

Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Sacraments of the Church

The Sacraments as a Means of Grace

The Sacraments as a "Second" Means of Grace

The structure of Bavinck's Sacramentology

One of the key theses of the various articles published on this web site is that Bavinck's doctrine of the *unio mystica* is the central motif of his theology. In this article, another step will be taken in order to demonstrate how the sacraments in general and the Lord's Supper in particular play an important role in Bavinck's understanding of the mystical union of the believer with Christ. We shall begin with an explanation of how Bavinck viewed the sacraments and then proceed to an in-depth analysis of his view of the Lord's Supper.

It is important to observe the manner in which a theologian structures his theology. Bavinck is no exception to the rule. Chapter Ten of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* is devoted to the topic of the "means of grace" (*Over de middelen der genade*). Before Bavinck begins his exposition of the sacraments, he spends approximately twenty pages discussing the Word as a means of grace.

The Word of God as a Means of Grace

Paragraph 56 (*Het Woord als genademiddel*) serves as a kind of "hinge" in Bavinck's theological exposition. In one sense, it points backwards to all that has gone before. In

another sense, it points forward to what Bavinck will have to say about the last main chapter in the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, which is his eschatology.

It could be argued that this structural arrangement makes for a rather lop-sided treatment of his theology. That would be true, if it were not for the fact that the tenth chapter contains the “heart” of what Bavinck desires to teach in the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. That is not to say that everything prior was unimportant. The contrary is the case. All that preceded the tenth chapter was crucial in the building of Bavinck’s theological method. Everything was a building stone that played and plays its part in the tightly arranged structure of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*.

The Sacraments as a Second Means of Grace

The sacraments are described as a “second means of grace.”¹ Bavinck sets the tone for what is going to be discussed when he writes, “All salvation and (every) blessing flows to fallen man by grace, which is a virtue of God. This grace with all its benefits has appeared, objectively, in Christ, who obtained them and distributes them through the means of the covenant. The fellowship of those who participate in Christ and all his benefits bears the name of church or congregation.”²

It is important to note that Bavinck begins this tenth chapter by reiterating many of the key building blocks of his theology. He speaks of the fallen nature of man, the

¹ GD4:441. “Bij het woord komt als tweede genademiddel het sacrament.”

² GD4:422. “Alle heil en zaligheid vloeit den gevallen mensch toe uit de genade als deugd Gods. Objectief is die genade met all hare weldaden verschenen in Christus, die ze in den weg des verbonds verwierf en uitdeelt. De gemeenschap dergenen, die Christus met al zijne weldaden deelachtig zijn, draagt den naam van kerk of gemeente.” Comp. GD3:206.

graciousness of God, the objective reality of God's grace in the Person and Work of Christ, the covenant of grace, and the fellowship that the Church has with Christ.

All these facets have both eschatological and pneumatological aspects. They have eschatological aspects in the sense that they point the believer to the "already-not yet" scheme of the Christian life. They have pneumatological facets in the sense of the working of the Word and Spirit.³

In addition, there are two other elements present that are not quite as obvious, but have been touched on previously in this work. The first is the concept of the organic manner in which Bavinck viewed truth. The organism of God's truth of the fullness of life communicated to man is perceived in light of the whole.

This organism of truth comes to man within the context of a "system." Normally, we think of the word, "system," as something sterile and static, although there are some exceptions, even among more liberal theologians.⁴ To Bavinck's way of thinking, the organic and systematic belong together.⁵

G.C. Berkouwer has rightly remarked in his memoirs that the concept of the "organic" in Bavinck's thinking and theology has nothing to do with an interesting theological problem, but is directed to practical matters.⁶ Certainly, that is also the case here. There

³ GD3:207, 212, 322.

⁴ Compare Wolfhart Pannenberg's postscript comments to E. Frank Tupper's book, *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1974), p. 303. Pannenberg writes, "I did not start to design a system, although I always thought it a prerequisite of disciplined thinking to care for the systematic implications and consequences of one's observations."

⁵ GD1:66.

⁶ Berkouwer, *ZV*, 62.

is a kind of overarching theme present in this tenth chapter that has to do with the manner in which man associates with God, practically and spiritually, in the covenant of grace.

In general, it could be argued that what has been discussed up to this point focused on how God associates with man. Of course, there are areas of overlap, but by and large, this has been the structure. Now, when the subject of how man associates with God is broached, the matter of man thinking God's thoughts after him is still in the foreground. In order to think those thoughts, man must be guided and directed by the Word of God.

That Word is *autopistos, iudex controversiarum, sui ipsius interpretis*. Nothing may be placed on the same level with it, whether it is church, confession, tradition, or anything else. Everything and everyone must submit to the rule of Scripture.⁷ The Reformed, in formulating their definition of the sacraments, remained closely "connected" to Scripture.⁸

A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Sacraments

Bavinck begins his explanation of the sacraments with an analysis of the history of the doctrine, through the various stages of development in church history.

The Early Church

Scripture does not mention the word sacrament. It mentions circumcision and Passover as well as Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but does not describe them all in an identical fashion.⁹ Even though Scripture does give some general outlines of the nature of the earliest Christian gatherings (Acts 2:42), we actually know very little concerning the

⁷ GD1:63, 4:450-451.

⁸ GD4:450. "In de definitie der sacramenten sloten daarom de Gereformeerden zich zoo nauw mogelijk bij de Schrift aan."

⁹ GD4:441-442.

Christian congregation at Jerusalem.¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:1-14 gives us more insight into the church that was gathered from the Gentiles.¹¹

In the second century, a rather large and significant change occurred. For whatever reason, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was separated from the "agape" meal and the two gatherings that had previously been separate—the preaching of the Word and the Lord's Supper—were made into one service.¹² From this point on, the Lord's Supper was normally celebrated after the preaching of the Word.¹³

Even with these changes having been made, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was open only for those who had been baptized and professed their faith in Christ.¹⁴ To this change other rituals and symbolic acts were added that resulted in the sacraments obtaining an increasingly mysterious character.¹⁵

Eventually, the Greek mystery religions exercised their influence upon the Christian worship service. "In the New Testament, the word, *musthion*, was the word used to describe those miracles and deeds of God that were previously hidden, but now had been revealed."¹⁶

Through the influence of the Greeks, the word obtained another significance in the Christian church. Rather than retaining its old meaning, it acquired the significance of

¹⁰ *GD4:442.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.* "Maar in de tweede eeuw kwam hier allens groote verandering in. De viering van het avondmaal werd, om welke redenen dan ook, van de agapae losgemaakt, en de beide vergaderingen, die tot den dienst des woords en die tot het avondmaal, werden vereenigd."

¹³ *GD4:442-443.*

¹⁴ *GD4:443.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* ". . . de viering van het avondmaal, stond alleen voor de gedoopten open, en kreeg door de bijvoeging van doopsbelijdenis, doopsbediening, oratio dominica en allerlei ritueele en symbolische handelingen hoe langer hoe meer een mysterieus karakter."

“that which was secret and incomprehensible.”¹⁷ The Latin translation of *musthriōn*—*sacramentum*—thus came to bear the meaning of a secretive, holy act.¹⁸

Once this change was brought about, even though the sacraments of Baptism and Lord’s Supper remained in the foreground, the vagueness of the name, “sacrament,” allowed the precise number of true sacraments to remain unfixed for quite some time. The influential church father, St. Augustine, also used the term in a broader sense.¹⁹

The Sacraments in the Middle Ages

It was Pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth century that gave the specified number of six sacraments.²⁰ By and large, however, Scholasticism reverted to St. Augustine’s broader definition of the term *sacramentum* and included a number of “holy matters and actions.”²¹

Hugo of St. Victor spoke of no less than thirty sacraments, which were divided into three distinct classes.

First, were the sacraments that were necessary and indispensable for salvation.

Next, were those that brought with them a “higher” measure of grace.

¹⁶ *GD4:443*. Comp. 4:450-451.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* “In het Latijn werd dit woord door *sacramentum* overgezet, dat de beteekenis had van eed, vooral door den soldaat aan het vaandel af te leggen, of van eene geldsom, die bij een proces in een locus sacer moest neergelegd worden en bij verlies van het proces aan de goden verviel, maar dat nu de gedachte van eene geheimzinnige, heilige handeling of zaak in zich opnam.”

¹⁹ *GD4:443*.

²⁰ *Ibid.* “Eerst Pseudodionysius in de 6e eeuw telde zes sacramenten: doop, confirmatie, eucharistie, priesterwijding, monnikwijding en gebruiken bij de begrafenis.”

²¹ *GD4:443*.

Finally, there was a class of sacraments that prepared the believer for the other sacraments.²²

It was Peter Lombard who first spoke of seven sacraments, even though theologians and councils after him continued to use the term *sacramentum* in a broader sense.²³ Even though there was still a great deal of vacillation in theology, depending on whether the broader or narrower definition was used, the council of Florence (1439) made two important decisions. First, they made Lombard's *Sententiae* the handbook of theological study. Second, they implicitly narrowed the number of sacraments to seven by their decision regarding Lombard's work.²⁴

All this leads Bavinck to conclude that the actual doctrine of the sacraments is the product of the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages.²⁵ Scholasticism undertook a very precise investigation into the various matters surrounding the doctrine of the sacraments. The results of that study culminated in the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent. Bavinck lists eight characteristics of this doctrine as those various councils formulated it.

First, Christ instituted every sacrament in the New Covenant. There are seven in number: Baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, the last rites, ordination into the priesthood, and marriage.

²² GD4:443-444. "Hugo van St. Victor noemt niet minder dan 30 sacramenten en verdeelt ze in drie klassen: zulke, die tot de zaligheid nodig zijn (doop, confirmatie, enz.) zulke, die een hogere genade mededeelen (gebruik van wijwater enz.) en zulke, die dienen tot voorbereiding voor de overige sacramenten (wijding van heilige gereedschappen enz.)."

²³ GD4:444.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

Second, these seven are all true and actual sacraments, essentially differentiated from those of the Old Covenant. In addition, these seven differ in their respective value.

Third, even though these seven are not for everyone, they are necessary for salvation. Without them, or without the desire for them, by faith alone, the grace of justification remains unobtainable.

Fourth, they not only signify grace, but contain grace in themselves and distribute grace *ex opere operato*.²⁶

Fifth, regarding those who administer the sacraments, it is necessary that their intention in the administration should be to do what the church does. In another sense, however, it is somewhat indifferent whether or not the one administering the sacrament is, himself, guilty of committing mortal sin.

Sixth, the only lawful distributors of the sacraments are ordained priests, but confirmation and the ordination of priests may only be administered by the bishop. Baptism may, in emergency situations, be administered by laypersons.

Seventh, it is required of those receiving the sacrament that they possess the intention of receiving what the church gives and that they put no obstacle in the way of the grace offered.

Finally, each separate sacrament confers a special grace, and baptism, confirmation, and ordination confer an indelible character.²⁷

²⁶ Comp. *GD4*:451.

²⁷ *GD4*:445. "Resultaat van deze scholastieke ontwikkeling was dat ten deele reeds op vroegere conciliën, maar vooral te Trente over de leer der sacramenten in het algemeen het volgende vastgesteld werd: 1° alle sacramenten des Nieuwen Verbonds zijn door Christus ingesteld en zeven in getal: doop, confirmatie,

The development of sacramentology during this period is evidence of how increasingly the Middle Ages distanced itself from Scripture.²⁸ Bavinck traces a threefold manifestation of this departure from Scripture in the Roman Catholic Church.

“In the first place, the grace that is distributed by the sacrament is described by Rome as a *gratia sanctificans*, that is, as a power that is poured out into man, lifts him up to a supernatural order, and makes him participate in the divine nature.”²⁹ In this resolution of the sacrament, God’s grace is made unrelated to guilt and forgiveness and made into a supernatural gift that comes to man from “outside.”³⁰

“In the second place, the connection between the sacrament and the word is, for all intents and purposes, broken by Rome.”³¹ God’s Word retains some significance, but only in a provisional and preparatory sense.³²

“In the third place, faith is no longer required in the recipient of the sacrament. Grace is present as *gratia sanctificans*, as something material contained in the sacrament that is

eucharistie, boete, laatste oliesel, priesterwijding en huwelijk. 2° Deze zijn alle ware en eigenlijke sacramenten, van die des Ouden Verbonds wezenlijk onderscheiden, maar toch onderling in waarde verschillend. 3° Zij zijn, ofschoon niet alle voor ieder mensch, tot zaligheid noodzakelijk, zoodat zonder hen of althans zonder verlangen er naar, door ‘t geloof alleen, de genade der rechtvaardigmaking niet te verkrijgen is. 4° Zij beteekenen niet alleen de genade, maar bevatten haar ook en deelen haar ex opere operato mede. 5° Van de zijde des bedienaars wordt voor de waarachtigheid van het sacrament minstens vereischt, dat hij de intentie hebbe om te doen, wat de kerk doet, maar is het overigens onverschillig, of hij in doodzonde verkeert. 6° Wettige uitdeelaars der sacramenten zijn alleen de geordende priesters, maar confirmatie and priesterwijding geschieden alleen door den bisschop, en de doop mag in geval van nood ook door leeken bediend. 7° Van de zijde des ontvangers is alleen noodig, dat hij de intentie hebbe, om te ontvangen wat de kerk geeft en aan de genade geene hindernis in den weg legge. 8° Ieder sacrament verleent eene bijzondere genade, en doop, confirmatie en ordening verleen een character indelebilis.”

²⁸ GD4:445. “De ontwikkeling dezer sacramentsleer toont, dat zij zich hoe langer hoe verder van de Schrift verwijderde.”

²⁹ GD4:445. “Ten eerste wordt de genade, welke het sacrament mededeelt, door Rome alleen opgevat als eene *gratia sanctificans*, d.i. als eene kracht, die in den mensch wordt ingestort, hem tot de bovennatuurlijke orde verheft en der Goddelijke natuur deelachtig maakt.” Comp. 4:451.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ GD4:445. Bavinck writes, “Ten tweede is de band van het sacrament aan het woord door Rome zoo goed als geheel verbroken. . .”

³² GD4:445-446.

distributed *ex opere operato*. It is supposed that the recipient will not place any ineluctable obstacle in the way of the working of the sacrament.”³³

The Reformation

Each of the three points mentioned above were revisited and revised by the Reformers. Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin, even though they differed on various points of the sacraments, were in agreement in refuting Rome’s sacramentology.

Their refutation included the following points. First, the grace that was given in the sacraments was primarily a “forgiving grace” and was related to sin.³⁴ The seriousness of this refutation lies in the reference character of grace. It is not directed towards a weakened human nature where the *donum superadditum* was lost, but where man was radically corrupted by sin.

The second point of the Reformers’ rejection of the Roman Catholic doctrine declared that a sacrament was a sign and seal that was (inextricably) bound to the Word and distributed no new or different grace from that Word.³⁵ That is, then, this: the Word of God gives us God’s grace, and the sacrament gives us that identical grace.

Finally, they taught that the working and fruit of the sacrament did not lie in itself, but was dependent on whether or not the participant possessed a saving faith.³⁶

³³ GD4:446. “Ten derde is het geloof verstrekt geen vereichte meer in den ontvanger van het sacrament; de genade ligt als gratia sanctificans, als iets materiëels, in het sacrament besloten, wordt erdoor medegeedeeld *ex opere operato*, en onderstelt dus hoogstens, dat de ontvanger geene onoverkomelijke hindernis in den weg legge.”

³⁴ GD4:446. “. . . de genade, die in het sacrament werd meegeedeeld, in de eerste plaats de vergevende genade was en niet op de lagere, van het *donum superadditum* verstoken natuur, doch op de zonde betrekking had. . .”

³⁵ GD4:446. “. . . dat het sacrament een teeken en zegel was, aan het woord gehecht, geene enkele genade meedeelde, die niet door het woord geschonken werd en dus zonder het woord hoegenaamd geene waarde had. . .”

³⁶ GD4:446. “. . . en dat niet het sacrament zelf, maar toch wel zijne werking en vrucht afhing van het geloof en in den ontvanger dus altijd het zaligmakend geloof onderstelde.”

When the Reformation is viewed as a whole, it becomes evident that among the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Zwinglians, Reformed, and Anabaptists, the sacraments were the focal point of the battle. They formed the “Shibboleth” of virtually every dogmatic system that was developed.

Bavinck contends that in the strife surrounding the sacraments we find embodied the “practical and concrete principles” of church and theology and of doctrine and life.³⁷ This is an important statement, because Bavinck is focusing upon the principles of doctrine and life. Where are those principles concentrated? According to Bavinck, they are concentrated in the practicality of the sacraments.

Bavinck believes that sacramentology is such an important theological key because it epitomizes the relationships of “God and world, creation and re-creation, the divine and human nature in Christ, sin and grace, spirit and matter.”³⁸ All of these reach their practical application in the sacrament. If this is true, and certainly Bavinck is basing his theology on it, then the sacraments must receive renewed attention in the Christian life.

Christians must reflect anew on the importance of the *unio sacramentalis*. They must give time and attention to understanding the relationship between the sign and the thing signified by that sign. Bavinck’s thesis is that when that occurs Christians will have a better understanding of the practical application of the doctrines of grace for all of life.

Bavinck quotes Calvin as saying the sacraments are “acts of confession” (*belijdenisacten*). They testify to our piety. They are “mirrors” in which we observe the

³⁷ GD4:446.

riches of God's grace towards us.³⁹ Therefore, the sacraments point us to two realities: the promises of God and the riches of his grace. They were instituted in order to give the believer a better understanding of God's promises and to "seal" the believer.⁴⁰

Appendix Doctrinae

It is clear that the Reformed were convinced that the Word could be preached without the attending celebration of one of the two sacraments, but the sacraments could not be administered without the attendant preaching of the Word of God.⁴¹ In this sense, "the sacrament is subordinate to the Word."⁴² Bavinck, himself, calls the sacrament an "appendix that comes with the gospel and is added to it."⁴³

This means that the Word of God has significance without the sacrament, but the converse is not true.⁴⁴ The very definition of what a sacrament is must be derived from Scripture.⁴⁵ The sacrament is nothing more or less than a *verbum visibile*.⁴⁶

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ GD4:447. "Nu vat ook Calvijn de sacramenten wel op als belijdenisacten, als mutua nostra erga Deum pietatis testificatio. Maar dat zijn zij bij hem toch eerst in de tweede plaats; allereerst zijn de sacramenten divinae in nos gratiae testimonia externo signo confirmata, teekenen en zegelen van de beloften Gods in zijn woord, spiegels, waarin wij den rijkdom zijner genade aanschouwen."

⁴⁰ Berkouwer, *Sacramenten*, 173 where he mentions Lord's Day 25, Q/A 66 of the Heidelberg Catechism: *What are the sacraments?* The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use he might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel. And this is the promise: that God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.

⁴¹ Berkouwer, *Sacramenten*, 51.

⁴² GD4:457. Comp. 4:458.

⁴³ Ibid. "... een appendix, dat bij het Evangelie bijkomt en eraan toegevoegd wordt." Bavinck speaks of the seriousness of the "appendix" nature of the sacraments as he inveighs against the Roman Catholic Church. "Daarin bestaat zijn eenige, maar toch ook naar Gods bedoeling zijn genoegzame waarde en kracht, om het woord te verduidelijken en te bevestigen en daardoor het geloof te versterken. In den strijde tegen Rome is handhaving van deze overeenstemming en van dit verschil tusschen woord en sacrament van het hoogste belang. *Wie beide anders bepaalt en aan het sacrament eene andere genadewerking toeschrijft dan aan het woord, deelt Christus en zijne weldaden, verbreekt de eenheid van het genadeverbond, materialiseert de genade, maakt het sacrament zelfstandig tegenover en boven het woord, keert de verhouding van Schrift en kerk om, maakt het sacrament ter zaligheid noodzakelijk en den mensch van den priester afhankelijk.*" (4:458.) Italics—RG.

⁴⁴ Ibid. "... "Het woord is dus iets en veel zonder het sacrament, maar het sacrament is zonder het woord niets en heeft dan geenerlei waarde of kracht."

⁴⁵ GD4:450.

⁴⁶ GD4:457. "... het is niets minder maar ook niets meer dan een verbum visibile.

When we direct our attention to the Word of God, we find that Scripture speaks of the rainbow and circumcision as a **tyrib. twa**.⁴⁷ With regard to circumcision, Romans 4:11 refers to it as a *shmei/on peritomh/j* and a *sfragi/da th/j dikaiosunhj th/j pi,stewj* which means that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are brought into a close relationship with the covenant of grace.⁴⁸ In addition, Mark's gospel (1:4; 14:22-24) also connects the sacraments with the Mediator and the forgiveness of sins.⁴⁹

The Reformed definition

In agreement with the texts cited above, the Reformed formulated a definition of the sacraments that included three key elements.

In the first place, sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals, instituted by God, whereby he more fully declares and seals to the believer the promises and benefits of the covenant of grace.⁵⁰ There is a kind of bilateral working that the Reformed attached to their definition. Bavinck states that the believers, from their side, in the presence of God, angels, and men, *confess* and *confirm* their faith and love.⁵¹

We need to pause and comment on this "attachment." There is a kind of "reference" character inherent in the sacraments that points the Christian to the promises of God and the benefits of Christ that accrue to the believer. At the same time, there is a twofold onus

⁴⁷ *GD4:451*. Comp. Gen. 9:12-13, 17; 17:11; Ex. 12:13; Acts 7:8. The publishers made a typographical error here and mistakenly call the covenant a **xymb xwa**.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* "Dienovereenkomstig omschreef de Geref. theologie de sacramenten als 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 menschen hun geloof en liefde *belijden en bevestigen*." Italics—RG.

upon believers. They are to be active in the confession of faith in Christ and also in the confirmation that they are Christians.

This moves the believer out of the realm of the passive, with regard to the sacraments, and into the sphere of the active. In other words, there are biblical, ethical requirements attached to the sacraments. Believers are not merely recipients, but also active participants in faith and love.

In the second place, the Reformed definitions of the sacraments included the notion they were also signs.⁵² This differentiated the Reformed from both the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. Both of these place primary emphasis on the “act” or “action,” that consists in a communication of grace. The former believes that it transpires through transubstantiation and the latter through consubstantiation.⁵³

The Reformed did not deny that there was an element of action involved, but made that action more Christ-centered than man-centered. They admitted that there was a hidden, invisible action of Christ that resulted in the internal gift of grace in the heart of the Christian.⁵⁴ However, the main point in the sacrament lies not the action of the one administering it, but in the significance of the sign.⁵⁵

⁵² *GD4:452*. “Ten tweede is in de Geref. definitie van de sacramenten ook opmerkelijk, dat ze als teekenen omschreven worden.”

⁵³ *GD4:452*.

⁵⁴ *GD4:452-453*. “De Gereformeerden ontkenden nu volstrekt niet, dat er in het sacrament eene handeling was. Maar dit was eene verborgene, onzichtbare handeling van Christus, die inwendig in de harten door den Heiligen Geest de genade schenkt.”

⁵⁵ *GD4:453*. Bavinck uses a word here that is very difficult to translate. He speaks of the “teeken-zijn” of the sacrament as the essential point. The literal translation is “sign-being.” Another possibility would be “sign-ness.”

Bavinck's point is that the sacrament depicts or represents and ensures the action of Christ. The action of the one administering the sacrament is certainly an action, but it is an *actio significativa*.⁵⁶

In the third place, the Reformed definition of the sacraments contains a peculiar aspect in that it unites the deed of God and the confession of the believers.⁵⁷ In this sense, Calvin reconciled Luther and Zwingli.

Thus, in sacraments, from God's side, he comes to his people and assures them, by means of visible guarantees and pledges, that he is their God and the God of their seed. He affixes seals to his Word, in order to strengthen their faith in that Word.⁵⁸

On the other hand, the sacraments are acts of confession. What is the nature of this confession? Bavinck specifies the following facets. The believers confess their conversion, their faith, their obedience, their fellowship with Christ, and their fellowship with each other.⁵⁹

There is a special "mutuality" described here. While God assures his people that he is their God, Christians participating in the sacrament solemnly testify that they are his children.⁶⁰ Bavinck summarizes what he means when he states that "every use of the sacrament is covenant renewal."⁶¹

⁵⁶ GD4:453.

⁵⁷ Ibid. "Ten derde is de Geref. definitie van de sacramenten nog daarin eigenaardig, dat zij de daad Gods en de belijdenis der geloovigen, die daarin op te merken valt, met elkander vereenigt."

⁵⁸ Ibid. "Hij verzekert hun met zichtbare onderpanden, dat Hij hun God is en huns zaad God; Hij hecht zegels aan *zijn* woord, om *hun* geloof aan dat woord te versterken, Gen. 9:11-15, 17:11, Ex. 12:13, Mark 1:4, 16:16, Luk. 22:19, Rom. 4:11 enz."

⁵⁹ Ibid. "Maar anderzijds zijn de sacramenten ook acten van belijdenis; de geloovigen belijden daarin hun bekeering, hun geloof, hunne gehoorzaamheid, hun gemeenschap met Christus en met elkander. . ."

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. ". . . elk sacramentsgebruik is een verbondsvernieuwing. . ."

By this definition, Bavinck concludes that a sacrament is a vow of faithfulness, an oath that obliges to the worship of Christ.⁶² This removes the sacrament from the sphere of the frivolous and trivial and places it firmly in the realm of a serious and solemn occasion that is, at the same time, a celebration.

The Sacraments as “Signs” and “Seals”

Sign and Seal: Two Parts

Bavinck states that the names “sign” and “seal” contain two elements. Those elements may be differentiated as *verbum* and *elementum*, *res sacramenti* and *sacramentum*, *signatum* and *signum*, *res coelestis* and *res terrestres*, and *materia interna* and *externa*.⁶³

In addition, these two elements contain a “reference” character. That is, “sign and seal both point beyond themselves to something else, of which they are sign and seal.”⁶⁴ The Scripture speaks in several places about signs. They normally bear the name *shmeia*, “because they are an evidence and sign of God’s presence, of his grace or power, of his truthfulness or righteousness.”⁶⁵

Signs belong to the class visible things that God uses to indicate and clarify invisible and eternal things.⁶⁶

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. “Teeken en zegel wijzen beide heen naar iets anders, waarvan zij teeken en zegel zijn.”

⁶⁵ *GD4*:454.

⁶⁶ Ibid. “Sacramenten nu behooren tot de ingestelde, buitengewone teekenen, die door God, niet naar willekeur, maar naar eene door Hem gepraeformeerde analogie, uit de zienlijke dingen genomen en tot aanduiding en verduidelijking van onzienlijke en eeuwige goederen gebezigd worden.”

The General Scriptural Teaching about Seals

In addition to signs, the Scripture also teaches that seals serve to establish and strengthen our faith.⁶⁷ There is a difference between signs and seals. Seals do not merely recall invisible things to our minds, “but they also strengthen and validate⁶⁸ them in our consciousness.”⁶⁹

Whenever something is spoken of in Scripture as truly authentic and needing to be kept from falsity, the concept of a “seal” is used.⁷⁰ The notion of “sealing” carries with it the connotation of “preservation from violation.”⁷¹ Most especially, God preserves all believers by sealing them with the Holy Spirit.⁷²

God’s purpose in sealing his people with the Spirit is to preserve them as inheritors of the future (blissful) salvation.⁷³ This sealing is done with a view to Christ. The Holy Spirit seals Christ by means of all types of signs as the Giver of the sustenance that endures into eternal life (John 6:27).⁷⁴

Bavinck concludes, therefore, that seals are always means to preserve people or things or to protect them from violation (*schending*).⁷⁵

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ The Dutch word Bavinck uses here is “waarmerken.” It has various meanings, but usually means “validate,” “stamp,” “authenticate,” “attest,” or “certify.”

⁶⁹ GD4:454.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Bavinck lists several items that are “sealed” according to Scripture. “Brieven van vorsten, 1 Kon. 21:8, Neh. 9:38, Esth. 3:12, of van andere personen, Jer. 32:10, en voorts wetten, Jes. 8:16, boeken, Dan. 12:4, Openb. 22:10, Daniëls leeuwenkuil, Dan. 6:18, het graf van Jezus, Matth. 27:66 enz.”

⁷¹ GD4:454.

⁷² GD4:454-455.

⁷³ GD4:455.

⁷⁴ Ibid. “Hij (the Holy Spirit—RG) verzegelt den Christus door allerlei teekenen als den gever van de spijze, die blijft tot in het eeuwige leven.

⁷⁵ Ibid. “Altijd zijn zegelen dus middelen, om de echtheid van personen en zaken te waarborgen of ook om ze voor schending te bewaren.”

The Sacraments and the Christian Conscience

The Christian conscience plays a key role in Bavinck's theology. This is not less the case in his sacramentology. Sacraments are, therefore, in addition to being signs, also seals, connected to his Word by God to win our conscience in both reliability and faithfulness.⁷⁶

Obviously, this type of speaking by Bavinck is couched within the context of the covenant of grace. This is covenantal language. God's revelation to man is "embodied," as it were, in the conscience of man. That language speaks clearly of God's reliability, faithfulness, and trustworthiness.

Bavinck combines the Word of God, man's conscience, and the covenant of grace in his sacramentology. The sacraments "give us the promises and benefits of the covenant in a better and more understandable manner."⁷⁷ The signs and seals of the sacraments help us better comprehend the invisible aspects of salvation. Therefore, they are indispensable for the believer, but must be administered properly, due to the serious nature of their essence.

The "Materia Interna"

The *materia interna*, which is the invisible thing (signified) that is symbolized and sealed, is manifold. Bavinck gives six inter-related spiritual graces that comprise the *materia interna* of the sacraments. First, there is the covenant of grace, itself.⁷⁸ Then, in succession, there is the righteousness of faith, forgiveness of sins, faith and repentance,

⁷⁶ Ibid. "Sacramenten zijn daarom, behalve teekens, ook zegels, door God aan zijn woord gehecht, om het, natuurlijk niet in zichzelf, want dan is het als woord Gods vast genoeg, maar voor ons bewustzijn om geloofwaardigheid, in betrouwbaarheid te doen winnen."

⁷⁷ Ibid. ". . .geven ons de beloften en weldaden des verbonds te beter te verstaan. . ."

⁷⁸ Ibid. "De materia interna in het sacrament, de onzichtbare zaak, die erin afgebeeld en verzegeld wordt, is het verbond der genade, Gen. 9:12, 13, 17:11. . ."

the fellowship with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the fellowship with Christ's flesh and blood.⁷⁹

In summary, Bavinck designates Christ, the "total, rich, full Christ," in both his divine and human natures, in both his humiliation and exaltation as the *materia interna*, the *res coelestis*, the thing signified in the sacrament.⁸⁰

Visible and Invisible Grace

The sacrament does not grant one single benefit that is not received by faith alone through the Word of God.⁸¹ The biblical word, "faith," encompasses a wide range of God's saving graces including eternal life. Everyone who believes is regenerated, has eternal life, is justified, sanctified, glorified, has fellowship with Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit.⁸²

The Word contains *all* the promises of God, and faith embraces them all. The *content* of the Word is Christ, the total Christ, and he is also the content of the sacraments. There is not a single benefit of God's grace that is held back in the Word but granted in the sacraments. In short, "there is neither a separate baptismal grace nor is there a separate Lord's Supper grace."⁸³

⁷⁹ Ibid. ". . . de gerechtigheid des geloofs, Rom. 4:11, vergeving der zonden, Mark. 1:4, Matth. 26:28, geloof en bekeering, Mark. 1:4, 16:16, gemeenschap aan Christus, aan zijn dood en opstanding, Rom. 6:3v., aan zijn vleesch en bloed, 1 Cor. 10:16 enz."

⁸⁰ Ibid. "Saamvattende kan men dus zeggen, dat Christus, de gansche, rijke, volle Christus, naar zijne Goddelijke en menselijke natuur, met zijn persoon en werk, in den staat zijner vernedering en in dien zijner verhooring, de *materia interna*, de *res coelestis*, de beteekende zaak in het sacrament is."

⁸¹ *GD4*:456-457. "Het sacrament schenkt geen enkele weldaad, die niet ook uit het woord Gods door het geloof alleen ontvangen wordt."

⁸² *GD4*:457.

⁸³ Ibid. "Er is noch een aparte doops-, noch een aparte avondmaalsgenade."

The content of both Word and sacraments is identical. Both contain the same Mediator, the same covenant, the same benefits, the same blessedness, the same fellowship with God.⁸⁴ They are identical in *modus* and *instrumentum perceptionis* because Christ is enjoyed spiritually through faith.⁸⁵

Is there any difference, then, between the Word and the sacraments? Bavinck answers Yes to that question. “They differ only in *forma externa*, in the *manner* in which they offer *the same* Christ.”⁸⁶ The Word of God signifies and seals Christ to us through the sense of hearing and the sacrament does the same thing by means of the sense of the eye.⁸⁷

The “Unio Sacramentalis”

The relationship that exists between the sign and the thing signified is sometimes called the *forma sacramenti* or the *unio sacramentalis*.⁸⁸ Both the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans are able to speak about a *unio* between the *materia externa* and *interna* in the Lord’s Supper, since they teach a physical, corporal, and local union.⁸⁹

Bavinck is also critical of the manner in which the teachings of Rome and Lutherans are inconsistent. For example, Rome teaches that the nature of grace is different in the

⁸⁴ Ibid. “De inhoud van woord en sacrament is *volkomen dezelfde*; beide bevatten denzelfden middelaar, hetzelfde verbond, dezelfde weldaden, dezelfde zaligheid, dezelfde gemeenschap met God. . .” Italics—RG.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid. “Maar het woord beteekent en verzegelt ons Christus door het zintuig van het oor; het sacrament beteekent en verzegelt ons Christus door het zintuig van het oog.”

⁸⁸ GD4:458.

⁸⁹ Ibid. “Roomschen en Lutherschen kunnen tot op zekere hoogte bij het avondmaal van eene unio tusschen de *materia externa* en *interna* in het sacrament spreken, want zij leeren, dat de beteekende zaak in het teeken ingaat en vervat is; zij nemen een physische, corporeele, locale vereeniging aan.”

other sacraments than it is in the Eucharist. The Lutheran teaching is more of juxtaposition than it is a true union.⁹⁰

The Reformed teach something quite different. Bavinck's description of this subject moves us more in the direction of some of the "forgotten" elements of the sacraments. Negatively, the relationship between the sign and the thing signified is not physical, local, corporal, or substantial. "The signs of water, bread, and wine are no *miracula, medicamenta, ovchmata, vehicula, canales, causae physicae* of the thing signified."⁹¹

What, then, is the precise relationship between the two? Bavinck says that it is an *ethical* relationship, completely comparable to that of Christ and the gospel or of that between the covenant of grace and the Word of God.⁹² That is to say, the relationship is real and essential but not physical.⁹³

Bavinck also has some criticisms regarding the elements instituted and used in the sacraments. "Water, bread, (and) wine are not, by nature, signs and seals of Christ and his

⁹⁰ GD4:458-459. "Maar zelfs op hun standpunt is er bezwaar; want bij the Roomschen verandert het teeken in de beteekende zaak, en is er dus geene eigenlijke vereeniging mogelijk; en bij de Lutherschen is the beteekende zaak wel in, met en onder het teeken en dus met het teeken op eene zelfde plaats en in eene zelfde ruimte saamgebracht, maar zulk eene juxtapositie is toch nog iets gansch anders dan eene vereeniging. Voorts draagt de unio sacramentalis bij den doop en ook bij de andere door Rome aangenomene sacramenten een zoo verschillend karakter van die in het avondmaal, dat het niet aangaat, zoo maar in het algemeen van eene unio sacramentalis te spreken."

⁹¹ GD4:459.

⁹² Ibid. "Maar het is een ethisch verband, eene relatie, volkomen gelijk aan die tusschen Christus en het Evangelie, tusschen de weldaden van het genadeverbond en het woord Gods, dat zo ons bekend maakt."

⁹³ Bavinck approvingly quotes from Turretin (19.4.3) to support his view. "From this sealing arise the sacramental union of the sign with the thing signified. This is neither physical, such as that of matter and form, of the subject and accident; not local, by contact and contiguity; not spiritual, so that by the signs the power of justifying and regenerating is immediately instilled. But it is wholly schetical (*schetik*) and relative, or moral (such as between the rites of investiture and the office with which anyone is invested or between a pledge and the thing which the pledge signifies). Just as things signified are not joined by a natural position with those words by which they are signified and by the very substance, but only by a relation and schesis (*schesei*), inasmuch as those words (as the marks of things) make the things themselves as it were present to the understanding of those who perceive them. Thus also a sacrament (which moreover is said to be a certain visible word, bearing into the eyes that which words bring into the ears) demands no local presence or nonexistence (*inexistentiam*) of the sign with the thing signified, but implies the mere relation and habitude of the one to the other." F. Turretin, *Institutes*

benefits.”⁹⁴ Nevertheless, it is the same God and Father who rules both in the realm of nature and of grace. God has created visible things in such a way that through them we can gain some understanding into invisible verities.⁹⁵ “The natural is an image of the spiritual.”⁹⁶

Even though the natural elements of water, bread, and wine might not quite “fit” the categories of salvation, God has been pleased to reveal the relationship between the sign and the thing signified in his words of institution.⁹⁷

For the Reformed, the words of institution have a different significance and place than for either the Roman Catholics or the Lutherans. The words contain no hidden, mysterious, or magical powers. The word is more of a *verbum concionale seu praedicatum* that is spoken clearly to the congregation. This word effects no essential change in the elements, but does work in the consciousness of the hearers.⁹⁸ This work is not effected by man, but by the Holy Spirit of God who works in total man to impart the total Christ.

of *Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 3, G.M. Giger trans. & James T. Dennison, Jr. ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1997), pp. 348-349.

⁹⁴ *GD4:459*.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* “Maar toch was er *een bijzonder woord van God* noodig, om in de teekenen van doop en avondmaal een afbeelding te zien van de geestelijke goederen des heils. En dit was te meer noodig, wijl water, brood en wijn de genade maar niet afbeelden, doch ook verzegelen en dus in Gods hand dienst doen, om ons geloof te versterken. In deze twee dingen bestaat dan ook de forma sacramenti: in de bovengenoemde relatie tusschen teeken en beteekende zaak (forma interna) en in de Goddelijke instelling, *die door het woord zulk een verband tusschen beide legt.*” Italics—RG.

⁹⁸ *GD4:460*. “. . .het is veeleer een *verbum concionale seu praedicatum*, dat luide tot de gemeente gesproken wordt, dat hoegenaamde geene verandering in het teeken aanbrengt, maar het alleen voor het *bewustzijn der hoorders* van de gemeente gebruik afzondert en er hic et nunc eene bijzondere bestemming aan geeft.” Emphasis mine. Compare Turretin, *Institutes*, 19.6.1-14, pp. 354-356.

The "Testimonium Spiritus Sancti

Bavinck's theology manifests a healthy interest in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the "great, powerful Witness of Christ, objectively in the Scripture, subjectively in the spirit of man."⁹⁹ He is poured out in the congregation, regenerates and leads it in the truth, and is its *principium cognoscendi internum*.¹⁰⁰

In the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* and in his other writings, Bavinck constantly maintains the relationship between objective truth and subjective illumination by the Holy Spirit. Heideman correctly says, "The Scripture is the Word of God because the Holy Spirit witnesses to it in Christ. Form and content penetrate each other and cannot be separated. God dwells in the congregation of Christ by His Spirit."¹⁰¹

Renewal of the congregation is part of the Spirit's work. "He renews the congregation by regeneration, sanctification and glorification."¹⁰² The concrete importance of this renewal has to do with the fact that the Spirit "renews not only *being*, but also *consciousness*."¹⁰³ Of what does this inner renewal consist? The "illumination of the Spirit is not a revelation of secrets, but the application of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge which are given in Christ and his word."¹⁰⁴

Bavinck puts it in perspective when he writes,

. . . revelation is not just doctrine, that enlightens the understanding, but is, simultaneously a life that renews the heart. It is both in an unbreakable unity. The one-sidedness of intellectualism and mysticism should be avoided, because they are a failure to appreciate the riches of revelation. Because head and heart, the whole of

⁹⁹ *GD1*:471.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Heideman, *Reason*, 205.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* Quoting *GD1*:356.

man in his being and *consciousness* must be renewed, revelation presents itself in this dispensation in the Scripture and in the Church.¹⁰⁵

When Bavinck speaks of the renewal of the whole man, he is to be taken literally. Renewal of the sinner is the purpose of God's redeeming grace. The grace of Christ reaches as far as sin, and the same is true of Scripture. The Bible uses the language of daily experience and remains always true.¹⁰⁶ The principles for all life are given in Scripture.¹⁰⁷

Heideman is correct when he says, "Bavinck often deals with the problem of Scripture in the terms of Christology. At the same time, however, he lays much greater emphasis upon the role of the Spirit."¹⁰⁸

The Word is the witness of the Spirit, the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*.¹⁰⁹ This is one of the oldest elements in Bavinck's theological methodology. In his inaugural speech of 1883, he spoke of the *principium cognoscendi externum* and *internum*. He re-worked this theme in the various editions of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. In the first edition he wrote that the witness of the Holy Spirit completed revelation and that it reached its goal in that witness.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ GD1:356. "Ook thans is de openbaring geen leer alleen, die het verstand verlicht, maar tegelijk een leven, dat het hart vernieuwt. Zij is beide te zamen in onverbreekbare eenheid. De enzijdigheden van het intellectualisme en mysticisme zijn beide te vermijden, want zij zijn eene miskenning van den rijkdom der openbaring. Wijn hoofd en hart, de gansche mensch in zijn zijn en bewustzijn moet vernieuwd worden, zet de openbaring zich in deze bedeeing voort in de Schrift en in de kerk te zamen." Italics—RG.

¹⁰⁶ GD1:417.

¹⁰⁷ GD1:415-417. Comp. Heideman, *Reason*, 206.

¹⁰⁸ Heideman, *Reason*, 207.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 209.

¹¹⁰ GD1¹:421-422.

In the second edition, he modified the statement somewhat and declared that through the witness of the Holy Spirit revelation reached its goal *in man*.¹¹¹ Even though he does not explicitly use the term “consciousness,” it is evident that this is his intention.

In the sacrament, God pours out his invisible grace through the Holy Spirit.¹¹² With regard to the working of the sacrament, Bavinck teaches that a mere *vocatio externa* is insufficient. What is needed is the renewing power of the Holy Spirit working through the consciousness of the redeemed sinner.¹¹³

Summary

We have examined Bavinck’s doctrine of the sacraments in this chapter. In summary certain salient points need to be rehearsed. Sacraments are both signs and seals of an internal, invisible grace.

The Working of the Sacraments

There is no separate grace imparted in the sacraments that is not found in the Word of God.¹¹⁴ Bavinck’s answer to the proper working of the sacraments, over against Rome and the Lutherans is instructive.

In the first place, the Reformed teach that the grace of God is not distributed *per verbum et sacramentum* but only *cum verbo et sacramento*.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ *GD1*²:534.

¹¹² *GD4*:460. “Alleen heeft God zich verbonden om, waar het sacrament naar zijn bevel bediend wordt, zelf door zijnen Geest de onzichtbare genade te schenken.”

¹¹³ *GD4*:465.

¹¹⁴ *GD4*:464-465. “Voorts maakt de Schrift volstrekt geen onderscheid tusschen de *gratio sanctificans*, welke in het sacrament wordt geschonken, en eene daarvan verschillende, speciale *gratio sacramentalis*; want de genade die in het sacrament verzegeld wordt, is geen mindere maar ook geen andere, dan die door het woord in het geloof wordt geschonken en die allereerst in de vergevende, daarna ook in de heiligende genade bestaat.” Emphasis mine.

¹¹⁵ *GD4*:465. “Ten eerste toch leeren zij, dat de genade door God wordt uitgedeeld niet *per verbum et sacramentum*, maar alleen *cum verbo et sacramento*.”

Second, the Reformed maintain that a *vocatio externa* is insufficient for salvation. Along with the calling through the Word, an additional calling by the Holy Spirit is necessary. Without this work by the Spirit, the sacrament does not answer to its purpose.¹¹⁶ This explanation does not destroy the meaning of the sacraments, but establishes them. It secures the objectivity and reality of the sacraments. How is this so? Bavinck gives the following reasons.

First, the bond between sign and thing signified in the sacrament is none other than that which exists between the Word of the gospel and the person of Christ.¹¹⁷ Whoever receives the Word with a believing heart, truly receives Christ according to the promise of God. In like fashion, “whoever receives the sacraments with a believing heart, receives, in the same manner and according to the same promise of God, the total Christ with all his benefits and treasures.”¹¹⁸

Second, the Roman Catholics and Lutherans ensure no other or better reality, with regard to the sacraments, than the Reformed. The physical presence of Christ in the sacraments of Rome and the Lutherans does not prevent the recipient from falling away

¹¹⁶ Ibid. “En ten tweede houden zij staande, dat eene *vocatio externa* tot zaligheid onvoldoende is, dat bij de roeping door het woord een roeping door den Heiligen Geest bijkomen moet, en dat dus per consequentiam het sacrament zonder meer, zonder bijzondere werking des Heiligen Geestes in het hart der geloovigen, aan zijn doel niet beantwoordt.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid. “1^o de band tusschen teeken en beteekende zaak in het sacrament is geen andere maar ook geen mindere dan die, welke tusschen het woord des Evangelies en den persoon van Christus bestaat.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid. “. . . en evenzoo, wie het sacrament geloovig ontvangt, ontvangt op diezelfde wijze en naar diezelfde belofte Gods den ganschen Christus met al zijne weldaden en goederen.”

from grace. In the Reformed view, the truth is emphasized that God's grace in Christ is spiritual in nature and can only be received spiritually.¹¹⁹

Third, the Lutherans and Roman Catholics demand a confession of faith in the adults who receive the sacrament.¹²⁰ This merely points to the truth that grace is not infused into everyone, but all types of qualifications are made both for children and unbelievers who receive a sacrament.¹²¹

Fourth, the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans are confronted with the same difficulty as the Reformed, when it comes to the question of when and in which cases the sacraments strengthen the recipients and impart grace to them.¹²²

Thus, according to Bavinck, the doctrine of the *unio sacramentalis*, no matter how closely the sign and the thing signified are brought into proximity, solves the dilemma of how the sacrament works. Everyone acknowledges that there are times when the sacrament does not impart what it promises (those who put obstacles in the way, the infidels, *etc.*).

Objectively, then, the sacrament is fully sufficient. Subjectively, what has to transpire is the enlightenment of the recipient's understanding, the "bending" of his will in order that the sacrament is truly understood and received.¹²³

¹¹⁹ *GD4:466*. "2° Roomschen en Lutherschen verzekeren aan het sacrament geene andere, betere realiteit, dan die er ook naar Geref. belijdenis aan toekomt. . . . De genade Gods in Christus is van geestelijke natuur en kan daarom alleen geestelijk aangenomen worden."

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* "3° Ook de Lutherschen durven bij volwassenen den eisch des geloofs voor de ontvangst van het sacrament niet laten varen."

¹²¹ *Ibid.* "En de Roomsche theologie handelt nog altijd over de vraag, of het sacrament, dat eerst door een obex verworpen werd, ook later zijne werking nog kan doen. De genadewerking gaat voglens geene enkele belijdenis altijd tegelijk met het sacrament gepaard. En toch wordt desniettemin de objectiviteit, en de band van teeken en beteekende zaak gehandhaafd."

Fifth, it is true that for believers the sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace.¹²⁴ They are not merely the establishment of the truth of the gospel that whoever believes will be saved. For the true believer, they are also the establishment of the entire covenant of grace, with all its promises and of the total Christ with all his benefits.¹²⁵

The sacraments do not ensure the recipient of some general, vague verity, but they are seals of this promise from God: *I will be your God and the God of your descendants*.¹²⁶ They present before us not only what God reveals to us in his Word, but what he distributes to us—faithfully—in our hearts.¹²⁷

The focus in the sacraments is the sealing of all God’s promises based on the once-for-all-time sacrifice of Christ on the cross. His redemptive atonement seals to us forgiveness of sins and eternal life through grace alone.

The Value of the Sacraments

If a sacrament is an “appendix,” it would seem that it is of less value than the gospel. Furthermore, if the sacraments are not absolutely necessary for salvation, of what real value are they? Bavinck admits that the covenant of grace is sufficient without the

¹²² Ibid. “4^o Roomschen en Lutherschen staan ten slotte voor dezelfde moeilijkheid als de Gereformeerden, dat is, voor de vraag, wanneer en in welk geval de sacramenten den ontvangers tot heil verstrekken en genade hun meedeelen.”

¹²³ *GD4*:467. “Objectief is het sacrament wel voldoende; in het sacrament wordt even reëel als in het woord de gansche Christus geschonken. Maar in het subject is noodig, dat zijn verstand verlicht, zijn wil gebogen wordt, om het sacrament waarlijk te verstaan en aan te nemen.”

¹²⁴ Ibid. “5^o Voor de geloovigen, voor hen, die de sacramenten in het geloof ontvangen en genieten, zijn zij teekenen en zegelen van het verbond der genade.”

¹²⁵ *GD4*:468. “Zij zijn geen bevestiging alleen van de sententie des Evangelies, dat, wie gelooft, zalig wordt, maar zij zijn voor de geloovigen zegelen van het gansche genadeverbond, van al zijne beloften, van den ganschen Christus en al zijne weldaden.”

¹²⁶ Ibid. “Zij verzekeren daarom niet maar eene algemeene waarheid, doch zij zijn zegelen, aan de belofte: Ik ben uw God en uws zaads God.”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

addition of any sacraments.¹²⁸ It is not the *privatio* of the sacraments, but *contemptus* that makes a person guilty before God.¹²⁹

Nevertheless, the sacraments have great value.¹³⁰ It is clear that the sacraments do not bring about faith, but they strengthen it.¹³¹ They do not pour physical grace (what would that be?) into the recipient, but they grant the total Christ, whom believers already possess through the Word. They grant this total Christ in a different manner and in another way, thereby strengthening the faith of the recipients.¹³²

The Sufficiency of the Sacraments

Over against the Roman Catholic Church, Bavinck declares the sufficiency of the Word of God and the two sacraments instituted by Christ. If a person accepts the sacraments with a believing heart, he may be assured of receiving the full, total Christ with all his merits, complete justification and sanctification, and unbreakable fellowship with God.¹³³

¹²⁸ Ibid. “Noodzakelijk zijn zij niet op zichzelf, want God behoefde ze niet in te stellen; en zijn verbond en genade, zijn woord en belofte zijn, als die van een waarachtig God, vast genoeg, dan dat zij de bevestiging der sacramenten van noode zouden hebben.” (Quoting from Calvin, *Inst.* 4.14.3, 6.)

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid. “Desniettemin hebben de sacramenten groote waarde. Omdat wij geen geesten maar zinnelijke, aardse schepselen zijn, die het geestelijke niet anders dan onder zinnelijke vormen kunnen verstaan, heeft God de sacramenten ingesteld, opdat wij door het zien van die teekenen een beter inzicht zouden verkrijgen in zijne weldaden, een krachtiger bevestiging zouden ontvangen van zijne beloften en alzoo in ons geloof zouden gesteund en versterkt worden.”

¹³¹ *GD4*:468.

¹³² *GD4*:469.

¹³³ *GD4*:473. “Daartegenover heeft de Protestantsche Christen aan het woord en aan de twee door Christus ingestelde sacramenten genoeg. Hij heeft daarin, indien hij ze in het geloof aanneemt, den ganschen Christus, den vollen schat zijner verdiensten, de volkomene gerechtigheid en heiligheid, de onverbreekelijke gemeenschap met God.”

There is no need for a separate grace imparted through confirmation, penance, or the like. Through the Word of God, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, believers receive all the grace they need for life and death, in time and eternity.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* "Zoo heeft hij geen aparte genade in confirmatie, boete, en laatste oliesel meer van noode, want door woord, doop en avondmaal ontvangt hij alle genade, welke hij in leven en sterven, voor tijd en eeuwigheid behoeft."