeenschap der gelooijgen met Christus is in de eerste plaats eene allernauwste, onbegrijpelijke vereeniging met den persoon van Christus, met Zijne Goddelijke en menschelijke natuur, met zijn ziel en lichaam, met zijn vleesch en bloed en daarna eerst deelgenootschap ook aan zijn schatten en gaven.”

⁴² *Inst.3.11.10*.

⁴³ *KL*, 170.

⁴⁴ *KL*, 170-171. Italics—RG. The quotation from the Geneva Cathecism is as follows: “Qu'est-ce que nous avons au Sacrement d'avantage, et de quoy nous sert il plus? C'est, que ceste communion est plus amplement confirmé en nous, et comme ratifié, Car combien que Iesus Christ nous soit vrayement communiqué, et par le Baptesme, et par l'Evangile: toutesfois, ce n'est qu'en partie, non pas pleinement.” (W. Niesel, *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen*, [Zürich: Zollikon, 1938], p. 39.) Also, comp. *Bekenntnis*, 150. “Quid amplius ex sacramento consequimur, aut quid praeterea utilitatis nobis confert? Hoc scilicet, quod illa, de qua dixi, communicatio nobis

Bavinck here emphasizes that the Lord’s Supper—even though an appendix which depends upon the Word and cannot be administered without being accompanied by the Word—is an exceedingly important facet of the Christian’s life.

There is no contradiction between Bavinck and Calvin’s thought, but there certainly is an antinomy. That is, while Calvin asserts that there is no different grace offered in the sacraments which is not given in the gospel and that the *totus Christus* is offered in both the gospel and the Lord’s Supper, he can still make the statement Bavinck cites.

W. Dankbaar argues that Calvin speaks in—what Dankbaar calls—a more “unbiased” manner about the Supper in the Genevan Catechism than he does in the *Consensus Tigurinus*.⁴⁵ But Dankbaar has forgotten that certain terms, such as *substantia*, disappeared in the *Consensus* because Calvin was trying to be “unbiased” there as well.⁴⁶

G. Hartvelt, on the other hand—surely rightly—, believes that Calvin’s motive is that he is emphasizing another *theme*, namely the *caro Christi vivifica* or *substantia corporis Christi*.⁴⁷ Hartvelt cites Calvin’s displeasure with the Anabaptists because they do not realize, “quelle conionction et unite nous avons avec nostre Seigneur Iesus car nous sommes uniz avec luy, iusques à estre faictz une mesme substance.”⁴⁸ What is important to note here is the phrase “une mesme substance,” (the same substance). To Hartvelt’s

confirmatur et augetur. Tametsi enim tum in baptismo, tum in evangelio nobis exhibetur Christus: eum tamen non recipimus totum, sed ex parte tantum.”

⁴⁵ Dankbaar, *Sacramentenleer*, 156.

⁴⁶ Willis, *Substantia*, 297. “The Consensus of Zürich poses a special problem because nowhere in it are the terms substance and substantial used in an affirmative sense. ‘Substance’ appears in Article 24, but only in transubstantiation, which is rejected. It also appears in Article 23, all of which is Calvin’s addition at the last minute to get into the document the affirmation that we feed on Christ in the sacrament....This Consensus could not represent Calvin’s own preferred way of speaking; it was admittedly a compromise document.”

⁴⁷ Hartvelt, *VC*, 89. “. . . [H]et is wel onze overtuiging dat deze ‘onbevangenheid’ van Calvijn beslist maar geen toevalligheid is, of een pastorale wending in een catechismus, maar dat deze verankerd ligt in het grote geheel van zijn opvattingen aangaande de *caro Christi vivifica*. . . . Want er is, om het op voorhand te formuleren, in de avondmaalsleer van Calvijn een ánder thema, nl. Dat van de *caro Christi vivifica* waarmee de gelovigen gemeenschap hebben, of, om het nog anders te zeggen: de *substantia corporis Christi*.”

⁴⁸ Ibid., quoting *CR* 7:121-122.

mind, that is the central distinction between the gospel and baptism, on the one hand, and the Lord's Supper, on the other. Suffice it to say that Calvin views the Lord's Supper as one of the most important means of grace God gives to the Christian Church for growth in the mystical union with Christ. Bavinck takes due note of this truth in the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.⁴⁹ The quotation is somewhat lengthy, but summarizes this thesis quite nicely.

In the Lord's Supper the concept of the eating of Christ's body is not exhausted either in faith itself or in trusting in Christ's death. Eating is not identical with faith, even though it always comes to its rightful place through faith. Rather, it is the fruit of the indwelling of Christ within us which always takes place through faith, but is differentiated from it (Eph. 3:17). It is apparent that what Calvin understood in the *unio mystica* was the fellowship (communion) of the believers with the total person of Christ. . . . In the Lord's Supper there is a communion (*gemeenschap*) not only with the treasures and benefits of Christ, but also with the person of Christ and then not only with his divine but also with his human nature; with his own body and blood. And this communion is called an "eating." It exists neither in a bodily descent of Christ from heaven nor in a *mixtura vel transfusio carnis Christi cum anima nostra*, but in a lifting up of our hearts to heaven, in a union with Christ through the Holy Spirit, in a *communio* with his body, with the result that Christ *spirat e carnis suae substantia vitam in animas nostras, imo propriam vitam in nos diffundit*. Calvin's conception is not entirely clear, especially with regard to the fellowship with Christ's own flesh and blood and what concerns the life that flows forth out of that communion. . . . But Calvin's main thought is clear: that in the Lord's Supper a spiritual communion is exercised with the person and therefore with the body and blood of Christ through the mediation of the Holy Spirit and that believers are fed and nourished unto eternal life has been taken over into various Reformed confessions and has become common ground in Reformed theology.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ GD4:534.

⁵⁰ GD4:534-535. "En het eten van Christus' lichaam in het avondmaal gaat in het gelooven, in het vertrouwen op zijn dood niet op. Het eten is niet met het gelooven één, al komt het altijd slechts door het gelooven tot stand, maar het is er veleer de vrucht van evenals in Ef. 3:17 het inwonen van Christus in ons wel door het geloof geschiedt, maar toch van dat geloof onderscheiden is. . . . Het was Calvijn blijkbaar te doen om de *unio mystica*, om de *gemeenschap* der geloovigen met den ganschen persoon van Christus. . . . In het avondmaal is er eene *gemeenschap* niet alleen aan zijn Goddelijke, maar ook aan zijne menschelijke natuur, aan zijn eigen lichaam en bloed; en deze *gemeenschap* wordt een eten genoemd. Dit bestaat dus niet in een lichaamelijk neerdalen van Christus uit den hemel noch ook in eene *mixtura vel transfusio carnis Christi cum anima nostra* maar in eene verheffing onzer harten hemelwaart, in eene vereeniging met Christus door de Heiligen Geest, in eene *communio* aan zijn lichaam tengevolge waarvan Christus *spirat e carnis suae substantia vitam in animas nostras, imo propriam vitam in nos diffundit*. . . . De voorstelling van Calvijn is niet in elk opzicht duidelijk, vooral niet wat de *gemeenschap* aan het eigne vleesch en bloed van Christus en het daaruit voortvloeiende leven betreft. Maar de hoofgedachte van Calvijn, dat er in het avondmaal door den Heiligen Geest eene geestelijke *gemeenschap* geoeftend wordt met den persoon en dus ook met het lichaam en bloed van Christus en dat de geloovigen daardoor gespijsd en gelaafd worden ten eeuwigen leven, is in verschillende Gereformeerde belijdenisschriften overgenomen, en gemeengoed geworden van de Gereformeerde theologie."

In summary, the mystical union, as taught by Calvin, comes especially to the forefront in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. "Eating" and "believing" are not identical. In the Supper the participant communes with both the humanity and deity of Christ through the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit. As Bavinck correctly states, the position of Calvin is not clear in every respect, but we are brought into intimate, personal communion with him without becoming divine ourselves. Perhaps it could be stated this way: In Calvin 's view of the Lord's Supper the mystical union is central. That union is different from *mysticism*. In the latter, man says to God, "I am you." In Calvin's view, man says to God, "I am yours."⁵¹

Thesis 4: The Relationship between the Fellowship with Christ's Person and His Benefits is Inseparable

In the Lord's Supper, Christ is offered to the participant as the only food for his soul in a different (*andere*), and clearer (*nog klaardere*) manner.⁵² How does that take place? It is precisely in the signs (*teeken*) of bread and wine that Christ is truly and essentially (*wezenlijk*) present. This thesis "dovetails" with the previous ones.

Bavinck appreciates that Calvin is not merely teaching an enduring, deeper, more intimate union with Christ in the Supper, but that this union is offered in a "different" and

⁵¹ Two writers who help summarize this thesis are Gerrisch & Krusche. I cite them in turn. Gerrish, *GG*, 134 writes, "Once the idea of communion with Christ's life-giving flesh, effected through the word, has been presented as the heart of Calvin's gospel, his doctrine of the Eucharist is already half stated. The role he assigns to the Lord's Supper in the life of the church presupposes that communion with Christ is not whole and perfect from the very first, but subject to growth, vicissitudes, and impediments. He does not think of 'receiving Christ' as a crisis decision, achieved once and for all, but rather as a magnitude subject to variation." Then, W. Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), p. 271. "Dass die *manducatio spiritualis* im Abendmahl nicht im geringsten etwas anderes ist als die im Glauben geschehende *communio cum Christo*, zeigt sich in der unbedingten Parallelität der Aussagen hier und da: es lässt sich zu jeder der oben zitierten Aussagen über die Christusgemeinschaft eine Fülle von Belegen aus dem Zusammenhang der Abendmahlslehre beibringen, die wörtlich dasselbe sagen, und—was das Entscheidende ist—es gibt keine Aussage über das geistliche Geschehen des Abendmahls die nicht auch ganz abgesehen vom Abendmahl in der Lehre von der Einung mit Christus gemacht würde."

⁵² *KL*, 171.

“more clear” fashion. This reiterates the following truth: in the Lord’s Supper we receive Christ’s own body and blood.⁵³

Bavinck puts it in more uncompromising wording when he says, “By virtue of the eating of the bread and drinking from the cup, we not only obtain the Spirit of Christ and his benefits, which he secured through his death. Specifically, we become participants in the one flesh and blood of the crucified and now glorified Savior.”⁵⁴

This is what Bavinck calls Calvin’s grasp of the “objective” side of the sacrament. In this sense, Calvin was on the side of Rome and the Lutherans.⁵⁵ His emphasis on the “objective” side involved, in part, a reaction against the Lord’s Supper being nothing more than a mere confession of our faith or a remembrance of the death of Christ.⁵⁶

The relationship between the fellowship with Christ’s person and benefits has a yet more intimate side. Bavinck explains it this way:

This fellowship with Christ is not exhausted in a participation in his benefits and is also not merely a harmony in thinking, feeling and willing, a unanimity, a harmony, but it is, indeed, the most intimate binding of person with person, of the total Christ according to his divine and human nature, according to both soul and body with the person of the believer equally according to both soul and body.⁵⁷

It is in this statement that Bavinck balances fellowship with Christ himself and fellowship with Christ’s benefits and brings them both into intimate union with the believer. The believer is fed with Christ’s person and with his benefits. There is a noticeable progression in what Bavinck is elucidating from Calvin’s sacramentology.

With each step, a new aspect or phase of the intimacy of the believer with Christ is portrayed. Holding on to what has already been demonstrated, the reader is pointed to the

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

statement in the above quotation, which expands on the intimacy of the believer with the Crucified One. The fellowship of life is more than participation in Christ's benefits and is more than thinking, feeling and willing. The participation is more than cognitive. With each successive statement the reader is drawn ever closer to the truth of the union of the believer with Christ in the Supper and the indispensable need to commune in the holy meal.

We have already seen how Calvin taught what could be called the “abiding effects” of the union that is maintained long after the participation in the elements of bread and wine has passed.⁵⁸ This “eating” of Christ’s flesh and blood can take place only by faith, but it involves more than faith.⁵⁹ Calvin makes the distinction that “eating” Christ is the fruit and result of faith.⁶⁰ This comports with the way God brings the believer into his household and feeds him with the spiritual food he needs. That food is Christ. The feeding upon Christ, by the believer, brings him into contact with a living-giving power. (*vis, vigor, virtus*).⁶¹

The statement “This fellowship with Christ is not exhausted in a participation in his benefits,” is a key one and demands explanation. As Bavinck attempts to unfold the intricacies of Calvin’s sometimes rather opaque way of speaking, he draws attention to a very important matter. He reminds us that the fellowship with Christ is not exhausted in a participation in his benefits *and* that it “is also not merely a harmony in *thinking, feeling* and *willing*.⁶²

The totality of the *unio* is to be explained by way of contrast and inclusion. It is not mere participation in Christ’s benefits—although that would surely be sufficient! It is not merely

⁵⁷ *KL*, 177.

⁵⁸ *KL*, 170; Reid, *CTT*, 161, writes, “The mystical union, the hidden and secret union of life with Christ does not exist only in the moment in which we participate in the Lord’s Supper. According to Ephesians 5:30, John 6:51 and 17:21 we are and we remain one with Christ outside the Lord’s Supper; bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. The nature of this union of life remains the same. The sacrament adds nothing new to the word and is nothing without the word.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

cognitive (thinking), emotive (feeling) or volitional (willing). It is all of that *plus* the total Christ bound to the total man. It is multi-dimensional. It is deeper and more intimate than man can ever imagine. It possesses a profundity that is unfathomable, but must be lived and striven for. It is a life that is guided, led and prompted at every point by the revealed will of God and by the subjective illumination of the Holy Spirit.

The union is one where growth and progression are realities. It is the union that gives the phrase “life-giving power” its true spiritual content. It is this union that must make redeemed man “eucharistic” man.

Using all the foregoing theses as foundational pillars, attention will now be given to an understanding of the *præsentia realis*, which is the topic of the fifth thesis in Bavinck’s article on Calvin.

Thesis 5: The Explanation of the “Præsentia Realis” is Crucial to a Proper Understanding of the Lord’s Supper

Bavinck states that Calvin cannot find words powerful enough to draw out and clearly delineate that he holds to the real, essential and true presence of Christ’s own flesh and blood in the Lord’s Supper.⁶³ When he refers to the *præsentia realis*, “it is clear that Calvin is not talking about just a ‘spiritual presence.’ He is talking about the real presence of the whole Christ (*totus Christus, sed non totum*)⁶⁴ who is present in the eucharist by the power of his word and Spirit.”⁶⁵ Willis quotes these words of Calvin to substantiate his position:

None of us denies that the body and blood are communicated to us. But the question is, what is the nature of this communication of our Lord’s body and blood? I wonder how these men dare to assert simply and openly that it is carnal. When we say that it is spiritual, they roar

⁶¹ Ibid., 176.

⁶² Ibid., 177. Italics—RG.

⁶³ Bavinck formulates it in this manner in *KL*, 171. “Hij (John Calvin—RG) kan schier geen woorden krachtig genoeg vinden om te doen uitkomen, dat hij de *werkelijke, wezenlijke, waarachtige* tegenwoordigheid van Christus eigen vleesch en van zijn eigen bloed in het avondmaal vasthoudt.” Italics—RG.

⁶⁴ *Inst.2.13.4; 4.17.29-30.*

⁶⁵ Willis, *Substantia*, 294.

out as if by this term we were making it not to be what they commonly call real. If they will use *real* for true, and oppose it to fallacious or imaginary, we will rather speak barbarously than afford material for strife. . . according to us the spiritual mode of communion is such that we enjoy Christ in reality.⁶⁶

The question then arises: “What, if anything, was the ultimate difference among Calvin, Rome, and the Lutherans, specifically and essentially?” Bavinck interprets the difference to be that of the *manner* (*wijze*) of Christ’s presence.⁶⁷

To his way of thinking, to posit a local, sensual, and material presence of Christ in the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper did despite to the true humanity of Christ⁶⁸ and, thereby, militated against the Scriptures.⁶⁹ The importance of the humanity of Christ in the Supper is, as we have already seen, fundamental in Calvin’s thinking.

It is precisely the approach of Rome and the Lutherans that (1) does despite to the veracity (*waarachtigheid*) and glory of the human nature of Christ and (2) contains notions—in transubstantiation and consubstantiation—which are virtually impossible.⁷⁰

The criticism here is twofold. First, there is the denigration of the true humanity of Christ. His human nature is and remains a true human nature, even after the resurrection.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ *KL*, 171.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 180. “. . . Christus’ lichaam blijft in den hemel. . .” Reid, *CTT*, 159.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 171. “Dit is ten eenenmale in strijd met wat de H. Schrift ons leert over de waarachtige menschelijke natuur van Christus, over zijne hemelvaart en verheerlijking aan de rechterhand des Vaders. Christus is nog waarachtig mensch, eindig, beperkt, aan plaats gebonden en daarom locaal in den hemel. Het is geheel vals, als de tegenstanders geene andere gemeenschap met Christus’ vleesch en bloed kunnen denken dan eene, die in de samenvoeging van Christus met hen in dezelfde plaats bestaat. Maar dat is eene tegenwoordigheid, die Christus vasthecht aan en besluit in de elementen van brood en wijn. Dat is eene tegenwoordigheid, die Hem zijne grootheid en majestet en heerlijkheid ontneemt, die aan zijne menschelijke natuur te kort doet. Vleesch moet vleesch en een mensch mensch blijven.”

⁷⁰ Ibid. It should be noted that Calvin was gentler in his criticisms when it came to the Protestants. In his article on the Lord’s Supper from 1541 he says, “I pray all the faithful, in the name of God, not to be too offended at the great difference which has arisen between those who ought to be leaders in bringing back truth to the light of day. For it is not a new thing for the Lord to leave his servants in some ignorance, and to permit them to dispute against each other. . . . Moreover, if we consider in what an abyss of darkness the world was, when those who have shared in this controversy began to elicit the truth for us, we shall not wonder at all that they did not know everything from the outset. . . . Once the contention had begun, it became more inflamed with time, and so has continued too bitterly for a period of fifteen years or thereabouts, without either party, listening to the other in a peaceful frame of mind. For though they once held conference, yet there was such alienation, that they parted without any agreement. Then instead of meeting with goodwill, they have always retreated farther and farther from one another, thinking of nothing but to defend their own opinion and confute anything contrary. . . . Both parties failed altogether to have patience to listen to each other, in order to follow truth without passion, wherever it might be found.” (Reid, *CTT*, 164-166).

Secondly, both transubstantiation and consubstantiation contain notions that are “impossible” for true and full humanity. There is a certain “de-humanization” present in both transubstantiation and consubstantiation.

This is not to say that Calvin desired to remove anything mysterious from the holy meal. Previous quotations have indicated how the “mystery” of the actual working of the Supper remained for him. The meal was better “experienced” than explained. Nonetheless, Calvin still criticized both Roman Catholics and Lutherans for holding to “impossibilities” in their respective views of the Lord’s Supper. Positively, Calvin taught that Christ was spiritually (*spiritualiter*) present and was constrained by his so-called *extra Calvinisticum*⁷¹ to teach that the flesh of the Savior remained in heaven.⁷²

As Bavinck investigates and explains Calvin’s view of the Supper, he argues that the spiritual presence of Christ is far superior to any view that purports to signify and seal some general or objective truth.⁷³ That general and objective truth would include facets such as “there is grace,” “there is forgiveness,” “there is eternal life in Christ for everyone who believes.”⁷⁴

Even though this list is in itself impressive, Bavinck is convinced that in Calvin’s view there is something much more at stake something far deeper which feeds the soul of the participant.⁷⁵ It is precisely in the Lord’s Supper that God signifies and confirms (*bevestigt*) not only forgiveness and eternal life in Christ, but God also *gives*, *grants*, and *offers* them to

⁷¹ Comp. Willis, *CCC*, 91ff.; Reid, *CTT*, 159.

⁷² *KL*, 172.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* “Neen, de teekenen in het sacrament zijn maar geen afbeeldingen maar werkelijk panden en waarborgen, dat het lichaam des Heeren eenmaal voor ons is opgeoffered en ons nu tot spijze is.” Reid, *CTT*, 166. “We confess, then, with one mouth that, in receiving the sacrament in faith, according to the ordinance of the Lord, we are truly made partakers of the real substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.”

us.⁷⁶ These words only add to the “specificity” of the spiritual union of the believer with Christ and confirm this truth, repeatedly and unrelentingly taught: the deep, intimate, and personal union of the believer with Christ.

This type of approach, which so emphasizes the *præsentia realis* in such adamant terms, is susceptible to being misunderstood, however. According to Bavinck, it was Calvin’s intention to maintain two important points in his doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. The first was its “objectivity” and the second was the “truthfulness of God’s promises.”⁷⁷ But there was yet a third point that Bavinck characterized as the “heart and core” of Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. The following quotation establishes an important truth, namely that of the relationship between the benefits of Christ and the union with the believer *and* the completeness of the union itself.

Zwingli taught no other fellowship with Christ in the Lord’s Supper except that which concerned his benefits obtained on the cross. That was insufficient for Calvin. There was yet another, deeper fellowship; a fellowship not just with the benefits but with the *person* of Christ himself, a fellowship with Christ’s own flesh and blood.⁷⁸ That is, there is an inextricable relationship between the benefits and treasures of Christ and the union that the believer has with him. These two are distinguishable, but not separable.⁷⁹

Exactly how intimate is this relationship—the *unio mystica*—with Christ that the believer enjoys? “The mystical union, the hidden fellowship of the believers with Christ is, in the first place, an intimate (*allernauwste*), incomprehensible union with the person of

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 173-174. Italics mine.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 174.

Christ, with his divine and human nature, with his soul and body, with his flesh and blood and, thereafter, a participation in his treasures and gifts.”⁸⁰

This quotation underscores the *totality* of the union, the *intimacy* of the union and, also, the *incomprehensibility* of it. Here, too, it is seen that Calvin retains a sense of awe and mystery concerning the union, all the while holding tenaciously to its reality and the reality of Christ in the holy meal.

Bavinck concludes from Calvin’s exposition that there are two things that are signified and sealed in the Lord’s Supper. First, Christ himself is the “material” and “substance” of the sacrament. Second, the purpose of the seal of the covenant (*bondszege*) is that we become partakers of Christ and, thereafter, through the instrumentality of his meritorious death by which we are reconciled to God, we are renewed by his Spirit to a holy life, and obtain righteousness and salvation.⁸¹

It is in the second part of Bavinck’s explanation that he has introduced a new feature—the “seal of the covenant.” It is important to take due note of the fact that the sacrament is spoken of in “covenant” terminology, which has far-reaching implications for both Calvin’s and Bavinck’s views.⁸² It is also noteworthy that Bavinck merely mentions it, almost in passing in this early article, but will devote more time to it in the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.

To clarify the concept of fellowship that Bavinck saw in Calvin’s sacramentology, he asks the question, “What is really the nature of the fellowship with the person of the Lord which is given and enjoyed in the Lord’s Supper *and* wherein is it differentiated from the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Compare two seminal works on Calvin’s and Bavinck’s views of the covenant, respectively, W. van den Bergh, *Calvijn over het genadeverbond*, (doctoral dissertation, University of Leiden), (‘s Gravenhage: W.A. Beschoor, 1879), 136 pp.; A.A. Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant*, (doctoral dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary), 1953, 380 pp.

fellowship with Christ's benefits?"⁸³ When he gives himself to us, it is in order that we may possess him entirely and this is especially true in the Lord's Supper.⁸⁴

Before passing on to the next thesis, we must note one more important aspect of the *præsentia realis* which Calvin—and Bavinck after him—is very concerned to preserve.⁸⁵ The Reformers and the Reformed taught and continue to teach an essential, true presence of Christ

⁸³ *KL*, 174. "Van welken aard is nu echter die gemeenschap met den persoon des Heeren, welke in het avondmaal geschenken en genoten wordt, en waarin is zij van de gemeenschap aan Zijne weldaden onderscheiden?"

⁸⁴ Willis, *Substantia*, 292. Comp. *OS*, 1:508. "il n'est pas seulement question que nous soyons participans de son Esprit; mais il nous fault aussi participer à son humanité, en laquelle il a rendu toute obeissance à Dieu son Père, pour satisfaire de noz debttes. Combien, à proprement parler, que l'un ne se puisse faire sains l'autre."

⁸⁵ Comp. *Inst.4.17.10*. "Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space."

in the Lord's Supper. This is a presence according to his natural flesh and blood.⁸⁶ The difference occurs precisely in relation to the *nature* and *manner (modus)* of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, but not in the *fact* that he is present.⁸⁷

This distinction is essential for a proper understanding of Calvin's view, which Bavinck incorporates into his own doctrine of the holy Supper. What the Reformed teach is a *spiritual* presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. This spiritual presence is no less a "presence" simply because it is not bodily in nature. It is a real presence that is powerfully effected by the Holy Spirit of God. It is to this fellowship between God and man, as the Holy Spirit to whom we now turn, brings it about.

Thesis 6: The Fellowship between God and Man as It is effected by the Holy Spirit

Calvin's answer to the question, "Exactly how intimate is the relationship with Christ that the believer enjoys in the Supper?" is that there is a great mystery contained here which can better be experienced than explained; better contemplated than expressed.⁸⁸ This does not mean that Calvin is taking flight into subjectivism. Quite the contrary is the case.

For Calvin does offer an explanation which helps formulate a better understanding of the fellowship. It is one effected by the Holy Spirit taking everything from Christ and imparting all his treasures and riches to the believer. It is the Spirit who works faith in the believer and who sustains that same faith throughout the Christian life normally making use of the means of grace. This is integrally connected to the notion of Christ's humanity being in heaven and the Christian being on earth.

⁸⁶ *KL*, 182.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Inst.4.17.4-7.*

A key concept here is the willingness of the Son to become incarnate in order to give man the renewed hope of immortality. It was precisely the Incarnation in which Christ made his flesh become “life-giving flesh” in order that, through fellowship with him, the believer might be fed with a view to this immortality.⁸⁹ Bavinck explains the intimacy of this fellowship in this way:

In the fellowship with Christ, which is given and established in the Lord’s Supper, we actually participate in his own life. He makes his own (*propriam*) life overflow in us. He pours his own life into us. He breathes his own life into us. The fellowship is a substantial one, not merely one with the Spirit, not merely with the benefits of Christ, but a fellowship with his own person. For He does not merely say, “My Spirit, or my divinity, but my flesh, my blood is true food and drink.” That flesh is particularly the material of our spiritual life.⁹⁰

It is precisely through the subjective activity of the Holy Spirit that we have true fellowship with Christ himself and participate in all his benefits.⁹¹ It is the Spirit who forms the *vinculum* between the resurrected and ascended Christ and the believer.⁹² According to the Heidelberg Catechism, it is a part of the work of the Holy Spirit to cause the believer to grow more and more into union with Christ.⁹³

The cohesion of Bavinck’s article and the relationship that exists among the various “theses” becomes clearer when we realize that it is part of the work of the Holy Spirit to feed the believer on the Person and benefits of Christ. This, in turn, leads to a deeper fellowship with His ascended flesh. This spiritual feeding hearkens back to the first thesis

⁸⁹ *KL*, 174. Compare *KL*, 174-175. “Dat vleesch van Christus heeft wel niet van zichzelf de kracht om ons levend te maken, maar blijkens Joh.5:26, eene plaats die volgens Calvijn niet spreekt van de eeuwige generatie maar van de gaven door den Vader aan den Zoon in het vleesch geschenken, heeft Christus ook in zijn menschelijke natuur de volheid des levens wonen. Het vleesch van Christus is een rijke en onuitputtelijke bron, die het leven, dat uit de Godheid daarin welt, in ons overstort. Door neder te dalen, heeft Christus die kracht des levens, welke Hij als het Woord bezat, in Zijn vleesch uitgestort, opdat vandaar de gemeenschap des levens ons toevloeien zou.” Comp. *KL*, 175. “Hieruit verklaart zich de bij Calvijn telkens voorkomende uitdrukking dat wij in het avondmaal de *substantie* van het vleesch en bloed van Christus deelachtig worden, en daardoor tot één leven met Hem samengroeien.”

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁹² Comp. Krusche, *Wirken*, 265-266. “Es ist darum dasselbe, ob Calvin sagt, daß wir durch den Glauben, oder ob er sagt, daß wir durch den Heiligen Geist zur Gemeinschaft mit Christus kommen, ob er den Glauben oder den Heiligen Geist als das *vinculum* bezeichnet, durch das Christus uns sich verbindet.”

concerning the spiritual food that God grants to the believer. This work, this “feeding,” is not to make the believer “essentially” one with Christ, but to make the believer “incomprehensibly intimate” with him.

The final thesis in Bavinck’s article deals with two inner-related subjects, namely God’s promises given to man and the covenant arrangement in which those promises were given.

Thesis 7: The “Promissio” and the Seals of the Covenant are Inextricably bound

For Bavinck, the covenant is basically a unilateral administration of God’s grace.⁹⁴ This unilateral covenant is destined to become bilateral, “to be accepted and kept by man, *consciously* and *voluntarily*, through the power of God.”⁹⁵ It is the maintenance, actualization and work of the Triune God that so beautifully comes to light in the covenant of grace.

It is the intention of God,

...that the work of grace should mirror itself in the human consciousness and arouse man’s will to energetic action. The covenant of grace does not put man to death, and does not treat him as a stick or a block, but it takes man into itself *as a totality*, with all his powers and faculties, with soul and body, for time and eternity. It envelopes him completely, does not annihilate his power but takes away his impotence, does not destroy his will but sets him free from sin, does not stupefy his consciousness but delivers him from darkness. It recreates the *entire man* and causes him, renewed by grace, with soul, spirit, and body, freely and voluntarily to love God and to dedicate Himself to Him. The covenant of grace therefore proclaims that God honors and glorifies Himself not at the expense of but for the advantage of man. God’s glory celebrates its triumphs particularly in the re-creation of the *entire man*, in his *illumined understanding* and in his *restored freedom*.⁹⁶

The “bilateral” outworking of the “unilaterally” established covenant is transparent in the above quotation taken from the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. It might have been this healthy approach to the covenant of grace that led Bavinck to a critique of the “fathers”

⁹³ Müller, *Bekenntnis*, 702-703.

⁹⁴ Bremmer, *HBDC*, 165.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 166. Italics—RG.

⁹⁶ 3:211-212. Emphasis mine.

when he said, “If I am not mistaken, the peculiarity (*eigenaardigheid*) of the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism has not been frequently understood.”⁹⁷ What Bavinck is aiming at is this: There is a direct relationship between the sacrament and the promises of God. Bavinck wishes to insure that the reader understands that these promises are not of a general nature—forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Christ the Redeemer⁹⁸—but that they are of a very specific nature,⁹⁹ given by way of the covenant of grace.

Bavinck understands the covenant of grace having its original promulgation in the *Protevangelium*. It includes the Abrahamic, Sinaitic and Davidic dispensations as all part of one covenant.¹⁰⁰ This is especially important for later as we shall see. In Bavinck’s theology, it should be kept in mind that the “covenant of Sinai” or the Ten Commandments are part of the covenant of grace as well. The specific promise of the covenant is from grace, through grace and unto grace.¹⁰¹ In Bavinck’s own words, “The covenant of grace does not depend on any human conditions; it bestows no gift on the basis of any consideration of merit; it does not wait for any fulfilment of the law on the part of man.”¹⁰²

Nevertheless, the covenant of grace, in its administration by Christ assumes a demanding, conditional form that recognizes and fully takes into account man as a rational

⁹⁷ *KL*, 181.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* “Ik, zegt de Heere, *zal uw* God zijn en de God van uw zaad in eeuwigheid.”

¹⁰⁰ Bremmer, *HBDC*, 135ff., 139ff. Also the statement by Bavinck in *GD3*:201. “Het verbond op den Sinai is en blijft in wezen een genadeverbond.”

¹⁰¹ In *GD3*:201, Bavinck gives the specificity of the promise when we writes, “De ééne groote belofte aan Abraham is: Ik zal uw God zijn, en gij en uw zaad zult mijn volk zijn, Gen. 17:8. *En deze is de hoofdinhoud ook van Gods verbond met Israël.*” Emphasis mine.

¹⁰² Bremmer, *HBDC*, 169.

and morally responsible creature.¹⁰³ Eucharistic man is called and obliged to a new obedience in the covenant of grace.¹⁰⁴

In Bavinck's thinking about the covenant seals, however, the sacrament is not—in the first place—a sealing of the participant in the sacrament, but rather a sealing of God's promises. An opportunity will present itself later in this work to consider whether there can be any sense in which the activity of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments can be referred to as a “sealing,” without referring specifically to the particular salvific workings of the Spirit. There is no doubt that Bavinck is aware of a “sealing” of the Spirit unto salvation. The question which remains to be answered here is: Does Bavinck acknowledge a “sealing” of the Spirit in the sacraments that may allow for participation in some of the covenant benefits without the actual exercise of faith?

This question is paramount as we begin our investigation of this thesis. The objective, that which is certain, and, therefore, that which leads to the rich comfort which is found in these covenant seals is all too often denied.¹⁰⁵ It is Bavinck's concern at every point to hold fast to the objectivity of the covenant seals. “The sacraments are instituted for the believers, for the participants in the covenant and they establish and empower it (*i.e.*, the objective, the certain, the rich comfort—RG) in invisible signs that God is their God and shall eternally remain their God in Christ.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁰⁴ *GD3:202*. “Gelijk Abraham, als God zich aan hem verbindt, verplicht wordt tot een wandel voor zijn aangezicht, zoo wordt ook Israël als volk door het verbond Gods vermaand tot eene nieuwe gehoorzaamheid.”

¹⁰⁵ *KL*, 181. This appears to be an incongruous statement by Bavinck. It is a digression from his otherwise tightly knit argument. He digressed to address an issue in his own church denomination and others of the Reformed persuasion who were very negative about assurance of faith. One personal example must suffice. When my wife was in the hospital after the delivery of our second daughter, the pastor of one of my wife's roommates came to visit. As he spoke to her about the initiation, he said words to this effect: “We really don't know what we can say about this little creature of damnation!” Bavinck experienced some in his denomination that had denuded the sacraments of the comfort of the promise and here he apparently takes up the cudgels against them.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

That objective truth must not be exchanged for a subjectivistic experience. Certainly, a phrase in the above quotation needs to be clarified. What is an “invisible sign?” That sounds like a contradiction in terms. Since in the context of his writing Bavinck refers to both the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession,¹⁰⁷ it might be expected that knowing some specifics about those confessions could help us to understand Bavinck at this point.

In citing the questions and answers 75, 76, and 79 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Bavinck emphasizes several things. First, the emphasis is placed on what is meant by eating the crucified body of Christ and drinking his shed blood.¹⁰⁸ Next, he underscores the importance of Christ’s flesh being in heaven—the *extra Calvinisticum*.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless—and this is the third point Bavinck accentuates—through the work of the Holy Spirit the Christian is unified more and more with the (holy) body of Christ.¹¹⁰ This truth is established, according to Bavinck, by question and answer 79 of the Catechism.¹¹¹

In addition, Bavinck appeals to article 35 of the Belgic Confession.¹¹² Unfortunately, in none of these appeals does one find the phrase “invisible signs.” The Belgic Confession is of some help when it speaks about sacraments being visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible.¹¹³ That thirty-third article of the Belgic Confession continues and declares that the signs are not void and meaningless so that they deceive us. Why is that? It

¹⁰⁷ *KL*, 180-181.

¹⁰⁸ Müller, *Bekenntnis*, 702-703. “76. Frag.: Was heist den gecreutzigten leib Christi essen, unnd sein vergossen Blut trinken? Antwort: Es heist nit allein mit glaubigem hertzen das gantze leiden unnd sterben Christi annemmen, und dardurch vergebung der sünden und ewiges leben bekommen: Sonder auch darneben durch den heiligen Geist, der zu gleich in Christo unnd in us wohnet, also mit seinem gebenedeyten leib je mehr und mehr vereiniget werden: daß wir, ob gleich er im Himmel, unnd wir auff Erden sind: dennoch fleisch von seinem fleisch, unnd bein von seinen beinen sind, unnd von einem geist (wie die glieder unsers leibs von einer seelen) ewig leben unnd regieret werden”

¹⁰⁹ *KL*, 180.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹¹¹ Müller, *Bekenntnis*, 704.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 247-248.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 245. “Sunt enim Symbola et sigilla visibilia rei internae et invisibilis, per quae, ceu media, Deus virtute Spiritus Sancti, in nobis operatur.”

is because they have Jesus Christ as their truth.¹¹⁴ Bavinck summarizes his thoughts by asserting that the words of the confessional statements clearly declare the believer's fullest participation in the body and blood of Christ.¹¹⁵ It seems most probable from the context that he is referring to the items mentioned above.¹¹⁶ By the same token, there is the undoubted accent that Bavinck places on what can be called the “reference” character of the sacraments with regard to the promises of God.

Since they possess this “reference” character to the specific promises of God, it is certain that the sacrament is not a sealing of the recipient, but of the promises of God.¹¹⁷ Not only is the *promissio* the link between the believer and the sealing of the covenant promises, it is also the bond between the sign and the thing signified.¹¹⁸

Moreover, the “reference” character of the sacraments has both a present and future facet. In the first place, the sacraments—which are for the believers; for the members of the covenant—establish and empower the truth in invisible signs that God *presently* is their God in Christ. Furthermore, the “reference” character of the sacraments points to the truth that God will *eternally* be their God.¹¹⁹ The “reference” character of the sacraments points,

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 245-246. “Iesum Christum enim pro sua veritate habent, sine quo nullius prorsus essent momenti.”

¹¹⁵ *KL*, 181. “De woorden in onze Belijdenisschriften, dat wij zoo waarachtig Christus’ lichaam en bloed ontvangen als wij eten van het brood en drinken van den wijn, mogen niet worden verzwekt.”

¹¹⁶ Comp. E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd Over Verbond en Doop*, (Kok: Kampen, 1946), p. 198. “Wat nu de sacramentsleer van Bavinck aangaat, daarbij kunnen wij uitgaan van zijn eigen begripsomschrijving: heilige zichtbare teekenen en zegelen, van God ingesteld, waardoor Hij de beloften en weldaden van het genadeverbond aan de geloovigen te beter te verstaan geeft en verzekert, en dezen hunnerzijds voor God, engelen en mensen hun geloof en liefde belijden en bevestigen. In deze definitie ligt opgesloten, dat de sacramenten dus allereerst zichtbare *teekenen* zijn. Ze worden door God, niet naar willekeur, maar naar een door Hem gepræformeerde analogie, uit de zielijke dingen genomen en tot aanduiding en verduidelijking van onzienlijke en eeuwige goederen gebezigt. De Gereformeerden ontkenden volstrekt niet, dat er in het sacrament een handeling was. Maar dit was eene verborgene, onzichtbare handeling van Christus, die inwendig in de harten door den H. Geest de genade schenkt. Daarentegen ligt bij het sacrament niet de hoofdzaak in de handeling van den dienaar, maar in het teeken-zijn van het sacrament; het beeldt af en verzekert de handeling van Christus.”

¹¹⁷ *KL*, 181. “Zeker, het Sacrament is geen verzegeling van den ontvanger, maar van de beloften Gods.”

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 180-181. “Onze Nederl. Geloofsbelijdenis stemt in art. 35 hiermede geheel overeen. Het avondmaal is ingesteld tot voeding en onderhouding van wie reeds wedergeboren en in Gods huisgezin opgenomen zijn; dezelfde aanvang als bij Calvijn. *Het verband tusschen teeken and beteekende zaak ligt vast en zeker in de beloften Gods.*” Italics—RG.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 181. “De Sacramenten zijn voor de geloovigen, voor de Bondgenooten ingesteld en bevestigen en bekrachtigen het in onzichtbare teekenen, dat God hun God in Christus is en eeuwig blijven zal.”

among other things, to the present life of the believer in its totality as well as to the coming glorious future.

Having said this, further explanation is required. This has to do with the notion of Baptism as a sign and seal *and* with the concept that Bavinck raised with his statement that the sacrament is not a sealing of the recipient but of the promises of God. What does he mean? Again, the context will have to help in providing an elucidation.

The paragraph in which Bavinck makes the affirmation that the sacrament is not a sealing of the recipient but of the promises of God¹²⁰ has to do with what he considers to be a deficiency among some Reformed thinkers.¹²¹ Bavinck wants to guard against either the minimizing or neglect of the “objective” side of the sacrament. He has strongly emphasized the person and work of the Holy Spirit as he works in the believing subject. In addition, Bavinck is on solid confessional grounds when he asserts that the sacraments seal the promises of God *to* the believer.¹²²

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. “Indien ik mij niet vergis, wordt de eigenaardigheid van de Gereformeerde leer der Sacramenten, zoowel van het avondmaal als van den doop dikworf niet duidelijk ingezien.”

¹²² Müller, *Bekenntnis*, 245. “Credimus benignum illum Deum nostrum, habita hebetudinis et infirmitatis nostrae ratione, Sacraenta nobis instituisse, ut promissa sua in nobis obsignaret. . .”

Summary

In this chapter the reader's attention has been directed to certain fundamental concepts that Bavinck gleaned from Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper explained in seven "theses." God has brought the believer into the household of faith through Baptism and in this adoptive, filial relationship the Lord feeds the believer with spiritual food.

The reasonable worship (Rom. 12:1) of the one restored by saving grace and brought into the household of God is to live as "eucharistic" man. Christ is the "substance" and "material" of the spiritual sustenance that the believer receives by and through faith, and, especially, in the holy meal.¹²³

The efficacy of the sacraments lies in the reception of the gifts and blessings that accrue to the believer by means of Christ's Person and Work. The effect of the Supper is to confirm to the believer the reconciliation he has with the Father through Christ's passion and death. Two items, therefore, are presented to the believer in the celebration of the eucharistic meal: Jesus Christ as the source and substance of all good *and* the fruit and efficacy of his passion and death.¹²⁴

What the believer receives in the Lord's Supper is the *totus Christus* in the most comprehensive sense of those words, without, however, becoming *essentially* one with him. Nevertheless, the believer becomes intimately, really one with Christ.¹²⁵ The gospel and Baptism give Christ partially, but not totally.¹²⁶ In the body of this chapter, this statement was seen to be enigmatic, but was interpreted within the context of what both Calvin and Bavinck were teaching, namely that in this special covenant meal the

¹²³ Gerrish, *GG*, 134.

¹²⁴ Reid, *CTT*, 146.

¹²⁵ *KL*, 177.

¹²⁶ Gerrish, *GG*, 134.

previously established union with Christ through faith grows and is nourished.¹²⁷ There is an appropriation by the Holy Spirit of the *unio mystica* in the holy meal that increases and strengthens the communion between Christ and the believer. In the Lord's Supper the believer communes with the risen Lord in a particular manner. The distance between the flesh of Christ in heaven and the flesh of the believers on earth is no ineluctable problem, since the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit is the “link” (*vinculum*) by which the believer is bound to Christ. The Spirit and his Work are central to soteriology in general and in sacramentology in particular.¹²⁸

Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper is described as a real presence (*præsentia realis*), although he is not *locally* present there. The reality Calvin conceives of is a spiritual one and, therefore, actually a more essential presence than either transubstantiation or consubstantiation can provide.

God's promises, given in the covenant relationship, are of the utmost importance. The key points of the covenant promise can be summarized as follows: First, that the believer becomes a participant in Christ, who is the source of every good. Second, that the believer is reconciled to God through the satisfaction of Christ's death on the cross. Last, Christ's Spirit renews the believer to a life of holiness and so to obtain righteousness and salvation.¹²⁹ Moreover, it was pointed out that the Sinaiitic covenant is just as much an integral part of God's gracious covenant dispensation as was the Abrahamic and Davidic.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Krusche, *Wirken*, 265ff. Cf. p. 266. “Alles, was wir bisher in diesem Kapitel behandelt haben, hat seinen Fluchtpunkt in dieser Lehre von der *unio mystica*, die nach Calvin's eigenen Worten bei ihm an höchster Stelle steht: der christologische Teil zeilt hierher, weil das Heilswerk Christi für uns ohne Nutzen ist, solange Christus *extra nos* und wir *extra eum* sind; weil Jesus Christus, der sich in der Menschwerdung zum Immanuel, zum Gott-mit-uns erklärt hat, zum Gott-in-uns werden will, weil also das ganze Christusgeschehen erst in der vom Heiligen Geist hergestellten *unio cum Christo* zur Wirkung kommt.”

¹²⁹ KL, 174.

Bavinck's independent thinking regarding the Lord's Supper was briefly touched upon. His own thinking on this matter will become increasingly clear as this work proceeds. At this juncture it is sufficient to say that what Bavinck accomplished was a more definitive union between theology and ethics in his approach and that this procedure bore great fruit for the abiding value of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.