

“A Living Bread That Came Down from Heaven”

An Exposition of Article Thirty-Five of the Belgic Confession

Article 35: The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper¹ to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family: his church.

Now those who are born again have two lives in them.² The one is physical and temporal—they have it from the moment of their first birth, and it is common to all. The other is spiritual and heavenly, and is given them in their second birth; it comes through the Word of the gospel³ in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is common to God’s elect only.

Thus, to support the physical and earthly life God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread, which is as common to all as life itself also is. But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers he has sent a living bread that came down from heaven: namely Jesus Christ,⁴ who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten⁵—that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith.⁶

To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood.⁷ He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith,⁸ which is the hand and mouth of our souls.

Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God’s Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible.⁹ Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood—but the manner in which we eat it is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith. In that way Jesus Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven¹⁰—but he never refrains on that account to communicate himself to us through faith. This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. At that table he makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death,¹¹ as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood.

Moreover, though the sacraments and the thing signified are joined together, not all receive both of them.¹² The wicked person certainly takes the sacrament, to his condemnation, but does not receive the truth of the sacrament, just as Judas and Simon the Sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament, but not Christ, who was signified by it.¹³ He is communicated only to believers.¹⁴

Finally, with humility and reverence we receive the holy sacrament in the gathering of God’s people,¹⁵ as we engage together, with thanksgiving, in a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, and as

we thus confess our faith and Christian religion.¹⁶ Therefore no one should come to this table without examining himself carefully, lest “by eating this bread and drinking this cup he eat and drink to his own judgment.” In short, by the use of this holy sacrament we are moved to a fervent love of God and our neighbors. Therefore we reject as desecrations of the sacraments all the muddled ideas and damnable inventions that men have added and mixed in with them. And we say that we should be content with the procedure that Christ and the apostles have taught us and speak of these things as they have spoken of them.

¹ Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26 ² Jn 3:5-6 ³ Jn 5:25 ⁴ Jn 6:48-51 ⁵ Jn 6:63, 10:10b ⁶ Jn 6:40, 47 ⁷ Jn 6:55; 1 Cor 10:16 ⁸ Eph 3:17 ⁹ Jn 3:8 ¹⁰ Mk 16:19; Acts 3:21 ¹¹ Rom 8:32; 1 Cor 10:3-4 ¹² 1 Cor 2:14 ¹³ Lk 22:21-22; Acts 8:13, 21 ¹⁴ Jn 3:36 ¹⁵ Acts 2:42, 20:7 ¹⁶ Acts 2:46; 1 Cor 11:26

Nothing offended the Pharisees any more than when Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Since the Pharisees regarded such sinners as “unclean,” it was unthinkable to the Pharisees that Jesus would sit down to eat a meal with such notorious people—since at that time eating a meal with someone was considered a bond of fellowship. Because Jesus ate with people of whom they did not approve, the Pharisees accused Jesus of being a drunkard and a glutton. And what was Jesus’ response to such criticism? “*And Jesus answered them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.’*” (Luke 5:31). As we consider the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, we begin with pointed reminder that Jesus still invites tax collectors and sinners to join him in a fellowship meal—a meal which we call the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

As we consider that section of our confession which deals with the sacraments (articles Thirty-Three through Thirty-Five), we now come to Article Thirty-Five, which deals specifically with the Lord’s Supper. Recall that our confession defines a sacrament as a visible sign and seal of God’s invisible grace. We believe that where the visible signs and seals are present (bread, wine, water) so too the reality is present (Christ’s body and blood, regeneration and the forgiveness of sins). This means that the sacraments are real means of grace because God works through material means. God graciously gives us these visible signs and seals of that which is promised to us in the gospel—namely all the saving benefits of Jesus Christ. Because we are weak and sinful and often insensitive to the things of God, he gives the sacraments to us to nourish and sustain that very same faith which he creates in our hearts through the preaching of the gospel. The sacraments are an essential element of a healthy Christian life, since they confirm all the promises of the gospel, and since they sustain and nourish our ever-weakening faith.

Article Thirty-Three of our confession deals with the sacraments in general. Our confession is careful to distinguish the Reformed view of the two sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper) from that of Rome (which not only teaches that there are seven sacraments, but that the sacraments draw their efficacy from the power Jesus supposedly invested in the Roman church and its sacrificing priesthood) as well as the view of the sacraments held by Anabaptists. The latter denied that the sacraments are in any sense means of grace, since many Anabaptist leaders had difficulty conceiving of God working through material means and not directly upon the human heart. It is important that our confession not only summarize biblical teaching about these two sacraments, but at the same time it distinguish the Reformed view from that of Rome, from the Anabaptists, and from the Lutherans as well.

Building upon the definitions set forth in Article Thirty-Three, Article Thirty-Four contains a summary of the biblical teaching regarding the doctrine of baptism, the purpose of which is defined as follows:

“By it we are received into God’s church and set apart from all other people and alien religions, that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father.” Baptism replaces circumcision and is essentially our ratification of God’s covenant oath to be God to us and to our children, even as we are his people through faith in his gracious promise to save us from the guilt and power of sin. This is why we baptize infants and children of believers, since they too are members of the covenant of grace, which Scripture declares is a new and better covenant. And how can a better covenant exclude our children, when formerly they had been included?

Since Jesus tells us that infants are members of the kingdom of God (Luke 18:15-17), and since he welcomed and blessed them when parents brought their infants to him, we believe that our attitude toward children should be the same as our Lord’s. If children of believers are members of the covenant of grace, then they are entitled to the sign and seal of that covenant, which is based upon God’s covenant promise to be our God and we his people. And that covenant sign and seal is baptism.

In Article Thirty-Five, our confession now summarizes the biblical teaching regarding the Lord’s Supper, making four main points. First, our confession sets out the purpose of the Lord’s Supper. Why did the Lord institute this particular sacrament? Second, our confession describes the nature and character of the Supper. What happens when we receive the bread and wine? What benefits do we derive from this fellowship meal? Third, our confession takes up the proper manner of partaking of the Lord’s Supper (to distinguish the Reformed view from that of Rome and the Lutherans), before finally stating the importance of rejecting all erroneous views of the sacrament.¹

Article thirty-five, opens with a discussion of the purpose of the Lord’s Supper. Guido De Bres (the author of our confession, who lost his life to Spanish authorities for believing this very doctrine and serving communion to Reformed congregations), writes, “We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family: his church.” At the heart of the Reformed understanding of the sacraments then, is the fact that the Lord’s Supper is understood as the on-going celebration of that same sacrament which Christ instituted for the church on that night in which he was betrayed.

To understand the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, we must understand the meaning of the words of institution. In Matthew 26:26-28, we read,

“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

Jesus does not say these words “represent” or “symbolize” my body (typical of the “memorialist view” in which the essence of the sacrament is that a Christian to reflect upon Christ’s death for us), or that the bread “becomes” my body (as in the Roman view, in which the priest supposedly transubstantiates the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ). Rather, Jesus says that the bread “is” my body, and wine in the cup “is” his blood using the kind of sacramental language we have been talking about—the

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 259.

sign (bread) can be spoken of as the thing signified (Christ's body).

To quote one of our more notorious contemporaries—"it all depends upon what your meaning of the word 'is' is." The bread is Christ's body—not because a priest turns the sign (bread) into the thing signified (Christ's body)—but because the sign is so closely identified with the thing signified that the one can be spoken of as though it were the other. Nor can we contend that the bread and wine are mere signs with nothing signified—signs without any reality behind them.

This is why when Jesus says, "this is my body," Jesus intends us to understand that when we take and eat the bread (the sign), we receive the thing signified (his true body and blood). This means that the essence of the sacrament as instituted by Christ is one of feeding upon him in our hearts through faith, and not merely reflecting upon what Christ has done for us, although such reflection is certainly a part of the celebration of the Supper. Rather, the essence of the Supper is receiving what Christ promises—his body and blood, because this is what God's word promises.

That these words of our Lord are the basis for the church's on-going celebration of the Supper, are clear from a passage like 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 in which these same words are recited by the apostle:

"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 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.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Therefore, the apostolic church based their practice of the supper directly upon the words of institution—and so should we.

Not only do the words of institution given by our Lord reflect the language of the Passover, since Jesus institutes the Supper during the celebration of the Passover, but Jesus clearly implies that he is the Passover Lamb and that through the shedding of his own blood, God's people will be delivered from the guilt and power of their sins, just as Israel was delivered from the Pharaoh and bondage in Egypt through the blood smeared on the doorpost of the Jewish homes on the night of the Passover. A number of Old Testament events echo throughout the institution of the Supper, such as Exodus 24. In that passage we read that the Lord said to Moses,

"Then he said to Moses, 'Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.' Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.' And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD."

In this case, it is the people of Israel who swear the oath of ratification—making the giving of the law a works-based covenant.

In verse 4 of Exodus 24, we see the reference to the blood of the covenant to which is in the background when Jesus instituted the sacrament. Moses . . .

“rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, ‘All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.’ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.”

After the blood of animals was shed as the Sinaitic covenant was ratified, the people ate and drank in God’s presence, just as the disciples did on that fateful night in which our Lord was betrayed. Therefore, not only does the sacrament center in the eating of Christ’s body and the drinking of his blood (in faith), but this meal is also a fellowship meal between God and his people, in which God’s covenant promises are renewed and re-ratified every time the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.

That the Lord’s Supper is a fellowship meal in which the people of God are nourished and refreshed, can be seen in other several important biblical passages. In Isaiah 65:13-15, Isaiah is told of a day yet to dawn in the messianic age when God’s people will join him in a fellowship meal which will both nourish and sustain them, while God’s enemies go away parched and hungry. We read,

“Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, my servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; behold, my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; behold, my servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame; behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart and shall wail for breaking of spirit. You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse, and the Lord GOD will put you to death, but his servants he will call by another name.’”

God’s people will enjoy a messianic feast in which hunger is satisfied and thirst is quenched. God’s people will eat and drink and they will rejoice and sing for joy. But those who reject Israel’s God will come under his curse.

This passage is one of several Old Testament texts echoing in the background when Paul tells the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22,

“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 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? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 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.”

To eat the bread and drink the wine is to participate in the body and blood of Christ. This could not be

the case if the Supper was but a mere memorial.

If the essence of the Supper is a memorial, why does Paul warn the Corinthians in chapter 11 (verses 27-32),

“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. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”

Since we are warned that we risk coming under God’s judgment if we do not discern Christ’s body in the sacrament, this means that the essence of the Supper cannot be that of a memorial. It also means that only those who understand that the Supper is a reception of the body and blood of Christ should be permitted to partake. People must understand that they are feeding upon Christ and receiving all of his saving benefits. This not only precludes infant communion and requires a profession of faith, but it requires the elders to fence the table and instruct those who are new to Reformed theology in this most wonderful doctrine so that they can come to Christ’s table and enjoy its benefits.

Next, our confession takes up a discussion of the nature and character of the Supper. Given the essence of the Supper as a reception of Christ’s body and blood through faith, the following points require further elaboration. “Now those who are born again have two lives in them. The one is physical and temporal—they have it from the moment of their first birth, and it is common to all. The other is spiritual and heavenly, and is given them in their second birth; it comes through the Word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is common to God’s elect only.” As we take care of our physical need of nourishment by eating and drinking, so too that new life (the new nature) which results from regeneration also needs nourishment and sustenance.

This is, in part, the reason why God gives us the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper and helps to explain why it is so important to the Christian life. This view of the Supper is the basis for a more frequent celebration. If the essence of the Supper is a memorial meal, then, of course, you do not want to partake too often. But if the Supper is essentially feeding upon Christ through faith, then the arguments for infrequent communion based upon “keeping it special” are completely invalid.

Our confession goes on to make this very point. “Thus, to support the physical and earthly life God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread, which is as common to all as life itself also is. But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers he has sent a living bread that came down from heaven: namely Jesus Christ, who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten—that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith.” Citing from John chapter 6, our confession makes the point that Christ is our living bread and that he sustains us just as Israel was sustained by Manna in the wilderness. In addition, because the sacraments draw their efficacy from the gospel, we receive the reality (Christ) when we receive the signs (bread and wine). The means of the reception of Christ’s body is faith, not the mouth.

This is what divides the Reformed from the Lutherans, who believe that Christ’s body is received by mouth, because Christ’s body is supposedly “in, with and under” the bread. It doesn’t sound like a big difference, but this has historically divided us for nearly five-hundred years and explains why a

Reformed church will usually commune a Lutheran, while Lutherans will not commune a Reformed Christian.

That the sacrament is designed to strengthen that faith created by gospel is now spelled out. “To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood. He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior. We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls.”

Thus when asked, “what do we receive in the sacrament?” We should answer, “Jesus Christ and all his saving benefits.” We should not be tempted look to the scientist nor the physicist for an answer for an answer as to how we can receive Christ’s true body and blood when these are present in heaven, not on earth. But the same blessed Holy Spirit who unites to Christ so that we receive all of his saving benefits, also ensures that we receive what God promises to us in his word—Christ’s *vere* (true) body and blood. The mode of reception is faith, just as it is with the gospel. When we take consecrated bread in our hands, and believe God’s promise that when we take and eat, we receive truly Christ and his benefits.

And this is where we must leave the matter, as our confession goes on to point out: “Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God’s Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible. Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood—but the manner in which we eat it is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith. In that way Jesus Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven—but he never refrains on that account to communicate himself to us through faith. This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits. At that table he makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death, as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood.”

Thus in the sacrament God gives what he promises. He invites sinners to join him in a fellowship meal, all of which anticipates that glorious scene in Revelation 19:9: “And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God.’” The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is in one sense an on-going wedding rehearsal.

Having then set forth the meaning the purpose of the Supper, the third main point addressed by our confession is the proper manner of partaking.

Our confession sets forth the critical issue as follows: “Moreover, though the sacraments and the thing signified are joined together, not all receive both of them. The wicked person certainly takes the sacrament, to his condemnation, but does not receive the truth of the sacrament, just as Judas and Simon the Sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament, but not Christ, who was signified by it. He is communicated only to believers.” Since the Lord’s Supper is a spiritual meal, which requires saving faith and the discernment of Christ’s body and blood, unbelievers receive only the outward sign (bread and wine) and not the thing signified. They go away from God’s holy mountain just as Isaiah foretold that they would—thirsty and hungry, under God’s curse for profaning him by not receiving nor accepting what he has graciously promised to give to his people.

Because of the covenant curse attached to the sacraments, churches are obligated to make sure that only those who profess faith in Christ and who understand that even though the manner of reception is a mystery, Christ is received in the sacrament through faith—making the Supper much more than a mere memorial.

At this point it is certainly appropriate to point out that, “yes, we could make it much easier for people to join our celebration of the Supper if we did not fence the table nor require elder interviews before we admit people to the Supper.” But if we stopped doing these things we would not be consistent with our confessions. The practice of fencing the table is not about the self righteous preventing repentant sinners from coming. Nor are we being mean to visitors.

Rather, fencing the table is designed to find out whether a visitor is a Christian and whether or not they believe this fellowship meal is more than a memorial. Why does this matter? Because not only are there covenant blessings, but there are also covenant curses associated with not discerning Christ’s body in the bread and wine. Does this mean everybody must be theologian? Of course not. Does this make it tough when friends and family come to church with you? Yes, it does. Fencing the table requires a lot of explanation and creates some tense moments.

But if people come to worship on the Lord’s Day expecting to be admitted just because they have arrived and just because we are celebrating the Supper and they think they are entitled even though they are not clear about what the Bible teaches, then they clearly have a problem with church authority and a disrespect for the solemnity of the occasion—and this by itself disqualifies them from coming. But that being said, let us never forget that this is Christ’s table and all will be admitted who trust in him and who seek whatever good things Christ has for them, regardless of their theological acumen. All we require is a profession of faith in Christ, and the acknowledgment that Christ offers himself to us through the bread and wine—what we call the “real presence.”

And this too is clearly spelled out in our confession. “Finally, with humility and reverence we receive the holy sacrament in the gathering of God’s people, as we engage together, with thanksgiving, in a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, and as we thus confess our faith and Christian religion. Therefore no one should come to this table without examining himself carefully, lest “by eating this bread and drinking this cup he eat and drink to his own judgment.” In short, “by the use of this holy sacrament we are moved to a fervent love of God and our neighbors.” The Lord’s Supper is that sacrament through which Christ not only strengthens us and sustains us, it is through this sacrament that he unites us together as his people, working in us, not only an increase in faith, but an increase of the fruit of faith—love for God and for each other.

Finally, our confession exhorts us to reject all false views of the Lord’s Supper. No doubt with both Rome and the Anabaptists in mind, the author of our confession concludes by stating, “Therefore we reject as desecrations of the sacraments all the muddled ideas and damnable inventions that men have added and mixed in with them. And we say that we should be content with the procedure that Christ and the apostles have taught us and speak of these things as they have spoken of them.” Since this sacrament is so important to the health and well-being to the church—precisely because it derives its efficacy from the gospel—to turn the Supper into a re-sacrifice of Christ is to not only commit the sin of idolatry, but it is the poisonous fruit of what Paul calls “another gospel.” To receive the benefits of this wonderful sacrament, we must simply and humbly take God at his word.

What should we say by way of summation? The Reformed conception of the Supper as sign and seal

(bread and wine), thing signified (forgiveness through his blood, the “blood of the covenant”), and sacramental union (our Lord’s words “this is my body”), arises directly from the biblical data. When Jesus speaks of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, we take him at his word without resorting to confusing the sign with thing signified (in the case of Rome), or inserting words such as “this represents my body,” as in the case of the memorialists.

As Paul calls Christ the rock (1 Corinthians 10:4), so too, the bread is Jesus’ body, not because the sign is miraculously changed into the thing signified as Rome argues in transubstantiation, but because Christ can speak of the bread (the sign) as the thing signified (his body) using the language of sacraments. A true sacramental union exists between the sign and the thing signified, the bread can indeed be spoken of as Christ’s body (Matthew 26:26 ff).

Following Calvin, the Reformed have tried to keep in mind both the reality of Christ’s Ascension, wherein Christ’s true human nature is now in heaven awaiting his return (Acts 1:9-11), and the real presence of Christ in the sacrament (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Though Christ’s true human nature is in heaven, the believer receives all of his saving benefits because the Holy Spirit has united the believer here on earth to Christ in heaven through faith, so too (Romans 6, Ephesians 1), Christ can be in heaven and the believer can receive his true body and blood, because the same Holy Spirit ensures that those already in union with Christ receive his true body and blood when they take bread and wine in faith (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-29).

The manner of eating is spiritual, not “carnal,” and we truly receive Christ by faith and not by the mouth (John 6:63 may apply here). In the words of institution, the body of Christ is not brought down to us, i.e., localized on an altar “in, with, and under” as the Lutherans argue, but the believer is able to feed upon Christ in the heavenlies through the power of the Holy Spirit who ensures that we receive what is promised. The means of reception is faith, since it is the soul not the body that receives the reality of what is promised, as the mouth receives only consecrated bread and wine. Therefore, when we eat bread and drink wine, through faith, the Holy Spirit ensures that we receive the true body and blood of Christ which is in heaven because we are in union with him.

That Christ is sacramentally present with his people through the Supper as they feed upon him in faith, is the heart of the Biblical teaching and Reformed doctrine regarding the Lord’s Supper. There is also an eschatological dimension here (Revelation 19:6-9), as the earthly supper anticipates the great marriage supper yet to come. There is a covenantal dimension as well, as each time the Supper is celebrated, God himself re-affirms his covenant oath to save sinners by bearing the curse for them, and that Jesus Christ still enjoys table fellowship with sinners as was typologically set forth in Exodus 24.

Given these biblical themes, and the biblical language of “real presence,” in addition to the biblical practice of connecting the Word and sacrament (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11; Acts 20:7), it is hard to make any kind of a case for a pure memorialism or infrequent communion as is practiced by many Reformed Christians. The memorialist position inadvertently makes the human testimony of worthiness to partake or of our testimony to faith in the promises of God as central to the Supper, and inevitably depreciates the fact that the essence of the Supper is a spiritual feeding and a covenant meal, in which God re-affirms his covenant oath. It is the Holy Spirit working through the Word, and not a priest or minister that makes the sacrament efficacious for believers. God is the active party (not the “rememberer” nor a priest), and the sacraments are, therefore, correctly called the visible word. We must see the Supper and the elements of bread and wine as gracious gifts from God, manna from heaven as it were, given to us by God to communicate to us the realities of the blessings of the covenant of grace,

through the signs instituted by God. The Supper is therefore, not incidental to the Christian life, but must be seen as a vital part of our sanctification and growth in Godliness.

Beloved in this meal, at this table, Jesus still invites tax collectors and sinners to join him. Here, he will strengthen and nourish our faith, renew his covenant, and remind us that we are his. He does this because he is our living bread that came down from heaven. Amen!