

# The Theology of Poems on the Lord's Supper by the Dutch Calvinist, Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687)

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## Abstract

In this article, I provide a detailed analysis of the poems on the Lord's Supper by the Dutch statesman and man of letters, Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687). Between 1642 and 1684, he wrote eighteen poems on this subject, sixteen in Dutch and two in Latin. The type of poem varies from pithy epigrams to sonnets, through to longer poems over fifty lines in length, replete with well-conceived poetic tropes. To date, these poems have received little scholarly attention. Huygens was a lifelong member of the Reformed church and his poetry considers themes which are central to Reformed theology, such as human sin, divine grace and human gratitude. In his poetry, he recognises that he is a sinner and that it is not sufficient merely to ask for divine forgiveness, and then sin again. He acknowledges the need to intend to change his ways, but also recognises that he can only do this with divine assistance. Huygens published most of these poems and although such a public acknowledgement of sin may seem strange to us, there is a sense in which he was performing a public act of confession, to make common cause with his fellow believers, and also perhaps to encourage them to do the same. Much of the poetry considers the ontology and efficacy of the Lord's Supper. As well as exploring familiar tropes such as the sacrament as a feast and a pledge for God's promises, Huygens also asks about the very nature of the bread and wine of the sacrament. We might expect him to ascribe little or no value to the elements themselves, beyond, to use Brian Gerrish's phrase, 'presenting what they represent'. However, at some points, the language Huygens uses to refer to the elements, such as 'holy bread' and 'healing dew', suggests something more is at stake. Some may dismiss such phrases as mere lyrical flourish, but I argue that they point to a central tension inherent within Reformed eucharistic theology between sign and signified and, furthermore, that this poetry offers us the opportunity to explore that tension. Huygens' poems bear comparison with the best English-language religious poetry of the seventeenth century, and remind us that poetry as well as prose can offer us valuable theological insight.

**Keywords:** Calvinist, Dutch, Huygens, Lord's Supper, poetry, sin.

## Introduction

In the United Provinces of the seventeenth century, there was much discussion and disagreement over various aspects of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Given the range of religious groups in the United Provinces at this time, this should not surprise us.<sup>1</sup> Nor should it surprise us that much of this discussion took the form of sermons and treatises, but it also found expression in a considerable body of poetry. Little of this poetry is, however, known in the English-speaking world. This is regrettable, for much of it is of a high literary quality and provides interesting insights on the sacrament from poets representing a wide range of confessional standpoints.

In this article, I want to address this situation, in an admittedly modest way, by discussing poems on the Eucharist by the statesman and man of letters, Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687).<sup>2</sup> I shall begin by providing a brief overview of Huygens' life and work, as some readers may not be familiar with these, and then turn my attention to his poems on the Eucharist, considering in particular their theological content.

## The life and work of Constantijn Huygens: An introduction

Huygens' parents had both moved from the Southern Netherlands to escape Spanish Catholic rule, so that they could practise their Calvinist faith more freely. Constantijn was baptised as a Calvinist and it seems clear that he remained loyal to this tradition throughout his life, but this does not mean he was a strict, conservative Calvinist. One of the defining moves in the history of Calvinism in the United Provinces was the Remonstrance against stricter forms of Calvinism, made to the States of Holland in 1610. The man who penned the Remonstrance was Huygens' friend, the preacher, Johannes Uytenbogaert (1557–1646). He was forced into exile in 1618 and did not return to the United Provinces until 1626.<sup>3</sup> However, Huygens certainly did

<sup>1</sup> Although the Calvinist, or Reformed (*gereformeerd*), Church was the 'public church' in the United Provinces, other denominations including Remonstrants, Mennonites and Catholics had a limited amount of freedom to practise their faith. For a more detailed discussion of this, see Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2005), pp. 169 ff., and Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 361 ff.

<sup>2</sup> The original Dutch text and translations of most of the poems referred to in this article can be found in *Poems on The Lord's Supper by Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687): A Facing Dutch–English Translation with Annotations and an Introduction by Christopher Joby* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008): henceforth, Joby (2008). All translations of Huygens' poems in this article are mine.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Schwartz, *Rembrandt: His Life, his Paintings* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985), p. 149.

not forget him during his exile and sent him a copy of versifications of the Twelve Articles and the Ten Commandments he wrote in 1619.<sup>4</sup>

Another hint that Huygens looked beyond the confines of strict Calvinism is that it is difficult to discern from his writings which side he took at the Synod of Dort (1618–19). One might have expected him to come out clearly on the side of the strict Calvinists, or Counter-Remonstrants, who were victorious at Dort, particularly as he continued to be a member of the Calvinist, as opposed to the Remonstrant, church. But there is no firm evidence for this.<sup>5</sup> As well as Uytenbogaert, Huygens had friendships with other Remonstrants, including the Amsterdam Professor of Philosophy, Caspar Barlaeus (1584–1648). Perhaps what was more important to Huygens than narrow confessional concerns was the need for church unity in the Netherlands. We see this in his poem, *Hofwijck*, completed in 1651. Here he not only distances himself from the strict Calvinists, or Gomarists as they were sometimes known, but also chides the Remonstrants, or Arminians. Both of them, as he sees it, are to blame for causing division in the church in the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, in his poems on the Eucharist, or Lord's Supper, it is not so much the division between Calvinists and Remonstrants which is a major cause for concern for Huygens, but rather the division between Calvinists and Catholics, which crystallises in his rejection of the doctrine of transubstantiation. This did not stop Huygens from having friends and acquaintances who adhered to the Catholic faith, and these included the French-born philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), who settled in the United Provinces in 1628.<sup>7</sup>

There may be some who question what a person's friendships can tell us about that person's own confessional position. That is certainly a reasonable point, though it would be difficult to imagine a strict Calvinist having the same warm relationships with Uytenbogaert, Barlaeus and Descartes as Huygens did in the first half of the seventeenth century in the United Provinces. However, perhaps a couple of examples from Huygens' own works will suggest that we are dealing with someone who would not have been entirely comfortable in a strict Calvinist environment.

<sup>4</sup> L. Strengholt, *Een werkelijk groot Nederlander: Het leven van Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687)* (Hilversum: Evangelische Omroep, 1977), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Hendrik Hofman, *Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687) (proefschrift)* (Utrecht: HES Uitgevers, 1983), p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3, and Constantijn Huygens, *Hofwijck*, eds. Ton van Strien and Kees van der Leer et al. (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2002), ll. 1504–7.

<sup>7</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, pp. 583 ff.

The only play that Huygens wrote, *Trijntje Cornelis* (1653), is notable for several reasons not least of which is that, as Reinder P. Meijer puts it, it shows ‘with great candour the down-to-earth, crude and sometimes vulgar side of Huygens’s personality’.<sup>8</sup> On a different note, Huygens was willing and able to challenge practices in the Calvinist church with which he disagreed. Since a previous Synod of Dort, in 1574, the use of organs had been banned in Calvinist church services. Huygens wanted this ban to be overturned, and so in 1641 he published a treatise advocating the playing of the organ during church services titled ‘Use or Non-use of the Organ in the churches of the United Netherlands’.<sup>9</sup> There was a delay between Huygens writing the treatise and its publication, and this may point to the delicateness of the subject in the church at that time.<sup>10</sup> However, it was published and provided an impetus for the gradual reintroduction of organ playing in Calvinist church services.

There is much more to say on Huygens’ life and work,<sup>11</sup> but what I have tried to do in this overview is to paint a picture of someone who, whilst remaining loyal to the Calvinist church, moved beyond narrow confessional confines. What I suggest we shall see as we move on to consider Huygens’ poems on the Lord’s Supper is a similarly nuanced relationship with Calvinist (eucharistic) theology. On the one hand, we shall see an affirmation of themes considered central to this theology, such as human sin and divine grace, but on the other, we shall see reflections on the ontology and efficacy of the sacrament, some of which in the first instance seem at odds with it. This will lead us to re-examine aspects of Calvinist eucharistic theology and we shall be reminded that rather than being at odds with this theology, these reflections point us both to the richness of it, but also to the erosion of meaning in the celebration of the sacrament in churches in this tradition today.

### Huygens’ poems on the Lord’s Supper: sin, grace and repentance

So, let us make a start by considering what Huygens has to say about human sin, divine grace and the need for repentance. What we shall see is a familiar pattern in the Christian tradition: the original sin of Adam and Eve placing humanity in bondage, mitigated by the saving grace of God who sent his only son, Jesus Christ, to live and die for us so that we might be saved through his atoning sacrifice on the cross. However, as we might expect, Huygens

<sup>8</sup> Reinder P. Meijer, *Literature of the Low Countries* (Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes, 1978), p. 146.

<sup>9</sup> See F. L. Zwaan’s edn (Amsterdam: B. V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> For further information on Huygens’ life and work in English, and select bibliographies, see Joby (2008), and Peter Davidson and Adriaan van der Weel, *A Selection of the Poems of Sir Constantijn Huygens (1596–1687)* (Amsterdam: AUP, 1996).

works out from this pattern to develop a series of deep theological reflections using a variety of poetic techniques, rhetorical devices and reconfigurations of familiar tropes.

To begin with, it is clear to Huygens that there was original sin and that the sin in the world has its source in the disobedience of Adam.<sup>12</sup> In one poem he writes 'for one man's sin we stand together in all guilt'<sup>13</sup> and in another he refers to his own sin as 'the yeast of Adam's fall', which may owe something to Jesus' injunction to beware the yeast of the Pharisees (Matt 16:6).<sup>14</sup> In a poem written in 1652, he refers to a 'reptile on the ground', and calls it 'the creature you (God) first punished', which is a clear allusion to the serpent in Genesis 3. Interestingly, Huygens seems to be likening himself to the serpent here, as if he is the lowest of the low, crawling along the ground. He emphasises his own lowliness when he says in the very next line that he is worthy of no better food than the leftovers of what dogs have eaten. A few lines earlier, he again abases himself when he reminds us of the Gentile woman whom Jesus encounters in Mark 7:28 and refers to himself as a dog barking for crumbs.<sup>15</sup> This image might seem slightly artificial and somewhat exaggerated but it is clear that Huygens was very aware of his own sinfulness and he referred to it in his poetry in a number of ways. Again, he recalls the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, on the occasion when they became aware of their own nakedness, and writes, 'no fig in this land seen/Has leaves whose widths suffice to hide my shameful sin'.<sup>16</sup>

Another trope Huygens uses on a number of occasions to refer to his own sinfulness is that of being clothed in a soiled garment. In an allusion to Revelation 19, in which the church is referred to as the bride of Christ the Lamb, and has been granted a garment that is 'bright and pure', Huygens seeks a way of making clean his own garment, soiled, as it were, by his own sins. He writes:

The garment must be clean, as white as flesh or snow,  
In which I at your feast, Almighty God, shall show:  
But it's a mud-filled snow, and flesh that's fouled full well  
That I bring to your meal . . .<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 3, Question 7.

<sup>13</sup> Joby (2008): poem 12, l. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: poem 2, l. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: poem 6, ll. 47–50. The Gentile woman tells Jesus, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs' (NRSV).

<sup>16</sup> Joby (2008): poem 5, ll. 5–6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.: poem 5, ll. 1–4.

Huygens recognises that he cannot remove his sins on his own and at the end of the same poem he calls on God to do this, or as he puts it, continuing with the trope of the wedding garment, to make him 'snow-white':

I shall be snow-white soon, if you to me apply  
The hyssop of your Spirit, and of your blood the lye.<sup>18</sup>

As the reader will note, for Huygens here it is the blood of Christ crucified which can cleanse him of his sin. He makes this point again in a sonnet he wrote in 1649 in which he also alludes to Christ's washing of his disciples' feet at the Last Supper (John 13:1–17). He writes:

Oh you who wash the feet of your much purer disciples,  
Wipe clean with the smallest drop of your innocent pain,  
My feet sullied from the race, before I come to your Table.<sup>19</sup>

In a later poem, written in 1668, he invokes the trope of a spotless garment once more. However, here, rather than suggesting that Christ's blood can clean his foul, sinful garment and make it spotless, it is the blood-stained garment which Christ himself wore during his Passion which can clothe Huygens and hide his sinfulness:

. . . .Lord, there is a garment, a holy garment,  
A blood-soaked garment, drenched in water and in sweat,  
The garment of the Mediator, whom you let appease you,  
That can clothe me with the least of its threads . . .  
. . . I know that through that Blood you will not see my wounds.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, though, the trope of a dirty garment, alluding to sin, did not find universal favour. One poet, for example, Geertruyd Gordon (1649–1728), wrote that she considered the trope inappropriate on theological grounds. For her, those who confess belief in Christ are thenceforth always worthy and their garment never becomes sullied. She opposed those such as Huygens who, as she saw it, placed too much emphasis on man's sinfulness, preferring instead to concentrate on the love of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: poem 5, ll. 9–10.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: poem 4, ll. 10–12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: poem 15, ll. 25–8 and l. 30. There is a possibility that Huygens means the reader to concatenate Christ and his garment here, though this is not clear. In any case, he seems to ascribe to the blood-stained garment the ability of Christ to mask/do away with his own, i.e. Huygens', sins.

<sup>21</sup> Ton van Strien and Els Stronks (eds), *Het Hart naar Boven* (Amsterdam: AUP, 1998), pp. 309 ff.

Another way in which Huygens alludes to his own sinfulness is to equate this with his old self and to contrast it with his new self in Christ. In a poem he wrote in 1660, he conceives of the relationship between his old sinful self and his new self in Christ in terms of a battle, one which by his own admission he wins at times and at other times loses.<sup>22</sup> This division between the old and new self is also at work in an earlier poem in which he writes:

Wrench me from myself, my God, and take me from this world,  
From vanity, from filth, and take me from my blood,  
That bubbles up and froths and take me from my haughty crimes.<sup>23</sup>

Here, we might even get an insight into the nature of the sin about which Huygens so regularly chastises himself. He talks of vanity, but also of 'haughty crimes' or 'pride', which, of course, St Augustine asserted was the beginning of all other sin.<sup>24</sup> Huygens wrote this poem in 1643, but a year earlier, in 1642, he had written a sonnet in which he also talked of a dual self. Here, though, he talks in terms of his body and soul and seems to equate his body with the old sinful self and his soul with the new self in Christ. He does this in the context of asking God to perform a miracle, namely the breaking apart of his body and his soul. He writes:

And grant this wonder too: O God, for me once broken,  
Break now this body and its fellow soul.<sup>25</sup>

What we are not talking about here, though, is salvation. Huygens, it seems, is secure in the knowledge that he is saved, but is equally clear that it is solely by the mercy of God that this is so. In a sonnet written in 1649, he makes the point unambiguously. Here, he appropriates the Pauline trope of running the race and asks, rhetorically as so often, whether he can be saved by running the race, i.e. by his own efforts, and by his own will: 'Shall I reach the goal, by will or running the race?'<sup>26</sup> Unsurprisingly, the answer is a resounding 'no', and he concludes the sonnet with the line, 'My will and course are naught; your mercy saves my life'.<sup>27</sup> In a poem written four years later, in 1653, he makes a similar point: 'By your grace, I am saved'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Joby (2008): poem 13, esp. ll. 6–8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 2, ll. 1–3.

<sup>24</sup> John Cavadini, 'Pride', in Allan Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 679–84.

<sup>25</sup> Joby (2008): poem 1, ll. 11–12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 4, l. 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 4, l. 14. A similar sentiment is expressed in the Latin coda to the poem: 'it (salvation) does not depend on a willing or running person, but on a merciful God'.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 7, l. 44.

Although Huygens is assured of the saving grace of God, this does not mean that he feels he can sin at will and then ask God simply to forgive him and help him move away from sin. This, it seems, was a charge levelled at him by a contemporary, Jan Zoet (1614–74), in his response to Huygens' 1645 sonnet cycle, 'Holy Days'.<sup>29</sup> Huygens makes this clear, in later poems at least, where he recognises that divine grace does not simply give him an excuse to sin and then apologise: he still needs to repent of his sins. In a poem written in 1660, almost as if responding to Zoet's charge, he tells us:

I do not ask frivolously to dare to want to be  
Eight times filled with sin then eight times just set free.<sup>30</sup>

The question of repentance arises again in an epigram Huygens wrote three years earlier, in 1657. In this poem he conjures up the image of Judas' betrayal of Christ, suggesting that only God knows if any of those amongst Huygens and his fellow communicants would now want to betray Christ and thus be condemned by God. It is not clear from the poem itself who would be betraying Christ here. One suggestion is that Huygens has in mind the verse from 1 Corinthians 11:29,<sup>31</sup> where we are told that those who do not discern the body of Christ eat and drink a judgement upon themselves. This may lead us to think that Huygens is referring to unbelievers here. But I wonder whether this is how things were in fact viewed in the Calvinist tradition in general and by Huygens in particular. For John Calvin, it seems that, rather than being condemned, the unbeliever simply does not enjoy the spiritual benefits of the Lord's Supper, instead merely eating the physical bread and wine.<sup>32</sup> For him, faith and repentance are necessary to enjoy the benefits of the Lord's Supper.<sup>33</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism talks in similar terms when in Question 81 it asks 'For whom is the Lord's Supper instituted?' The Answer begins 'for those who have repented of their sins and believe that they are forgiven them'. However, it goes on to say that those who do not sincerely turn to God and repent eat and drink a judgement upon themselves. So, from these passages, it seems that it is those who do not

<sup>29</sup> Van Strien and Stronks (eds), *Het Hart naar Boven*, pp. 185 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Joby (2008): poem 13, ll. 19–20.

<sup>31</sup> C. Huygens, *Avondmaalsgedichten en Heilige Dagen*, ed. F. L. Zwaan (Zwolle: W. E. J. Tjeenk Willink, 1968), p. 71, note to l. 4. Henceforth, Zwaan (1968).

<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM Press, 1961), IV.xvii, pp. 33–4. Henceforth, *Institutes*.

<sup>33</sup> In his *Petit Traicté de la Sainte Cene de Nostre Seigneur Jesus Christ*, (1552), Calvin writes 'only let us not come without Faith and repentance'. John Calvin, *Three French Treatises*, ed. Francis M. Higman (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 113–14.



repent of their sins before coming to the Lord's table who betray Christ. Whether or not this was who Huygens had in mind in his 1657 epigram is unclear, but it is certainly a possibility. The question then is whether believers have to repent fully before partaking of the Lord's Supper without bringing judgement upon themselves.

Calvin recognises human failings and writes, 'it is a perilous mode of teaching which some adopt, when they require perfect reliance of heart and perfect penitence, and exclude all who have them not',<sup>34</sup> and Huygens himself makes a similar point in two of his epigrams, one written in 1668 and the other in 1684. In the former, he again makes reference to the trope of a wedding garment, this time alluding to the guest in Matthew 22:11–14, who came to a wedding feast without the appropriate garment and was bound up 'hand and foot, and throw[n] into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (NRSV). He writes:

Here's good company at the feast,  
God knows well if it is so inside.  
If any be rejected,  
Who came as guests without a wedding garment,  
I fear few would remain,  
And that only bread and wine would be left at the table.<sup>35</sup>

Here we may take references to God knowing whether things are good on the inside of the guests and to guests coming without a wedding garment as allusions to whether the guests have fully repented of their sins before coming to the Lord's table, and Huygens of course concludes that if only those who have done so were to come to the table, then there would be few present at it. In the 1684 poem, he makes the point even more strongly, saying that if only those who were completely worthy of God were to sit at the Lord's table, then it would stand empty.<sup>36</sup> However, what is critical for Huygens in the struggle with sin is not simply repentance, full or otherwise, but rather intention to move away from sin, and he recognises this in a poem he wrote in 1654.

In the first thirty-three lines, he tries to give answers to the question of what it is that constitutes sufficient repentance, and after each answer asks rhetorically 'Is this not enough repentance?'. After recognising that his initial answers do not suffice, in line 34 he realises that it is intention which is the

<sup>34</sup> John Calvin, 'Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper', in *Treatises on the Sacraments*, tr. H. Beveridge (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Heritage, 2002), pp. 163–98, at p. 177.

<sup>35</sup> Joby (2008): poem 14.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 18.

key to repentance, for without the intention to change his old ways he would merely repeat them again, however much he repented of them. That said, for Huygens intention is not merely a function of the will, but he again recognises that he requires God to stir his heart<sup>37</sup> in order to give him this intention to change his old ways.

So, we have seen here Huygens' recognition of his own sinfulness, which ultimately he ascribes to the sin of Adam, his understanding of divine grace, which is not only salvific but also necessary to take him away from his old, sinful, self, and in addition his need to repent and to intend, with God's help, to turn away from that old self. And, although such themes may be expected in poems on the Lord's Supper by a Calvinist, what I have tried to demonstrate is that Huygens has used the form and language of poetry to present these themes in unexpected ways.

Before we move on to consider our other main theme in this part of the article, the ontology, and indeed efficacy, of the Lord's Supper, it is briefly worth mentioning that two other themes central to Calvinist eucharistic theology, thankfulness and forgiveness, do not occur explicitly as frequently as one might expect, given their importance in this theology. One exception to this is a poem Huygens wrote in 1653. Alluding to Matthew 11:30, he begins by asking a rhetorical question, which he then goes on to answer:

Is this our burden, then? To sit and eat and drink,  
And give our thanks to you, and make that thanks ring out,  
That churches might shake with praise and worship and honour?<sup>38</sup>

He recognises thankfulness does not of itself suffice, and acknowledges, with reference to Matthew 6:14, that he needs to forgive his neighbour in order to receive forgiveness from God. This reminds us that, although these poems are often deeply personal addresses by Huygens to God, he is also very aware of his fellow man, and this gives the poems a deeply ecclesiological dimension, a theme to which we shall return.

### The ontology and efficacy of the Lord's Supper for Constantijn Huygens

For now, let us turn our attention to the sacrament itself and ask how Huygens understood this. To start with, it seems that for Huygens the Lord's Supper was very much a celebration or a feast. But of course this was no ordinary feast. In the poem on the Lord's Supper in his sonnet cycle, 'Holy Days',

<sup>37</sup> Joby (2008): poem 9, l. 45: 'But you who have stirred my heart, complete your work . . .'

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.: poem 7, ll. 1–3.

Huygens starts by asking the question 'Is it your high Feast again?'<sup>39</sup> and elsewhere, in a poem he wrote in 1652, he refers to it as a feast of peace, contrasting this with the internal strife which he himself is experiencing:

Do I come here to your feast with all my strife,  
To your feast of peace, at odds with my old self?<sup>40</sup>

It was common at this time in the Calvinist tradition to consider the Lord's Supper as a spiritual banquet<sup>41</sup> and this is very much how Huygens himself viewed it. The fact that the Lord's Supper was typically celebrated only four times a year<sup>42</sup> gave the faithful an opportunity to examine and prepare themselves spiritually for partaking of the bread and wine, and several of Huygens' poems on this subject are meditations on the significance of the sacrament, which may have helped him to prepare to receive it. Such infrequent celebrations of the sacrament no doubt added to the special significance ascribed to it and this is another reason why Huygens often refers to it as a feast. He develops this trope in several of his poems by referring to himself as a guest at the feast. In one poem written in Latin in 1654, Huygens begins:

I come when you call, kneeling when you command,  
Called as a guest . . .<sup>43</sup>

He uses the motif of guest again in an epigram in 1645, and here seems to suggest that God will grant guests at his table who are worthy of the host.<sup>44</sup> Here, as elsewhere for Huygens, the host is Christ, which should not surprise us, but what is particularly striking about this and other poems by Huygens is its deeply personal and conversational tone, with the poet often addressing Christ himself directly. For Huygens, though, Christ is of course not merely the host at the feast, but the one whose atoning work on the

<sup>39</sup> Zwaan (1968), p. 109.

<sup>40</sup> Joby (2008): poem 6, ll. 1–2.

<sup>41</sup> The titles of two sermons in a collection of sermons tr. from English into Dutch and publ. in 1671 point to this. The title of one sermon is 'The covenant sign of the Lord's Supper is a spiritual banquet', and of another is 'The Holy Supper is a feast for the souls of the faithful'. See *Koning aen syn Tafel ofte XXXIII Avondmaels Predicatie Deur Verscheydene Godgeleerde in de Engelse Tael beschreven* (Bolsward: Samuel van Haringhouk, 1671): henceforth Reen (1671).

<sup>42</sup> Practice varied, but in poem 13 (Joby 2008), he begins 'Three months have passed, since I last sat here . . .'

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 8, ll. 1–2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 3.

cross allows our sins to be forgiven. In a poem of 1653, he addresses Christ saying:

And did you not suffer, die and rise again,  
To wash away the stain of all sin with your Blood?<sup>45</sup>

This is not unexpected, but interestingly, when alluding to Christ's atoning work elsewhere, Huygens does so using language borrowed from the world of commerce. In language similar to that used by Anselm of Canterbury in *Cur Deus Homo*, Huygens understands our sin in terms of a debt which only Christ's self-sacrifice can pay off. In one place he talks of a victory over the forces of evil 'bought with [Christ's] dear blood'<sup>46</sup> and elsewhere, again evoking the trope of the wedding garment, he says that he cannot pay for the garment but only Christ can do so with his precious blood.<sup>47</sup>

As well as paying the price for our sin, another important aspect for Huygens of Christ's death on the cross is that in and of itself it is one complete sacrifice. In what is possibly Huygens' earliest verse on the Lord's Supper, which he wrote to accompany his poems on the Ten Commandments in 1619, he concludes by saying:

Let his borrowed punishment and unearned pain  
Be our complete sacrifice on your altar once and for all.<sup>48</sup>

It is possible to read too much into these lines but, given that only a few years later Huygens was praising the English for their opposition to the doctrine of transubstantiation,<sup>49</sup> it might be reasonable to surmise that here Huygens is asserting that Christ's death on the cross was a 'complete sacrifice . . . once and for all', to contrast his position with that of propitiatory sacrifice, an important part of Catholic eucharistic doctrine. So, for Huygens, Christ's work on the cross, recorded in the Gospels, was a once and for all action, which was determinative for his relationship and that of others to God. This being so, it is not surprising that for Huygens one of the more important aspects of the Lord's Supper is that it is a meal of memorial. We see this in one of his later poems on the sacrament, which he begins with the line, 'You told us to do this (i.e. celebrate the Lord's Supper) in memory

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 7, ll. 34–5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 2, l. 40.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 16.

<sup>48</sup> Constantijn Huygens, *Koren-bloemen* (The Hague: Adriaen Vlack, 1658), book 1, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> In a poem which he sent to his fellow poet, P. C. Hooft, from England in 1622, he wrote '[England], where at the Holy Table, untransubstantiated bread is the food of the soul'.

of you',<sup>50</sup> and in an earlier poem, with reference to the part of the church service in which the events of the Passion were recalled, before the bread and wine were distributed, he talks of 'this awful tale'.<sup>51</sup> However, I have already noted that Huygens saw the Lord's Supper as a feast or celebration, and suggested in particular that he would have understood it in terms of a spiritual banquet. This necessarily leads us to ask whether he believed it had any spiritual significance beyond this for those who partake of it. To put it another way, we might ask whether he considered that communicants could draw any benefits from the Lord's Supper beyond those which might arise merely by recalling the events of the Passion.

In sermons of this time, it seems that preachers felt the need to address this question. Further, it seems that an important analogy which was used to frame this discussion was the idea that the Lord's Supper might be some kind of medicine. In a sermon published in 1653, the Calvinist preacher, Focco Johannes (born c.1587), refers to the Lord's Supper in ways which may be expected, such as 'a guest-meal', 'a heavenly meal' and 'a spiritual table', but also calls it 'a medicine of the soul'.<sup>52</sup> Almost as if responding to Focco, another Calvinist preacher, Casparus Streso (1603–64), tells us what the Lord's Supper is not. As well as not being a sacrifice of expiation, or a bodily food for the mouth, which we may take to be an allusion to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, he says that it is not something which makes the human heart alive in the way in which medicine cleans and strengthens the body.<sup>53</sup> So, it seems that there was a question mark over the effective power of the Lord's Supper itself in the Reformed tradition.<sup>54</sup> When we come to consider what Huygens' own position would have been, we have to begin by admitting that he does not use the term 'medicine' to refer to the sacrament in the poems under discussion. That said, he does recognise Christ's ongoing work in wiping away his own sin.<sup>55</sup> Although he makes this point in poems on the Lord's Supper, it is not necessarily the case that he would believe that this could only happen by celebrating the

<sup>50</sup> Joby (2008): poem 17, l. 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 12, l. 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Proef-Praedicatien Voorbereydinge tot het H. Avontmael des Heeren ... door Focco Johannes ...* (3rd imprint; Leeuwarden: Tomas Willems Zuiertsma, 1653), p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Casparus Streso, *A Compendium* (6th imprint; The Hague: Christoffel Doll, 1661), p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, John Calvin says in his *Institutes* (IV.xvii, p. 42), 'let us remember that this sacred feast is medicine for the sick'.

<sup>55</sup> Joby (2008): poem 7, ll. 36–7, where Huygens addresses Christ saying 'Then, do not look at what I did, but at what you did and do/To lighten my burden and remove my stains'.

sacrament. However, perhaps we get a hint of something more in a poem Huygens wrote in 1684, shortly before he died. Here he writes:

I am not worthy Lord to sit at your table,  
But sit here now to feel more worthy.<sup>56</sup>

For some these lines may be easily explained. The sentiments expressed here do not seem to depart from the idea that the bread and the wine of the sacrament are merely signs,<sup>57</sup> which bring gifts of spiritual nourishment analogous to the bodily nourishment which bread and wine ordinarily bring, or, to use Brian Gerrish's succinct phrase, they 'present what they represent'.<sup>58</sup> However, I suggest it may be worthwhile examining more closely the language Huygens uses to refer to the bread and wine to ask whether for him they have any value over and above that of being signs pointing beyond themselves to spiritual realities.

Ordinarily, we might expect Huygens to ascribe no intrinsic value to the bread and wine, and this is certainly what we see in some of his poetry. In one of his later poems, he addresses Christ saying:

May we . . . cleave our hearts to you, our living Bread,  
More than to the livid hue of your mortal flesh.<sup>59</sup>

With the words 'livid hue of your mortal flesh', he is of course referring to the white colour of the bread in the Lord's Supper,<sup>60</sup> and here is saying that the faithful need to draw close to Christ, who, in contrast to the bread before their eyes, is the true living bread. Elsewhere, he is equally dismissive of the bread, referring to it as 'a feeble crumb of wheat'.<sup>61</sup> But this is not the whole story. In one of his witty epigrams, Huygens draws a distinction between the Calvinist understanding of the bread and that of the Catholic Church. He begins with the lines:

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.: poem 18, ll. 1–2.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, taking his lead from Augustine, typically uses the word *signum* to refer to the sacrament, though e.g. in later editions of his *Institutes* he used *symbolum* in IV. xvii, p. 2. In Huygens' own time, Streso refers to the sacrament itself as a sign saying 'the Lord's Supper is an external corporeal sign and seal of [the New Testament in Christ's Blood]'. Streso, *A Compendium*, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Brian Gerrish, 'John Calvin', in: *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp. 90–3, at p. 92.

<sup>59</sup> Joby (2008): poem 17, ll. 14–16.

<sup>60</sup> Compare Zwaan (1968), p. 81, note to ll. 15–16.

<sup>61</sup> Joby (2008): poem 2, l. 11.

God leads us through the Bread that evil men do make  
To heaven's eternal Bread; blind Romans are sick of this,  
And choke on human Bread, o Pope, o wretched man,  
You cannot go from one Bread to the other.<sup>62</sup>

Here we note that in the first line and a half, although he recognises that the bread of the Lord's Supper is made by human, therefore sinful, hands, it is almost like a door,<sup>63</sup> which God opens for the faithful to be able to access the eternal bread, i.e. Christ. It may be argued that this again ascribes no special worth to the bread itself, for it is God and not the bread doing the work here, but we could look at things the other way round and say that, without the bread and celebration of the Lord's Supper, the faithful might, at least to a certain extent, have reduced access to Christ. Elsewhere, Huygens also seems to ascribe some significance to the bread and the wine, when he refers to them as 'Holy Bread' and 'healing dew' in a poem he wrote in 1660.<sup>64</sup> Some may argue that Huygens commits a category error here and confuses efficient cause with instrumental cause; God, with the means by which God mediates himself to the faithful.<sup>65</sup> The danger of such an error seems to have been appreciated by a preacher in this period, who, whilst wanting to ascribe some special significance to the sacramental elements, said it is only 'in regard to their use that they are much more excellent than ordinary Bread and Wine'.<sup>66</sup> Another possibility is that Huygens means us to take these phrases figuratively. He might argue that to say the wine is 'healing dew' has something in common with a figurative interpretation of the words of institution, to which he and fellow Calvinists would ascribe. To put it another way, just as the eucharistic bread has something in common with Christ's body, but is not equivalent to it, so too the wine has something in common with healing dew, but is not equivalent to it. Huygens himself makes a similar point in a poem he wrote in 1655.<sup>67</sup> Here he somewhat playfully suggests that, if we take the words of institution literally, then

<sup>62</sup> Constantijn Huygens, *Koren-bloemen* (Amsterdam: Johannes van Ravesteyn, 1672), book XVI, poem 129.

<sup>63</sup> This sense in which the Lord's Supper is like a door taking us from one world to another is something we find in the poetry of George Herbert. In his poem, 'Holy Communion', he writes 'For sure when Adam did not know/To sinne, or sinne to smother;/He might to heav'n from Paradise go,/As from one room t'another./Thou hast restor'd us to this ease/By this thy heav'nly bloud'. *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), p. 183, ll. 33–8.

<sup>64</sup> Joby (2008): poem 13, l. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. John E. Colwell, *Promise and Presence* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), p. 60.

<sup>66</sup> Part of the title for sermon XXXVI in Reen (1671).

<sup>67</sup> Joby (2008): poem 10.

with reference to various passages in the Gospel of John, we should also consider that Christ is a Way to tread on, a Door to open and an actual Vine. He concludes in line 57 by asking whether people have not heard of the language of Canaan, i.e. figurative language.

But I wonder if we can say that Huygens is using figurative language when he writes in another poem in 1668 that Christ ‘fill[s] the table with nothing less/Than [His] own flesh and blood’.<sup>68</sup> To my mind, this may well not be the case, for it is orthodox Calvinist theology to assert that believers do indeed eat Christ’s body and drink his blood in the Lord’s Supper. But this is not the end of the matter, since for Calvinists Christ remains in heaven and the eating and drinking is effected by the Holy Spirit.<sup>69</sup> So, it should strike us as strange that Huygens says Christ ‘fill[s] the table . . .’, i.e. here on earth. It may be that Huygens is telling us that this is how he experiences the sacrament. But more likely what it points to is an inherent tension in Calvinist eucharistic theology between heaven and earth. In a recent study of Calvin’s theology, Randall Zachman points to this tension saying that, on the one hand, Calvin insists that ‘the Lord . . . exhibits and presents the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine of the Supper . . . [but] on the other hand, [he] insists that Christ is not to be sought in the symbols of bread and wine but in heaven’. Zachman argues that, in the final edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin seeks to resolve this tension by claiming ‘the descent of Christ to us both by the symbols and by the Spirit takes place so that we might thereby ascend to Christ in heaven’.<sup>70</sup> Calvin himself writes, ‘for they think they only communicate with [the body of Christ] if it descends into bread; but they do not understand the manner of descent by which he lifts us up to himself’.<sup>71</sup> However, phrases such as ‘the manner of descent’ do leave Calvin open to the charge often levelled at him by his opponents that he was overly reliant on the use of reason in his eucharistic theology. It is not my intention here to try and square this theological circle, but rather to consider whether there is another approach to dealing with the vexed question of the meaning of the words of institution. And here we come back to Huygens for, in a Latin poem he wrote in 1643, he reflected on possible alternative meanings of the word ‘body’ in this context.<sup>72</sup>

In this poem, Huygens takes the words *hoc enim est corpus tuum* (‘for this is your body’), a slight but important variation on the Latin words of institution,

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 15, ll. 3–4.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 29, Question 79.

<sup>70</sup> See Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), pp. 340–2.

<sup>71</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xvii, p. 16. Calvin has Lutherans above all in mind with references to ‘they’.

<sup>72</sup> Joby (2008): poem 2.



*hoc enim est corpus meum* ('for this is my body'), and offers up four possible suggestions for what the word 'body' means in this context.<sup>73</sup> On the first occasion, in line 7, he suggests it stands for the body of Christ broken for us on the cross. On the second, it is now Christ's glorified body in heaven, to which his own soul is attached in the Lord's Supper, to which it refers. In line 26, he repeats the phrase and this time he says that it is his own body, which will be raised from the dead on the final day, and which will become like Christ's glorified body. Finally, in line 42, he suggests that the eucharistic body is the body of Christ as the church. These reflections on the body raise a couple of important points.

First, it shifts discussions away from the meaning of 'is' in the words of institution and, further, allows us to move beyond dichotomies such as 'is' versus 'is like', figurative language versus literal, and indeed heaven versus earth, which seem to dominate debates on these words, and which may ultimately remain unresolved.<sup>74</sup>

Second, the final part of the poem reminds us that the faithful are to be united with each other, as the body of Christ, the church, and that this union takes place through the feeding on Christ's flesh and drinking of his blood by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Lord's Supper.<sup>75</sup> In a series of sermons we have looked at already, some of the titles refer to the place of community in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.<sup>76</sup> We see this of course in our own word for the sacrament 'communion', more fully 'holy communion', and it is clear that, for Huygens, the communal aspect of the Lord's Supper was very important. We saw earlier that he often refers to the sacrament as a feast, and when he does so he often takes account of other believers who have come to the Lord's table. He starts a poem written in 1668 with the words 'Here's good company at the feast',<sup>77</sup> and in a poem written in 1653, after admitting his own sin, asks whether any of his fellow guests are without stain.<sup>78</sup> In a poem he wrote a year earlier, Huygens begins by acknowledging all those things which he struggles with in life and the first of these is his

<sup>73</sup> This is much as John Calvin did before him in his *Institutes* (IV.vxii, p. 21).

<sup>74</sup> Discussions of the meaning of 'is' are to my mind somewhat fruitless, as e.g. in the Aramaic Christ spoke a separate copula is not usually expressed.

<sup>75</sup> See Question 76 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

<sup>76</sup> Reen (1671), 4, sermons XXIII and XXIV.

<sup>77</sup> Joby (2008): poem 14, l. 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 7, ll. 20–1. This raises another important aspect of Huygens' poems on the Lord's Supper, that of 'public piety'. He published many poems, including these, in which he acknowledged his own sin, and there is a sense in which he was performing a public act of confession, to make common cause with his fellow believers, and also perhaps to encourage them to perform similar acts of confession.

fellow man.<sup>79</sup> But, despite this, he comes to the feast and wants to celebrate it with his fellow man. So, for Huygens, as we note above, there is a deeply ecclesiological dimension to the Lord's Supper, in which he and his fellow believers can be united with one another and with Christ, and this finds expression in several of his poems, including the one he wrote in 1643.

As we know, the church of Huygens' day, like the church of our day, was not united, and perhaps paradoxically, although as he understood it, the *telos* of the Lord's Supper was that he and his fellow believers would be united with Christ, it was differing understandings of the sacrament, particularly as he saw it the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which divided the church of his day.<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

What we have seen in the poems by Constantijn Huygens on the Lord's Supper is, on the one hand, a preoccupation with his own sinfulness and need for repentance and forgiveness of others but, on the other, a great awareness of the grace of God and the atoning sacrifice of Christ when he died on the cross. This, it should be admitted, is not entirely unexpected from a man who, though complex and open to friendship with those from other traditions, remained a Calvinist throughout his life. What perhaps was unexpected is the central role that the Lord's Supper seems to play for him in the commerce between God and himself and, more interestingly, the sense of the efficacy of the sacrament in his spiritual life. That it is to some extent efficacious for him seems to be beyond doubt, if we take his poetry to be sincere. Those familiar with the history of the sacrament in this tradition may not find this so surprising, but it highlights that the notion of sacramental efficacy has perhaps been lost in this tradition, as in practice it has become little more than a meal of memorial. What this poetry offers us, in some small way, is a resource for recapturing the richness and indeed the sense of mystery of the sacrament in the tradition, and it reminds us of the deeply ecclesiological dimension to Calvinist eucharistic theology, which points to ultimate union with Christ through drinking his blood and feeding on his body.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*: poem 6, l. 3.

<sup>80</sup> In one poem (Joby (2008): poem 1), he refers to 'eternal strife' in the church. The poem was inspired by the conversion to Catholicism of a close friend, Tesselschade Visscher, and it seems that for him this 'eternal strife' was caused by the doctrine of transubstantiation. See also n. 49 above.