OUTWARD AND ORDINARY MEANS OF GRACE:
HOW THOSE MEANS ARE EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATED
TO GOD’S PEOPLE

by

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A THESIS

Submitted to the faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts (Religion)
at Reformed Theological Seminary

Villa Park, California
February 2012
Accepted:

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This thesis paper will address the question, “Does God use means to communicate his benefits to his people?” If that question is answered in the affirmative, the Westminster Shorter Catechism proceeds to ask, “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?”

Scripture and the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition is convinced that God does indeed use outward and ordinary means to communicate his benefits to his people, and as the Catechism answers, these, “are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” While mystics and pietists deny this and Rome abuses this, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck presented and defended a biblical view of what is typically known as the outward and ordinary means of grace and their role in church life.

This paper will present an overview of Bavinck’s view of the means of grace as a gift to Christ’s church, their definition, function, scriptural support, their historical use and abuse and their place with the believer’s mystical union with Christ. Then, this paper will turn to Bavinck’s view of various components of the means of grace; namely, the proclamation of the Word, the sacraments in general, baptism and the Lord’s supper and
how the church has viewed these and other potential means of grace over the years.

Finally, this paper will then present an appeal for Christian churches to rediscover and commit themselves to the right use of the outward and ordinary means of grace.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck first published his magisterial four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Reformed Dogmatics) in 1895.¹ In it he devoted nearly one-hundred and fifty pages presenting the doctrine of the Holy Spirit’s inner workings through the means of grace. Bavinck did not present a radically new doctrine of the means of grace, but he adhered to the classic Genevan reformed understanding. In the preface of the first edition the Dutch version of his Dogmatics he wrote, “This Dogmatics is most closely connected with that type that was received in the Christian religion and theology in the 16th century, especially in Switzerland. This is not because it is the only true expression (of Christian religion and theology), but because in the conviction of the author it is the relatively purest expression of the truth.”²

Building upon the work of Calvin, Bavinck proceeded to provide a fully orbed and highly beneficial theological resource in his Reformed Dogmatics. J.I. Packer described Bavinck’s work as such: “Solid but lucid, demanding but satisfying, broad and deep and sharp and stabilizing, Bavinck’s magisterial Reformed Dogmatics remains after a century the supreme achievement of its kind.”³ It is from Bavinck’s body of work that

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¹Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, (Kampen: Bos, 1895). The volumes I, II, III, & IV appeared in 1895, 1897, 1898, and 1901, respectively, by the same publisher.


we can learn how he would answer the Westminster Shorter Catechism question 88, “What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?”
CHAPTER 2

BAVINCK AND THE MEANS OF GRACE

Bavinck defines grace clearly and concisely as the “favor and fellowship of God” and he defines the “means of grace” as, “external, humanly perceptible actions and signs that Christ has given his church and with which he has linked the communication of his grace.” These means Christ has given his church comprise the preaching and reading of the Word and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Reformed and evangelical theologians differ when determining the means of grace beyond the Word and sacraments. Many, Presbyterians for example, at least include prayer, some add Christian fellowship, and some, such as theologian Wayne Grudem, include as many as eleven different activities to the list.

Bavinck held that there are but three means: “Strictly speaking, the Word and the sacraments alone can be viewed as means of grace.” He further argued that these means of grace may never be detached from the person and work of Christ, nor from the church as his covenantal body, for Christ is the sole “acquirer and distributor” of grace. In addition, whether Christ administers his grace extraordinarily (immediately) or ordinarily (through means), he does so through the inner working of the Holy Spirit “whom he has

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4Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:474.
5Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:448.
7Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:448.
bestowed on the church, in the fellowship of the church, which he has instructed to preach the gospel to all creatures.”

In summary, Christ has sovereignly bound himself to outwardly and ordinarily administering his grace to his covenant people by the Holy Spirit working with the means of the Word and sacraments.

Bavinck in Accord with Historic Reformed Doctrine

Bavinck’s views on this subject are in accord with and stem from historic Reformed theology. For example, Calvin wrote a great deal about the means of grace in his four books of the Institutes of the Christian Religion. Known as the “theologian of the Holy Spirit,” Calvin began in Book One addressing “the knowledge of God the Creator” emphasizing how the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord through scripture. Book Two addresses “the knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ” and shows Christ clearly revealed in the gospels. With that basis, Book Three then addresses “the way in which we receive the grace of Christ” and stresses justification by faith, while Book Four addresses “the external means or aids by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein” and develops the doctrines of the church and the administration of the sacraments. On the whole, Calvin’s Institutes can be summarized as an answer to the question of how God communicates his benefits to his people.

Later Reformed creeds and confessions built upon Calvin’s teaching. The Heidelberg Catechism question 65 asks, “Whence comes saving grace?” and then

8Ibid.
answers, “It is the effect of the Holy Spirit in our heart by means of the preaching of the holy Gospel, and confirmed by the use of the holy sacraments.”

The Westminster Larger Catechism question 154 asks, “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation?” and answers, “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to his church the benefits of his mediation, are all his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments and prayer; all of which are made effectual to the elect for their salvation.”

The Belgic Confession lists three marks of the true church: “if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God . . . .” While not calling the preached Word and the administration of the sacraments “means of grace,” the Confession regards these as integral and foundational activities of Christ’s body.

In sum, Bavinck’s teachings on the means of grace did not create a new doctrine or understanding. Rather, he put “meat on the skeleton” of a topic often covered before, through a clear and thorough discussion for the benefit of the church of Christ. In other words, he built on what the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition had handed down to the church over the years.


Careful Considerations

Before turning to the Holy Spirit’s working with the means of grace in regenerating and strengthening the elect, it is wise to acknowledge man’s limitations concerning this topic. For as the Canons of Dort states that just as, “man cannot fully understand the manner of God’s creating and sustaining life, so too is man limited in understanding the manner of God’s use of means in bestowing grace”, and “Believers cannot in this life, fully comprehend the manner of this operation [of grace received]: in the mean time they acquiesce in it; because, but this grace of God, they know and feel, that they believe in their heart and love their Savior.”12 This is a key point to keep in mind, since Bavinck was a member of a church affiliation that embraced and taught the theology found in the Canons of Dort. In the Reformed Dogmatics, Bavinck repeatedly points out that the Christian dogmatician must do his work in concert with the creeds and confessions of his church. Bavinck makes it clear that many questions remain open concerning this discussion:

Questions of Method—Just how does God employ the sacraments to distribute his grace and benefits? How does this actually work and make itself efficacious to the believer?

Questions of Consistency—Is grace always bound up with the sign so that the sacrament always remains the same objectively? Are there variations throughout time and space?

12 The Articles of the Synod of Dort (Harrisburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1993), 301.
Questions of Distinctions—In what way is the sacramental grace distinguished from grace received earlier by believers? Are there different kinds of grace given to believers?

Questions of Timing—Does grace occur simultaneously with the administration and reception of the sign or can it also occur before or later? Is there a “window of efficacy” for a means of grace?

These and many other questions are to be considered but Bavinck humbly concludes: “Who is to say in what way God conveys spiritual life and spiritual power to his elect through the means of grace? We can, here as well, perhaps trace the lines on either side, the boundaries within which we must think, just like the council of Chalcedon did with respect to the unity of the two natures of Christ. But we are unable to describe in fixed and clear formulations the relation established between God’s grace and the means he uses in bestowing grace.”

The Means of Grace in Regeneration—Three Questions

Beginning with a study of regeneration, Bavinck posits three questions to help clarify God’s use of the means of grace. First he asks, “In which way does the Holy Spirit work in the human heart?” That is, does the Spirit remain outside of a person influencing through ordinary ways as an ordinary person would influence, such as through the intellect and will? Or does the Holy Spirit work immediately by descending into the human heart and acting directly and irresistibly with a person?

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13 Herman Bavinck, Saved by Grace (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 135—emphasis mine.
Bavinck answers this first question by looking to Augustine and the Reformers and proclaiming that the Holy Spirit, “with His almighty power He penetrates the human heart, touches a person immediately in the innermost part of his being and thus renews him to conform in principle to the image of God, apart from a persons knowing and willing.”

The second question Bavinck posits is, “If the Holy Spirit . . . performs his work directly, then does not this direct operation exclude the use of means? If the operation of the Holy Spirit is immediate, does that not entail that the use of means is superfluous and futile, yes, even wrong and detrimental?”

Bavinck answers this second question by restating the Reformers’ view that the Holy Spirit works directly, internally, and irresistibly, and in this sense, immediately, in heart of the elect. However, the Reformers also never referred to regeneration as “immediate” at the exclusion of the Word as a means of grace, to which the Holy Spirit joins his work for the Spirit and the Word work in cooperation with each other. For example, while the Holy Spirit regenerates a person immediately by turning the heart of stone to a heart of flesh, as a rule and ordinarily, he does so through the means of the preaching of the Word.

The third question Bavinck posits is, “What is the relation between the Spirit’s immediate operation and the use of means?” That is, based on the two previous questions, if Holy Spirit’s working immediately in a person’s heart does not render the use of means superfluous or detrimental, how should we view the relationship between the Holy Spirit’s immediate workings and the operation of the means?

\[14\] Ibid., 131.
To answer this weighty and difficult question, Bavinck looks to the Synod of Dort’s confession concerning the immediate working of the Holy Spirit in regeneration:

And this is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God works in us without our help. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God has done his work, it remains in man's power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead, as Scripture (inspired by the author of this work) teaches. As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are certainly, unfailingly, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. And then the will, now renewed, is not only activated and motivated by God but in being activated by God is also itself active. For this reason, man himself, by that grace which he has received, is also rightly said to believe and to repent.

Believers cannot in this life, fully comprehend the manner of this operation [of grace received]: in the mean time they acquiesce in it; because, but this grace of God, they know and feel, that they believe in their heart and love of their Savior.\textsuperscript{15}

In other words, the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration does not happen merely by outward teaching or persuasive argument, but it is an entirely supernatural work that is marvelous, hidden and inexpressible.

At the same time, God does indeed use means to carry out his providential plan. This is evident in God’s mediate working in the creation, preservation and governance of the world. “He illuminates and warms the earth with the sun. He waters the plowed fields with the rain that he causes to fall from the clouds. He builds the house by means of the workmen . . . He nourishes by means of food. He quenches by means of water . . .

\textsuperscript{15}Synod of Dort, 301.
Always and everywhere the Lord binds outcomes to pathways, ends to means. He maintains and rules all things through and in relation to each other.”

Nevertheless, in his being and working, God is never at any time separated from his creatures by these means, for God is immediately and directly present with all things. In him all things live and move and have their being. While the Lord maintains and rules all things mediately, with his omnipresent and almighty power he himself is immediately present in all his creatures. So too, the Lord mediately bestows his favor and fellowship on his people while at the same time he himself is immediately present with them.

Summary

Salvation is of the Lord and no part of that salvation is of the work of man. “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Nevertheless, God works saving faith in the hearts of his elect mediately and has sovereignly bound himself to the use of means in administering his saving grace. Faith comes not by an immediate inner enlightenment, but “comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

Next, we will look at how Christ uses the means of grace to sanctify his church.

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16 Bavinck, Saved by Grace, 134.
18 Philippians 2:13.
19 Romans 10:17.
The Means of Grace in Sanctification

On the basis of this confession of the working of the Holy Spirit with the Word in regeneration, Bavinck then considers the role of the means of grace beyond regeneration for “regeneration is but one of the many benefits God bestows upon His elect along the path of the covenant.” Bavinck then asks how does Christ continue to communicate his benefits to his people. Does he also use means? The benefits God grants to His elect are not done so in an immediate way, but by way of means of Word and sacrament which he has ordained for his church. In summary, the Holy Spirit works faith in a person’s heart by the proclamation of the Word and strengthens it through the use of the Word and sacraments.

The means of grace operate in a similar way as a contract, or, as Reformed theology emphasizes, through his covenantal dealings with his people. God has bound himself to impart his grace to everyone who receives and enjoys these divinely instituted means in faith according to his ordained purpose. In the means he has, so to speak, indebted himself to us. Whenever we use them in the proper way, in childlike obedience, then he gives us the right to plead with him and to expect everything from him on the basis of them; and then he binds himself through his covenant, through his promises, to provide everything our spiritual and physical indigence requires.

There exists a danger regarding wrong thinking here. First, while grace is indeed joined to the means, it is not in an infused, confused, or confined manner. Second, this

20Ibid., 133.

21Ibid., 139.
grace is not under the authority and control of the minister who proclaims the word and administers the sacrament. It remains the property of God who bestows grace in Christ through the Holy Spirit according to his sovereign good pleasure.

Whenever the means of grace are administered, therefore, properly speaking, no union between the external, visible signs and the spiritual invisible grace comes into existence, as if both of these in any manner were locally bound and united together. Rather, there occurs a union between grace and the soul of him who uses the means of grace in faith.

This is how, as Bavinck points out, that as early as the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic theologian Bonaventure taught. The Reformed view is that the sacraments do not contain grace within themselves “like a cup holds water or a pill contains medicine, but they signify grace and point to grace.” 22 And if we hold that that grace is indeed imparted by the sacraments, then this is to be understood that grace is bestowed not to the visible signs but to the soul of the recipient. It is therefore correct to say that the thing signified is united to us rather than that the thing signified is untied to the signs. This “mystical union” arises between Christ and our souls; and of that the means of grace function as sign and seal pointing God’s covenantal grace.

The Means of Grace in the Unio Mystica

The unio mystica is the mystical union the believer has with Christ and, since it is a mystical and spiritual union, it is beyond human understanding. John Murray in “Redemption Accomplished and Applied,” wrote, “Union with Christ is a great

22Ibid., 140.
mystery…[yet] we are liable to use the word to designate something that is completely unintelligible and of which we cannot have any understanding. That is not the sense of scripture.”

Indeed, scripture is not silent in revealing what believers are to understand concerning this communion for it is the very core of the believer’s life in Christ. John Murray continues, “nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ,” and that, “union with Christ is the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”

From scripture we learn this union is that, in Christ and by the Spirit, God himself dwells in the believer. “It is a most intimate union with God by the Holy Spirit, a union of persons, an unbreakable and eternal covenant between God and ourselves…it is so close that it transforms humans in the divine image and makes them participants in the divine nature.”

Bavinck understood the profound significance of this union perhaps greater than any other theologians barring Calvin, and this is reflected in how he wove the concept into the entire fabric of the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

There has been significant interest in the union mystica in the past several years. Westminster Theological Seminary professor Scott Oliphint tied in the concept of the believer’s union with Christ throughout his 2007 book, “Justified in Christ.”

Both Todd Billings (Associate Professor of Reformed Theology at Western Theological Seminary) and Robert Letham (Professor of Systematic Theology at Wales Evangelical School of

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24Ibid., 161, 170.

25I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume III* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 304.

Theology and Visiting Professor of Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Baltimore / Washington D.C.) published books in 2011 titled, “Union with Christ.” Ron Gleason in his doctoral dissertation offered an extensive analysis on the integral role the unio mystica played in Bavinck’s theology in general and his sacramentology in particular. More and more, the church is seeking a deeper understanding of the constitutive nature of the mystical union. As Robert Letham writes, “the union we enjoy with Christ is more real and more fundamental than the union we have with members of our own bodies.”

Bavinck has much to offer the church on this topic. He writes that this union is not as a pantheistic mingling, nor a mingling of substances in which the believer somehow becomes Christ, but a union whereby Christ lives and dwells in believers, and in addition, in this union believers exist in him. Scripture likens this union to a branch and vine, as a head and its members, as husband and wife, and as a cornerstone to a building. Bavinck notes a key and profound point that this mystical union, “is not immediate but comes into being by the Holy Spirit.”

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29Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23). But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Romans 8:10).

30And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, (1 Corinthians 1:30).

31John 15.

32Romans 12:4.

331 Corinthians 6:16-17.
In addition to the above analogies, scripture refers to this union as “being in the Spirit” or “being in Christ.” Bavinck writes, “to be in the Spirit is the same as being in Christ, and the idea that the Spirit indwells someone can also be expressed by saying that Christ is in someone, for Christ only dwells in our hearts by his Spirit, and those who do not have the Spirit of Christ do not belong to him. The new life is the life of the Spirit but just as much the life of Christ in us. Believers have been crucified, have died, been buried and raised, set at God’s right hand, and glorified with Christ. They have put on Christ, have been formed in his likeness, reveal in their bodies the suffering as well as the life of Christ, and are perfected in him. In a word, ‘Christ is all and in all’ and they are ‘one spirit with him.’”

The mystical union with Christ comes to expression in and is cultivated by the Holy Spirit working with the means of grace of the Word and sacraments. First, looking to the Word’s role in the mystical union, Letham writes, “it is clear that the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ through the instrumentality of the preaching of the Word of God.” He notes that both Peter and James attribute the regeneration of believers to the instrumentality of the Word and that faith comes through hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:9-17). “The preaching of the gospel is, so to speak, the midwife by which the Holy Spirit regenerates us and unites us to Christ. While the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, the God, who created the world shines in our hearts to give the light of salvation by his Son, and this he does as ‘we preach Jesus Christ as Lord’ (2 Corinthians 4:4-6).”

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34 1 Peter 2:4-5.
36 “that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, (Ephesians 3:16-17).
39 Ibid., 124.
Second, the believer’s union with Christ is a sacramental union as portrayed in John 6. Jesus said,

> Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.\(^{40}\)

He also said the Holy Spirit is the giver of this life. Christ knew these words would cause great offense—and in fact, “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.”\(^{41}\)

**Summary**

Just as God bound himself to the use of the means of grace, so too does he bind his people to them. It is not an act of piety for the Christian to seek an immediate way of growth and sanctification. For just as God uses means in bestowing saving faith, so too is strengthening faith inseparably connected by the will of God to the means of grace.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\)John 6:54-58.  
\(^{41}\)John 6:66.  
CHAPTER 3
OPPOSING VIEWS OF THE MEANS OF GRACE

Bavinck’s reformed view of God’s use of means in communicating his benefits to his people has been opposed from two sides. Mystics generally insist God does not bind himself to means and instead communicates his benefits immediately. Rome insists the means are essential and tied to the sacramental power of the institutional church’s priesthood.

The Mystic View

The mystic view, held by Pietists, Anabaptists and in later times Quakers, denies the existence of divinely-ordained means of grace of the church and maintains that God, omnipotent, sovereign and free, could use means if he so desired, but he chooses not to bind himself to means to distribute the blessings of his grace. Instead, the Holy Spirit, without the aid of the Word, illuminates each man immediately by an inner light at a certain time, and that by it only is man able to understand the Word of God.

The mystic view argues that since grace is not some manner of force or superadded gift, but consists as a restoration of God’s favor, it simply could not be locked into a sign perceptible to the senses as in a physical container to be administered by a person. Christ is the only one who could distribute grace and he has not designated anyone on earth to be his intermediary for he himself continues his priestly office. Furthermore, the fact every Sunday thousands of people receive the sign of the Word and
the sacraments without ever participating in saving grace is a testament to its unnecessary and superfluous incorporation in the church.

The Confession of the Society of Friends (Quakers), which is one of the few places the “mystic” view is expressly presented, states in The Second Proposition (Concerning Immediate Revelation), that “the testimony of the Spirit is that alone by which the true knowledge of God hath been, is, and can be only revealed: who as, by the moving of his own Spirit . . .” and while “divine inward revelations, which we make absolutely necessary for the building up of true faith” never contradict the outward testimony of the Scriptures, “yet, from hence it will not follow that these divine revelations are to be subjected to the examination, either of the outward testimony of the Scriptures or of the natural reason of man . . . for this divine revelation and inward illumination is that which is evident and clear of itself, forcing, by its own evidence and cleanness, the well-disposed understanding to assent, irresistibly moving the same thereunto.”

While this Second Proposition is, frankly, rather unclear and confusing, it stresses the immediate divine inward revelation to the believer today in like manner as to the believer during the older covenant administration through immediate measures such as dreams, appearances, outward voices or simply through “inward manifestations in the heart.” There is no requisite need for the Word or the sacraments to present God’s revelation.

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44 Ibid.
Bavinck’s Critique

Bavinck summarizes and then criticizes the view that it is God, or Christ or the Spirit in us, or the inner light, that work grace in people and that the Word and sacrament do no more than point to or depict that inner grace as lacking. If this were the case, the written Word, then, would merely express what is written on the heart of every believer already; and the sacraments would only make visible what Christ has already invisibly worked internally by his Spirit. “Mysticism finally comes down to the same thing as rationalism, which . . . sees in the sacraments only ceremonial precepts, memorial signs, and acts of confession.”\textsuperscript{45} Not trusting outward senses or signs, Rationalism, is the view that “human knowledge presupposes certain principles that are known independently of sense-experience and by which knowledge of our sense-experience is governed.”\textsuperscript{46} The mystic view is indeed rationalist because it denies any efficacy of the Word and sacraments and sees these external elements as mere helps to aid what already exists internally.

The Roman Catholic View

In stark contrast to the immediate mystic view is that of Roman Catholicism, a “magical overvaluation” of the means of grace which holds that grace is absolutely bound to the means.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the means of grace differs from the Reformed doctrine in three ways. The first point of difference lies in the conception of the

\textsuperscript{45}Herman Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:443.

ecclesiastical office. While both the Reformed and Rome view the church and its ecclesiastical office as a divine institution, the Reformed look upon it as a *ministerium*, which, as the word sounds in English, is a continuous Christian ministering and working of the church in the Word and sacraments. Rome, however, holds the idea of a *sacerdotium*, or an ecclesiastical hierarchy, forming the real foundational means of grace. For, according to the teachings of Rome, “the church, the visible church sustained by the invisible Spirit, is the actual authentic perfect means of grace, the sacrament par excellence.”

The second point of difference is the relative position the Reformed and Rome assign to the means of grace. The Reformed maintain that this grace is first communicated through the Word of God and confirmed by the sacraments and that the sacraments act as an appendage to the Word, as an accessory. Rome reverses the roles and considers the sacraments as the chief means of grace, and the Word of God as an accessory.

A third point of difference is the way in which the means of grace are understood to confer grace and forgiveness. According to the Council of Trent Session 7 Canons 5-8, the sacraments work *ex opere operato* (i.e., by the work performed). That is, first of all, they contain the grace which they signify. Second, they always confer grace and confer it upon all who do not oppose an obstacle to it. Third, the grace is conferred *ex opere operato* without any devotion or faith on the part of the recipient. This doctrine holds that the correct and ecclesiastical administration of the rite, by default, conveys grace to the recipient, unless the recipient places a spiritual impediment (*obex*) in the way.

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of grace. The sacraments, therefore, have a *virtus operativa*, or operative power.\(^{48}\) This view is clearly articulated in the following canons from the Council of Trent intended to den\-\-\-\-y the view of the Reformers.

Canon 5. Whoever shall affirm that the sacraments were instituted solely for the strengthening our faith, let him be accursed.

Canon 6. Whoever shall affirm that the sacraments of the new law do not contain the grace which they signify, or that they do not confer that grace on those who place no obstacle in its way, as if they were only the external signs of grace or righteousness received by faith, and marks of Christian profession whereby the faithful are distinguished from unbelievers, let him be accursed.

Canon 7. Whoever shall affirm that grace is not always given by these sacraments, and upon all persons, as far as God is concerned, if they be rightly received, but that it is only bestowed sometimes and on some persons, let him be accursed.

Canon 8. Whoever shall affirm that grace is not conferred by the sacraments of the new law, by their own power (*ex opere operato*), but that faith in the divine promise is all that is necessary to obtain grace, let him be accursed.\(^{49}\)

The Reformers rejected the above four Romanist positions—for the sacraments are indeed given to strengthen faith (Canon 5), do not contain grace but are but a means (Canon 6), and are efficacious if rightly received (Canon 7) through faith (Canon 8).

Bavinck’s Critique

Bavinck argued that the Reformed, in defining the sacraments, aligned themselves as closely as possible with scripture and rejected the Romanist view as tainted by mystical Greek thinking that confused the distinction between grace and the means of


\(^{49}\) Schaff, *Creeds*, 2:120.
Bavinck stressed the scriptural teaching that God bestows his grace and favor on his people—to the soul of the believer, not to the visible signs. The means of grace possess nothing in themselves other than a moral operation, that is the sacraments communicate grace not immediately, but mediatelly. “God does not embed grace in the visible signs, nor does He transmit grace thereby into the soul of the one using the sacraments as though through a channel. Not the sacrament, but God Himself communicates grace from His fullness to the one who uses the sacrament according to its instituted purpose.”

The means of grace do not work or effect anything by and in and of themselves, but only as the Holy Spirit uses them.

This can be illustrated by use of metaphors of a royal scepter or a building key. When a royal scepter is handed to a person, it grants royal prerogatives. When a building key is handed to a person, it grants authority over that building. Looking to a biblical narrative, Naaman was not healed by Elisha’s words or by bathing in the Jordan River. He was healed by God’s power. “So too grace is not bestowed by the sacraments, but by God alone. Therefore sacraments, in a proper sense, could not be termed causes, instruments, or tools of grace; such terms were merely figurative, insofar as God has obligated Himself according to His promise to the communicating of His grace to each person who uses the sacraments according to His instituted purposes.”

Continuing with this theme, Bavinck wrote, “Christ is the complete savior, the only Mediator between God and humanity, and the church is first of all the communion

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52 Ibid., 138. It is for this reason Reformed theologians often use the formulation that Christ works *with* or *along-side* the Word and sacraments and not *through* the Word and sacraments.
of saints, not the *meidatrix* of salvation but the assembly of believers who live in communion with Christ. Christ indeed instituted offices in that believing community, but all these offices do not constitute a priesthood (*sacerdotium*) but a body of ministers (*ministerium*), bound absolutely to Christ’s word and having no other power than the power of the word.”

Much of Rome’s error concerning the means of grace stems from its view that the church is superior to scripture, that is, that the church is not built upon scripture, but scripture is derived from the church. The Reformers placed the church on the foundation of scripture and the word of God became the means of grace *par excellence* (in contrast to Rome’s view that the church holds that position). Even the sacraments were subordinated to the Word and had neither meaning nor power apart from that Word. By placing God’s written word in the hands and homes of believers, the Reformers further reinforced the power of the proclaimed word and liberated the believer from Rome’s sacerdotalism. “No longer did any person or thing stand between them and Christ. By faith they appropriated the whole of salvation, and in the sacrament they received the sign and seal of that reality. Thus the Reformation changed the Roman Catholic doctrine of the means of grace.”

The means of grace, as such, are nothing else than what Bavinck refers to as a “moral operation.” That is, in and of themselves they possess no power to recreate since God’s grace is not infused in the means but accompanies them. Even though God in his great goodness and mercy, binds himself to employ means and to work with means, “he

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54Ibid., 445.
himself remains independent of those means; he descends into the heart of the sinner, and there works with his grace and Spirit in a direct, invincible, though also gentle and lovely manner.”

Summary

The Reformers brought about a fundamental shift in the “place and character of the church, the church’s offices, and the means of grace.” Bavinck echoed the Reformers by adopting a balanced and scriptural position between the mystical undervaluation of the means of grace which maintains God works immediately in the hearts of people and denies the use of means and Rome’s magical overvaluation of the means of grace which maintains the means possess and convey grace. The Reformed view, as taught by Bavinck, is that God uses means by administering his grace along-side those means to the heart of the believer. The Reformed view is an elegant description of the beautiful way God has chosen to redeem and nourish his people.

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55 Bavinck, Saved by Grace, 141.

56 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:444.
CHAPTER 4

THE WORD AS A MEANS OF GRACE

The chief means of grace is the Word of God. “The first and most important means of grace is the word of God . . . for the word of God, both as law and gospel, is the revelation of the will of God, the promulgation of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.”\(^{57}\)

The Word holds primacy over the sacraments, such that apart from the Word they cease to be sacraments. Nevertheless, in both instances the Word is proclaimed to the believer—the one audibly (preaching, reading, singing, etc.) and the other visibly and physically (water, bread, and wine). Both means direct the believer to the same Christ and both means point to the same benefits.\(^{58}\)

Reformed confessions demonstrate the primacy of the Word in their very order of topics. For example, the Helvetic Confession treats the Word of God in its first chapter, and the sacraments in the nineteenth. Likewise, the Westminster Confession of Faith treats the Word in the first chapter and the sacraments in the twenty-seventh. The reason for this is that the Bible, as the Word of God, is the foundation of the whole warp and woof of God’s revealed plan of redemption and sanctification.


\(^{58}\) Herman Bavinck, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 141.
Given the Word’s primacy, how is it related to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper? Or simply put, how are the means of grace united to each other? Bavinck answers that the means of grace are united not in a mere formal, human or theological connection, but through the “consequence of a divine act, the institution of the church and of the ecclesiastical office. The means of grace are not ordinances that the church merely possesses, but its foundation itself. The church is called into its very existence by the Word of God, while by baptism and communion the church is manifested as a religion community.”

Various Senses of the “Word” of God

What is this Word of God? Bavinck notes the Word of God in scripture can be viewed in three senses: as the divine Logos, as God speaking and as the Law and Gospel.

The Word as the Divine *Logos*

The term “Word” refers first of all to the Son of God incarnate in Christ. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”

Christ bears the name of the Word, of the *Logos*, because the Father eternally declares his entire being in Him and thus has given him to have life in himself. The

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59 Ibid., 145.

60 John 1:1.

61 Hebrews 1:3.
Word of God in this sense possesses a creating and recreating power whereby all things that are not are called as though they were. Additionally, and rather interestingly, Bavinck notes that the eternal generation of the Son by the Father is likened to speaking, and therefore the Son is called the Word, the Logos of God.

The Word as God Speaking

Based on the Word as the divine Logos, the second use of the term “Word” describes that which “proceeds from God when he creates and preserves, and recreates and renews things.” Creating and recreating are often presented in scripture as the speaking of God. By speaking, God summons all things into existence and sustains their existence, both in the realm of nature and in the realm of grace. God speaks and things appear, when He calls, they stand before him. Bavinck writes, “This power of divine speaking is inscrutable; it has never arisen in the heart of any creature; only through faith do we understand that the world was prepared through the word of God . . . This is how all things are maintained and governed—through the Word proceeding from God’s mouth.”

It is clear that scripture identifies God’s word with God’s power. It is *effectual* (“so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

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64Bavinck, *Saved by Grace*, 142.

65Ibid., 142.

66Ibid., 143.
—Isaiah 55:11), *creating* (God spoke, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”—Genesis 1:3), and *sustaining* (man shall live by “every word that comes from the mouth of God.”—Matthew 4:4). To be clear, words from the Lord are effectual, creating and sustaining because of the power of the Lord. Christ called out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” It was not the outward sound of Christ’s voice that raised Lazarus from the dead, it was Christ’s life-giving power made manifest for his glory. It is important to bear this in mind when considering the Word of God as a means of grace.

**The Word as the Law and the Gospel**

With the understanding that the Word is the Son of God and the power proceeding from God in and through all his works, the third sense of the Word Bavinck displays is the Word of the law and gospel. In the law and gospel, God addresses his people, makes known his will, and invites them to obey that will. This word is addressed to all the elect in the covenant of grace and is evident to them in their external call heard through a sermon, read in scripture, a book or in a tract.67

As discussed earlier, the means of grace possess no creating power. As such, a sermon preached or a prayer offered do not contain power in and of themselves to create new life in a person. If they did, it would not matter in what language a sermon or prayer were spoken as long as the proper *abracadabra* were uttered. It would be like many approaches to the “sinner’s prayer” where if the penitent simply recites the proper words, Jesus will come in to his heart. Such an understanding is a misunderstanding of how God uses means to accomplish his will and divorces the written and spoken word from the divine Word; that is, Christ and his power.

67Ibid., 146.
Bavinck writes, “Just as the Logos has assumed genuine human nature in Christ, so too the word of God’s will has become flesh in the law and gospel in our human language. Because the Reformed understood this, they also insisted that the external call was neither sufficient nor effectual. For the external call is simply a call by the word and could thus perform merely a moral, persuasive operation.”\textsuperscript{68} In contrast, the complete union of the three senses of the Word (Logos, power and law & gospel) is what is required and provided for in salvation. The “effectual, invincible direct operation of the Holy Spirit must accompany the word if the external call was to be heeded and obeyed.”\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{The Word in Regeneration}

Regeneration, or new birth, precedes the saving hearing of the Word, if not always within time, at least in order of sequence. Since the Word of God can only be heard savingly by one who is regenerated, “for the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{70} Bavinck makes a distinction between the operation of the Word in regeneration and its operation in faith, conversion, and sanctification.

Reformed theologians have always firmly held that adults can be regenerated practically simultaneously with saving faith; and that infants can be regenerated with saving faith and repentance occurring years, and in some cases, almost a lifetime later. Given this understanding, Bavinck addresses the role of the Word in regeneration of both adults and infants.

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{70}1 Corinthians 2:14.
Strictly speaking, regeneration is an immediate work of the Holy Spirit. But that is not to suggest that regeneration always occurs apart from or outside the Word. For in the instances that regeneration occurs through the preaching of the Word, it is done so as a means of the working of the Holy Spirit. Reformed theology has not severed regeneration from the Word as an exclusive work of the Holy Spirit since the inward call of the Holy Spirit and the outward call of the proclaimed gospel are not two separate calls. “The calling is one, but it has two sides…The Word that God causes to be proclaimed by the external call is the same Word that he causes, in the internal call by the Holy Spirit, to be inscribed on the heart. It is one call, whose two parts are continually connected to each other.”

While both calls are indeed one call, they are not always united. For, on the one hand, many are called (outward call) who are not chosen (inward call); and on the other hand, it is possible that some are chosen (inward called) who were never able to self-consciously hear the preaching of the Word (outward call), such as the elect who die in infancy or those born without the mental faculty needed to discern.

Bavinck concludes this point. “Despite all of this, however, the Reformed were always careful to keep external and internal calling connected to each other. As a rule the Spirit of Christ works only where his Word and sacrament are administered in accord with his ordinance. And to the extent that this Spirit might work savingly outside of this sphere, such a working is infrequent, extraordinary, and unknown to us. For

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71Bavinck, Saved by Grace, 149.
regeneration, as a rule, is the operation of the Holy Spirit, connected to the proclamation of the gospel.”  

The Word in Faith and Conversion

While regeneration is linked to the Word (since the Holy Spirit ordinarily works savingly only where the gospel is proclaimed), there is a distinction between the Word’s operation in regeneration and its operation in faith and conversion.

True faith, as defined by the Heidelberg Catechism in Question and Answer 21 is “not only a knowledge and conviction that everything God reveals in his Word is true; it is also a deep-rooted assurance, created in me by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, that, out of sheer grace earned for us by Christ, not only others, but I too, have had my sins forgiven, have been made forever right with God, and have been granted salvation.”

In the actus fidei, or, the act of faith,73 the Word is absolutely necessary. “How then will they call on him whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”74 The Word is a means whereby God, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, uses the Word to progress the capacity for faith (the savingly hearing the proclaimed gospel) to the act of faith for which the Word is designed and equipped. Bavinck likens God’s use of the Word in the capacity for faith and the act of faith to the

72Ibid., 149.

73The actus fidei is the act, actualization, perfecting operation, or actualizing operation of faith; whereby faith as it occurs in the human, believing subject, in which the intellect and will appropriate the object of faith, namely Christ and his benefits. The act of faith, “although it may be defined as an operation, is not an activity in the sense of a deed or a work, but an operation in the sense of an actualization in which faith comes to be faith or, in other words, moves from potency to actuality.” (Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms, 22).

74Romans 10:14.
human eye and ear. For “even as the eye alone is insufficient but genuinely sees only
when rays of light pass through it from the outside, and as the ear by itself is insufficient
but hears only when it receives sounds from the outside, so to the capacity for faith that is
sown in regeneration cannot progress to the act of faith apart from encountering the Word
of the gospel from the outside. Just as light is suited to the eye and sound is suited to the
ear, so the object of faith offered in Holy Scripture fits and is suited to the new life that
the Holy Spirit infuses into the heart in regeneration.”

The parable of the sower in Matthew 13 demonstrates this operation. The sower
sows with the intention of casting the seed upon fertile soil so it will germinate, grow and
bear good fruit. But in the process, “some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came
and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much
soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun
rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds
fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.”

Christ taught his listeners
that people represented by the path, the rocky ground and the thorny patch, are those who
hear the gospel. Their unregenerate hearts hear the gospel with apathy, indifference or
hostility; some may even hear with a piqued interest or with a partial though not genuine
conversion.

In each of these instances, God’s Word accomplishes all that he purposed for the
seed which falls in fertile soil, is the Word proclaimed to the regenerate who possess the

75 Bavinck, Saved by Grace, 150.
76 Matthew 13:3-7.
77 Isaiah 55:11.
capacity for faith. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, it grows and bears fruit of faith and repentance. In contrast, the seed which does not fall in fertile soil and never grows to bear good fruit, nevertheless comes into contact with the earth and manifests its nature and properties. This demonstrates that the gospel proclaimed to the unregenerate still has a valuable, but unsavingly effect. Known as the second use of the Law, John Calvin in the Institutes 2.7.10 shows that the Word of the God acts as such: “at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats of the law…[which acts] like a halter to check the raging and otherwise limitlessly ranging lusts of the flesh.” The Word affects the thoughts and hearts of all those who hear, it restrains unrighteousness, and can foster a more open society allowing the church to lead a quiet and tranquil life.

In summary, the capacity for faith is bestowed in regeneration, but the external calling of the proclaimed gospel is insufficient since it must be connected with the inward calling of the Holy Spirit in order to make the capacity for faith realized in the act of faith. This capacity for faith and its fruit of the act of faith are both special operations of the Holy Spirit who employs the Word as an instrument to grow the capacity for faith into the act of faith. Nevertheless, even when the Word is proclaimed to those without the capacity for faith, it does not return empty for God accomplishes his purpose in both the elect and reprobate.

The Word in Sanctification

Man’s sanctification is not a human achievement, but a work of divine grace and the Word is the Holy Spirit’s means of granting sanctifying grace par excellence.

Though man is privileged to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, he can do this only in virtue of the strength which the Spirit imparts to him form day to day. The Westminster Larger Catechism question and answer 75 defines sanctification as “a work of God's grace, whereby they whom God has, before the foundation of the world, chosen to be holy, are in time, through the powerful operation of his Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ unto them, renewed in their whole man after the image of God; having the seeds of repentance unto life, and all other saving graces, put into their hearts, and those graces so stirred up, increased, and strengthened, as that they more and more die unto sin, and rise unto newness of life.”

Sanctification is a subsequent fruit of justification and “while distinct from each other, are not for a moment separated.” Sanctification is also a powerful operation of the Holy Spirit and just as the Spirit works mediately with the Word in regeneration and faith, so too he works mediately with the Word in sanctification.

The Word is the principle means the Holy Spirit uses in the believer’s sanctification. Scripture alone teaches “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.” Scripture offers all the objective conditions for a holy and healthy Christian life as it “excites spiritual activity by presenting motives and inducements, and gives direction to it by prohibitions, exhortations and examples.”

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81 *Westminster Shorter Catechism* answer to Question 5, “What do the scriptures principally teach?”
Scripture admonishes, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.”

Summary

The most important means of grace is the Word of God. God uses his Word in his children’s regeneration, saving faith, and sanctification. Since the Word contains both the law and the gospel and both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, it has a universal significance even beyond its public proclamation in church as a means of grace.

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83 1 Peter 2:2.

84 John Bolt, Comments in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics, 4:441.
Alongside the Word, the sacraments are a second means of grace. While scripture does not use the word “sacrament,” nor does it present an explicit doctrine of the sacraments, it does speak of circumcision and Passover, of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Historically, the first real doctrine of the sacraments developed with medieval scholasticism which detailed the institution, administration, necessity, functionality, number and components of the sacraments.  From there, through times of use and misuse, and eventually through a return to biblical faith, the Reformation revised and modified the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments and brought them in line with scriptural teaching.

Bavinck’s view of the sacraments as a means of grace reflects the historical Reformed understanding. He defines the sacraments as such: “Sacraments are visible, holy signs and seals instructed by God so that he might make believers understand more clearly and reassure them of the promises and benefits of the covenant of grace, and believers on their part might confess and confirm their faith and love before God, angels, and humankind.”

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The Sacraments as an Accommodation

When God gives us his Word in scripture, he does so as an accommodation. Calvin likened this to a nurse and writes, “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to “lisp” in speaking to us.” 87 The sacraments are another tender way God makes accommodation for his children. “But as our faith is slight and feeble unless it be propped on all sides and sustained by every means, it trembles, wavers, totters, and last gives way. Here our merciful Lord, according to his infinite kindness, so tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and, do not think about or even conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements, and to set before us in the flesh a mirror of spiritual blessings.”88

Because of man’s weak and feeble nature, the sacraments hold great value. “Because we are not disembodied spirits but sensuous earthly creatures who can only understand spiritual things when they come to us in humanly perceptible forms, God instituted the sacraments in order that by seeing those signs we might gain a better insight into his benefits, receive a stronger confirmation of his promises, and thus be supported and strengthened in our faith.”89

God’s tender accommodation of providing a physical sign of a spiritual reality can be seen throughout the history of his covenantal dealings with his people. He provided

88 Calvin, Institutes, IV.xix.3: 1,278.
89 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:489.
the tree of life as a physical sign and seal to Adam of the covenant of works that if Adam obeys the Lord, he will have life. He provided the rainbow as a physical sign and seal to Noah that he would never deluge the world in judgment. He provided circumcision as a physical sign and seal to Abraham that God had cut him off from the surrounding nations and brought him unto himself and that, should be break the covenant, he would be cut off. He instituted the Passover meal and provided the stone tablets as a physical sign and seal to Moses and the people of Israel of salvation and law. He provided the throne as a physical sign and seal to David and the people of Israel that the redeemer King shall come from his line. And finally, Christ instituted the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as signs and seals of the new covenant.90

It should be noted that despite their value, the sacraments given under the old covenant and the new covenant were not inherently necessary, for God did not have to ordain them. “For God’s truth is of itself firm and sure enough, and it cannot receive a better confirmation from any other source than from itself.”91 His covenant and grace, his word and promise, being those of a true God, are firm and sure enough not to need the confirmation of the sacraments. Nevertheless, God in his abundant mercy, looks upon his people, recognizes their weakness, and provides physical tangible signs and seals of his spiritual blessings.


91Calvin, Institutes, IV.xiv.3:1,278.
The Sacraments’ Working

It is helpful to bear in mind Bavinck’s teaching of how the sacraments function and how they do not function. “God does not embed grace in the visible signs, nor does He transmit grace thereby into the soul of the one using the sacraments as though through a channel. Not the sacrament, but God Himself communicates grace from His fullness to the one who uses the sacrament according to its instituted purpose.”\textsuperscript{92} The Westminster Confession of Faith 27.3 adds further clarity to our understanding of the sacraments’ working. “The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it, but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.” With that understanding, the sacraments work in three main ways.

First, the sacraments act to accompany the Word. Calvin wrote, “a sacrament is never without a preceding promise but is joined to it as a sort of appendix, with the purpose of confirming and sealing the promise itself, and of making it more evident to us and in sense ratifying it.”\textsuperscript{93} The sacraments are often referred to as the “visible Word” in that they confer the same message as the gospel but in visible, physical and tangible form.

The sacraments do not impart a benefit that is not also received from the Word of God by faith alone; the content of both is identical. While the external form and manner

\textsuperscript{92}Herman Bavinck, \textit{Saved by Grace} (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 137.

\textsuperscript{93}Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.xiv.3:1,278.
are different, they both contain the same Mediator, covenant, benefits, salvation and fellowship with God. The sacraments are nothing without the Word. They only strengthen the faith already present. Without the Word and aside from their use, water, bread and wine are just ordinary daily fare. As Augustine taught, “Take away the Word, and water is nothing more and nothing less than water; add the Word to the element, and it becomes a sacrament.”

Second, the sacraments act to reinforce faith. “The sacraments do not work faith but reinforce it, as a wedding ring reinforces love. They do not infuse a physical grace but confer the whole Christ, whom believers already possess by the Word. They bestow on them that same Christ in another way and by another road and so strengthen the faith.”

Third, the sacraments act as a covenant renewal. Each time the sacrament of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are administered, the covenant that God has set apart for himself a people is remembered, re-ratified and confirmed. Bavinck wrote the sacraments, “renew the believers’ covenant with God, strengthen them in the communion of Christ, join them more closely to each other, set them apart from the world, and witness to angels and their fellow human beings, showing that they are the people of God, the church of Christ, the communion of the saints.”

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94 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:482.
95 Ibid., 490.
96 Ibid., 490.
In sum, for the sacraments to be efficacious, faith is required, devotion and an internal motion of the mind (1 Corinthians 11:27) and because without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Sacraments as Signs and Seals and the Unio Mystica

First, the sacraments are signs given to the believer. Bavinck harkens back to Augustine’s observations regarding signs from On Christine Doctrine II.I. He noted, “natural signs are those obvious associations such as smoke for fire, dawn for the advent of the sun, the footprint for the walker, etc. In addition to natural signs, positive signs are those established by agreement, custom, or usage and are accepted and recognized in a more or less restricted circle such as flags, insignias, letters of the alphabet, and so forth. Positive signs are again divided into two kinds; ordinary or extraordinary (such as miracles). The sacraments belong to category supernatural positive signs in that they are instituted extraordinary signs that God has taken—not arbitrarily but according to an analogy preformed by him—from among visible things and uses for the designation and clarification of invisible and eternal goods.”

The relation between the sign and the thing signified in the sacrament is neither different from nor less than that which exists between the Word of the gospel and the person of Christ. “Those who accept the word in faith truly, in accordance with God’s promise, receive Christ himself; similarly those who accept the sacrament in faith receive Christ with all his benefits and goods in the same way and according to the same divine promise.”

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Second, the sacraments are also *seals* in that they confirm God’s trustworthiness and strengthen for the believer the element of the covenant of grace summed up in Christ, with all his benefits and blessings.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 27.1 summarizes the sacraments in this manner: “Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him: as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the Church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.”

Third, the sacraments portray the *unio mystica* or, mystical union, between the sign and what they signify. “The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God’s grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband, which is done in their effectual calling.”99 The sacraments communicate this union for “There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.”100 Bavinck describes the mystical union of the believer with Christ in that Christ lives in and dwells in believers and that they exist in him. “The two are united as branch and vine, as are head and members, husband and wife, cornerstone and building. This mystical union . . . is not immediate but comes into being by the Holy Spirit.”101 This union is portrayed

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99 *Westminster Larger Catechism*, answer to Question 66: “What is the union which the elect have with Christ?”

100 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 27.3.
vividly in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s supper. Robert Letham sums this up:

“... sacraments are God’s prescribed vehicles through which he communicates his
mercies to us by the Holy Spirit through faith; that means union with Christ.”

\[\text{\cite{114}}\]

\[\text{\cite{115}}\]
CHAPTER 6
BAPTISM AS A MEANS OF GRACE

“The foundation for baptism in the New Testament was laid in the days of the old covenant by circumcision, a rite that God expressly enjoined upon Abraham.”¹⁰³ To understand the new covenant rite of baptism, one must understand the older covenant rite of circumcision. Circumcision served as a sign and confirmation of the covenant of grace, whose one grand and all encompassing promise from Genesis 17:7 was, “I will be your God and the God of your descendants after you.” Paul’s letter to the church in Rome teaches that circumcision was a seal of two benefits of this covenant; namely, of the righteousness of faith¹⁰⁴ and of the circumcision of the heart.¹⁰⁵ The rite of circumcision did not confer those two benefits automatically or mechanically, but acted as a sign pointing to the righteousness of faith and the inward circumcision of the heart.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, the sacrament of baptism is the New Testament sign and seal of the covenant of grace. The Westminster Larger Catechism answer 165 defines baptism as, “a sacrament of the New Testament, wherein Christ has ordained the washing with water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, to be a sign and seal of

¹⁰³Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:499.
¹⁰⁴Romans 4:11.
¹⁰⁵Romans 2:28-29.
¹⁰⁶Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:499.
engrafting into himself, of remission of sins by his blood, and regeneration by his Spirit;
of adoption, and resurrection unto everlasting life; and whereby the parties baptized are solemnly admitted into the visible church, and enter into an open and professed engagement to be wholly and only the Lord's.” Just as circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant of grace in the older covenant, so now is baptism a sign and seal of the covenant of grace in the newer covenant. Neither circumcision nor baptism justifies a person, but both are signs pointing to justification by faith in the Redeemer and both are seals certifying that God’s promises are sure.

Finally, it is good to note that while baptism replaced circumcision, it is far greater than circumcision—not in essence but in degree—since circumcision only pointed forward to Christ’s death, but baptism points back to it. “The former ends, the latter begins, with that death.”

Baptism and the Unio Mystica

The mystical union the believer enjoys with Christ in his death and resurrection comes to expression in the sacrament of baptism. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death . . . “ Jesus considered the cross to be his true baptism for the water baptism he received at the hands of John was a baptism of repentance—Jesus had no sin from which to repent. Robert Letham notes that Jesus was baptized by John in a “vicarious capacity, on behalf of his people, whom he was to save from their sins. Thus it had a prospective force, looking forward to the cross. Later, he

107 Ibid., 527.
108 Romans 6:3-4.
explicitly indentified his coming sufferings with baptism. At the cross there was the unmitigated judgment of God on human sin and the superlative demonstration of God’s grace. Baptism exhibits both elements—death as condemnation of sin and life freely given by God.”

In the mystical union with Christ, the believer shares in Christ’s death and resurrection and this is signed, sealed and exhibited in baptism. The Apostle Paul noted in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians this union with Christ in his baptism. To the church in Rome he wrote that all who have been baptized into Christ are united with him in his death and resurrection and to the church in Galatia he wrote, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Letham writes, “This means that we are made part of one body, the church, formed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit baptized us into the church, which Paul regards as the same thing as being baptized into Christ.”

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” Baptism is the first of the two sacraments, the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ through it, and Paul writes that after baptism, we all were made to drink of one Spirit—a likely reference to the other

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109 “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50).


111 See Romans 6:3-11.

112 Galatians 3:27.


114 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.
sacrament of the Lord’s supper. This passage of Paul’s “returns to the theme of union with Christ in his death and resurrection, and connects it explicitly with baptism in Colossians 2:11ff.”

The Benefits of Baptism

As expected, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck devoted a significant amount of writing addressing typical concerns regarding baptism: the rite itself, to whom should it be administered, who is a proper administrator, when should it take place, and the appropriateness of the baptizing infants. In addition to this, and of great value, is Bavinck’s discussion on the benefits of baptism as a means of grace.

Water becomes a sacrament by the word of institution. Christ commanded his church to baptize in the “name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This expression is not intended to provide a magical formula to be uttered during the rite, but describes the essence of Christian baptism; namely, baptism into the name of the Triune God. Just as the Holy Spirit works with the Word but does not confine his power and operation within that Word, so he also works with the water of baptism. For in baptism the Triune God promises and assures the recipient that, as the Heidelberg Catechism question 69 states, “as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away the impurity of the soul.”

The benefits of baptism flow from the working of the Triune God. The Father makes manifest that he has placed us in an eternal covenant of grace and adopts us as his

115 Letham, *Union With Christ*, 139.

116 Ibid., 517.

117 Matthew 28:19
children and heirs. The Son assures that he washes us in his blood and incorporates us into the fellowship of his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit assures us that he lives in and sanctifies us to be members of Christ.

Bavinck elaborates and provides three specific benefits of baptism as a means of grace: justification and the forgiveness of sins; regeneration, repentance, death to the old self and newness of life; and fellowship with Christ and his church.

**Justification and the Forgiveness of Sins**

In the case of adult believers baptism, confession of sins and justifying faith precede baptism. Baptism, then, looks back to the fact that past, present and future sin and its guilt and punishment are completely forgiven. “While repentance is the way by which the forgiveness secured by Christ comes into our possession and is enjoyed by us, baptism is precisely the proof and pledge of the forgiveness obtained in the way of repentance.”

**Regeneration, Repentance, Death to the Old Self and Newness of Life**

Article 15 of the Belgic Confession states that original sin is not “altogether

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118 And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” (Genesis 17:7) and “For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (Acts 2:39)

119 “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (Romans 6:3) and “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:27)

120 “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11) and “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,”(Titus 3:5)

abolished or wholly eradicated even by baptism.”  This reflects scriptural teaching that to those baptized, baptism, as a sign and seal, “breaks the power of original sin, and causes them to walk in newness of life, yet so that sin still continues to live in their flesh and takes them captive against their will under its own law.  Original pollution, accordingly, is removed by baptism as a sacrament in part and in principle, but not wholly.”¹²²

Sin no longer condemns believers but it does remain in them as a burden.  The Apostle Paul wrote, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”¹²³

Despite the continual and perturbing presence of sin, Baptism reminds and assures the believer of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and the washing of Christ’s blood and Spirit.  As a catechumen of the Heidelberg Catechism knows, “To be washed with Christ's blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven my sins because of Christ's blood poured out for me in his sacrifice on the cross.  To be washed with Christ's Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed me and set me apart to be a member of Christ so that more and more I become dead to sin and increasingly live a holy and blameless life.”¹²⁴

The Presbyterian Church in America’s Book of Church Order 56.4 states that

¹²²Ibid., 521.

¹²³Romans 7:21-25.

¹²⁴Heidelberg Catechism answer to Question 70: “What is it to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?”
when a pastor administers baptism, he is “to admonish all that are present to look back to
their Baptism, to repent of their sins against their covenant with God; to stir up their faith;
to improve and make right use of their Baptism, and of the covenant sealed between God
and their soul.”125

Fellowship with Christ and His Body the Church

The baptized person is set apart from the world (Acts 2:40-41), made a disciple of
Jesus (Matt 28:19), placed into his church (1 Corinthians 12:13), is called to live in the
newness of life (Romans 6), and to confess the Lord’s name in a life of obedience
(Matthew 28:19). For the adult believer recipient of baptism, “these benefits have
already been bestowed on the baptized person before baptism in the word of the gospel.
They were received on the part of the baptized by faith; but now these benefits are further
signified and sealed to them in baptism.”126 It is important to note that there is not a
single grace conveyed by baptism that is not already conveyed by the Word. Membership
into Christ’s body occurs through faith and receives its sign and seal in baptism.

“Baptismal grace exists and can, according to Scripture and the Reformed confession,
exist in nothing other than in declaration and confirmation.”127

125The Book of Church Order 56.4 also states, “He is to exhort the parent to consider the great mercy of
God to him and his child; to bring up the child in the knowledge of the grounds of the Christian religion,
and in the nurture and admonition of the Lord; and to let him know the danger of God’s wrath to himself
and child, if he be negligent; requiring his solemn promise for the performance of his duty.”

126Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:521.

127Ibid. See also Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 66 and 69: Q: What are the sacraments?
A: The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals, appointed of God for this end, that by the use thereof
he may the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel; namely, that he of grace grants us
the remission of sins and life eternal, for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.

Question and Answer 69: Q: How is it signified and sealed unto you in holy baptism that you have part
in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross? A: Thus, that Christ has appointed this outward washing with
The Benefits of Baptism for Infants

Bearing in mind that baptism does not confer a single benefit not already provided by the Word and accepted by faith, baptism as a means of grace is of great benefit to children of believers. The benefits described above (the forgiveness of sins, regeneration, and incorporation into the church of Christ) are granted to adults as well as children. “For just as without their knowledge they can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and endowed with the capacity to believe, so they can also without their knowledge by strengthened in that capacity by the same Spirit.”  

As in so many of the Lord’s activities, there is a mysterious reciprocal activity at work here. Bavinck likens this to the way light and the human eye “presuppose and support each other,” so too faith “enjoys the sacrament more to the degree that it is stronger, and faith is sealed and reinforced by the sacrament to the same degree as well.”  As the baptized child grows and matures in faith, the sacraments take on more and more significance and meaning as he looks back upon his baptism, makes right use of it, repents of his sins, and holds firm to the promises of his covenant-keeping God.

Finally, as a member of the covenant community, the baptized child receives the sign and seal of God’s covenant with his people. As the Heidelberg Catechism states, “Infants as well as adults are in God’s covenant and are his people. They, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith. Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be

water and added the promise that I am washed with his blood and Spirit from the pollution of my soul, that is, from all my sins, as certainly as I am washed outwardly with water, by which the filthiness of the body is commonly washed away.

128 Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:532.

129 Ibid., 532.
received into the Christian church and should be distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Testament by circumcision, which was replaced in the New Testament by baptism."\textsuperscript{130} All the blessings of the covenant are promised to children of the covenant and baptism, as a sign and seal, fosters spiritual growth.

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Heidelberg Catechism} answer to Question 74: “Are infants also to be baptized?”
CHAPTER 7
THE LORD’S SUPPER AS A MEANS OF GRACE

While baptism is the sacrament of incorporation into the body of Christ, the Lord’s supper is the sacrament of growing in communion with Christ. Christ instituted the supper, like baptism, as a sacramental means of grace for, “God alone is the distributor of grace and he alone can bind its distribution to the means ordained by him.”131 In distributing his grace with the supper, Christ manifests his role as prophet, priest and king. As prophet, he proclaims and interprets his own death. As priest, he gives himself as sacrifice on the cross for his people. Finally, as king, he “freely makes available the grace secured and gives it to his disciples to enjoy under the signs of bread a wine.”132

In addition to inaugurating the supper, Christ also acts as host and administrator. Just as he was the host and administrator when he physically shared the meal with his disciples in Matthew 26, he remains the host and administrator whenever his meal is celebrated by the church today. Moreover, he is not only the host and administrator, he is also the source and the locus. It is a meal in remembrance of him,133 a proclamation his

131 Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:562.
132 Ibid.
133a and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (1 Corinthians 11:24)
death,\textsuperscript{134} and a participation in his body and blood.\textsuperscript{135} Bavinck writes that, “In the Lord’s supper, Christ comes together with his church, and the church comes together with Christ, thereby testifying to their spiritual communion as displayed in Revelation 3:20: “I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”\textsuperscript{136}

The Lord’s Supper as a Covenant Meal

Bavinck teaches the Lord’s supper is, first of all, a meal. Just as baptism has its historical roots in circumcision, so does the Lord’s supper have its historical roots in the Passover meal. The Roman Catholic view of the supper as a sacrifice is simply contrary to the description scripture provides as a “supper,”\textsuperscript{137} the “table of the Lord,”\textsuperscript{138} the “breaking of bread,”\textsuperscript{139} the “cup of the Lord,”\textsuperscript{140} (1 Corinthians 11:27) and the “cup of blessing.”\textsuperscript{141}

Given the view of the supper as a meal, just as a human meal is not conducted in quiet isolation, but with great conversation, so too the Lord’s supper accompanies the

\textsuperscript{134} “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).

\textsuperscript{135} “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

\textsuperscript{136} Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 4:562.

\textsuperscript{137} “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat.” (1 Corinthians 11:20).

\textsuperscript{138} “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.” (1 Corinthians 10:21).

\textsuperscript{139} “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42).

\textsuperscript{140} Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:27).

\textsuperscript{141} “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).
great conversation of the Word and is always connected to it. Ministers proclaim the “mysteries” that God has revealed in the gospel of Christ and are God’s stewards tasked with distributing his grace. Bavinck stresses that “the unique linkage of the administration of the Lord’s supper to that of the Word proves that the minister acts in the name of Christ and functions as the steward and distributor of his mysteries.”¹⁴² In the Passover meal, the Word was to be taught as well:

And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. (Exodus 13:5-9)

Another association Bavinck notes of the Lord’s supper with a meal is the elements provided; namely, bread and wine. These two physical elements are no more arbitrarily chosen than the water of baptism. Christ chose bread and wine to indicate the sacrament is a meal—a meal “on the basis of, in memory of, and as an exercise of communion with, the crucified Christ. To that end, the signs of bread and wine are eminently suited.”¹⁴³ Since the body and blood are given separately, each as a sign of its own, Bavinck held that intinction is an improper manner in serving the supper as it confuses the two separate elements into one and distorts and diminishes the covenantal meal nature of the supper.


¹⁴³Ibid., 563.
Finally, as a meal, the Lord’s supper is to take place in the public gathering of believers (the congregations) for it is a coming together as a banquet and “includes not only an exercise of communion with Christ but also such an exercise with one’s fellow believers.”  

As a congregational meal, Bavinck held the most appropriate manner to serve the elements is sitting down as one would partake of a meal with members of the family.

The Lord’s Supper as Primary Participation in the *Unio Mystica*

Having argued against the Roman Catholic understanding that the Lord’s supper is a sacrifice, Bavinck then turns and argues against the other pole that the supper is nothing more than a memorial meal. While the Lord’s supper is indeed a memorial meal, it is significantly more than that because it is a means by which God bestows his grace. “Of primary importance in the Lord’s supper is what God does, not what we do. The Lord’s supper is above all a gift of God, a benefit of Christ, a means of communicating his grace. If the Lord’s supper were only a memorial meal and an act of confession, it would cease to be a sacrament in the true sense…The Lord’s supper, however, is on the same level as the Word and baptism and therefore must, like them, be regarded first of all as a message and assurance to us of divine grace.”

How is this evidenced? Among other ways, Bavinck notes that in granting the signs of bread and wine, Christ offers his own body and blood as nourishment and refreshment for the soul. That is a communion far surpassing the communion found in a

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144 Ibid.

145 Ibid., 567.
memorial meal. “It is not merely a reminiscence of or a reflection on Christ’s benefits but a most intimate bonding with Christ himself, just as food and drink are united with our body.”146

Additionally, by the Word and by faith, the believer enters into an intimate mystical communion (unio mystica) with Christ, his body and blood, just like the food a person eats and the person who eats it. “Neither the Word nor faith literally imparts that communion, but God has obligated himself to impart to those who believe his Word his fellowship in Christ and all the benefits associated with it.”147 Bavinck’s emphasis of the mystical union between Christ and the believer is built upon the teachings of Calvin and, as Bavinck scholar Ron Gleason writes, “Calvin views the Lord’s Supper as one of the most important means of grace God gives to the Christian Church for growth in the mystical union with Christ.”148 Bavinck expounds this truth in the Reformed Dogmatics and details several key characteristics of the unio mystica.

First, the mystical union is so intimate and inseparable that it cannot be fully comprehended or expressed in words. “As a matter of fact we cannot understand this unity in its depth and intimacy. It far transcends our thought.”149 Nevertheless, the mystical union can be made clearer through images provided in scripture. The vine and the branch, the head and the body, a bridegroom and his bride, the cornerstone and the

146 Ibid.
147 Ibid., 563.
148 Ronald N. Gleason, Herman Bavinck’s Understanding of John Calvin on the Lord’s Supper, 2009, 12.
building that rests on it—these are types of the mystical union signified and sealed in the Lord’s supper.

Second, the mystical union is spiritual in nature and is brought about by the Holy Spirit who “dwells in Christ as the head and in believers as his members.” Bavinck argues that a physical union, such as the transubstantiation of the Roman Catholics or the consubstantiation of the Lutherans, is groundless and worthless for “only the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, can so unite people with Christ that they share in his person and benefits and cannot be separated from him . . .” For this reason, the mystical union is always and will always remain spiritual in nature and as such, is of greater value and benefit to the believer than if it were only a physical union.

Third, the mystical union with Christ, strengthened in the supper, is nothing other and nothing more than that which is brought about by the Word as a means of grace. “In exactly the same manner in which a person is incorporated by faith into Christ, so that person is also strengthened and confirmed in that communion by the Lord’s supper. There simply is no other or higher communion.” The sacrament does not provide any additional grace—it merely provides the same grace as the Word but by another means for the strengthening of faith.

Fourth, in the supper, Christ is truly and essentially present with his divine and human nature in the same way he is present in the gospel. He is no more physically located in the bread and the wine than he is in the Word proclaimed. Along with the sign, Christ “bestows the thing signified, that is, himself with all his benefits.” While Roman

\footnote{Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:577.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
Catholics and Lutherans hold that grace given in the supper is something material, passive and received physically, for the Reformed, it is “the personal living Christ himself who imparts himself in the supper as spiritual food to those who believe in him.” As such, in Bavinck’s reformed view, Christ is even more present “vigorously and authentically” than to Rome or the Lutherans, for he is not physically and locally present in the signs, but spiritually in the hearts of believers.

Finally, Bavinck notes that faith is the indispensable requisite for receiving the sacrament since God has obligated himself to bestow his benefits on all those who believe. An unbeliever taking the supper receives only the sign but not what it signifies just as when he hears the Word he hears only sounds without receiving the thing denoted by the Word. “Needed—to receive the promises and benefits of the Word and sacrament—therefore, is a working of the Holy Spirit in the heart of a person; and it is precisely this working of the Spirit that effects and maintains this communion with Christ, both apart from and in the Lord’s supper.”

The Benefits of the Lord’s Supper

Having established the mystical union the believer enjoys with Christ in the holy meal, Bavinck then expounds on the benefits of the Lord’s supper as a means of grace. For if the believer shares in the person of Christ through the mystical communion, he also naturally shares in his benefits.

Communion with Christ

152 Ibid.
153 Ibid., 578.
First and foremost of the benefits in the supper is the strengthening of the believer’s communion with Christ. Believers, by faith, already enjoy communion with Christ—the Lord’s supper provides no additional communion to that which they already enjoy. “But when Christ himself, acting through the minister, gives them with the signs of bread and wine, his body to eat and his blood to drink, they are strengthened and confirmed in that communion by the Holy Spirit and ever more intimately united in soul and body with the whole Christ, both in his divine and in his human natures.”\textsuperscript{154}

The benefit here differs from the benefit received in baptism. Baptism is the sacrament of incorporation, but the Lords’ supper is the sacrament of a maturing communion with Christ. In baptism we are passive as the sign and seal is placed upon us; but in the Lord’s supper we are active as we feed and nourish our hungry and thirsty souls on Christ.

Nourishing Meal

Second, in the Lord’s supper, Christ gave his body and shed blood as food to nourish our souls in a holy meal. This nourishment is primarily and intentionally spiritual in nature. As discussed earlier, it is important to note that Christ instituted this meal with two distinct courses: the bread as his body and the wine as his blood. It foreshadows the great banquet in glory where believers commune with Christ and with each other.

Forgiveness of Sins

Third, in the Lord’s supper is the forgiveness of sins. This must not be seen in the Roman Catholic sense that taking the supper will remove “daily faults” or “venial sins.”

\textsuperscript{154}Ibid.
for the Christian already possesses the benefit of complete forgiveness by faith and received the sign and seal of it in baptism. Instead, “In this benefit it comes out clearly that the sacrament does not add a single new grace to the Word; with an eye to our weakness, it only bestows the same grace in another manner in order that we may firmly believe and be healed of all doubt.”

This blessing is a gracious accommodation that strengthens the believer’s faith and helps him walk with renewed confidence and assurance of forgiveness.

Confession of Faith

Fourth, the Lord’s supper as a memorial meal proclaiming Christ’s death strengthens the communion of the saints and serves as a confession of faith before the world. Paul argues in 1 Corinthians 10:17 that, “because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” The bread is a participation in the body of Christ and unity arises in that through the one loaf they have fellowship with the one body of Christ. The traditional Dutch Reformed Church’s liturgy for the Lord’s supper which Bavinck would use as minister puts it like this: “For as out of many grains one meal is ground and one bread baked, and out of many berries, pressed together, one wine and drink flows and mixes together, so shall we all who by true faith are incorporated in Christ be all together one body.” This confession announced through the Lord’s supper is a loud proclamation to a lost world who has no understanding of the unity of the church in Christ.

Summary—The Unio Mystica

155Ibid., 579—Emphasis mine.
Finally, the comprehensive blessing found in the supper as the work of the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the *unio mystica*. Gleason sums up, “What the believer receives in the Lord’s Supper is the *totus Christus* in the most comprehensive sense of those words, without, however, becoming *essentially* one with him. Nevertheless, the believer becomes intimately, really one with Christ.” Both Calvin and Bavinck taught that, “in this special covenant meal the previously established union with Christ through faith grows and is nourished. There is an appropriation by the Holy Spirit of the *unio mystica* in the holy meal that increases and strengthens the communion between Christ and the believer. In the Lord’s supper the believer communes with the risen Lord in a particular manner. The distance between the flesh of Christ in heaven and the flesh of the believers on earth is no ineluctable problem, since the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit is the “link” (*vinculum*) by which the believer is bound to Christ. The Spirit and his Work are central to soteriology in general and in sacramentology in particular.”\(^{156}\)

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156 Gleason, *Bavinck’s Understanding of John Calvin*, 12.
CHAPTER 8
RECIPIENTS OF THE SACRAMENTS

Christ gives the sacraments to his church as a means of grace. But what constitutes the church? Does it include infants and children? The answers to these questions determine who is appropriate to receive the means of grace in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper.

Who Should Receive Baptism?

There is substantial agreement among Christian churches that baptism is for believers. Where differences come into play is when the topic of infant baptism comes into the discussion. Bavinck addressed this polemical topic in his *Reformed Dogmatics* and devoted over 10 pages addressing the objections to infant baptism and then the validity of the practice. Infant baptism was not a controversial topic in Holland during Bavinck’s years, but given his knowledge base and what he saw during his international travels, including to America, Bavinck realized the need for a thorough assessment of the issue and a defense of the historic Reformed understanding.

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What was of controversy concerning infant baptism was the doctrine of presupposed regeneration espoused by Abraham Kuyper and his followers. Bavinck wrote more than twenty articles concerning baptism; these were collected and published as *Ouders of Getuigen? Bundeling van artikelen in De Bazuin van 31 augustus, 1900 tot 22 februari 1901*. He argued that the doctrine of presupposed regeneration was not grounded in scripture or in historic Reformed theology or practice. “he directed the attention of the Reformed church to what was becoming a nearly superstitious practice … baptizing their children as early as possible because of the doctrine of presupposed regeneration.” (Ronald Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian*, Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2010, 265). Bavinck argued children of believers “have a right to baptism from the moment of their birth, since from the first moment of their existence they share in the grace of Christ,” not because of a presumed regeneration. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:527.
The grounds for rejecting infant baptism are usually two-fold. First, the practice does not occur in scripture. Second, according to its original usage, baptism always presupposes faith and repentance, things that cannot occur and be recognized in small children. Bavinck addresses these two key objections and offers a number of arguments for the practice of baptizing the children of believers. To begin, he notes, “the validity of infant baptism depends exclusively on how scripture regards the children of believers and hence wants us to regard them. If scripture speaks about such children in the same way it does about adult believers, the right and hence the duty to practice infant baptism has been established. For we may not withhold from the children what we grant to adults.”

Given that understanding, Bavinck presents his arguments summarized as follows.

First, we should not be surprised the New Testament nowhere expressly mentions infant baptism. During the days of the New Testament, the baptism of adults was the rule, and the baptism of infants, if it occurred at all, was the exception. The reason for this is that it was the period in which the Christian church was founded and was expanded by adult conversions from Judaism and paganism. The New Testament never describes the administration of baptism to adults who were born of Christian parents for most of the baptisms were conversion baptisms. Bavinck adds, “Adult baptism is therefore the original baptism; infant baptism is its derivative; the former must not be conformed to the latter, but the later must be conformed to the former.” As such, scripture does not have to state somewhere that children may be baptized—it states it implicitly.

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Second, before discussing the pattern of baptism presupposing faith, it is key to address the concept of the covenant of grace. In Genesis 17:7, God told Abram, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” In verse 14, the rite given as the sign of this covenant was circumcision, “You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” From then on, circumcision was administered to male children on the eighth day after birth. Colossians 2:11-12 describes the Old Testament rite of circumcision being replaced by the New Testament rite of baptism.\(^{160}\)

Circumcision is now made obsolete and Bavinck notes that, “baptism, therefore, is more than circumcision, not in essence but in degree. Circumcision pointed forward to the death of Christ; baptism points back to it. The former ends, the latter begins, with that death. If, however, that circumcision as the sign of the covenant could and must be administered to the children, the same applies \textit{a fortiori} to baptism, which is not poorer but much richer in grace.”\(^{161}\) One evidence that the new covenant is richer in grace is that it is more inclusive as evidenced in its sign administered no longer only to male members of the covenant but now also to female members.

Furthermore, it is not just circumcision that carries the argument of children’s membership in the covenant, the entire idea of the covenant itself carries the view. God did not establish the covenant with an individual person, but “in that person also

\(^{159}\)Ibid.

\(^{160}\)“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” (Colossians 2:11-12).

immediately with that person’s descendants.” Specifically, children are regarded in connection with their parents and while grace is not automatically inherited, as a rule it is bestowed from generation to generation through the covenantal framework. Therefore, it is appropriate, and required, to administer the sign of the covenant to those who are members of it.

Finally, it is important to note the covenant of grace established with Israel, though it has changed in “dispensation,” remains the same in essence. The church of the New Testament has replaced the Israel of the Old Testament. It is now the people of God. “As was the case in the Old Testament, so now too the children of believers are included among the people of God. The church of the New Testament, after all, is not a collection of individuals, but an organism, a body, a temple, and as such, as a people, it took the place of Israel.”

In sum, God’s covenant of grace, whether during the Old Testament era with Israel, or the New Testament era with the church, includes believers and their children. The sign of the covenant, circumcision in the Old Testament, and baptism in the New Testament, is given to the children of believing adults as a means of grace. Arguments citing conversion prior to baptism are simply historical narrative describing first generation Christian converts. Bavinck lists several more compelling arguments for infant baptism as a legitimate practice and indeed a duty for believing parents, but suffice it to say, the principle argument is the institution of the covenant of grace and how God chooses to administer his means of grace to his covenant people.

162 Ibid.

163 Ibid., 528.
Who Should Receive the Lord’s Supper?

As with baptism, the Lord’s supper was instituted with believers. Christ observed it only with his disciples and later the supper was exclusively celebrated by Christians within the congregation.\(^{164}\) While unbelievers had access to the gathering of the congregation where the Word was preached,\(^{165}\) they were excluded from gatherings in which the love feasts and communion celebrated.\(^{166}\) The early church in the second century divided the worship service into the open gathering where the Word was preached and the exclusive love feast where the supper was celebrated.

Over time, the Lord’s supper suffered significant abuses. The original simplicity of the supper was lost as magical elements and solemn ceremonies were added. Bavinck notes, “the bread was first received with one’s bare hand, then in a piece of linen cloth or golden saucer, and still later, after the beginning of the eleventh century, from the priest with one’s mouth and from a kneeling position near the altar.”\(^{167}\) The sacrament was soon administered outside the congregation to the sick in their homes, to the dying as “food for the journey” and eventually, as the doctrine of purgatory developed, to the dead themselves.

The Reformation restored the scriptural framework to the supper and sought to address two issues. The first issue is who has the right as well as the obligation to come

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\(^{164}\) And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42) and “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together and to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight.” (Acts 20:7).

\(^{165}\) “If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all,” (1 Corinthians 14:23-24).

\(^{166}\) “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (1 Corinthians 11:18).

\(^{167}\) Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:582.
to the supper. Since the Lord’s supper is a means of grace given by Christ to his church, it is therefore to be enjoyed only by members of the household of faith.

The second issue is who must be admitted to or barred from the supper by the church? The church has the responsibility to bar all those who by their talk and walk present themselves as unbelieving and ungodly people. The non-baptized, unbelievers, heretics, schismatics, public sinners, and excommunicates are automatically excluded. Bavinck notes that as the Reformation grew, it further restricted access to the table of the Lord’s supper. First, by rejecting the Mass and purgatory, the Reformers also had to end the administration of the supper for the dead. Second, many Reformed leaders and churches prohibited the administering of the supper to the sick and dying in their private homes on the concern that it would be outside of the congregational setting and prone to superstition. Some leaders and churches allowed the practice, though, if the home administration included a small gathering of believers and the preaching of the Word.¹⁶⁸ Finally, the supper became more restrictive as some reformers prohibited children from partaking even while other reformers encouraged it. In support of paedocommunion, many today refer to the Calvin contemporary reformer, Wolfgang Musculus (1479-1563) who, in his *Loci Communes*, argued for paedocommunion along similar lines of argument for paedo-baptism.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 583.

¹⁶⁹Musculus’ arguments were as follows:
(i) Those who possess the thing signified have a right to the sign.
(ii) Children who can receive the grace of regeneration can also be nurtured in their spiritual lives without their knowledge.
(iii) Christ is the Savior of the whole church, including the children, and feeds and refreshes all its members with his body and blood.
(iv) The demand for self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:26-29) is not intended as a universal requirement. See also: http://www.paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus_common_places.php.
Bavinck demurs. The Lord’s supper is for believing adults and he cites several reasons. First, the Lord’s supper is the New Testament replacement of the Passover meal. Infants would not have partaken of the Passover meal of meat and bread. Second, there is a great difference between baptism and the Lords’ supper and the arguments for paedobaptism do not carry over to paedocommunion. “Baptism is a sacrament of regeneration, a sacrament in which the human is passive. The Lord’s supper is a sacrament of maturation in communion with Christ, the formation of the spiritual life, and presupposes conscious and active conduct on the part of those who receive it.”

Third, scripture describes adults partaking of the meal. When Christ instituted the supper in the midst of his disciples saying, “Take, eat and drink,” it presupposes that they took the bread and wine from his hand. When Paul writes that the church in Corinth joined together to celebrate the meal, he leaves no impression other than that self-conscious adults took part. Fourth, Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 11:26-30 that people should examine themselves prior to partaking the Lord’s supper with rather severe consequences if not followed. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.” This demand is quite general, addressed to all partakers and therefore automatically excludes children.

Fifth, withholding children from the table does not deprive them of any benefit of the

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covenant of grace that they already possess. In contrast to baptism, as an inaugurating sacrament, withholding the Lord’s supper from a child simply acknowledges that while members of the covenant, they must wait until they reach an age suitable for partaking of the meal. “The Lord’s supper, after all, does not confer a single benefit that is not by faith granted through the Word and through baptism.”

Bavinck points to his Dutch Reformed church polity regarding admitting communicants to the table. Generally speaking, the children of believers are baptized as believers, then instructed in the truth; upon sufficient instruction of scripture and the catechism and after a public profession of faith (sometimes after an examination by the church elders) they are admitted to the table. In the case of unchristian views or “irregular conduct,” they are removed from the church. “The rule of the covenant is that the church must nurture its youthful members, who were born as children of the covenant and incorporated as members by baptism, to where they can make an independent personal profession of faith and on that basis admit them to the Lord’s supper.” The rule of the covenant is also to maintain the purity of the church and culling members who do not profess faith is a difficult, yet necessary task. Such a process is a good model for churches today as it helps maintain purity, properly fence the table, and prepares the member to fully benefit from receiving the means of grace.

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171 Ibid., 584.
172 Ibid., 585.
CHAPTER 9

OTHER MEANS OF GRACE

Strictly speaking, the means of grace comprise the Word and the sacraments for they alone act as external, humanly perceptible actions and signs that Christ has given his church and with which he has linked the communication of his grace. Bavinck wrote, that while the term “means of grace” can “even be stretched to include the things that are needed on our part to enjoy, for the first time or continually, the benefits of the covenant, such as faith, conversion, the struggle against sin and prayer,” narrowly defining the means of grace as the Word and the two sacraments best adheres to its definition of “external, humanly perceptible actions and signs that Christ has given his church and with which he has linked the communication of his grace.”

Beyond the Dutch Reformed

While the Reformed Church has limited the definition to the three, the Presbyterian Church has added a fourth; namely, prayer. Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge counted prayer as the fourth means of grace. In his *Systematic Theology*, he defines the means of grace as, “those means which God has ordained for the end of communicating the life-giving and sanctifying influences of the Spirit to the souls of men,” he then argues prayer fits within this definition. “It has not only the relation which

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any other cause has to the end for which it was appointed, and thus is the condition on which the blessing of god, providential or spiritual, are bestowed; but it brings us near to God, who is the source of all good.”¹⁷⁴ When the soul draws near to God in prayer, God draws near to it and he manifests his glory, love, peace and grace. Prayer is a means for this.

Reformed theologian John Frame includes in the means of grace the Word, fellowship and prayer. Fellowship includes worship and especially the sacraments. He writes, “it is not typical in Reformed theology to regard fellowship as a means of grace. But I think it clearly is.” Citing many passages from the New Testament speaking of “one anothering,” Frame argues that our spiritual health “depends on one another: both what other believers do for us and what we do for them. The larger concept that includes all those one-anotherings is the concept of fellowship.”¹⁷⁵

Today, in popular usage, the means of grace have expanded to include many and varied duties believers perform to grow in faith and improve upon their sanctification. If we are to list all the means of receiving the Holy Spirit’s blessing bestowed to the believer in the ministry of the church, the definition could be broadened to include all kinds of things.

Contemporary evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem asks, “Should we limit our discussion of the means of grace to these four activities only? It would seem more helpful to list all of the many varied activities within the church God has given as special


¹⁷⁶ Meaning the Word, baptism, Lord’s Supper and prayer.
ways of receiving his “grace” day by day and week by week.”\footnote{Wayne Grudem, \textit{Systematic Theology} (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 951.} Grudem’s list of means available to believers \textit{within the church} includes the following:

1. Teaching of the Word
2. Baptism
3. The Lord’s supper
4. Prayer for one another
5. Worship
6. Church discipline
7. Giving
8. Spiritual gifts
9. Fellowship
10. Evangelism
11. Personal ministry to individuals

But why limit God’s means of growing his children to only activities within the church? God also grows his children through:

\textit{Testing and trials}—“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness…” (James 1:2,3).

\textit{Suffering}—“We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance…” (Romans 5:3).

\textit{Self denial}—“And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’” (Luke 9:23).

\textit{Overcoming temptation}—“with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

\textit{Discipline}—“Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law.” (Psalm 94:12).

\textit{Persecution}—“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12).
Moreover, scripture is full of narrative demonstrating how God purifies his people with a refiner’s fire to bring them more and more into the likeness of Christ. Job, the Psalmist, prophets, the Apostles and the early Christian church all grew and were blessed through means not found in the church but in difficult daily life.

Once we go beyond Bavinck’s strict definition of the means comprising only the Word and sacraments, the field could open up to include almost anything, spiritual or natural, that God uses to grow his people. It is for this reason that Berkhof, echoing Bavinck, restricts the means of grace to those means administered by ordained clergy.

“As the official means of grace placed at the disposal of the Church, both the Word and the sacraments can only be administered by the lawful and properly qualified officers of the Church.”

Charles Hodge writes by “means of grace are not meant every instrumentality which God may please to make the means of spiritual edification to his children. The phrase is intended to indicate those institutions which God has ordained to be the ordinary channels of grace, i.e., of the supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit, to the souls of men. The means of grace, according to the standards of our Church [the Presbyterian Church], are the Word, sacraments, and prayer.”

Means of Growth

It is true that God can and does use all kinds of means to mold, refine and sanctify the believer, and in the broadest sense of the word, all things are means unto that end.

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those

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178 Berkhof, Systematic, 610—emphasis mine.

179 Hodge, Systematic, 3:466.
who are called according to his purpose." Nevertheless, it is best to limit the definition to the narrow ecclesiastical activities of ordained ministers for this is the way God has chosen to work within Christ’s body. Perhaps a compromise can be reached through new nomenclature: the church could use the term “means of grace” to include the Word, sacraments and prayer and the term, “means of growth” to include everything else.

180 Romans 8:28.
CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSION: AN APPEAL TO THE CHURCH

What Has Happened

The temptations facing the modern church have faced the church throughout history. Man continually seeks ways to either bypass or supplement the outward and ordinary means of grace instituted by God.

Bavinck travelled twice to the United States, first in 1892 and again in 1908. He found the preaching of the Word in Presbyterian churches to be to be thin on content and the music to be vaudeville-esque. Of the sacraments, he noted baptism, “was not held in high esteem, and it seemed that many delayed its administration far too long. When it was finally administered, the perception was that it was more of a ‘dedication’ service than a covenant sacrament for a covenant child. The Lord’s Supper also tended to be viewed more as a ‘remembrance meal; in the line of Zwingli than in the true Calvinistic sense.’”\(^{181}\)

Not much has changed since Bavinck’s travels over 100 years ago. Within Protestant circles, the means of grace have been de-emphasized as evidenced by the prevalence of topical pop-psychology sermons, confusion about the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and its being administered in haphazard manners (often by women and

even children and offered to non-believers) and confusion about the covenantal significance of baptism. When the means of grace of the Word and sacraments are down-played, something has to take their place. The modern church has found myriad replacements with personal testimonies, man-centered music, liturgical dance, concerts, entertainment, and an overall vaudeville-esque approach to worship. Confusion abounds as church leaders seek to find the new next big thing to excite their congregations after the previous next big thing wears off.

On the other hand, Reformed churches must also beware of the influence of Roman Catholic (and Lutheran) thought which places a magical overemphasis on the sacraments. Presumed regeneration, grace contained in the supper elements, and other ideas can creep in if the pastor, session and members are not careful. The historical Reformed view of the means of grace, taught by Calvin and later espoused by Herman Bavinck, offers the most balanced and scriptural approach for the church seeking to honor God in its worship.

The Need for Means of Grace Churches

When Herman Bavinck addressed similar concerns in his day, he pointed his students to the necessity of the sound preaching of the Word. This high view of the Word reflects the fact that through the preaching of the Word the Lord as promised to “exalt his grace and to impart the benefits of Christ.”

People attend church seeking an experience. But what the church too often offers is an emotional experience not unlike a sugar-high—a brief time of excitement that when

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182 Herman Bavinck, Saved by Grace (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 154.
worn off, returns the person to confusion and despair. Instead, the church needs to offer the simple and profound outward and ordinary means of grace.

God works in his people through their intellect, will and emotions; none should be discounted and the means of grace address all three. Specifically, the Word and sacraments as visible manifestations of the Word touch our intellect as we think and meditate on the truths God teaches. Second, the Word and sacraments touch our will as we are admonished and encouraged to live in obedience to the Word. Third, the Word and sacraments touch our emotions as they soften our stony hearts. The means of grace are not a sterile, impersonal rite or activity, but very much a sentient experience. John Frame writes that, “God’s means of grace often have powerful effects on our emotions. When we read in scripture of what God has done for us, we not only gain a better intellectual grasp of the events, but we come to feel as God feels about them…The sacraments, worship, fellowship and prayer also deeply affect our feelings.”183 If the church wants to provide its congregation with an experience, it should provide its people with the means of grace. It need not add to them nor subtract from them.

Ligon Duncan posits in his article, “The Ordinary Means of Growth,” that within Protestantism today, there are basically three views of ministry. The first is the view of liberalism that believes effective cultural engagement requires an updating of the message. The second is the view of the modern church that believes effective ministry requires an updating of the methods. The third is the view of scripture that effective ministry begins with a commitment to both God’s message and methods, as set forth in

His Word. This approach is the ordinary means of grace approach to ministry. Duncan defines this as:

ministry that focuses on doing the things God, in the Bible, says are central to the spiritual health and growth of His people, and which aims to see the qualities and priorities of the church reflect biblical norms. Ordinary means ministry is thus radically committed to biblical direction of the priorities of ministry. Ordinary means ministry believes that God has told us the most important things, not only about the truth we are to tell, but about the way we are to live and minister — in any and every context. Hence, God has given us both the message of salvation and the means of gathering and building the church, in His Word. However, important understanding our context is, however important understanding the times may be (and these things are, in fact, very important), however important appreciating the cultural differences in the places and times we serve, the ordinary means approach to ministry is first and foremost concerned with biblical fidelity. Because faithfulness is relevance. The Gospel is the message and the local church is the plan. God has given to his church spiritual weapons for the bringing down of strongholds. These ordinary means of grace are the Word, sacraments, and prayer.184

The church is in dire need to return to the outward and ordinary means of grace that Christ has instituted for his people. This requires a radical commitment to look to God’s Word for both the message and the method.

Christian pastors and elders would do well to consider the teachings of Herman Bavinck concerning the means of grace. There is nothing new under the sun—Bavinck had seen the means of grace treated in a mystical undervalued manner. He had seen Rome treat it in a magical and abusive manner. His exposition of the means of grace in his 1895 *Reformed Dogmatics* is as relevant and valuable to the church today as when it was written.

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