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BAVINCK, BARTH, AND THE UNIQUENESS OF THE EUCHARIST

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INTRODUCTION

Within Reformed circles, these are quite interesting times for understanding the Lord's Supper. On the one hand, the issue of the eucharist continues to be prominent in many ecumenical discussions. There is ongoing conversation about the reception of the *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document of 1982,¹ conversation that has been reinvigorated by current ecumenical work towards a statement on 'The Nature and the Mission of the Church'.² On the other hand, though not unrelated, a number of important Reformed theologians over recent decades—including Thomas Torrance,³ Alasdair Heron,⁴ and (most recently) George Hunsinger⁵—have offered attempts to understand the Lord's Supper in a way that is both 'Reformed' and palatable to the wider ecclesial community.⁶

This article is part of a larger project which explores this sacramental terrain. The fundamental purposes of the larger project are twofold: first, to reflect on and cautiously critique existing attempts to move the Reformed tradition in an ecumenical direction; and second, to attempt to offer a constructive alternative which—in my view—is truer to the fundamental insights of the tradition yet which retains the potential of ecumenical promise. In this article, I explore the sacramental theology of two giants of the Reformed tradition: Herman Bavinck and Karl Barth.

¹ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper 111; Geneva: WCC, 1982).

² *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (Faith and Order Paper 198; Geneva: WCC, 2005).

³ Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Paschal Mystery of Christ and the Eucharist', in *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Chapman, 1975), pp. 106-38.

⁴ Alasdair Heron, *Table and Tradition: Towards an Ecumenical Understanding of the Eucharist* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1983).

⁵ George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁶ I leave to one side in this article the question of the criteria by which a theology might be adjudged to be 'Reformed' (or not).

In what follows, I first present the theology of the Lord's Supper as it is found in Bavinck and Barth; I then move to draw the two into conversation by way of the concept of the *uniqueness* of the sacrament; and I finally offer three brief concluding comments on some of the ground covered.

THE EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY OF HERMAN BAVINCK

The obvious place to find Bavinck's doctrine of the Lord's Supper is in the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, his four-volume work of systematic theology now happily translated by the late John Vriend. First published in 1895-1901, this monumental work went through successive editions and impressions. However, the doctrine of the sacraments contained in it remained almost identical throughout these iterations, with only 'cosmetic' or 'negligible' changes.⁷

Bavinck's doctrine of the Lord's Supper appears in the fourth, pneumatological volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, where it is located under a section headed 'The Spirit Creates New Community'.⁸ In a series of chapters in this section, Bavinck unfolds what he refers to as 'The Spirit's Means of Grace': there are chapters on Proclamation, on the Sacraments in general, and then on Baptism and The Lord's Supper in particular.⁹

Bavinck on the sacraments

From the rubric alone, it is clear that at the heart of Bavinck's constructive position is an agreement with the claim of the Reformers that 'the Word and sacraments were the ordinary means by which God gave his Spirit and imparted his grace'.¹⁰ So how does Bavinck understand these 'means of grace'?

⁷ R. N. Gleason, 'Herman Bavinck's Understanding of John Calvin on the Lord's Supper', online article <http://www.rongleason.org/PDFs/bavinck/Bavinck_Lords_Supper.pdf> [accessed 1 May 2011], p. 2, and R. N. Gleason, 'Calvin and Bavinck on the Lord's Supper', *WTJ*, 45 (1983), 274-275. Note also Bavinck's article 'Calvijn's leer over het avondmaal', to which Gleason refers: this first appeared in the Dutch church newspaper, *De Vrije Kerk* 13 (1887), and was later included in a book on Bavinck's early work entitled *Kennis en leven: Opstellen en artikelen uit vroegere jaren* (Kok: Kampen, 1922).

⁸ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. by John Bolt, trans. by John Vriend, 4 vols (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2003-2008), 4, pp. 271-585. [Subsequent citations are indicated by *RD* together with volume and page number.]

⁹ Respectively chapter 8 (*RD*, 4, pp. 441-60), chapter 9 (*RD*, 4, pp. 461-96), chapter 10 (*RD*, 4, pp. 496-539), and chapter 11 (*RD*, 4, pp. 540-85).

¹⁰ *RD*, 4, p. 446, though it becomes clear on *RD*, 4, p. 448 that by 'Word' in this connection is meant 'proclamation': 'As a means of grace in the true sense

With the Reformed tradition—at least as he circumscribes it¹¹—Bavinck agrees that the sacraments are

visible, holy signs and seals instituted 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.¹²

We will pause and reflect a little more carefully on this resonantly Calvinist definition in three aspects.

First, for Bavinck the sacraments are instituted by God: it is God who links the communication of grace with them;¹³ it is God who administers them and is alone their ‘efficient cause’;¹⁴ and it is God who has taken them as extraordinary signs from the created realm for ‘the designation and clarification of invisible and eternal goods’.¹⁵ There is no automatic or natural connection between the signs and the things signified,¹⁶ but the relationship instituted between them is not arbitrary either, for it is according to ‘an analogy performed by [God]’¹⁷ and includes a ‘most striking correspondence’ between sign and signified.¹⁸

Underpinning this divine work is Bavinck’s basic contention that

God has obligated himself, where the sacrament has been administered according to his command, to grant the invisible grace by his Spirit. God and God alone remains the distributor of grace, and also in the sacrament, the

alongside the sacraments, the word of God only comes up for discussion in so far as it is publicly preached by the minister.’

¹¹ The Calvinist definition suggests that Bavinck approaches the Reformed tradition from a relatively narrow Genevan perspective, which he considers to proceed by ‘align[ing] ... as closely as possible with Scripture’, *RD*, 4, p. 473.

¹² *RD*, 4, p. 473.

¹³ *RD*, 4, p. 448.

¹⁴ *RD*, 4, p. 474. On baptism, see *RD*, 4, p. 533: ‘The one who administers this baptism is Christ. ... But in administering baptism Christ employs people whom he charges with the distribution of the mysteries of God.’

¹⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 476. God rules both the realm of nature and the realm of grace, and consequently, according to Bavinck, we are able to understand the invisible world by way of the visible world, *RD*, 4, p. 481. Bavinck asserts, also on *RD*, 4, p. 481, that ‘The natural is an image of the spiritual.’

¹⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 481.

¹⁷ *RD*, 4, p. 476.

¹⁸ *RD*, 4, p. 481.

Christian depends not on the minister but on God alone and must expect all things from him.¹⁹

As the connection is established by divine institution, the liturgical words of institution are words of proclamation only and do not change the elements or unite the elements and the signified.²⁰

Second, the sacraments are signs in the created realm—external, visible, perceptible.²¹ Yet they are not *simple* signs,²² but also seals: they do not simply bring the invisible and eternal goods to mind but validate and confirm them;²³ they act in ‘guaranteeing the genuineness of persons and things or protecting them from violation’;²⁴ and they are linked to the communication of the grace of Christ.²⁵ Indeed, for Bavinck, the ‘internal matter’ or ‘heavenly substance’ of the sacrament—that which is signified and communicated—is Jesus Christ Himself: ‘the full, rich, total Christ, both according to his divine and his human natures, with his person and work, in the state of his humiliation and in that of his exaltation’.²⁶

¹⁹ *RD*, 4, p. 482. This bond is unshakeable: Bavinck writes that ‘the connection 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’, *RD*, 4, p. 487. This bond will not perish, *RD*, 4, p. 487.

²⁰ *RD*, 4, p. 481. Bavinck writes of the ‘form’ of baptism that it ‘consists in a divinely forged link between a visible sign and an invisible spiritual benefit’, *RD*, 4, p. 515, and that it is not the minister or the water ‘but Christ who ... gives the thing signified’, *RD*, 4, p. 519.

²¹ *RD*, 4, p. 448.

²² Cf. *RD*, 4, p. 475, where Bavinck writes that the sacraments are primarily *signs* that image and reassure us of the action of Christ, and are not—as the Lutherans held them to be—*actions*. Bavinck notes that the Reformed ‘absolutely did not deny that in the sacrament there occurs an action. But this is the hidden invisible action of Christ, who inwardly confers grace in the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, ... the main thing is not the action of the minister ..., but in the sacrament’s being a sign. ... Indeed, even the action of the administrator ..., though an action, is itself a significative action.’ There are some rather odd distinctions indeed in operation here, certainly in Bavinck and possibly also in the tradition.

²³ *RD*, 4, p. 476.

²⁴ *RD*, 4, p. 477. It is not only the elements of the sacrament but also the accompanying ceremonial actions that have this signifying and sealing function, *RD*, 4, p. 477.

²⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 448.

²⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 477 ... and therefore not sanctifying grace, as—according to Bavinck—the Roman Catholics (and certain Lutherans) would have it, *RD*, 4, p. 478.

The relationship between the signs and the signified in the sacraments is not, for Bavinck, physical, local, corporeal, or substantial,²⁷ yet it is nonetheless 'objective, real, and essential'.²⁸ For Bavinck, grace is imparted in a *spiritual* manner and not in a *physical* manner that would profit nothing.²⁹ Thus the sacrament 'grants the same full Christ as the Word and in the same manner, that is, a spiritual manner by faith'.³⁰ Precisely as such, however, Bavinck acknowledges that 'the sacrament does not impart a single benefit that is not also received from the Word of God by faith alone'.³¹ The content of Word and sacrament is identical—the same Mediator, the same covenant, the same benefits, the same salvation, the same fellowship with God; the mode of reception of Word and sacrament are identical—spiritually and by faith, not physically and by the mouth; but they deliver in a different manner—in the Word through the hearing and in the sacrament through the seeing.³²

It should also be noted here that there is a typically Reformed hierarchy of Word and sacrament: the sacrament is 'an appendix' to the Word;³³ it cannot create faith but only serves 'to strengthen faith',³⁴ it is 'nothing' and has 'neither value nor power' without the Word.³⁵ Instead, together with the Word, it serves 'to direct our faith toward Christ's sacrifice on the cross as the sole ground of our salvation'.³⁶

Third, in light of this, the sacraments are not 'inherently necessary': God did not have to ordain them, God's Word and promise are firm and

²⁷ *RD*, 4, p. 481. Bavinck continues: 'The signs of water, bread, and wine are not miracles, remedies, schemes, vehicles, channels, or physical causes of the things signified.'

²⁸ *RD*, 4, p. 482. On baptism, cf. *RD*, 4, p. 519.

²⁹ *RD*, 4, p. 483, citing John 6.63. A physical communication would also be 'inconsistent with the nature of the Christian religion, the essence of grace, and the nature of re-creation', *RD*, 4, p. 483.

³⁰ *RD*, 4, p. 483.

³¹ *RD*, 4, p. 479. It is a Reformation principle that 'Faith alone apart from any sacrament communicates ... all the benefits of salvation', *RD*, 4, p. 515. On baptism, see *RD*, 4, p. 521—'Baptismal grace exists and can ... exist in nothing other than in declaration and confirmation'. On the Lord's Supper, see *RD*, 4, p. 567—'in the Lord's Supper we indeed do not receive any other or any more benefits than we do in the Word, but also no fewer'.

³² *RD*, 4, p. 479.

³³ *RD*, 4, p. 479.

³⁴ *RD*, 4, p. 448.

³⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 479.

³⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 480.

sure without them, and God's salvation does not depend upon them.³⁷ However, Bavinck insists that they have great value:

by seeing those signs we ... gain a better insight into his benefits, receive a stronger confirmation of his promises, and thus [are] supported and strengthened in our faith. The sacraments do not work faith but reinforce it they 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 beings³⁸

Consequently, Bavinck posits that for 'maturing believers ... the sacraments do not gradually decrease in importance but continually gain in value'.³⁹

Here too is perhaps the place to mention the profound corporate aspect of the sacraments apparent in Bavinck's theology. The sacraments are given by Christ to his church,⁴⁰ and in them there are united the action of God and the confession of believers.⁴¹ Though the sacraments are not limited in Bavinck's theology to signs that witness to the faith of the community, they nonetheless do this also.

Bavinck on the Lord's Supper

In Bavinck's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, we see the three general aspects of the sacraments that we referenced above reach the level of particularity.

First, the Lord's Supper is an event of divine origin. He writes that 'God alone is the distributor of grace, and he alone can bind its distribution to the means ordained by him'.⁴² For this reason, the eucharist reflects a matter of divine obligation on God—'to impart to those who believe his Word his fellowship in Christ and all the benefits associated with it'.⁴³ It is Jesus Christ who is its Mediator in His threefold office, not only inaugurating but also hosting and administrating the Supper.⁴⁴ Of primary importance in the Lord's Supper, then, is not what we do but what God

³⁷ RD, 4, p. 489. On baptism, see RD, 4, p. 534.

³⁸ RD, 4, p. 489-490.

³⁹ RD, 4, p. 532: 'they are proof of grace received, a sign of God's faithfulness, a basis for pleading one's case in prayer, a supporting pillar for one's faith, and an exhortation to new obedience'.

⁴⁰ RD, 4, p. 448.

⁴¹ RD, 4, p. 475.

⁴² RD, 4, p. 562.

⁴³ RD, 4, p. 567.

⁴⁴ RD, 4, p. 562.

does.⁴⁵ Its sacramental signs of bread and wine are not arbitrary, but are rather 'eminently suited to give us an impression of the spiritual food and drink that Christ in his death has prepared for our souls',⁴⁶

Second, Bavinck acknowledges that the bread and wine are signs for the community, but affirms that they are also 'seals for the exercise of communion with the crucified Christ'.⁴⁷ Indeed, he observes—in somewhat circular fashion—that 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'.⁴⁸ While it is indeed a sign, then, the Lord's Supper is 'first of all ... a message and assurance to us of divine grace',⁴⁹ which bonds the believer 'with Christ himself, just as food and drink are united with our body'.⁵⁰

The particular form of that grace is 'an objective and real communication of the person *and* benefits of Christ to everyone who believes'.⁵¹ His body and blood are spiritual refreshment,⁵² and the mystical union of the believer with Christ⁵³ is here signed and sealed by the sacrament,⁵⁴ in which Christ 'offers his own crucified body and shed blood as nourishment for our souls'.⁵⁵ This union of Christ and believer is for Bavinck spiritual—not in the sense that it excludes the physical, but in the sense that it is effected by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ To achieve this, Christ does not come down from heaven: rather, 'we lift our hearts spiritually to heaven, where Jesus Christ ... is at the right hand of his heavenly Father'.⁵⁷ Beyond

⁴⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 562.

⁴⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 575.

⁴⁷ *RD*, 4, p. 575.

⁴⁸ *RD*, 4, p. 567.

⁴⁹ *RD*, 4, p. 567. Or again, the Supper is primarily 'a gift of God, a benefit of Christ, a means of communicating his grace', *RD*, 4, p. 567.

⁵⁰ *RD*, 4, p. 567.

⁵¹ *RD*, 4, p. 568. This is a communion 'not just with the benefits but above all with the person of Christ, both in his human nature and in his divine nature', *RD*, 4, p. 576.

⁵² *RD*, 4, p. 567. Bavinck draws here on John 6, though he acknowledges that this passage need not be interpreted sacramentally. *Contra* Zwingli and *cum* Calvin, Bavinck posits that eating the body and blood of Christ is not exhausted by believing: believing will in due course become seeing.

⁵³ Gleason posits that 'Bavinck's doctrine of the *unio mystica* is the central motif of his theology,' in 'Bavinck's Understanding', p. 1, but this claim would require rather more careful and holistic assessment which is not undertaken here.

⁵⁴ *RD*, 4, p. 568.

⁵⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 575.

⁵⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 577.

⁵⁷ *RD*, 4, p. 576.

this, Bavinck writes that this communion is 'so intimate and unbreakable that it can scarcely be expressed in words and can only be somewhat made clear by images'.⁵⁸

At the same time, Bavinck is careful throughout to maintain that this communion with Christ is not unique to the Lord's Supper. He notes that the Lord's Supper bestows the forgiveness of sins 'with an eye to our weakness ... in another manner' than the Word, but without adding 'a single new grace'.⁵⁹ Indeed, he is clear that in the Supper we receive no more and no fewer benefits than in the Word.⁶⁰

Third, Bavinck describes the benefits of the Lord's Supper. He writes that those who believingly accept the sign accept the whole Christ with all His benefits and receive communion with Him.⁶¹ He also writes that the Supper strengthens the communion of the believer with Christ, as the believer is 'ever more intimately united in soul and body with the whole Christ'.⁶² The corollary benefit is eternal life, alluded to—though note, Bavinck acknowledges, in a sacramental context—in John 6.⁶³ The final effect of the Lord's Supper is to act as a confession of faith before the world and to strengthen the community of believers in so doing.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ *RD*, 4, pp. 576-77. The mystical union is certainly not a pantheistic or substantialistic oneness: Christ and the believer remain distinct, *RD*, 4, pp. 576-77. Gleason quotes Bavinck writing of the 'incomprehensible union' between Christ and the believer, in 'Bavinck's Understanding', p. 21, quoting *Kennis en Leven*, p. 174.

⁵⁹ *RD*, 4, p. 579.

⁶⁰ *RD*, 4, p. 567, cf. *RD*, 4, p. 577: the sacrament 'only strengthens and confirms that which has been received by faith from the Word'.

⁶¹ *RD*, 4, p. 577.

⁶² *RD*, 4, p. 578.

⁶³ *RD*, 4, p. 579-580. Bavinck again uses this passage as illustration.

⁶⁴ *RD*, 4, p. 580. As such, it is an *activity*, involving the faith and love of the partakers, *RD*, 4, p. 473. Cf. Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after receiving access to the table of the Lord*, trans. by John Dolfin (Grand Rapids: Louis Kregel, 1922), p. 56: 'First we are to consider by ourselves our sins and the curse due unto us for them, to the end that we may abhor and humble ourselves before God. Secondly, we are to examine, our own hearts whether we do believe this faithful promise of God, that all our sins are forgiven us, only for the sake of the passion and death of Jesus Christ and that the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed and freely given unto us as our own. Finally, we are to examine our own conscience whether we purpose henceforth to show true thankfulness to God in our whole life, and to walk uprightly before Him. What a significant confession we therefore make when we come to the Lord's Supper!'

This last benefit leads us to consider briefly again the communal dimension. Bavinck observes that in the Lord's Supper, by Christ's example *and* command, Christ and the church come together, thereby testifying to their spiritual communion.⁶⁵ The Supper serves 'as the confession of our faith before the world and conduces to the strengthening of the communion of believers among themselves'.⁶⁶

With this presentation—so deeply resonant of Calvin—clearly in mind, we now turn to the eucharistic theology of Karl Barth.

A EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY AFTER KARL BARTH

Work on Barth's theology of the Lord's Supper is rendered rather complex by two factors: first, that his sacramental theology changed markedly during his life, and second, that the *Church Dogmatics* remained unfinished at his death. In respect of the first factor, my presentation is concerned with Barth's final position on the eucharist, as it is implied in volume IV/4 of the *Church Dogmatics*.⁶⁷ In respect of the second factor, Barth himself wrote in the preface to his doctrine of baptism, published in 1967, that 'intelligent readers may deduce from [it] how I would finally have presented the doctrine of the Lord's Supper'.⁶⁸ In what follows, then, I hope to offer a plausible reconstruction of Barth's eucharistic doctrine, carefully drawing out the implications of his doctrine of baptism towards a possible understanding of the eucharist.

As an overarching rubric to Barth's sacramental theology, one could perhaps cite the following quotation: 'here, if anywhere, I have learned to regard a cautious and respectful "demythologising" as expedient and practicable'.⁶⁹ A fundamental indicator of this sacramental 'demythologi-

⁶⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 562.

⁶⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 580.

⁶⁷ My presentation of this position contrasts starkly with the presentation of Barth's theology given in Paul Molnar, *Karl Barth and the Theology of the Lord's Supper: A Systematic Investigation*, Issues in Systematic Theology, 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). Molnar is perhaps rather more convicted about the continuity of the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* with the earlier volumes than I would be.

⁶⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 volumes in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), IV/4, p. 9. [Hereafter indicated by *CD* followed by volume/part number, and page number.]

⁶⁹ *CD*, IV/2, p. xi, translating 'eine respektvoll umsichtige "Entmythologisierung"', in Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 volumes in 13 parts (Fifth edition; Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947-1967), IV/4, p. IX. Barth comments that 'in the 16th and 17th centuries appeal was made to Christology in explanation and confirmation of a sacramental concept already presupposed

sation' is Barth's rejection of the idea that baptism—or indeed the eucharist—is a 'sacrament' or a 'mystery'. For him there is only one sacrament or mystery—Jesus Christ.⁷⁰ Baptism, and by implication the eucharist, respond to that mystery without co-constituting it.⁷¹

Writing of baptism, then, Barth posits that it 'is a basic human Yes to God's grace and revelation, but ... not a means of grace and revelation.'⁷² A corollary of this position is that the clear distinction that Barth posits between what he conceives as the 'two elements in the foundation of the Christian life'⁷³ between baptism with the Spirit and baptism with water. Barth writes:

On the one side is the action of God in His address to man, and on the other, made possible and demanded thereby, the action of man in his turning towards God. On the one side is the Word and command of God expressed in His gift, on the other man's obedience of faith required of him and to be rendered by him as a recipient of the divine gift.⁷⁴

This clear distinction of the objective and the subjective elements of baptism is basic to Barth's structural decision to locate baptism—and the eucharist—within the *ethical* section of his doctrine of reconciliation.

On this basis, then, we would anticipate that in analogous fashion Barth's doctrine of the Lord's Supper would deny that the Lord's Supper was a sacrament, or a means of grace or revelation, and would posit a clear distinction between the divine feeding of the Christian with the body and blood of Christ and the human response of eating the bread and wine of the Supper.

to be legitimate. The only thing was that no one took the opportunity to ask whether the presupposed concept taken over from the Roman Church was really legitimate,' *CD*, IV/2, p. 55.

⁷⁰ *CD*, IV/1, p. 296, see also *CD*, IV/2, pp. 54-55.

⁷¹ *CD*, IV/4, p. 102. Barth writes further of baptism at *CD*, IV/4, p. 105: 'what concerns us is the consensus [of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed] that baptism is to be defined, described and explained as a mystery. This consensus needs to be demythologised. We oppose it.' He continues: 'Our objection to the sacramental interpretation of baptism is directed against this conjuring away of the free man whom God liberates and summons to his own free and responsible action' [*CD*, IV/4, p. 106]. Moreover, Barth stresses that 'the community is not made the body of Christ or its members members of this body ... by baptism and the Lord's Supper (as so-called "sacraments")', *CD*, IV/1, p. 667.

⁷² *CD*, IV/4, p. 118, see also *CD*, IV/4, p. 34.

⁷³ *CD*, IV/4, p. 41.

⁷⁴ *CD*, IV/4, p. 41.

To explore this concept of the Lord's Supper in a little more detail, and, paralleling the form of Barth's treatment of baptism, I want to explore how this 'demythologising' might work out in practice across three dimensions of the human action of celebrating Lord's Supper: its basis, its goal, and its meaning.

The basis of the Lord's Supper

For Barth, the simplest answer to the question of the direct basis of the Lord's Supper is purely and simply the dominical command of Luke 22.19: 'Do this in remembrance of me'.⁷⁵ Yet to stop here would be to do an injustice to Scripture. The justification for the ongoing eating of bread and drinking of wine is not simply based in a historical command without precedent or context, but in an immediate historical event which is framed by a number of different contexts. The Passover meal was part of the broader *Sitz im Leben* of the earthly ministry and teaching and action of Jesus, which regularly included table-fellowship with sinners. The Passover meal was also a festival of the Jewish people which looked back upon and celebrated a divine act of redemption.⁷⁶ Eschatologically, one might consider the context of heavenly banquet of the saints, which was a central aspect of Jesus' own preaching; protologically, one might look to the original divine act of election, in which context God graciously elected to be for humanity in Jesus Christ. The dominical command to participate in the eucharist is thus not a new thing for the disciples, but an explication and proclamation of the whole history of Jesus Christ, determined in eternity.⁷⁷

Having considered this broad basis of the Lord's Supper, we move to consider how Barth would perceive its goal.

The goal of the Lord's Supper

In common with baptism, Barth would affirm that the goal of the Lord's Supper is transcendent and not immanent. The sacrament therefore looks beyond itself: beyond the capacities of the participants, the power of their common action, the particular character and effect of the action as a meal

⁷⁵ Or, alternatively, 1 Corinthians 11:24-25. Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 50 and its reference to Matthew 28.19.

⁷⁶ Further on these two contexts, it is interesting to note that, in his last years, Barth spoke explicitly of his desire to root his doctrine of the Lord's Supper in '[die] Sündermahlzeiten und [das] Passamahl Jesu', cf. Eberhard Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011), p. 443.

⁷⁷ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 52. It is clear that each of these contexts noted above deserves more detailed and more precise exposition, for which there is no space here.

together, and the properties and possible effects of the bread and wine used.⁷⁸ Instead, the sacrament looks to the same goal as baptism: 'God's act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, God's act of judgement and grace, of salvation and revelation'.⁷⁹ The cross and resurrection are at the heart of Barth's understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper. While baptism has as its goal these events as the divine change which forms the basis of the Christian life,⁸⁰ the Lord's Supper has as its goal these events as the divine action which nourishes and sustains the Christian life.

Given its transcendent reference, however, the goal of the Lord's Supper does not lie within its administration: 'its genuine goal, its truly divine goal ... lies before it, beyond the participants and their action and means of action'.⁸¹ The divine action which forms the basis of the Lord's Supper does not in any way mean that 'the work of the Mediator, or even a part of His work as the Executor of divine grace and revelation, is to be ascribed to faith or [the Lord's Supper] as the instruments, channels, or means which He uses'.⁸² By contrast, Barth insists of Jesus Christ that 'He is He, and His work is His work, standing over against all Christian action, including Christian faith and Christian baptism', and hence including also the Christian Lord's Supper.⁸³

In face of this event, what is left for Christians to do is a human action, which 'has to acknowledge the work of God, to bear witness to it, to confess it, to respond to it, to honour, praise and magnify it'.⁸⁴ Above all, in the eucharist, this human action is to be characterised by *thanksgiving* for the divine action. As this is done, God can take up human words in the Lord's Supper and give them power to bear testimony to God.⁸⁵ But the human work itself is obedient work, modest work, humble work; it is to renounce any attempt to portray itself as divine speech or action.⁸⁶ What, then, is the meaning of this human action?

⁷⁸ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 69.

⁷⁹ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 72. Indeed, this reconciliation, and the perfect fellowship of Jesus and Christian which it represents, is 'celebrated, adored, and proclaimed' in the Lord's Supper, *CD*, IV/3, p. 542.

⁸⁰ *CD*, IV/4, p. 72.

⁸¹ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 71.

⁸² Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 88, text changed from 'baptism'.

⁸³ *CD*, IV/4, p. 88.

⁸⁴ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 72.

⁸⁵ *CD*, IV/3, p. 737.

⁸⁶ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 73.

The meaning of the Lord's Supper

Barth cautions clearly that an estimation of the meaning of the Lord's Supper is 'not served but fatefully damaged if the sanctity of this action is sought ... in a supposedly immanent divine work'.⁸⁷ To avoid such docetic dangers, Barth renders exceptionally clear at this point that the Lord's Supper 'is not itself ... the bearer, means, or instrument of grace' and that it 'is not itself ... a mystery or sacrament'.⁸⁸ By contrast, the earlier explorations of the basis and goal of the Lord's Supper suggest that the meaning of the observance 'has to be understood ... as the ethical meaning of an action which, though it comes from Jesus Christ and hastens towards Him, is still genuinely human'.⁸⁹ The *human* action of meeting to break bread and drink wine together is a genuinely free action of obedience, of thanksgiving, and of hope. The *free* nature of the action of participating in the Lord's Supper indicates that in the event of reconciliation in Jesus Christ God calls the individual to free and responsible human action.⁹⁰

At stake in the action of the eucharist is the perennially required reorientation of the Christian life from the path of sin to the path of obedience. Barth writes that 'The whole of the further progress on the way which they plainly enter here [in baptism] can consist only in further responses to the Word of God which they accepted here, and hence in mere repetitions and variations of the grasping and exercising of this hope'.⁹¹ The Lord's Supper represents perhaps the paradigmatic example of this grasping and exercising of hope, as the community strides forward in the direc-

⁸⁷ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 101.

⁸⁸ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 102.

⁸⁹ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 107. There would be room for significant exegesis of relevant New Testament passages at this point, as Barth does in respect of baptism at *CD*, IV/4, p.p 111-27. His conclusion on the final page of that section is: 'That some of the passages could be taken sacramentally we do not deny, though it is no more than a possibility. We have not come across a single passage that has to be taken thus.' Again, as per Barth's practice on *CD*, IV/4, p. 128-30, there would be room here to relate the work of Barth on the Lord's Supper to that of Zwingli. Barth's concludes on the last page of that section that his own work attempts 'to understand Zwingli better than he understood himself or could make himself understood'.

⁹⁰ See further on this Paul T. Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark Continuum, 2007), *passim*.

⁹¹ *CD*, IV/4, p. 198. Or again: 'A whole life, longer or shorter, attaches itself to baptism. ... In its continuities and changes, in its possibilities and failures, in its expansions and restrictions, it must repeat the choice which was made in baptism. ... The future has not to be merely a being after baptism; it must be a being from baptism. It must be, not a daily *reditus ad baptistum* (Luther), but a daily *conversio* and *progressio baptizati*,' *CD*, IV/4, p. 202.

tion of the Lord who will come again and thereby declares the great acts of God to the world.⁹² The Christian strives always to move obediently towards Jesus Christ: to grasp the promise of His sustaining power and to be thankful for it. The divine empowering and sustaining of the Christian community thus summons the community to its regular⁹³ human confirmation in the Lord's Supper.⁹⁴

As the Christian comes to the communion table in obedience and thanksgiving, so there is exemplified truly *human* action, in which all pseudo-human masks fall away and in which God is justified.⁹⁵ The human renunciation, pledge, and thanksgiving involved are wholly and utterly related to the renunciation, pledge, and thanksgiving of Jesus Christ.⁹⁶ This human action is subject to the divine judgement, of course, but it is also an action that appeals to the divine grace, and thus it is carried out in both humility and joy.⁹⁷ Hence though the action of breaking bread and drinking wine are, as human actions, 'so unassuming, equivocal and irrelevant', nevertheless they become and are 'eternally important and significant' in relation to the divine act of nurturing and sustaining the community.⁹⁸

And the fundamental, and even *saving* aspect of its action is prayer:⁹⁹ prayer for the inadequacies of our attention and the poverty of our motives in participating in the Lord's Supper and prayer for the fractured and broken nature of our communities—social and ecclesial and ecclesiastical—in the concrete midst of which it is celebrated. As this prayer, the Lord's Supper finds its ultimate meaning of human action in conform-

⁹² Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 199.

⁹³ Barth strongly advocated in his later years that the Lord's Supper be celebrated weekly in Reformed churches, see Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth*, p. 443.

⁹⁴ This empowering and sustaining is not some general phenomenon, but rather pertains to the very particular God of Jesus Christ and to the covenant of grace elected and enacted by Him. There is a clear corporate dimension in view here: as the community of the covenant makes its way forwards, it does so as it looks at Him and is aware of Him, in confidence in, and orientation to, the history of reconciliation between God and the world and thus in faith. Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 150.

⁹⁵ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 143: 'truly human action is evident ... when a man is reduced to justifying God'.

⁹⁶ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 158.

⁹⁷ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 144.

⁹⁸ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 135.

⁹⁹ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 208.

ity to God and thus, in this carefully qualified sense, a good and saving human work.¹⁰⁰

BAVINCK AND BARTH ON THE UNIQUENESS OF THE EUCHARIST

Though there are many ways in which one might approach an analysis of the above material, I here use the heuristic lens of the uniqueness of the eucharist in the hope that this will shed light on some of the broader dynamics at stake in these two construals of the Lord's Supper.

Let us begin with Bavinck. On one level, the Supper is for him very unique indeed. As we have seen, it is a divine institution, commanded and exemplified by Jesus Christ. But over and above this, it is an action in which God is the principal agent: God has bound Godself to operate in a certain way in response to faithful performance of this sacrament. In this sense, it is truly a means of grace.

There is an interesting dynamic which results here in respect of understanding 'a means of grace'. On the one hand, Bavinck also describes the church itself as 'the great means of grace that Christ ... uses to gather his elect'; but is clear that the church is not a means of grace alongside Word and sacrament but only as it is entrusted with and in turn administers them.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, Bavinck posits that not only the Word preached and the sacraments administered are means of grace, but also 'faith, conversion, the struggle against sin, and prayer'; yet he cautions that the latter are more appropriately referred to as 'fruits of grace' as they are 'subjective conditions' rather than 'objective institutions'.¹⁰² This objectivity—and thus the uniqueness—of the sacraments as means of grace thus seems to depend on their tangibility and on their ecclesiality: they are visible, perceptible, and external, and they are institutions given over to the ministry of the gathered community.

At the same time, the sacraments achieve nothing different than the Word. In good Reformed fashion, there is no grace to be found here that is not available elsewhere, no uniqueness of content or result. Bavinck recognises that Christ can call 'either apart from or through the Word and

¹⁰⁰ Cf. *CD*, IV/4, p. 210.

¹⁰¹ *RD*, 4, p. 447.

¹⁰² *RD*, 4, p. 447. Indeed, he writes that if the Supper were only a memorial meal, it would no longer be a sacrament or a means of grace, and could only be—like prayer—'obliquely and indirectly' a means of grace, *RD*, 4, p. 567. Whether the words 'objective' and 'subjective' are entirely apt to characterise the distinction between the different types of 'means of grace' in view here is another question.

sacraments'.¹⁰³ But this means that Bavinck struggles—as Calvin did—to articulate on this level the necessity of the sacrament on the plane of grace. The sacrament offers grace, but Bavinck admits that 'the grace which is granted unto us in this sacrament is no other than that which constantly accompanies the Word of the Gospel and feeds us day by day'.¹⁰⁴ Bavinck does cite Calvin's position: that though the communion of Christ with the believer 'does not come into being first of all by the Supper, ... it is nevertheless granted "more distinctly" in the Lord's Supper and sealed and confirmed in the signs of bread and wine'.¹⁰⁵ He writes himself that the Supper 'bestows the same grace in another manner in order that we may firmly believe and be healed of all doubt'.¹⁰⁶ But these statements still fall short of asserting any sense in which the sacrament is unique.

The result is that Bavinck falls back—as Calvin perhaps ultimately does as well—upon the divine institution and command in terms of specifying the uniqueness of his doctrine of the Lord's Supper. This is the divine will: that this Supper be celebrated in the Christian community and that the Supper represent a normative means for God to offer the grace of an opening and a strengthening of communion with Christ.

When we turn to Barth, of course, we find a radically different position indicated. The question of 'means of grace' is not something which is in any way relevant. The Lord's Supper is not a divine action, but a human action, and as such stands alongside all other human actions without any ontologically or objectively distinguishing qualities. As an ethical action, the Supper can be parsed as an encounter of the community with the Word of God as Law and Gospel: there is a command laid upon the community by Jesus to perform this action and when it does this, the community responds in faith and obedience. In the particular case of the Lord's Supper, the command of repetition is most immediately based in the dominical institution at the Last Supper.

At the same time, it is clear that Barth would strive to say more than this. Even for him, the Lord's Supper is not simply another human action. This is an action with—on the human plane at least—a resonance and importance which goes beyond the immediate, limited context of divine command and obedience. The resonance is with the open and non-condemnatory table fellowship with sinners; the resonance is with the Passo-

¹⁰³ *RD*, 4, p. 448, though he stresses that the calling of Christ is always 'through the internal calling of the Spirit', *RD*, 4, p. 448.

¹⁰⁴ Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁰⁵ *RD*, 4, p. 557.

¹⁰⁶ *RD*, 4, p. 579. Sacraments, according to Bavinck, differ only in the external form, in the *manner* in which they offer the *same* Christ to us, *RD*, 4, p. 479.

ver feast of the Jewish people; the resonance is with the eschatological banquet feast of the Kingdom of God; the resonance is with the eternal and gracious divine act of election. The importance of the Supper is what it indicates: that in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, reconciliation has come between God and humanity; that the consequence is that we are commanded to leave behind the way of sin and to enter upon the way of righteousness; that we are called to respond with thankfulness and hope to the election revealed to us in the covenant of grace.

Is this a uniqueness of the Lord's Supper, then? It is certainly not a qualitative uniqueness: such resonances and consequences are not confined to the Lord's Supper, even if they are particularly aptly reflected in it. Perhaps the most we can say about any uniqueness of the eucharist resides in the particularity of the dominical command that is to be followed by His community.

For all their differences, then, there is at least the possibility that the way in which Bavinck and Barth conceive the *uniqueness* of the Lord's Supper is ultimately the same: its foundation in the instruction and example of Jesus. And this raises a broader question for Reformed theologies of the Lord's Supper: can they ever say more than this? In his desire to avoid Lutheran and Roman Catholic 'magical overvaluation' of the sacrament, Bavinck tries to chart a path that also avoids the 'mystical undervaluation' of the sacrament.¹⁰⁷ The question remains, however, whether that path is, or can be, anything other than a slippery slope.

Bavinck occasionally gives evidence of slipping not *down* that slope but of gliding *up* it into a rendering of the Lord's Supper that portrays it as indeed somehow qualitatively different from the Word.¹⁰⁸ Bavinck writes on one occasion that

The Word already offers and grants Christ to us, but the Lord's Supper does this more clearly (*illustrius*). In the Lord's Supper the fellowship with Christ is established and increased. For—and this is what we read in the Genevan Catechism—even though Christ is given to us both in Baptism and in the Gospel, yet we do not receive him totally, but only partially.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ The descriptors are Bavinck's, *RD*, 4, p. 444.

¹⁰⁸ This point is raised by Gleason, 'Bavinck's Understanding', p. 11, who refers to a 'tension' in the work of Bavinck here.

¹⁰⁹ Bavinck, *Kennis en Leven*, pp. 170-1, quoted by Gleason, 'Bavinck's Understanding', p. 11.

This position is unsustainable given what Bavinck writes elsewhere on the Lord's Supper,¹¹⁰ but deserves two further brief comments. First, I would suggest, this gliding up the slope is counter to the historical trend of many Reformed theologies to move down the slope. If anything, it seems to me that more churches Reformed in theology have moved away such an elevated conception of uniqueness than towards it. Second, I would suggest, however, that this gliding up the slope finds echoes in many of the contemporary Reformed attempts to offer a revised Reformed theology of the Lord's Supper for ecumenical consumption. Whether this is a good thing or not must for now remain an unanswered question.

CONCLUSION

There are many other features of these views on the Lord's Supper—besides the important question of the uniqueness of the sacrament—which space precludes examining in greater detail here. I will very briefly mention but three which may merit further exploration in future work.

First, there is the issue of the divine freedom. For Bavinck, God has exercised the divine freedom to bind Godself to these created means of grace. It is clear for Bavinck that nothing compelled God to do so; rather this decision of God to do so is part of the covenant of grace. For Barth, no such binding of God—beyond the decision for incarnation—seems possible. God does not put either the being of God or the grace of God at our disposal, not even in the church.¹¹¹

Second, there is the issue of the divine election. For Bavinck, the doctrine of election determines who will receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper efficaciously: though many receive bread and wine, fewer receive

¹¹⁰ And, at the same time, it is not clear that Bavinck's approval of Julius Müller's statement that 'the flesh of Christ [is] life-giving because from its substance life flows forth into our souls', *RD*, 4, p. 578, is in any way sustainable in the context of Bavinck's Reformed Christology, though in this inconsistency he is arguably in the fine company of Calvin.

¹¹¹ Barth writes that '[Jesus Christ's] own movement towards us, His reconciling being among us and with us and in us—where does the New Testament ever say anything to the contrary?—is always His movement, which we may expect and hope for with certainty and joy, but for which we have always to pray. It is His affair,' *CD*, IV/4, p. 88. There is a Christological echo here of Barth's pneumatologically grounded denial that the [divinely given] apostolicity of the church is tied to the [humanly mediated] laying on of hands in episcopal ordination: see *CD*, IV/1, pp. 714-16. For Barth, then, we can never make Jesus Christ move to us: we can only pray for this to happen.

Christ and His benefits.¹¹² For Barth, however, the doctrine of election structures his entire understanding of the dynamic of Gospel, Law, and covenant which undergirds his view of the Lord's Supper as a human response to the prevenient divine Word.

Third, there are the rather different ecclesiologies in view at this point. For Bavinck, 'God freely binds the distribution of his grace to the church of Christ'.¹¹³ As such, the means of grace cannot be separated from the church as organism and institution.¹¹⁴ For Barth, the reference to the community is also central, but it is framed always in terms of its gathering, upbuilding, and sending, rather to any particular dispensations that it may have over grace.

In exploring these divergences, one could look for a measure of explanation in analysing the different contexts within which Bavinck and Barth were writing. Yet even if this were to be done, there remains a profound theological distance between them in respect of each of these points. At this juncture, the only possible course of action would be turn back to the ongoing theological task of wrestling with Scripture. And both Bavinck and Barth would agree on that.

¹¹² Bavinck asserts that grace, according to Reformed theology, is 'the personal living Christ ... who imparts himself in the Supper as spiritual food to those who believe in Him', *RD*, 4, pp. 577-8.

¹¹³ *RD*, 4, p. 447, though the rule is explicitly said to be 'for those who reached adulthood'.

¹¹⁴ *RD*, 4, p. 448, nor from the person and work of Christ.