

THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER*

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Developments in Connection with the Doctrine of the Lord's Supper

1. AS WE SURVEY contemporary views regarding the Lord's Supper, we are struck first by the remarkable parallel to the development of thought concerning baptism. We are referring to the fact that today many seem to lack certainty about the *institution* of the Lord's Supper by Christ himself. A historical-critical approach to the Bible has either obscured or removed the portrait of this institution. The narrative about Christ's actions during the night of his betrayal and his farewell to the disciples are viewed as a later product of the liturgy-celebrating church. These doubts demonstrate a connection with another remarkable fact, namely, that in order to understand the meaning of the Lord's Supper, theologians reach back with a certain measure of emphasis, even forcefulness, to the meals of Jesus during his ministry. For the narrative found in the Gospels informs us that Christ ate more than once with sinners and tax collectors—to the offense of the law-abiding Jews. From that fact, some draw the conclusion with respect to celebrating the Lord's Supper that at

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his table Christ desires an “open” fellowship, characterized by solidarity with those in society who are despised. Christ’s meal appears to be a weapon in the struggle against racial or social discrimination. This development of thought flows exactly parallel to the appeal to the baptism of John, as we saw in connection with the doctrine of baptism. “Solidarity” is a key word for understanding baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

2. Calling to mind the meals Jesus enjoyed during his life on earth is related, for some, to their struggle to liberate the “bread of the church” from its sacral-liturgical isolation. For our age demands that the “bread of the church” and the “bread for the world” be more closely related to one another than has been the case for many centuries. Was not the whole of that profound sixth chapter of John’s Gospel written on the occasion of the feeding of thousands of hungry people? And did not the early church celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the context of “love meals” which ministered to the poor?

Against this background people experiment with organizing celebrations of the Lord’s Supper that faintly resemble those early Christian love meals. In this connection the danger is far from imaginary that the *experience* of fellowship becomes the criterion for such celebration. At the same time the suffering and dying of Christ are pushed into the background. The course of Christ’s suffering is reduced to the level of a stimulating illustration. Celebrating the supper of the Lord is thereby completely humanized.¹

3. Quite apart from this development, in many contemporary perspectives on the sacrament we encounter a stronger emphasis on *fellowship* and on the exercise of fellowship. People point to the fact that in the past, the Lord’s Supper has been diminished often in individualistic ways. One’s own personal participation in the forgiveness of sins was allegedly the key feature of many celebrations of the sacrament. In contrast to that, many wish to

¹Cf. M. Kruse, “Abendmahlspraxis im Wandel,” *Evangelische Theologie* 35 (1975): 487-488.

emphasize, in agreement with the apostolic instruction of 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, the practice and the experience of (table) fellowship between participants.

4. In our day we see a remarkable growth in the practice of *family communion*, where parents and children take the Lord's Supper together. Whereas formerly, in the tradition of the Reformation, access to the Table was tied to public profession of faith, nowadays many refuse to acknowledge this as the only legitimate route to the sacrament.

This phenomenon has its own background and complications. We might mention one element at this point in connection with our preceding discussion. We have in mind the modern preference for the "experience" of fellowship. Fearing the "intellectualizing" of the faith, people appeal to the pedagogical principle that "doing it yourself" is more effective than "learning it" from somebody else. Given this argument, celebrating the Lord's Supper becomes a kind of catechetical experience for the children.

5. Naturally, we should devote special attention to developments in the *doctrine* of the Lord's Supper. For centuries already, opinions about the Lord's Supper have been characterized by deep-seated division, not only between Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church, but also among Protestant churches themselves. One feature of the twentieth century was the numerous attempts made to break through the battle lines formed centuries ago. Christians from the Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions met together and conducted dialogues and "plurilogues" with one another. The results of these conversations have been recorded in documents of varying significance. So many have emerged that listing them would be beyond our capacity at this point.² We would mention only the

²Overviews can be found in *Praktisch Theologisches Handbuch*, 51ff.; *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. G. Krause and G. Müller (Berlin-New York, 1977), vol. 1, 153ff.; Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. by Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979),

well-known and important theses of Arnoldshain (1957), a product of the labors of German theologians in the Reformed and Lutherans traditions.³ We might also mention the Concord of Leuenberg (1973), an agreement following the line of Arnoldshain that emerged between European churches in both Reformational traditions, along with the consensus between the Reformed (Hervormden) and Lutherans reached in 1956.

All of these efforts were accompanied by liturgical renovations and were assisted by developments in the area of biblical exegesis.

In connection with the latter point, we should pause to consider exegetical efforts involving the so-called “words of institution” of the Lord’s Supper. Of central significance to these words of institution are the well-known words “body” and “blood” (of Christ). In contrast to the centuries-old debate surrounding the interpretation of these words, in recent years⁴ we see an important and remarkable tendency to relate “body” and “blood” less to the *substance* of Christ’s flesh and blood and more to the *person* and the *actions* of Christ. Moreover, emphasis is being placed increasingly on the consideration that fellowship with Christ in the Lord’s Supper must be sought not exclusively in the elements of bread and wine, but rather in the totality of the Supper.⁵ We might summarize these developments within Protestant theology as an attempt to free the church from “substance”-thinking.

Similar developments were registered in Roman Catholic theology. Everyone understands that loosening the connection with so-called “substance”-thinking would naturally cause

385ff.; W. J. Kooiman, in *Hervormd-luthers gesprek over het avondmaal*, ed. C. W. Mönnich and G. C. van Niftrik (Nijkerk, 1958), 212-231.

³See W. L. Boelens, *Die Arnoldsbainer Abendmahlsthesen* (Assen, 1964); W. Aeverbeck, *Der Opfercharakter des Abendmahls in der neueren evangelischen Theologie* (Paderborn, 1967), 381ff.

⁴In fact, this period spans approximately fifty years. It was in 1936 that H. Gollwitzer published his important essay, “Die Abendmahlsfrage als Aufgabe kirchlicher Lehre,” in *Theologische Aufsätze*, 275ff.

⁵This point was met with significant resistance from the side of orthodox Lutherans (see, e.g., Aeverbeck, *Opfercharakter des Abendmahls*, 440ff.).

tensions in a church that had for centuries taught the “transubstantiation” of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ as official and immutable dogma. Nevertheless, even there we see various attempts to break free of the tight restraints of “substance”-thinking. Some try to interpret the ancient pronouncements of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) with the help of categories supplied by modern philosophy, borrowed generally from “relational” perspectives. Within this framework people now point to the fact that at the institution of the sacrament, the “sign” was placed within a new meaning-context, to function henceforth in that relationship. These new theological vocabularies supply replacement words, so that instead of “transubstantiation” people now speak of “transfinalization” and “transignification”—terms forged for the purpose of explaining Trent in such a way that whatever may have offended Protestant believers in the Roman Catholic view of the Lord’s Supper will be removed.⁶

For the sake of that same rapprochement similar developments are occurring within Protestant thought. We see this in the energetic communal efforts to combine, in the eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving, the notions of *Lord’s Supper* and of *sacrifice*. In thanksgiving for the gift, the church offers the sacrifice of Christ to God in remembrance, and thereby the church participates in the priestly work of Christ.

6. The path of change in thinking that we have been identifying in this orientation brings us inevitably to developments in the *World Council of Churches*. For years already, discussions have been going on, especially in the Faith and Order Commission, with regard to matters involving the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. With the aid of historical, exegetical, doctrinal,

⁶See Th. Schneider, “Die neuere katholische Diskussion über die Eucharistie,” *Evangelische Theologie* 35 (1975): 497ff. In the encyclical *Myterium fidei* (1965), Pope Paul VI opposed attempts to “demythologize” the dogma of transubstantiation. The “relational thinking” mentioned in this connection is closely related to the philosophical paradigm underlying the report *God With Us*. Very enlightening here is the orientation of A. Ganoczy in *Einführung in die katholische Sakramentenlehre* (Darmstadt, 1979), 83.

and liturgical investigations, people have been trying to discover those points where various traditions seem to converge. After pausing at various interim stops,⁷ this development has reached a provisional destination in the Lima Declaration of January 1982.⁸ With regard to the Lord's Supper, this Declaration is clearly influenced by the eucharistic theology of the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Although here is not the place to analyze this Declaration,⁹ we would mention the fact that the results of the Declaration are embodied in the *Lima Liturgy*. We are struck by the prominence within this liturgy of typically Eastern features of the eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving. This prayer of thanksgiving embraces all of God's works in creation and redemption, and in fact constitutes a praise offering to God with an eye to the whole creation. In that context, then, the *bread* and the *wine* are presented to God, which means: *are presented to God as a sacrifice*, together with the prayers of Christ.

Here we find one of the most characteristic elements in modern perspectives on the Lord's Supper: *the notion of sacrifice is once again connected with the Lord's Supper*. It is exactly this combination the people hope will break through the ancient battle lines that have kept East and West apart, and divided Rome and the Reformation.

The "remembrance" obtains a double focus: *in terms of the congregation* the sacrament serves to make the cross event effectual today (the representational character), and *in terms of God* the sacrament serves to make the sacrifice effectual before God's face, whereby the church inserts herself in the sequence of Christ's priestly self-sacrifice and intercession.¹⁰ All of this betrays

⁷See W. Averbeck, *Opfercharakter des Abendmahls*, 665ff., and *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 1, 196ff.

⁸The official title of the Lima Declaration is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva 1982, Faith and Order Paper no. 111).

⁹See W. Schöpsdau, "Eucharistie," in *Kommentar zu den Lima-Erklärungen über Taufe, Eucharistie und Amt* (Göttingen, 1983), 60ff.

¹⁰See, e.g., *Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine* (the Windsor Declaration, 7 September 1971, from Roman Catholics and Anglicans), *Verklaring van de Groupe des Dombes* (1972), and the *Discussienota van de Raad van kerken in Nederland*, 12 June 1972, esp. 13.

the heavy influence of the French Protestant theologian M. Thurian, whose contribution has enjoyed wide interest among Roman Catholics for years already. Thurian calls the celebration of the Lord's Supper a "memorial"—a "commemoration." He is of the opinion that this concept brings together in the Lord's Supper both *the presence of Christ* and *the sacrifice to God*. When the church celebrates Holy Communion, she brings to God's remembrance the work of Christ. In this way, the Lord's Supper functions as a prayer and a sacrifice directed toward God as well.¹¹

Max Thurian (b. 1921) is one of the Friars of the Communauté de Taizé, a kind of Protestant monastery in France. He is also a theological adviser to the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He provides us a brief summary of his views in "The Eucharistic Memorial, Sacrifice or Praise and Supplication," in *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.¹² There he describes "memorial" as "actualisation of Christ's sacrifice, in the Church and before the Father." According to Thurian, objective reconciliation has been fulfilled by Christ on the cross, but the task remains for the church as body of Christ to be the instrument for the application of salvation.

In his introduction to the Lima Liturgy, Thurian describes the "commemoration" as a making-present and making-alive of the redemptive event that occurred on the cross, and the presentation of Christ's only sacrifice to the Father as a fervent prayer of the church.

We quote the following passages from the liturgy itself:

- From the Epiclesis I: "May the outpouring of this Spirit of Fire transfigure this thanksgiving meal that this bread and wine may become for us the body and blood of Christ."
- From the Anamnesis: "United in Christ's priesthood, we present to you this memorial: Remember the sacrifice of your Son and grant to people everywhere the benefits of Christ's redemptive work."

¹¹Regarding the view of Thurian, see W. Averbeck, *Opfercharakter des Abendmahls*, 767-768; *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen, 1957-1965), vol. 1, col. 1431; and *Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen, 1961), vol. 3, col. 1279.

¹²Edited by M. Thurian (Geneva, 1983), 90-103; in this document we also find the Lima Liturgy, with an introduction by Thurian (225-246).

- From the Epiclesis II: “Behold, Lord, this eucharist which you yourself gave to the Church and graciously receive it, as you accept the offering of your Son whereby we are reinstated in your Covenant.”¹³

In the coming years, the Lima Declaration will surely receive widespread attention. For the intention is to collect the responses of member churches (and from the Roman Catholic Church as well) and rework them into a definitive declaration.

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For our purposes, this orientation is sufficient. We move next to consider on the basis of Scripture the meaning of the Lord’s Supper that Christ has left to his church for the period between his ascension and his return. In that context we will discuss, implicitly or explicitly, the insights presented in this orientation.

The Lord’s Supper according to the New Testament

An immense amount of material is available to us at this juncture. We will attempt to present this material by means of a coherent overview. For that reason, we focus our observations in terms of the following nine areas.

1. *The Lord’s Supper as Divine Gift and Congregational Deed*

Celebrating the Lord’s Supper proceeds from Christ’s commission to his disciples. At the heart of that commission, naturally, was the activity of the disciples. At the same time the command of Christ contained a firm promise to them as well. That becomes clear when we hear the Bible speak about the church’s fellowship with the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). “Fellowship” involves more than one party, since it requires reciprocity.

¹³These citations from the Lima Liturgy are taken from *Baptism and Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration*, ed. by Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright (Geneva: World Council of Churches, and Eerdmans, 1983), 253.

We reach the same conclusion when we consider that other key word in the institution of the Lord's Supper: "remembrance." This remembrance is to be *performed* by the disciples but *instituted by* Christ himself. He was the one who, with emphatic purpose, instituted the commemoration of his extraordinary work of redemption. The disciples were to remember him, but at the same time he remembers his covenant (according to Psalm 111:4-5). Keeping in mind these simple truths can help free or protect us from the sterile problematic of whether the Lord's Supper must be seen as God's activity or as the church's. The secret lies in the fact that this is not really a choice.

2. *The Institution of the Lord's Supper*

As we consider the words of the institution, we begin with 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. In that epistolary section the apostle supplies us with reliable information about the tradition that had come to him. This tradition had its origin in Christ himself, and in this Scripture passage it is handed down to the church with apostolic authority. Here we have the earliest report about the institution of the Lord's Supper. The first thing that strikes us about this apostolic narrative is that the apostle presents us this command to celebrate the sacrament as the will of the living Lord. He is not digging up an ancient chronicle, but instead he is drawing our attention to the Lord of the church. He talks about this Lord whom he himself had encountered (Acts 9). His emphasis on that particular fact is so strong that clearly a matter of crucial interest was at stake for the apostle at this point. We notice references to the (living) *Lord* in verses 23, 26, 27 (twice), 32, and also in 1 Corinthians 10:20 (twice) and 10:21.

The proclamation that is involved in the Lord's Supper thus relates to the *death* of the Lord (v. 26), but it is the death of *the Lord*, of him whom we know as the resurrected and heavenly ascended Majesty, who since the day of Pentecost dwells among his church through his Spirit and does nothing else than work toward the day of his glorious return. This present-day glory of Christ is the presupposition of all our talking and thinking about

the Lord's Supper and about our participation in celebrating the sacrament. So it is not the Lord's Supper that makes us members of Christ or "flesh of his flesh" (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15, 17, 19 and Eph. 5:30, KJV). For through his Spirit he himself is with his church; indeed, he dwells in his church. From those hands we today receive, through the instrumentality of the apostles, the mandate to remember his death. The living Christ himself guarantees the validity and relevance of his own words spoken on the night of betrayal.

The evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke have also left behind their reports of the institution. The fact that these reports do not correspond in every detail is an indication to us that it was not God's intention to hand down a few sacred and magical incantations. Moreover, the differences among the accounts are rather few. In this connection we would make a few observations.

- In the account of Mark 14:22-26 we notice that the words "*for many*" are spoken not in connection with the bread, but with the cup. The same observation applies to the account in Matthew 26:26-28. This "for many" corresponds with the "for you" in 1 Corinthians 11:24. They provide a clear characterization of the nature of Christ's dying; his is a substitutionary dying for all those whom he, as the suffering Servant of the LORD, will want to ransom from the power of sin and death (Isa. 53:10-12). Christ knows he is the mediator of the new covenant. Recalling the "blood of the covenant" that Moses once sprinkled at the inauguration of the old covenant (Ex. 24:8; Heb. 9:20), Christ knew he was called to surpass this mediator by permitting his own blood to be shed as "blood of the covenant" (Heb. 10:29). When Matthew 26:28 explicitly mentions the "forgiveness of sins" as its goal, that too is a reference to the characteristic gift belonging to the new covenant, as we learn from Jeremiah 31:34 (see Heb. 8:12; 10:17).
- Notice, in contrast to 1 Corinthians 11, the remarkable mention of the *kingdom* in the context of the accounts in Mark 11:25, Matthew 26:29, and Luke 22:16, 18, 29-30. This is a direct proof of the close relationship between "kingdom" and "new covenant."

- In the formula spoken with the breaking of bread, Luke speaks about the body *given* for you (Luke 22:19). In 1 Corinthians 11:24 we read of a “body-for-you.” Several important manuscripts contain here the additional word “*broken*” (“body broken for you”). This textual variant is contradicted by other sources. At the moment we are unable to reach a definite conclusion on this point. Our sense is that the argument that the word “broken” does not belong to the text is by no means conclusive.¹⁴ For practical reasons, then, we follow most modern translations, which render the phrase “this is my body which is for you.” We notice further that according to the account in Luke 22:20, not the “blood” but the “cup” is “shed” or “poured out.” Nevertheless, we should understand the “shedding” to refer to the contents of the cup as a metaphor of sacrificing blood. The word cannot be tied to either filling or emptying the cup. On this point we agree with the criticisms of S. Greijdanus’s view advanced by H. N. Ridderbos.¹⁵

3. *The Lord’s Supper as Proclamation of the Lord’s Death*

1 Corinthians 11:26 characterizes the Lord’s Supper as the “*proclamation of the death*” of the Lord.

“Proclamation” points to a solemn communication, a public announcement of big news. He whom we know today as our living Lord has at one time fully given himself in love for us. His love went as far as it could go: he gave himself for us all the way to death (see John 13:1; 15:13; Rom. 5:7-8).

Therefore, celebrating the Lord’s Supper always involves the fact of Christ’s death as the principal proof of his all-surpassing love for our lives. At the Lord’s Supper we keep on repeating this account of his death. We tell it as the most important news about Christ himself. But at the same time this is the big news about

¹⁴Therefore, the characterization “obviously not original” of Herman Ridderbos (*The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. by H. de Jongste, ed. by Raymond O. Zorn [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962], 429) seems too strong a claim, in our opinion.

¹⁵Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 429-430. For the entire argument we refer gratefully to J. P. Versteeg, “Het avondmaal volgens het Nieuwe Testament,” in *Bij brood en beker*, ed. by W. van ‘t Spijker (Goudriaan, 1980), 23-32.

ourselves; it is the cardinal fact of our life story. We hold it before each other, we let the world know it, and in this story we praise our Lord. Interpreters who see here a New Testament parallel to the story of the Exodus at the Passover meal (the *Haggada*) rightly draw our attention to this festive declaration within the broader context of the meal. The “proclaiming” of 1 Corinthians 11:26 is preaching, profession of faith, and doxology all at the same time. This is how the Lord of the church wants to be known among his people. *His* death is the big news of our lives. God must hear that, the world must hear that, children must hear that, and we must hear that from each other. It is not that the Lord simply wants to be known among his people in this way. We can state it more strongly yet: in this way he wants to come to be with his people again and again and be present among his people.

This will become more clear as we turn now to consider another key word in the apostolic account, namely, remembrance.

4. *The Lord's Supper as a Remembrance*

“Do this in remembrance of me.” That is the command of celebration, stated twice (1 Cor. 11:24-25). “*To do this*” means

- to take the bread and the cup
- to pronounce the thanksgiving
- to break the bread, to distribute it, and to say of this bread: this is my body for you
- to take the cup, to pass it around, and to say of this cup: this is the new covenant in my blood
- to eat the bread
- to drink of the cup

All of these actions together form “*the remembrance of Christ.*” Everybody understands that the apostle cannot possibly be referring to keeping alive the memory of a cherished death. This “remembering” can be explained exclusively in terms of the nature of divine revelation. That revelation is revelation in

history. The living God permits his name to radiate in this history that he himself forms. To know him is therefore possible only by learning to know him in the history of his deeds. In no other way can the church come to know her heavenly Lord. By the power of the Holy Spirit she must again and again enter into his historically dated words and deeds (cf. John 14:26; 16:12ff.). So, then, the result of this remembrance will not be that we refresh our knowledge of this history, but that we know him as he is. For as he was then, so he is now (Heb. 13:8). Anyone who holds firmly to this image of him will recognize him when he comes. So this “remembrance” entails that the church knows her *living* Lord.

To know him truly is to know him in his love, a love that went as far as it could: he gave himself over to death, even the death of the cross. Anyone who knows him this way, truly knows him. For in that self-sacrifice we have seen his heart. At every celebration of the Lord's Supper the congregation proclaims: This is the kind of Lord we have; we will walk with him and we will live for him. Celebrating the remembrance of Christ's death is not a repetition of those events in any form whatsoever. Still less does this remembrance consist in calling up these events from the grave of past time in order once again to make these events live in the present and thereby to grant them relevance by way of so-called representation. For the Lord's Supper serves *his* remembrance, the remembrance of the Lord who lives. The Lord's Supper involves encountering and knowing him, loving and expecting him.

“Remembrance” seems to have everything to do with “communion” and “fellowship.” In this celebratory remembrance, fellowship with the Redeemer is both celebrated and renewed. That was true already of the Passover as a commemoration of the grand fact of the exodus (Ex. 12:14). How much more, then, may the same be true of this commemoration. Surely at the Lord's Supper we may make the promise our own: “In every place where I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you” (Ex. 20:24b). *We* commemorate, but *God*, in particular *Christ*, is there and *causes* this remembrance. Thus the “doing” of the congregation and the

activity of Christ go together at the celebration of the Lord's Supper. During the night of his highest love—which was at the same time the night of his betrayal!—Christ mandated his church to fix in her memory this exact moment in the history of love between him and his people, to hold on to it, and to call it to mind again and again. At certain times, in response to the command of the bridegroom, the bride brings out their wedding picture. And the bridegroom says: as I was then, so I remain; that is how I am still today. In spite of everything that has happened since, I am for you the same as then. So the bride is convinced once again of the miracle of this marriage. For quite a bit has happened along the way!

In this remembrance, therefore, the new and everlasting covenant of grace displays its unchangeable nature. The bride can respond in but one way: This is how we were married! I belong to this kind of husband!¹⁶

With our emphasis on remembrance we want to honor implicitly the effort of Zwingli. This is how he formulated his rejection of the mass in January 1523 (18th thesis): the mass is “not a sacrifice, but a remembrance of the sacrifice . . . and [the] assurance of the salvation Christ has made known to us.” This effort is on target and shows Zwingli's capacity for building his case from the words of the Bible. It is regrettable that in the Lord's Supper debates of the sixteenth century, the feature of “remembrance” often receded into the background. Honoring Zwingli's effort can have liberating effects in the stalled debates between Calvinists and Lutherans and for understanding the meaning of the institution itself. Quite properly the Heidelberg Catechism treats the doctrine of the Lords Supper in the “section” dealing with salvation, and not in the one dealing with gratitude. The

¹⁶Like any metaphor, so too that of the wedding picture has limits. When you look at a wedding picture, you are struck by the fact that the wedding day was merely the start. That kind of picture draws attention to the fact that the wedding couple was then so cute, so young, and so inexperienced. Those associations we don't wish to evoke, of course, with our metaphor. The value of this imagery lies for us in the *historical* character of the wedding picture. In terms of its proper meaning it fixes but one moment in that couple's love-history: their entrance into the marriage covenant. In those terms that picture maintains its claim throughout every stage of marriage.

Lord's Supper belongs to the means of grace; Christ works in us with this sacrament through his Holy Spirit. Yet, we can hardly insist on an either-or. Celebrating the Lord's Supper is also a fruit and expression of the life of gratitude. For the Lord's Supper also has a dimension of thanksgiving (eucharistial!), a sacrifice of praise and confession.

Regarding the combination of "remembrance" and "fellowship" Dutch theologian Klaas Schilder wrote some remarkable passages in the second edition of his *Christ in His Suffering*.¹⁷ By this means Schilder was seeking to prevent or dispel false dilemmas in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

The salvation-historical understanding of the "remembrance" severs the popular notion of representation at its root. For the various expressions of that idea always display one common feature: the historical distance is experienced as a hindrance and therefore must be overcome. This elimination of the historical distance, however, attacks the (salvation) *historical* character of Christ's sacrifice (the "once for all" of Heb. 9:26, 28; see also 10:10, 12; and the "once for all time" of Heb. 7:27; Rom. 6:10), and subsequently functions in the context of a reintroduction of the "sacrifice" character of the Lord's Supper. In this way, the church becomes the agent that brings about the real sacrifice.¹⁸ The description of the doctrine of the mass given in Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism—"that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ, unless Christ is still daily offered for them by the priests"—is materially correct in its description of the representation-idea found in Trent's pronouncement of 17 September 1562.

¹⁷Vol. 1 (1948), 269, 274-275.

¹⁸Cf. G. N. Lammens, *Tot Zijn gedachtenis. Het commemoratieve aspect van de avondmaalsviering* (Kampen, 1968), 251ff.; this is a comprehensive treatment of the representation idea. For the exegesis of "remembrance" we have found this book very helpful. The extremely negative criticisms of C. Graafland (in *Bij brood en beker*, 341ff.) are not correct, in our view. Graafland objects strongly against speaking in terms of "participation" to describe what happens at the Lord's table. For the congregation is the "recipient" and the idea of "participation" can lead easily to ideas of Roman Catholic synergism. In my opinion, this approach is untenable (cf. *De Reformatie* 56 [1980-1981]: 252-253).

5. *“This is my body for you”*

With a view to, and in the context of, this remembrance, Christ declared at the breaking and distribution of the bread: “This is my body-for-you” (1 Cor. 11:24). Precisely because of this context it is completely preposterous to suppose an identification between bread and body.

It is difficult to find the proper terms with which to describe the significance of Christ’s action at this moment in history. Every word we select carries with it some historical baggage. Therefore we will select a provisional term. We realize that this term as well requires protection, explanation, and deepening. Nevertheless, we need it for the progress of our narrative. During the evening of his departure, with the breaking and distributing of the bread, when Christ said: “This is my body-for-you,” he is busy, in terms of the remembrance, *“forming an historical image”*: he wants to leave this image of himself behind for the future, now that he is sharing the table with the disciples for the last meal of his sojourn and is directing the commemorative celebration. The construction of just such an image belongs with a commemoration; it aids remembrance and makes it perpetually possible.

For the lamb on the Passover table “is” the lamb from the night of the exodus. And so that lamb “is” at the same time the salvation from God’s wrath, a salvation that was made possible at that time by the lamb’s blood. The “image” focuses the attention of subsequent generations on the essential acts of salvation, and in this way the God of salvation comes down through the ages to his people.

At the most critical moment in history Christ found a piece of broken and shared bread suited for the purpose of forming that image that would need to undergird the remembrance. Apparently the bread is a sustainable instrument for carrying out the mandate to remember. From this bread proceeds a declaration that accurately touches the core of his dying for the sake and in the place of his people (“for you”). The bread can serve as an “image” of his body-for-them only if his dying body

is like bread. Here we must certainly not understand the word *body* “substantially” (or if you will, “physically” or “ontologically”). He himself is “body” as he lived among the disciples and made himself available for communion with them and for communion with God, and is now at this historical moment in a position to give himself entirely over to death for them (cf. Heb. 10:5, 10; 1 Pet. 2:24). For Christ has surrendered his body and thereby *himself* for us. Precisely this moment—the moment of giving himself away—is what the Lord’s Supper most emphatically intends to confirm. Death is death. But this death is bread. This death, bitter and full of reproach, is the death of the beloved Son of God. Indeed, the contradictions pile up here; for we speak about the love of the Son of God who allowed himself to be submerged in God’s wrath against the sin of the whole human race. Who could ever measure the extent? But in all those contradictions the divine plan of salvation reaches fulfillment. This death of Christ Jesus is life for us. In the most everyday means of life, he has permitted us to recognize and recover his dark death. The cross is a hard, dumb pole, on which hung many a life that was bleeding away. But the cross of Christ is a tree of life. For there Christ gave himself for the sake of his people. “This is my body-for-you.” For that very reason bread is capable of being his body-for-his-people.

In our exegesis of the bread-saying we have used the research of J. Jeremias¹⁹ regarding the so-called “second saying” at the Passover meal, but for the rest we have not followed him in his interpretation that “body” and “blood” represent *sacrifice* terminology.²⁰

Nor did we adopt his view that we are to “Do this to bring me [i.e., Jesus] in remembrance”—by God. For the focus of the commemoration is directed to the disciples and to us. *We* must remember.²¹ We don’t need to bring to God’s remembrance Christ’s

¹⁹J. Jeremias, *Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu*, 3rd edition (Göttingen, 1960).

²⁰Cf. the opposition of G. N. Lammens at this point against Herman Ridderbos, who follows Jeremias here (Lammens, *Tot Zijn gedachtenis*, 97ff.; Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. by John Richard De Witt [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 374-375, 416).

²¹Cf. G. N. Lammens, *Tot Zijn gedachtenis*, 168ff., and Herman Ridderbos, *Paul*, 421-422, n. 93.

sacrifice. The living Christ does that in person (Heb. 9:12), seated as he is on the throne of God (Heb. 8:1-2). The Lamb that was slain stands daily before God.

Nota bene: our interpretation effectively dismantles the exegetical basis undergirding the construction of M. Thurian and along with him, the Lima Liturgy.

6. *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”*

“In the same way the cup also,” says 1 Corinthians 11:25. At the close of the meal Christ declared: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

Already here any identification becomes absolutely inconceivable. How could anyone ever imagine the transubstantiation of a “cup” into a “covenant”? “Cup” stands for the *wine* that was being offered. And by virtue of its outward likeness, wine is an image of the *blood*. In that word “blood” no special attention is required for the *substance*, but rather the *powerful* character of Christ’s *dying* is very consciously being indicated. For his blood was “shed” (cf. the versions of Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In a few moments, Christ would be handed over (1 Cor. 11:23) into the hands of men, and it would be those hands that would take his life from him.

When, then, at this moment in history one of the disciples received from this Lord this very cup extended to him, then at that actual moment he received the new covenant that was grounded and secured in that powerful death of Christ. The key feature of that new covenant is that it is stronger than the power of religious adultery. It is the covenant after the divorce (the exile). The power of this love is stronger than the destructive power of that unfaithfulness. Therefore it is the *forgiveness of sins* that characterizes this covenant and supplies its durability (Matt. 26:28).

7. *The Body and Blood of the Lord*

We have now considered the words of the institution and have seen the gift Christ left behind with his disciples. We

understand that his words were intended not only for these disciples, but that they are just as valid for the generations following them, as often as they eat the bread and drink the cup (1 Cor. 11:25-26). They too receive, via the continuing tradition, *this* bread and *this* cup extended to them. We also may speak in the same way, by virtue of the image formed of the commemorative meal. Each administration at the table of the Lord's Supper "is" the table of the night he was betrayed. That language of identification is not based on the elimination of the historical distance ("being present with Christ") or on the re-actualizing of the facts in the representation itself. Rather, this language is based on the presence of the Lord. His hands extend bread and wine, and his mouth says to us again and again: "This bread is my body-for-you" and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." For we speak of the "body" and "blood" of the *Lord*. Bread and cup do not constitute the portrait of one who is absent, a portrait put in service to the redemptive commemoration. The Lord himself is present in this "image." He instituted it, he accompanies it, and he comes to us in it. He is the bridegroom who again and again has his bride bring out this wedding photo. That is why, in our discussion of Christ making this picture for us, we cannot suffice with the concept of "sign." For the "image" does much more than point to a reality that is present somewhere else. It not only points backward (to an earlier time) or upward (to heaven) or forward (to the future). Christ himself comes to us in the image or figure. For that reason we need words like "pledge," "fellowship," "presence," and "guarantee." That cannot be explained from any inward or additional power of the sign. It is the all-surpassing reality of Christ's present lordship that leads us to this acknowledgement. He instituted the sign and at this moment he maintains it. Therefore we are not permitted to abstract bread and cup from the Lord from whose hands they came and keep coming again and again.

In this way we can also understand why we may *call* the bread and the cup, which are characterized this way as instruments of the Lord himself, *the body and blood of the Lord*. 1 Corinthians 11

leads the way for us (v. 27). Down through the ages the confusion about these words has been widespread. But the meaning is simple for those who do not abstract these words from the context in which they have been spoken.

We are not dealing here with the language of an objective observer, language that summarized the ingredients of the church's meal. Nor do we have here the language of the insurance agent, language describing the contents found in a cupboard somewhere in the church building. Still less do we hear at this point the language of philosophy, aimed at enriching us with the definitions of all kinds of "essences."

The apostle is here speaking direct language, unique to faith and love. That language is spoken to the congregation. Various tones resonate in this choice of words: gratitude, awareness of riches, respect, the congregation's expectation. How could a church who knows her Lord, who expects him from heaven, and who celebrates the Lord's Supper at his command, ever become confused when the bread and cup of the Lord's table are called "body and blood of the Lord"? Does not the Lord's table feature that body and that blood with which our Lord once upon a time, long ago, purchased his church? And do not these words come to us in the context of our remembrance of that reality?

We receive the bread and cup of *that* night and from *those* hands. All the love of Christ is concentrated therein, and it is this love that, in this way, is extended to us. For Christ himself has qualified the bread and cup as his body and blood, has he not? If anyone should then treat *that* bread and *that* cup in a careless ("unworthy") way, such a table participant would betray deep ignorance or serious disrespect toward Christ himself. He would not be treating this bread with respect. He would seem to lack an eye for the distinction between this bread and all other bread (v. 29). But there is nevertheless a very clear distinction. For was it not *his* hands that offered this bread and this cup? Was it not *his* mouth that gave the command to celebrate the Lord's Supper? Did not all of this come to us from *that* night of his highest love, when he gave himself entirely for us? Was not this the only way in the world that he could possibly have portrayed himself as

bread? Does not that bread-for-us speak of his self-sacrifice, his “body-for-us”?

To understand this is at the same time to realize that there is only one way to respond to Christ's command: by receiving in love what was given in so much love. Otherwise our guilt toward him, that Christ-of-long-ago, would render us guilty of “the body and blood of the Lord.”

For if at the liberation of one's country, the flag of national freedom could be raised only at the cost of human life, then to dishonor or despise *that* flag renders one guilty of the blood of the liberator.²²

The confusion surrounding eating and drinking “the body and blood of the Lord” surfaced when the Lutherans asserted and stubbornly insisted that even “the unworthy,” despite their unbelief, *received* and *ate* the true body and blood of the Lord. In connection with this, the appeal to 1 Corinthians 11:27 played a significant role. At this point the Zwinglians and Calvinists have always offered firm and united resistance.²³ For those reasons the Lutherans suspected the Swiss of subjectivism, while they in turn called down upon themselves the accusation of objectivism.

The dilemma is important, but that does not mean it is a proper one. “*Receiving*” Christ through the mediation of the signs of bread and wine is a concept with multiform meaning, a concept that needs to be clarified in such a debate.

If it is permissible to clarify this issue with the help of an illustration coming from the catechism classroom, one might suggest the following.

Suppose that a person wishes to favor someone with a particular sum of money, and so he gives that money by means of a bank check sent through the postal system by registered mail. In such a case, one can speak in at least four different ways of “*receiving*” that money.

²²A good example of “distinguishing” and “treating with distinction” is the story of David's reaction to the effort of his heroic soldiers who made work of getting water for him from Bethlehem's well, 2 Sam. 23:13-17 and 1 Chron. 11:17-19.

²³Cf. the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549, articles 16-18 (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche*, ed. by E. F. K. Müller [Leipzig, 1903]).

1. When the bank check is delivered to the addressee, then the latter has “received” the money. The sender and the postal worker have fulfilled their duties and the addressee can “sign” a release to that effect. “To receive” means here “to get what is extended or offered.”
2. When the mail envelope is picked up and opened, then the “receiving” is no longer merely an objective reality, but the process now begins of “making it one’s own” or appropriating the money.
3. If the bank check is read carefully and if it is trusted to be a legal guarantee, then at that moment the recipient realizes he or she has been enriched and has *inwardly accepted* the gift. At that point, the response is legitimate: “I have received so much *money!*” That is “sacramental” language, the language of gratitude and trust.
4. If the recipient now goes to the bank to cash the check (make it effective) and to use the cash received in exchange, then the *receiving* has reached its highest point in terms of the legitimate *use*.

Anyone wishing to oppose subjectivism will emphasize stages one and two, for only then can we speak of genuine receiving and the reliability does not depend on subjective trust.

Anyone criticizing objectivism will emphasize that the “picking up and opening” of stage two is not yet to reach the point of real acceptance found in stage three, much less to begin the process of legitimate use (stage four). The Swiss theologians emphasized the fact that unbelief separated the genuine guarantee from the guaranteed salvation. For that reason unbelief cannot come to a genuine reception of Christ. Unbelievers at the Lord’s Table do indeed “take,” but they do not “receive.”²⁴ Out of fear of emptying the sign, the Lutherans wanted to say that those who are unbelievers and unworthy also receive *Christ* at the Table. Even though this polemical position was

²⁴See the distinction made by the Gallican Confession, Art. 35, between “prendre” and “reçevoir”, and the identical argument in the Belgic Confession, Art. 35. The Gallican Confession reads: “Le meschant prend bien le Sacrement à sa condamnation; mais il ne reçoit pas la Verité du Sacrement.” When unbelief separates the “sign of guarantee” from “salvation,” by its despising of the “sign” it clearly rejects the salvation itself. Unbelief does not “empty” the sign, but despises it as a sign that has been qualified by the promise; thereby unbelief bars access to the “truth” of the sacrament: Christ with all his benefits.

understandable and meaningful, it is nevertheless untenable in light of Scripture's instruction concerning the necessity of faith, and the argument becomes unnecessary if we employ pure distinctions.

8. *Fellowship at the Table of the Lord*

The remembrance of Christ is not localized in one or another of the words or elements of the Lord's Supper celebration, but arises with the totality of the words and actions associated with the sacrament. Therefore, *eating* the bread and *drinking* the cup (1 Cor. 11:26-29; 10:21) are essential components of this totality. After all, what is a meal without eating and drinking?

We will discuss this eating and drinking more fully at the conclusion of this section. But at this point we would mention the following:

1. In the eating and drinking of the same food and drink the fellowship character of the meal finds its clearest expression. Together at the Table of the Lord's Supper we eat one bread and we drink of one cup. One cannot possibly look only at oneself in this celebration. The Bible addresses us very clearly about this fellowship character of the meal. Aside from the fact that each meal is an expression of fellowship and covenant (relatedness), in this context we must pay special attention to two facts in Scripture.

The first we find in the instruction regarding the celebration of the Passover. Concerning the eating of the lamb's meat the Lord told his people in Egypt: "Do not eat any of it raw or boiled at all with water, but rather roasted with fire, both its head and its legs along with its entrails." That meant very concretely that at the Passover celebration not every family member received a piece of lamb's meat, but that for the entire family one lamb was presented for consumption. "Eating a lamb together" is something entirely different than "each person eating a piece of lamb's meat." The difference lies in mutual fellowship.

The apostle registers the same emphasis in the second text that is relevant here, 1 Corinthians 10:17: "Since there is one

bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

Here Paul is speaking emphatically about the table of the Lord’s Supper. At that table we find not little pieces of bread prepared for each participant. The sequence of celebration is that at that table one bread is broken and all together eat one bread.

The apostle’s words in verse 17 flow directly from verse 16: “the bread which we *break*. . . .”

One could hesitate over the question whether symbolic force should be ascribed to this *breaking* with an eye to the breaking of Christ’s body on the cross.²⁵ But no uncertainty is possible about the primary meaning of this breaking as *sharing*. In the “breaking” and “giving,” the communion is constituted, that is: the fellowship of the table. This communion is the foundation of the communion of the saints as well as of the diaconal communication of the love offerings. Individualism at the table of the Lord’s Supper is, therefore, such a deep contradiction that the apostle feels compelled in 1 Corinthians 11 to address severe words to the Corinthians. For *that* is what makes eating and drinking a matter of “unworthiness” (1 Cor. 11:22f., 27ff.).

In terms of the tradition, it is very important to have a good grasp of the precise meaning of 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. There the apostle writes (according to the King James Version): “Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and

²⁵G. N. Lammens provides a clear overview of the difference of opinion (*Tot Zijn gedachtenis*, 151ff.) and reaches the cautious conclusion that the possibility is not excluded *a priori*, that the anamnesis included both the handling and the distribution of the bread (*Tot Zijn gedachtenis*, 155; cf. also 157). Especially within and around the Palatinate people of that time strongly emphasized the “breaking” as symbolic of Christ’s dying, in opposition to the liturgical custom of distributing the already-prepared host. That emphasis is recognizable in the Heidelberg Catechism, ans. 75. The well-known Erastus devoted a book to this matter; cf. M. A. Gooszen, *De Heidelbergsche Catechismus en het boekje van de breking des broods in het jaar 1563-1564 bestreden en verdedigd* (Leiden 1892). Various liturgical decisions of ecclesiastical synods of that time rely on this Palatinate view.

drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.”

We know that these words have often occasioned serious disquiet. On the basis of these verses, many have either avoided the Lord's Supper or have participated with a troubled heart. The celebration of the Lord's Supper has, for many generations, been anything but a *celebration* in the sense of Acts 1:46!

We have already discussed various aspects of the apostle's teaching in these verses. In this context we direct your attention to the following items.

- In verse 27 the apostle is not talking about the “worthiness” of the *person* who goes to the table, but about the worthy *manner* of *celebrating* the Lord's Supper. In so doing, he is opposing erroneous conditions in the church. People were grabbing bread and wine without waiting for each other in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. So what is in view is not the question of whether *we* are “worthy” before God. The right of access (our “confidence”) lies in Christ and comes to us in the summons to partake.
- In verse 28 the apostle is not saying that one must examine oneself in order thereafter to decide—on the basis of the results of the examination—whether or not one will celebrate the Lord's Supper. Paul is saying that one must examine oneself and should thereafter (“so” or “then”) eat of the bread and drink of the cup. This self-examination is not intended to serve as an occasion for gathering from one's own experience arguments that then warrant one's celebrating the Lord's Supper. Rather, it serves as an occasion for testing one's own walk and conduct (especially with respect to brothers and sisters in the faith) before the face of God. One who does that will not come to the table of the Lord thoughtlessly or carelessly.

2. With the eating and drinking at the Lord's table, the proclamation of the Lord's death reaches its climax. For in the eating and drinking of *this* bread and of *this* cup we demonstrate triumphantly that in his self-sacrifice Christ is our great means of life. He gave himself over to death, so that we would live for him. He gave himself for all of us, so that through him we would live together. Each one understands that in this way the celebration

of the Lord's Supper maintains and demonstrates the strong relationship between Christ and his church. The living Christ is the host at this meal (cf. 1 Cor. 10:21; 11:20). But he is a very special host: he not only invites people to his table, but he is himself also the *food* and *drink* on this table. For the living Lord shows us in bread and wine his self-sacrifice unto death, and has us enjoy that gift as our food and drink. Thus we live from the sacrifice that he has once brought to God in the depths of isolation. With this Christ we exercise fellowship in the Lord's Supper.

3. This consideration helps us understand 1 Corinthians 10:16. There the apostle writes: "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?"

More than once people have commented that by this characterization, Paul is *interpreting* the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:24-25). However, such an approach to this much-discussed Bible verse does not get at the core of Paul's intention. It is clear from the context that the apostle wishes to remind the Corinthians (judging from the interrogatory form) of something they could well have known regarding the *extensive implications* of their Lord's Supper celebration. The apostle does that with the most practical of intentions in order to bring these church members to a clear conviction about an essential point of their walk of life (1 Cor. 10:16-21). The apostle wants to settle the issue that he had set out for them (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1, 4) regarding participating at pagan sacrificial meals, and so in verse 16 he sets forth his argument on the basis of the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper. For he wants to convince the church that celebrating the Lord's Supper cannot be combined with participating at pagan sacrificial meals. For the table fellowship that constitutes the Lord's Supper is more than an everyday meal, since it brings us into fellowship with the most costly gift that God's love has ever given us: the body and blood of Christ. At the same time this table brings us into fellowship with each other (v. 17).

That a meal should establish such far-reaching contacts was known not only by the Christians who celebrated the Lord's Supper, but by Jews and pagans as well (vv. 18, 20): food and drink bind the table participants to each other and to the source or giver of the gifts. That feature is exactly what now makes the antithesis between the Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper and the pagan sacrificial meal so obvious. This feature explains why the contradiction is so shocking in the life of those who suppose they can combine both meals (v. 21).

From Old Testament legislation we are familiar with the *sacrificial meal*: the peace offerings that were presented to God were for the most part returned by the Lord to the worshiper as provision for a festive meal. This sacrificial meal was a wonderful form of thanksgiving and praise before the face of the Lord. The table was laden with food from the altar and people understood that God was present in this table fellowship as the host.

Dutch theologian Herman Ridderbos has interpreted the New Testament celebration of the Lord's Supper on the basis of this sacrificial meal. For Ridderbos, the apostle's teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:16-18 has decisive relevance. On the basis of this exegesis, it was not difficult for Ridderbos to defend the thesis that the Lord's Supper did not involve the (representation or dramatization of the) sacrifice of Christ, but rather (the enjoyment of) the *fruit* of the sacrifice of Christ.²⁶ G. N. Lammens has disputed this view of Ridderbos with convincing arguments.²⁷ Precisely because Christ's act of sacrifice fulfilled the Old Testament atonement offerings, guilt offerings, and sin offerings, the interpretation that rests upon peace offerings seems to us untenable. Christ's sacrifice was a "holocaust": there was nothing left over for any meal (cf. Lev. 1:9 and elsewhere; Heb. 13:10-12).

At the Lord's Supper we remember Christ's complete sacrifice of himself with thanksgiving and joy. We do that in the form of a meal, because it is precisely in his self-sacrifice that Christ is the bread of life, in accordance with the law of his mediatorial substitution. At the same

²⁶Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 430; *Paul*, 416; "Woord en sacrament," in *Het avondmaal. Problemen rondom de avondmaalttheologie en de intercommunie*, ed. by J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink *et al.* (Assen 1949), 39: "What is presented is not Christ's self-sacrifice as such, but the fruit thereof for his own."

²⁷G. N. Lammens, *Tot Zijn gedachtenis*, 83ff.

time, the joy of that table provides us with mutual peace. The apostle's teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:16ff. is an indication of the extent of the celebration. The feature of "fellowship" with the (unseen) host is parallel to the sacrificial meal. But 1 Corinthians 10:16 does not indicate the basis of that fellowship nor the way it came into existence.²⁸

4. As we seek to reach a conclusion with respect to 1 Corinthians 10:16, we think it is important to protect this verse against *being kidnapped*. This means that we must resist any use of this verse that is alien to its purpose. The text talks about fellowship with the body and blood of Christ. Often in debates about the Lord's Supper, people have added the notion of receiving a share in the body and blood of the *glorified* Christ, to which are added various speculations and consequences. That is what we are calling "kidnapping" this text. We are convinced that we must stay with the results of our study of the words of institution. For that reason, we must hear the apostle Paul speaking in 1 Corinthians 10:16 about "body" and "blood" as a description of the *self-sacrifice of Christ on Golgotha*.

For centuries the church has spoken on the basis of this text, in connection with the Lord's Supper, about bread and wine as fellowship with the body and blood of Christ. This manner of speaking is entirely correct, and deepens our insight into the range of the words of institution. For example, in our description of the significance of the Lord's Supper, this understanding prevents us from being limited to words like "figure," "sign," "seal," and "pledge." At the Lord's Supper we exercise *fellowship* with Christ. In the bread and wine this fellowship comes to us, and in our eating and drinking we confirm and enjoy that fellowship. But here we must remain within the boundaries. That is to say, we must understand the words "body" and "blood" here no differently than elsewhere. These refer not to the "body" and "blood" of the glorified Christ, substances thought to be present in any number of ways in the bread and the wine of the Lord's table. "Body" of Christ refers always to Christ, the one

²⁸Cf. F. Hahn, "Die alttestamentlichen Motive in der urchristlichen Abendmahlsüberlieferung," *Evangelische Theologie* 27 (1967): 371.

who has sacrificed himself for us on the cross (cf. also Rom. 7:4). “Blood” of Christ refers continually to the effectual dying of our Savior. At the Lord’s table, in eating the bread and drinking the cup we receive and exercise intimate contact with our Lord, who sacrificed himself once on the cross for us all.

If at this point we went beyond the boundaries, our line of argument would become stranded in contradictions and unintelligibilities. Surely here lies one of the primary causes of frustration in the sacramental debates of the sixteenth century. Both Luther and Calvin wanted to confess the real presence of the glorified Christ in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. According to Luther’s view, Christ was physically present *in, with, and under* the bread and wine. Increasingly for Luther that became the unique gift of the Lord’s Supper. In his view, this issue involved the entire incarnation.

Calvin came as close to Luther’s position as possible and spoke of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ at the Lord’s Supper. But for Calvin, this real presence could not be conceived in any other than as a presence *through the Holy Spirit*. From that vantage point Calvin could clarify the phrase “eating unworthily,” for the Spirit leads us to enjoy Christ *through faith* (which is the hand and the mouth of the soul). Meanwhile, in light of the doctrine concerning the two natures of Christ, Calvin continued speaking of the presence of the glorified body of Christ, and for that he sought support in the Scripture’s own language concerning “eating Christ’s flesh” and “drinking his blood” (see John 6:51-56). But in our opinion, Calvin is at this point expressing obscure and speculative views regarding the “life-giving flesh” of the glorified Christ, views derived from fifth century Alexandrian theology. In this connection, we agree entirely with the crisp analysis and clear conclusions of G. P. Hartvelt. The flesh of Christ is indeed life-giving, writes this author, “but not because from it the divine life itself flows forth to us, but because in that flesh the work of salvation is finished. And we think that this is how Scripture speaks about the flesh of Christ, namely, as the instrument whereby salvation is obtained.”²⁹ From Calvin we must repeatedly learn anew that it is impossible to

²⁹G. P. Hartvelt, *Verum corpus. Een studie over een centraal hoofdstuk uit de avondmaalsleer van Calvijn* (Delft, 1960), 225. We recall as well the clear reserve evidenced already a century ago by Herman Bavinck in his essay about Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper (reprinted in *Kennis en leven* [Kampen, 1922], 165-183, esp. 176).

share in the gifts of Christ apart from believing fellowship with his Person, wrought by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we must resist a tendency present in the perspectives of Luther and Calvin, generated primarily by the polemic against Zwingli, to see fellowship with Christ at the Lord's Supper as transcending the fellowship of faith, our answer to God's promises.³⁰

9. "Eating" and "Drinking" Christ

We have come now to one final question in this connection. The issue involves the legitimacy of speaking about "eating" and "drinking" Christ (his "body" and "blood") at the celebration of the Lord Supper. May we speak this way?

Our reply to this question is that especially at the celebration of the Lord's Supper, this far-reaching language is absolutely legitimate. For we are dealing here with the far-reaching language of love. That such language is indeed confident but not impolite we learned from our consideration of the words of the institution: "this (bread) is my body-for-you" and "this (cup) is my blood" (Matt. 26:26, 28; Mark 14:22, 24). This extremely direct language, in which the heart of Christ beats for the many, elicits a love response which is just as direct. That is the deep meaning of the so-called "*sacramental mode of speaking*" that we discussed earlier in our consideration of 1 Corinthians 11:27, 29 (in §7. above).

³⁰We are thinking, for example, of the Genevan Catechism, ans. 346. There we read, in connection with the Lord's Supper that in this sacrament fellowship with Christ is further confirmed and as it were established. "For though both in Baptism and in the gospel Christ is exhibited to us, yet we do not receive him wholly but only in part." We might also think of the *Institutes* 4.17.5. Cf. also Herman Bavinck, *Kennis en leven*, 177, and *Gereformeerd Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, 4th edition (Kampen, 1930), 534; G. P. Hartvelt, *Tot Zijn gedachtenis*, 88, 115, 191ff. We encounter here difficult questions regarding Calvin's view of fellowship with Christ. For Calvin distinguished between "believing" and "eating" Christ. At the same time, he could speak about an uninterrupted communication with the flesh of Christ apart from the Lord's Supper (cf. R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* [Edinburgh-London, 1953], 146-147, 151, 200-201, 211-212, 238).

By the phrase “sacramental mode of speaking” we understand the phenomenon that the name of the symbolized “thing” or “person” is given to the “symbol.” The legitimacy of such direct (abridged) language lies in the outward correspondence and/or the reliability of the guarantee.

In everyday life we use this kind of abridged mode of speaking with regard, for example, to paintings, photographs, maps, bank checks, or warranties.

The sacramental mode of speaking is first used in the context of communion between God and people by the Holy Spirit (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, qu. 73, 78), and on that basis also in man’s answer or response. In this mode of speaking the nature of that relationship comes into its own: it is shown to be a relationship of reliability, trust, and love.

Therefore, we may indeed say that in the Lord’s Supper we eat and drink Christ, his body and blood. In this context we should always keep one thing clearly in mind, namely, this language is not the language of a neutral observer or of a descriptive philosopher, but it is open-hearted love language. Concretely this means that with such language we are speaking of something wonderful, deep, and tender in quick, short words. At this point we are not speaking in definitions. As we are enjoying the redemptive secret of fellowship with Christ, airtight definitions, refined terminologies, or highly developed arguments cannot do the job. If a good listener needs but half a word, then the church of Christ can ultimately suffice, at the heart of her remembrance of the sacrifice of her Lord, with few words.

But this also means that afterward we may not make such words of love and devotion the basis of reasonings and speculations. For then we would be kidnapping these words for another use. Saying that at the Lord’s Supper we are *eating and drinking Christ* (his body and blood) is a kind of intense and intimate use of language. As soon as we would start analyzing that language, we would have to qualify this usage as a form of highly developed *figurative language*. “Eating” and “drinking” is (to put it nicely) “using.” Whatever one eats he makes entirely his

own, so that it constitutes part of his life from that moment on.³¹ A person lives with and from the food he ingests. One who “eats” Christ can no longer conceive of living without him. “Eating Christ” means that he “nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat him, that is to say, when they appropriate and receive him by faith in the spirit” (Belgic Confession, Art. 35).

We realize that this is why people have, on the basis of Ephesians 5:30, associated the most intimate words of human fellowship, “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones,” with the fellowship between Christ and his own at the Lord’s Supper (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, ans. 76). That is absolutely correct, and this all belongs to the glorious secrets of the Christian life. In this way the children of God may use the strongest words they have at their disposal to express their praise and wonder for their deep fellowship with Christ. For the phrases “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones” belong to the oldest song in the world (Gen. 2:23), and these Paradise phrases seem well-suited for describing the most beautiful and the most intimate fellowship in the world (Eph. 5:30ff.). Both the most beautiful result of the Creator’s work and the result of the Redeemer’s work are ultimately praised and chorused with the very same words! This mystery is great, says the apostle (Eph. 5:32).

But it is precisely with such words that we must be on guard for injury and kidnapping. We may not commandeer this song for purposes of speculation. The best antidote at this point is presumably the observation that such fellowship with Christ is not a gift tied specifically and exclusively to celebrating the Lord’s Supper, but belongs to the nature and the abundance of the Christian life. For those Corinthians, who needed to receive so much instruction from the apostle concerning the Lord’s Supper, were after all believers called to *fellowship with God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord* (1 Cor. 1:9)—according to the very emphatic opening in

³¹One can also speak of “tasting” or “eating” the Word (cf. Ezek. 3:1-3; Rev. 10:9-10; Ps. 119:103; Heb. 6:5). The clearest example we find in John 6, where Christ speaks extensively about “eating his flesh” and “drinking his blood.” We hope to discuss John 6 more fully in what follows.

the salutation of the epistle.³² The specific element in the Lord's Supper celebration of these called believers is the remembrance of the self-sacrifice of Christ. At that moment these believers held the magnifying glass over the heart of Christ's work of love: they focused on the body and the blood of Christ which he sacrificed in order to merit the calling of 1 Corinthians 1:9. With bread and cup they remember, proclaim, confess, and celebrate that fact. One who celebrates that fact as the central fact of his life tastes the intimacy of fellowship with Christ, in the hope of his coming. Faith and love are strengthened, the expectation of Christ's return is revived, comfort is enjoyed amid the trials en route to that return, the insight of faith is sharpened, and the desire is awakened to live henceforth with each other and for him. That taste is a foretaste of peace and fellowship which one day will be the portion of God's people, when the "symbol" is no longer needed because everyone will see him as he is.

For all these reasons the Lord's Supper may be for us a matter of great joy (Acts 2:46) and wonderment. Christ himself extends to us the bread and cup, and through such simple means calls us back from our many cares to the one fountain of all salvation. For he is busy taking us along to his future.

Christ's words in John 6:48ff. have played an important role in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, also for the Reformers. Especially Calvin's language was strongly influenced by this passage, whereas Zwingli never ceased reminding the Lutheran theologians that "the flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63).

Clearly John 6 does not contain an invitation addressed to unbelieving Jews to celebrate especially the Lord's Supper, in spite of everything else. At the same time, it is patently clear that eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood are absolutely essential to life for every person (v. 53).

Both pieces of information together yield the result that Christ is speaking of the absolute need for intimate faith-fellowship with him. That fellowship is life-fellowship (see especially vv. 56-57). The question remains why Christ chose these words, words that rendered such a provocative formulation ("eat flesh" and "drink blood") so final

³²Cf. also 1 Cor. 6:15ff. and Heb. 3:14.

and so strict that many of his disciples were led to characterize this as a “difficult statement hard to listen to” (v. 60). For it cannot be denied the by his choice of words, Christ must have irritated Jewish sensitivities with his reference to drinking blood. At the same time, it is clear that Christ self-consciously closed every possible route of escape. In our opinion the following features must be kept in mind.

1. Christ is talking to people who, though they certainly encouraged him to perform miracles and they definitely wanted to profit from such miracles, nevertheless at the same time they failed to realize the greatest miracle of all: his Person, sent by the Father from heaven to be bread for all who hungered. That reflects the theme of this discourse: “my Father gives you the true bread out of heaven. . . . I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst” (vv. 32, 35).

2. Thus, this discourse consists of a single urgent summons to faith and to faith-fellowship with Christ: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life” (v. 47).

3. “Flesh” and “blood” point us to the way in which Christ can be life for the world. For his “flesh” will be *given as bread* and his blood will be rendered *available as drink*. “Flesh” and “blood” are the constitutive elements of mortal man. The capacity of *this* flesh and *this* blood to feed and nourish unto eternal life lies in the miracle of the Person of Christ, who as the Son of God was sent by the Father into the world. But John 6 is not limited to the miracle of the incarnation: the “giving” of his “flesh” for the life of the world envisions the self-sacrifice of Christ in death for the sake of the life of the world.³³ The mystery of this discourse is therefore the mystery of Christ himself; it is the mystery of his Person, of his life and of his death. It would be the events of Golgotha and Easter that would make these words of Christ fully understandable (see v. 57, together with vv. 53-54).

4. In all these words Christ compels his listeners to concentrate all their life’s hopes upon him, just as he would ultimately manifest himself in his self-sacrifice as the one sent from the Father. Faith in this Person would signify intimate fellowship with the Living One (v. 56), who would be willing to sacrifice himself even unto death for our sakes.

5. In connection with celebrating the Lord’s Supper, this means that John 6 surely undergirds in a powerful way the sign language of the

³³Cf. H. N. Ridderbos, “Woord en sacrament,” 41.

bread and cup, but provides no interpretation of the specific meaning of the celebration. John 6 helps us to know the intimacy of faith-fellowship with Christ and teaches us to focus on the price that had to be paid for that fellowship. John 6 also discloses to us where Christ came from, for he was sent by the Father to us as the true bread out of heaven. This Bible passage discloses to us the wide extent of fellowship with this Christ: never again to hunger and thirst (v. 35), to be raised at the last day (vv. 39-40), to live eternally (vv. 47, 58), to abide in him (v. 56). Such is the immeasurable dimension of fellowship with this Son of God. In him is life and this life is the light of men (John 1:4).

That instruction gives us confidence also to speak the exalted words about being “flesh of his flesh” and “bone of his bones.” But those words are not bound to the elements of the Lord’s Supper. They are powerful both before and after that celebration. The Lord’s Supper does not represent something additional in terms of this faith-fellowship (how could that ever be possible?), but it leads us to remember that our Lord has purchased for us this glorious fellowship by a very bitter suffering. Remembering that fact with each other leads us to celebrate faith-fellowship with Christ as the provision for our lives.

Preliminary Summary

In the previous section we attempted to set forth the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper on the basis of relevant Bible passages. Now we wish to conclude our initial review with a summary relating to three points:

- the sixteenth-century conflicts involving the Lord’s Supper;
- the confessional formulations pertaining to the Lord’s Supper; and
- the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

The Sixteenth-century Struggle over the Lord’s Supper

It was for good reason that in the previous section we concentrated carefully on the text of Scripture. Generally speaking, we could conceivably have chosen another approach. For example, it would have been possible to consider the issue by

starting with the problems with which we as Reformational Christians have struggled since the time of the Reformation.

Nevertheless, we chose quite self-consciously to begin with the exegetical discussion. Becoming acquainted with the various opinions surrounding the Lord's Supper during the sixteenth century is not only a rather comprehensive task, but it can easily have a disheartening effect. For the sixteenth century provides us a picture of such widespread confusion and alienation, precisely within the Reformational camp, that after four centuries we are still embarrassed by this demonstration of impotence. People who should have recognized and embraced one another under the authority of the recovered Word of God did not. They were and remained divided over the table of fellowship. The polemic occasioned deep bitterness and caused deep wounds that even now seem hardly to have healed.

Apparently Luther was unable to appreciate or to understand Zwingli. He saw Zwingli as a fanatic and opposed him in a reckless manner.

Zwingli saw Luther to be a man who, when it came to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, wanted to return to the flesh pots of Egypt, that is, to the categories of the Middle Ages.

Calvin had deep respect for Luther, considering himself to be the latter's pupil, to the extent that under Luther's influence he initially rejected the school of thought in Zürich.

Amid all these difficult human relationships filled with friendships, human bonds as well as personal aversions, stood the peace-loving figure of Martin Bucer from Strasburg. He wanted to be everybody's friend and to build bridges between opponents, but precisely for that reason he was met with much resistance and aversion, especially in Wittenberg and Zürich.

In the heat of battle people drove each other and themselves from one cluster of problems to another. To maintain personal positions numerous intellectual constructions were borrowed, for example, from the doctrine of Christology (the doctrine of so-called ubiquity, which maintained that Christ's human nature can be omnipresent by virtue of its union with his divine nature, a Lutheran invention). Various medieval scholastic philosophers

responded to such a point by expressing their differences of opinion. People quarreled about the words of the Lord's Supper and produced expansive exposés and numerous distinctions involving "spatiality" and "omnipresence." Further, people argued about the words of the institution ("this *is* . . ."), about metaphorical language and figures of speech. All of this and much more was supposed to serve the church's understanding of what Christ was bestowing upon her in the Lord's Supper and what was being recovered for her with the liberation of the church's life from the stranglehold of the mass! All of this history can be reviewed only with a sad smile, once all of this effort is seen in the light of the simple words of the Heidelberg Catechism, that the Lord's Supper was instituted to help us understand *all the better* the promise of the gospel!

We sympathize with the great struggles of our ancestors, who had just been set free from the centuries-long grip of Roman Catholic theories of the mass, and who then had to explain so many things at the same time to the church. We realize that under the circumstances, one leader began here, another there, also with regard to the Lord's Supper. And it is obvious that in all of these efforts, personal capacities and experiences contributed in uniquely individual ways to choosing the path of reformation. But we do not understand the arrogant and excessive polemic of Luther in opposition to the Swiss theologians, and we understand even less the aggressive tone taken by Luther's followers, during the years after his death, against Bullinger and Calvin. All of these things occasioned deep hatred and enmity, injuring the cause of the Reformation in an indescribable manner and endangering that cause not least of all on the level of civil order and government.

This highlights all the more prominently the honest and persevering attempts of Calvin to reach a synthesis containing all the valuable elements in the various viewpoints. In those attempts we see the balanced theologian Calvin laboring at the limits of his capacity. He labored with such intensity, that at one point he was forced to admit that he could experience far more of the realities embedded in his personal convictions than he

could either understand or put into words (*Institutes* 4.17.7; 4.17.32). Calvin was deeply convinced of the inadequacy of his own explanation. Particularly with regard to fellowship with the body and blood of Christ and the manner of Christ's presence in the elements of the Lord's Supper, Calvin reached the limits of his own intellectual and linguistic capacities.

Calvin also humbled himself in the face of the sorrowful course of events, which he experienced as the opposition of the devil and as a discipline from God. Already in 1541, in his *Petit Traité* (Small Treatment of the Lord's Supper), Calvin complained about the impatience and the excess and the mutual irritation of the polemic between the Lutherans and the Swiss.³⁴

Down through the years Calvin searched tirelessly for synthesis, but his success did not reach beyond the accord with the men of Zürich (the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549, prepared in extensive correspondence with Bullinger). Reaching an accord with Wittenberg thereafter appeared more than ever to be impossible.

Considering this course of events saddens us deeply, as we realize that this matter of the Lord's Supper—which Christ left behind for us on the night of his highest love—could be handled only in a polemical context. For the risks of that approach are well known: on the one hand, overemphasis, and on the other hand, neglect of essential aspects. That, then, is also the reason why we have sought to obtain insight concerning the gift of the Lord's Supper first from the Scriptures.

The Reformed Confession regarding the Lord's Supper

As we next consider the confessional documents of the churches of the Reformation (restricting ourselves to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism), we are not surprised that the sixteenth century polemic has left its mark. Nevertheless,

³⁴Cf. the translation of this section by C. Vonk, *De voorzeide leer*, vol. IIIb (Barendrecht, 1956), 514-517. For more information about the *Petit Traité*, see W. Balke in *Bij brood en beker*, 180-193; W. L. Boelens, *Die Arnoldshainer Abendmahlsthesen*, 257ff.

we seem to have arrived, after such stormy theological reading, within the enclosure of the confession like a virtually wind-free harbor. Only from the higher waves—those long sentences!—can we tell that there has been a fierce storm. To say it without using a metaphor: we may consider ourselves fortunate that in the midst of the sixteenth-century conflict, these confessional documents have been provided to the churches of the Reformation. Even though in our day we would perhaps distribute the emphasis differently, especially in view of newer problems, yet we may be thankful for the numerous insights found in the explanation of Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 28 and 29, and Belgic Confession, Article 35.

With regard to the Catechism, we would point out

- the concentration of attention upon Christ and his treasures; it is fellowship with him that allows us to share in his benefits
- the remembrance (ans. 75, 77, 79)
- the attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, who unites us with Christ
- the mention and description of the sacramental mode of speech; and
- the introduction of the words “sign,” “pledge” (ans. 79), and “token” or “assurance” (ans. 78).

The Belgic Confession gives us a very comprehensive article that was actually inspired by Calvin himself. What is striking in this article is the emphasis with which the *true body and blood of the Lord* is presented as the reality intended by the sacrament.

In addition to these strong formulations, whereby the hand was being extended especially to the Lutherans, we notice:

- the decisive rejection of the idea of “eating unworthily”
- the concentration of the gift of the Lord's Supper upon the fellowship Christ acquires for *himself* and (thus) upon the merits of his suffering and death

- the mention of celebrating with thanksgiving, as remembrance and confession, after self-examination and in mutual love.

Concerning Lord's Day 30, ans. 80, we need not reduce the strongly contested condemnation of the papal mass, for example, with the help of a footnote. The argument is advanced against the sharp condemnation at the conclusion of answer 80, that Roman Catholic theology and church doctrine do not imply a denial of the only sacrifice of Christ, but in fact proceed from that single sacrifice. The Eucharist is not a repetition of Christ's sacrifice, but it rather makes that sacrifice present, connecting with and sharing in that sacrifice.³⁵

Now it is not the Catechism's intention to respond to theological propositions and arguments. The Catechism seeks to lend pastoral utility to an ecclesiastical practice (see the passage about worshipping Christ in the form of bread and wine) that had grown out of the doctrine and had become burdensome. From this vantage point, it is clear that in the mass—in spite of numerous distinctions and conceptual “refinements”—faith's attention was directed toward the daily occurrences in the church and not to the “once for all” of Golgotha. At the same time expectation was fixated upon the divine-human character of the transubstantiated bread.³⁶

All the new concepts of modern Roman Catholic theology cannot change that fact. The texts of the new Roman Catholic missal (of 1969) use clear language at this point. The Council of Trent pronounced its numerous anathemas against people who taught like the Reformers. The Catechism replies with its own anathema upon the doctrine and practice of Roman Catholic worship. That worship is condemned in terms of the net result of the papal mass for the practice of faith.

Taking all of this into consideration, we have much reason to be thankful and to consider ourselves enriched with this ecclesiastical confession that had to be written in very difficult circumstances.

Moreover, it cannot be denied that especially in the Belgic Confession, Article 35, Calvin's influence led to placing rather

³⁵Cf. K. Lehmann and E. Schlink, editors, *Das Opfer Jesu Christi und seine Gegenwart* (Greiburg-Göttingen, 1983), passim; P. A. van Leeuwen in G. P. Hartvelt, P. A. van Leeuwen, *De maaltijd des Heren* (Delft, 1971), 44-45.

³⁶P. A. van Leeuwen, *De maaltijd des Heren*, 46.

strong emphasis on the eating and drinking of the actual and natural body and the actual blood of Christ. One receives the impression that precisely this is the reality (see “thing signified”) secured by the sacrament.

As we consider this admittedly difficult formulation found in Article 35, we would ask the reader to take note of the following three points.

1. The formulation as such cannot, in our opinion, be grounded exegetically in the words of the institution. Rather, we find here a blending of the weighty words in John 6 and the words of institution.

(We find something similar in the Catechism. John 6 is very dominant in Answer 76; the words of institution serve as proof in Answer 77; and Answer 79 provides the result of this combination of ideas.)

It appears to us that for didactic and substantive reasons, it would have been advisable to keep John 6 and the specific words of the institution of the Lord's Supper distinct when formulating the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The “body” mentioned in institution of the Lord's Supper is not simply the same as “flesh” in John 6. Similarly, “fellowship” with the body of Christ, as 1 Corinthians 10 speaks of that, cannot be “translated” into “eating” the glorified body of Christ.

2. Because the formulation of Article 35 is subject to misunderstanding, we do well to pay careful attention to the safeguards erected in Article 35 itself.

With an eye to the Lutherans, the expression is safeguarded by characterizing this eating and drinking as the soul's eating and drinking by the power of the Holy Spirit and with the instrument of faith.

With an eye to Reformed confessors, the formulations are clarified by the emphatic and repeated declaration that the Lord's Supper is a spiritual meal wherein Christ bestows *himself* to us. That truth sounds forth as the central faith conviction of Belgic Confession, Article 35. This truth is simultaneously Calvin's rich legacy to the Reformed churches. On this point we realize how

we have benefited from the struggle of the sixteenth century, because here the profit of that struggle comes to us with convincing force.

Therefore, expressions about enjoying and sharing Christ's body and blood and being united with Christ's own body are descriptions that seek to show us the depth of our fellowship with Christ. They are not describing some kind of privilege that is to be enjoyed alongside of or beyond that fellowship, but rather they show us the breadth and depth of that fellowship.

In the classic liturgical Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper used in many Reformed churches this very same matter is expressed in the liturgical prayer this way: ". . . in order that our burdened and contrite hearts, through the power of the Holy Spirit, may be nourished and refreshed with His true body and blood, yea, with Him, true God and man, the only heavenly bread."³⁷ We find similar formulations in the Genevan liturgical formulary for the Lord's Supper.

3. As soon as our fascination with Christ's glorified body is abstracted from Christ himself and from his death, then we believe that the saying in John 6:63, "the flesh profits nothing," applies to that body.

This saying is what gave impetus from the very start to the opposition against the Lutheran exegesis of the words of institution. At the same time, our own consideration of the gift bestowed at the Lord's Supper is kept in proper balance by this saying. It is precisely that difficult formulation of Belgic Confession, Article 35, which continues to provide the most important piece of historical evidence of the far-reaching desire for unity by which Reformed churches, even in their own confessional formulations, have been guided.

³⁷Striking, in my opinion, is the heavy emphasis on the fact of Christ's dying in the liturgical formulary for the Lord's Supper from the Palatinate. That is all the more striking against the background of the fact that Calvin's liturgical formulary contains no explicit anamnesis.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper

When we enjoy the meal that Christ has prescribed for his church, then we are following Christ's leading as we stand together at the source. There we meet God, and there we see him coming to us in the love with which he loved his only begotten Son. We taste and sample the price that Christ has paid to bring us back into fellowship with God. Thus, in response to that love we can renew peace with God, deeply amazed that he found us, called us to himself, and has carried us along until this day.

At the Lord's Supper we also meet one another: we eat the same bread and drink from one cup. It appears that at the very same moment we too are standing together at the source of our mutual love-fellowship. We renew peace also with one another, deeply amazed that we have been given to one another and that we have remained preserved together.

This, then, is how we celebrate salvation, the "making whole" of lives devoted to God's honor and strengthened in our faith, our hope, and our love.

A powerful message emanates from this throughout all our lives. We may well come to the Lord's Supper with various struggles, trials, and sorrow. The intention is not that we should leave those problems at home. But once again, God speaks the first word. He places all our problems under the claim of his work in Christ and sees to it that we do not remain alone in our difficulties and that our trials do not shut us out from him. In the context of the serious questions that occupy the human race with regard to the self-justification of God in the face of catastrophes and global threats against life in this century, the Lord wishes initially to reply by having us remember the death of Christ. For the death of Christ is the self-justification of God. And in the great conflict of our day, the voice of the "holocaust" of Gethsemane and Golgotha takes precedence over the heartrending cry reaching us from the holocaust in Auschwitz. The eclipse of God that many associate with "Auschwitz" can be stripped of its power only at the table of the Lord's Supper.

Our celebration of the Lord's Supper is not motivated by our feelings. We do not set the table of Christ because we feel the need or because our experiences with God are so elevated. Our sentiment is nothing more than a defective instrument; it experiences nothing more than an initial, hesitating beginning of resonating to the message of salvation.

It is obedience to the absolutely adequate teaching of Scripture that motivates us to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It is the gospel of salvation in Christ, explicated in the doctrine and concentrated in the formulations of the Lord's Supper. We may expect that along the paths of obedience, the Holy Spirit will tune our hearts more and more to the words of God's grace and peace.

Therefore, celebrating the Lord's Supper is for us not a right that we may make use of, or not, as we see fit. According to the institution of Christ it is very clearly a duty. Undoubtedly it is an honorable duty, for we do it primarily with an eye to the honor of God and his Son Jesus Christ. But for that reason it is still a duty—toward God, toward the church, and toward oneself. When we sit down at the table of the Lord's Supper we are functioning most definitely as members of the church of Christ. We recite our confession of faith, we proclaim Christ's death, we greet one another with a holy kiss, and together we await our Lord's return in glory.

One consequence is that the celebration can occur exclusively in faith. Only a public confession of faith before God and the congregation can open the door to this celebration. For that reason catechesis is required for coming to the Lord's table.

With regard to exactly these points, the move toward family communion generates serious problems. We wish to say a few things about this, although we realize the need for a more comprehensive treatment.

The move toward family communion can arise from various motivations. The early church even practiced infant communion, because on the basis of John 6:53 people considered the Lord's Supper an indispensable means of salvation.

In our opinion, this reasoning has little force nowadays. The fact that a few people argue for this kind of communion may serve as a warning for those who carelessly argue for family communion on the basis of infant baptism.³⁸ Simply being baptized is not a strong enough argument for children's communion because of the difference between being baptized and celebrating the Lord's Supper. Nevertheless, we repeatedly encounter the argument based on membership in the church. We do wonder how this argument relates to the way of thinking which views infant baptism and adult baptism as "alternatives of equal value." Would it not then be true of the Lord's Supper, as people strongly argue with regard to baptism, namely, that a person must be put in a position to make his own free decision?³⁹

Our sense is that the dominant feature of the arguments for family communion is the *motif of experience*. "Faith" is not a matter of "intellect," and "doing it oneself" is more than "learning from a book." In this way celebrating the Lord's Supper becomes the primary source for a catechism-of-experience. But we object to that. The path of catechesis is the route to the Lord's table. For that reason catechesis must be oriented toward the Lord's table from the very start. To the extent that catechesis is provided to the baptized children of the congregation, it is the catechizing of those invited to the meal; they are being prepared for believing participation at that meal (in faith-knowledge concerning sin, salvation, and service—according to the liturgical Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper).

Catechesis is not designed to be an orientation to the world, and still less an orientation to the church, and still less yet a way to process personal experience. Catechesis involves handing down the doctrine of the church. As such, that has nothing to do with intellectualism. One who withholds this doctrine from the children of the church is a traitor

³⁸Cf. the Lima Declaration, for example, on baptism (sub 14, Commentary sub b).

³⁹At this point it might be asked whether, when the Lord's Supper is celebrated, baptism needs to precede it. If both rites represent merely ecclesiastical traditions worthy of respect, it is not clear why children who have not (yet) been baptized may not be admitted to the Table. "It could very well please the Holy Spirit in some cases to lead a person not from baptism to the Lord's Supper, but from the Lord's Supper to baptism"—as we read in *Open en oecumenisch avondmaal*, the report of the general synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk), 13 February 1972, cited in K. Blei, *De kinderdoop in discussie* (Kampen, 1981), 188, n. 37.

to these children. He makes them prime targets for being snatched away by the sects.

We realize that questions remain with regard to the timing of public profession of faith; we cannot enter into these questions in this context. At this point we are concerned to insist that children ought to be safe in the church, safe with their parents and with the officebearers. They may expect leadership from parents and officebearers, also in the direction of the most exalted activity to which a person can be called as a church member. Only then are these children taken seriously as children.

Catechesis paves the way to the supper. Living the Christian life is walking the path from supper to supper. For those who hold office in the church this entails the need to provide stimulus and admonition, by means of family visiting, pastoral supervision, and church discipline. That is the order characterizing a reformationally organized congregation. The beauty of that order emerges more clearly against the background of the Middle Ages, with its inadequate catechesis, formalized confessional, and Latinized mass. It is indeed a rich blessing to be able to stand, in our own day, at the source, opened by Christ and discovered anew in the Reformation.

Lord's Supper, Baptism, and Preaching

It will not have escaped the reader's notice that up to this point we have hardly ever talked about the "sacraments." Baptism and Lord's Supper are institutions of Christ, and we have tried to understand them from the vantage point of the words of their institution, without employing the overarching notion of "sacrament." As explained already in our essay on baptism, behind our approach lies the desire to avoid formulating the meaning of baptism and Lord's Supper on the basis of a particular definition of "sacrament." As we said, we have no objection against the notion of "sacrament" as a concept within dogmatics and a term in the Confessions. But we do have a problem with forming a definition beforehand, one that then would precede our investigation of the meaning of baptism and

Lord's Supper and would restrict our reflection on those rites. We readily understand Zwingli's initial resistance to the notion of sacrament, a resistance that has never totally disappeared. And Zwingli was not alone.⁴⁰ Scholastic, philosophically directed thinking about baptism and Lord's Supper was rather dominant. Zwingli and others wanted the freedom to reflect directly from Scripture about Christ's intention with baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Nevertheless, the Reformational Confessions came up with a doctrine of the sacraments (for example, Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25; Belgic Confession, Art. 33; and Second Helvetic Confession, Art. 19). Theirs was an entirely different notion of sacrament than that of scholasticism. In their descriptions, the Confessions reached back to the biblical words "sign" and "seal" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25, Q/A 66)—the word "pledge," a word the Catechism employs (A 79).⁴¹ For that reason, the concept of sacrament is an entirely acceptable summary of the function of baptism and Lord's Supper, if that concept brings together the common characteristics of both of Christ's gifts. This is why we wish to concentrate, in our concluding section, on the "sacraments" and their relationship to preaching.

We shall first inquire about the relationship between baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Before proceeding with our description, it is good to realize that also in the Old Testament *circumcision* and *Passover* were closely related.

The Lord added the sign of circumcision to his promissory word, doing so apparently in view of the unbelievable character of his promise. For that promise went far beyond anything humanly imaginable. It was a promise from the Almighty. In this sign God

⁴⁰See G. W. Locher, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte* (Göttingen, 1979), 219; H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde dogmatiek*, vol. 4, 4th edition (Kampen, 1930), 449-450.

⁴¹The Second Helvetic Confession, arising within the Swiss tradition, speaks of "covenant signs," "holy customs," and "sacred acts," as well as of "sign," "seal," and "pledge."

bound himself all the more (even as his “oath,” cf. Heb. 6:13ff.) and thereby elicited the obedience of faith.

Seen from the point of view of its institution, the Passover stood in a different historical context. It was given to Israel as a “day of remembrance” and was to have been celebrated as a “feast unto the Lord” (Ex. 12:14). It was the commemoration of Israel’s liberation.

Nevertheless, we observe many features connected to this celebration. Circumcision was given in terms of God’s unbelievable promise, while Passover was related to his astonishing redemptive power. In both, God opened a future for his people. Together, they speak of the power of God’s Word and God’s deed. Since God had spoken his promise concerning Abraham’s own land and great posterity, the day came when God proceeded with a great display of power to lead his people to that land. The God of the exodus showed himself in Egypt to be also the God of the fathers who made good his ancient promises (cf. Ex. 2:24-25; 3:6-9, 15-17 and 6:2-7). It is especially Israel’s acquaintance with God as the God who had made good his promise that gave the Passover feast its imposing character. For these reasons the Passover could never have been celebrated if circumcision had not preceded it (Ex. 12:44ff.; Josh. 5:2-10).

It does not take much to see that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are intimately related and at a particular moment even touch each other. Both ordinances were bestowed by Christ to the church, and both of them have everything to do with the central redemptive facts of Golgotha and Easter. Immediately before these great events, the Lord’s Supper was instituted, and immediately after them, baptism was instituted (according to Matthew 28:19). The Lord’s Supper speaks to us of the death of the (exalted) Lord for us, and baptism speaks about our engrafting into Christ, especially in his death and resurrection. Both call us back to the center of salvation history and to the source of salvation in the new and eternal covenant of grace.

If we had to identify the single feature common to both baptism and Lord’s Supper, the first word that comes to mind is the word *fellowship*. By baptism we are brought into fellowship with Christ and his church, and at the Lord’s Table we are confirmed in that fellowship with Christ and his church. Baptism marks the *beginning* and the *nature* of the new regime under which

we live from that point forward: putting away the old man and putting on the new man. The Lord's Supper evidences the continually recurring *joy* regarding the establishment and the progress of that new regime: we celebrate our feast of liberation.

We are *engrafted* into fellowship with Christ and his church only once, but we may *celebrate* that salvation together with him and the church over and over again.

Thus, the ancient church had a very meaningful liturgy when it followed the baptism of the catechumen immediately with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. By both means, we share in Christ, the crucified one, and we are called to direct our faith to his body and blood. He has surrendered his *body* in death as a ransom for many (the Lord's Supper) and thereby he has nailed our sins to the tree so that we who have died to sins may live unto righteousness (baptism), according to 1 Peter 2:24 and Romans 7:4. His *blood* was shed as the blood of the covenant (Lord's Supper) and according to Hebrews 9:14 and 1 John 1:8 may serve to cleanse us from all sin (baptism).

Through Jesus Christ we have in this way obtained access to the Father and in this way he has obtained for us the life-giving Spirit. In short, by means of baptism and the Lord's Supper Christ permits us to share in him in different ways. Nowhere in the New Testament are these two gifts presented to us as a pair, under the term "sacraments." But the inner relationship between them appears comprehensive, something we recognize in the language of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 and 12:13. For that reason, there can be no objection to a summarizing concept called "sacrament," as long as we fill in that concept from the information supplied by Scripture.

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With this last observation we have committed ourselves to a further consideration of the concept of "sacrament" and of the relationship between the sacrament and preaching. By way of concluding our treatment, we wish to raise four points concerning this matter.

1. As we have been reflecting about baptism and the Lord's Supper, it has become more and more clear that we may never view the water, the bread, and the wine as abstract substances, as elements-in-themselves. We must continually see the hands of Christ. From those hands we receive baptism and the Lord's Supper, and by those hands these gifts are maintained. The recognition of Christ's presence in baptism and the Lord's Supper is a priceless piece of Reformed doctrine. Through his Holy Spirit he is actively present in the administration of both sacraments, and he employs both for his redemptive work in our lives and in the life of the church. We believe that activity is what the Catechism is suggesting in Lord's Day 25 when it speaks twice about the *use* of the sacraments.⁴² The logical subject of that usage, the agent, must be the Holy Spirit. He takes water, bread, and wine from daily usage, qualifies these elements as his instruments, and uses these instruments according to his intentions. The elements have no energy in themselves. But they derive their power and effect from the present activity of the Redeemer.

2. At the same time, Lord's Day 25 shows that the Reformation wanted to define the nature and working of the sacraments only in relationship to preaching. Isolating them from preaching would seem to create a new abstraction.

We are able to grasp this design of the doctrine concerning sacraments against the background of the Reformation's struggle against the Roman Catholic sacramental church. Salvation possesses a promissory character—this is how earlier we briefly described the intent of the Reformation. That meant restoring to honor the activity of *preaching* and the exclusive necessity of *faith* in the preached Word. The sermon is not merely preparatory in view of the celebration of the mass, but it is as such the administration of reconciliation.

⁴²Space does not permit us to provide extensive proof on the basis of linguistic usage of that time. We suffice by referring to M. A. Gooszen, *De Heidelbergse Catechismus en het boekje van de breking des broods*, 99-100.

This restoration of honor to preaching gave rise to the question why then the church still needed *sacraments*. Was not the church threatened with the danger that the sacraments would become empty signs, impoverished symbols, or human acts of faith? Down through the centuries, Roman Catholic apologists have accused Reformational teaching of courting this danger.

If that accusation is not based on truth, how then can anyone holding to the Reformational view ever ascribe a specific meaning to the sacraments? If God is present in the sacraments and works in them, what is then the unique nature of that work in contrast to and in distinction from the redemptive work brought about by preaching? It is undeniable that Reformed theology has frequently faced a difficult challenge with such questions. Does not this line of thinking perpetually face the danger that, sooner or later, it will conceive of a sacramental grace outside of or beyond the relationship between preaching and faith? Is there not a real danger that we will conceive of a fellowship with Christ that transcends the fellowship through Word and faith? Does not the Lord's Supper doctrine of Luther and Calvin provide clear proof of that? Or the doctrine of baptism taught by Abraham Kuyper? What is the unique and specific significance of the sacraments, from a Reformed viewpoint? After all, is it not true that everything God has to give us (Christ and all his benefits) is given in the proclamation?

3. Our answer to this question can be nothing else than *a posteriori* reflection about the meaning of Christ's command to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. We neither can nor may deduce the necessity of the sacraments from various more or less self-evident "higher principles" which we then could presumably slip in behind Christ's command as a kind of philosophical legitimization. This could be done easily, for example, on the basis of considerations from the field of anthropology: people possess the senses of hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching; therefore the Lord reaches us not only through our sense of hearing in the preaching, but he desires to reach us also by way of the other senses in the sacraments.

As we seek to resolve this matter by considering the institutions as given by Christ, we can profit from the result of our study up to this point. The core of both sacraments we have found to be *fellowship*, and we have seen that the nature of both sacraments is determined by the *use* to which God puts them.

That fellowship we call the fellowship of the *covenant*. If you want to find the key for understanding the specific meaning of the sacraments in relation to the Word, you must consider the nature of the covenant and of God's actions in the covenant. In the Bible the Holy Spirit supplies us with powerful assistance, when in many passages in the Old and New Testaments he depicts for us God's covenant as a *marriage covenant*.

In this context we will look only at Ephesians 5:22-23. Especially this passage of Scripture—one that has played a significant role in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, ans. 76), and one that speaks explicitly about Word and baptism (v. 26) and about Christ's care for his church—this passage allows and enables us to clarify the fellowship between Christ and us with the help of the human marriage covenant.

Marriage rests upon mutual concord. At a particular point in time, husband and wife have become one, have given each other their promise, and desire to maintain that word. The covenant rests on those spoken words.

But for the purpose of maintaining their fellowship, the husband and wife have more at their disposal than simply the continual repetition of their wedding vows.

Consider, for example, the unrepeatable wedding day. On the level of language as such, that day signifies nothing new, since people have spoken these or similar words of troth for ages. But these facts are indeed new: giving the wedding ring as a symbol and pledge, the festivity of the celebration, the many witnesses, the official documentation of the wedding ceremony, signing the wedding license—to limit ourselves just to these. All of these elements are accidental to the fundamental promise, and yet at the same time are quite essential to the relationship. They involve especially the public character of the marriage bond and the

celebration of marital joy. Down through the years, both features possess a strongly supportive character.

The wedding day is followed by many, many workdays, days of joy and worries, of concord and differences of opinion. There follow also Sundays and holidays, birthdays and other anniversaries. In addition, love knows its own times and seasons when fellowship is celebrated.

When a husband gives his wife some flowers or jewelry for her birthday or their anniversary, he is communicating with her in a different way than by word. But he is communicating, and he is telling her a lot! For he “uses” those flowers or that present within the relationship of love.⁴³ That is the reason why those flowers talk, and they provide the relationship with a festive occasion. And as husband and wife walk together, encountering difficulties in their relationship, this sign language speaks all the more effectively.

In short, the non-essential ceremonious locations, presents, and holidays have a manifold function: celebration, cleansing, repairing, encouraging, amazement, comfort, gratitude, and more. But all of these effects rest upon this one fact, that they help husband and wife concentrate on the real source of their relationship. Cultivating such concentration could certainly be a job assigned to a speech or an overview of their love history. But the sign language of a gift is more abridged and therefore more powerful. The marriage does not depend upon this. But if it is perpetually absent, that absence speaks volumes. It bespeaks the withering and the quenching of love's resourcefulness.

4. The secret of the relationship between God and his people far surpasses the human marriage relationship in both depth and wonder. That relationship between God and his people was made possible by God's own Son, and for that very reason remains a daily miracle. The covenant between the holy God and a radically

⁴³We have borrowed this example from G. P. Hartvelt, from his comments in his essay “In taal en teken,” in *Uit tweeën één. Tussentijdse balans van het gesprek Rome-Reformatie*, edited by H. M. Kuitert and H. A. M. Fiolet (Rotterdam, 1966), 107-111; G. P. Hartvelt, “Het teken in de theologie van het woord,” *Vox Theologica* 35 (1965): 77ff.; G. P. Hartvelt, *De maaltijd des Heren*, 54.

imperfect people can be nothing else than a vulnerable relationship. Time and again the impossible must be made possible, the weak partner must be strengthened and encouraged, the relationship must be cleansed. The Lord does this by continually having the Word of his grace in Christ proclaimed. He does it also by the sign language of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The specific property of baptism is that it establishes the beginning and typifies the continuation, since baptism involves *engrafting* into fellowship with Christ. God binds himself at the beginning and for the duration, and at the same time he binds us by first and last names.

The Lord's Supper is marked by two moments, namely, by the *purification* of the beleaguered fellowship and the *celebration* of the great happiness of this communion. Both means concentrate the church's attention upon the source of salvation, calling her back to the beginning of the love history between God and his people. Especially at the ever-recurring Lord's Supper, the church is ashamed for her sins and faults, flaws that from the time of their beautiful beginning together have come between her and her God. At same time she is encouraged to go on, for the goodness of God surpasses all, and the love demonstrated on the night of betrayal has never changed or diminished. Both together (shame and encouragement) make the church long with heart and soul for the future, for undisturbed and uninterrupted communion with her Triune God.

So we must see the single love of God in Word, baptism, and Lord's Supper. In all of them, the one divine heart is speaking, but that heart-speech is not monotone. Genuine love is not monotone but ingeniously colorful. On that basis we can explain these three means of one grace. The various senses that human beings have, their weakness and dullness—all of these have to do with the sacraments. But they cannot explain the two sacraments and are in no position to do justice to the greatness of God's goodness in using these means. God fixes his promises in a ceremonious, public act of baptism, and he leads his people to

celebrate salvation at the table of fellowship. In both activities God is acting and in both he is acting upon us.

We need many words to do justice to the numerous aspects of this divine acting. In such circumstances, the church speaks with words like “sign,” “seal,” “pledge,” and “fellowship,” and they are all true as long as we recognize in them the love of God. The effect of this divine acting in the sacraments is not merely cognitive but also demonstrative and effectual and affective—that is what the field of doctrinal studies teaches us. That, too, is all true, as long as in those descriptions we see our good God at work. But to us falls as our primary task the obligation to avoid one-sided emphases and lifeless definitions. For we are dealing here with the most wonderful reality joining heaven and earth, namely, God’s love for people who have been called out of their lostness into unchangeable fellowship. Every doctrine concerning preaching and sacraments will ultimately have to render praise for this reality. Doctrine that does not yield praise is false doctrine. But true and powerful is the doctrine that saves us from our barrenness unto the praise of the Triune God and unto the celebration of our indestructible redemption. That is why the apostle tells the believers in Corinth, after all his instruction about the table of the Lord, that they must go celebrate the Lord’s Supper together: “Greet one another with a holy kiss. . . . If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha!” (1 Cor. 16:20b, 22). And beyond this word we do not live.