Spiritual marriage

A key to the theology and spirituality of Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711)

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Introduction

Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) was an important representative of the Dutch further reformation. He was brought up in the God-fearing family of Theodorus à Brakel and completed the main part of his education in Franeker. He also studied under the supervision of Gisbert Voetius in Utrecht for a number of years.

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After his ordination he became a pastor at Exmorra (1662), then Stavoren (1665), Harlingen (1670), Leeuwarden (1673) and Rotterdam (1683), staunchly defending the church’s independence from the state, opposing the Labadistic separation and becoming well known for his ability to combine theology and spirituality; see *The Christian’s Reasonable Service.*\(^2\) This book has been published and republished many times through the centuries;\(^3\) in 1715 and 1717 two German editions were published and\(^4\) it was also translated in English.

For Abraham Hellenbroek (1658-1731) there was no mystery surrounding the success of this book. During a service held in honour of Wilhelmus à Brakel, Hellenbroek declared that *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* was a book characterised by “a real piety that would endure the ages”\(^5\). These words seem to have been prophetical. At least it appeared that Hellenbroek understood the intention behind À Brakel’s writing. In his introduction to his *magnum opus*, he wrote that his motivation had been to write a book that could be used for spiritual edification. So, to understand the message of this book, we have to understand its spirituality.\(^6\)

The aim of this article is to study the spirituality of Wilhelmus à Brakel from the perspective of the spiritual marriage, because this

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\(^2\) Originally printed as *Redelijke Godsdienst*, Rotterdam, Reinier van Doesburg, 1700 (referred to as RG), J.R. Beeke (ed.), B. Elshout (trans.), *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, Grand Rapids 1992 (referred to as CRS). Book 1 of *Redelijke Godsdienst* includes Volumes 1, 2 and 3 of CRS. I use CRS and RG when referring to À Brakel’s work.

\(^3\) Pietas mentions 24 printings in the eighteenth century ([www.ssnr.nl/pietas](http://www.ssnr.nl/pietas), accessed 1 Oct. 2015). There are indications that some of the reprints are fake, as it is thought that the publisher announced a new print run to sell an older one. Pietas mentions five printings in the nineteenth century. After contacting the present publisher, I understand that this particular work of À Brakel was reprinted in 1908, 1965, 1967, 1973, 1979, 1981, 1985, 1991, 1994, 2002 and 2010 by several publishers.


metaphor is used at decisive moments in his *magnum opus*. Several times in his voluminous work À Brakel writes about Christ as the Bridegroom and the believer as the bride. In the chapter on the Trinity, Brakel first refers to this marriage. In his discussion of the human soul, À Brakel refers to the soul as if it was created for this spiritual marriage. When he deals with the central issue of the covenant of grace, it appears that the covenant can be understood as the marriage covenant. It is also striking how, in the chapter on the Surety of the covenant, he refers to Christ as Bridegroom. Writing about the offices of Christ, À Brakel mentions prophet, priest, king, Goel, Bridegroom and Immanuel. Apparently Christ’s acting as Bridegroom demands special attention, because it is a specific topic in the context of Christ’s offices. Also in the chapters on Christ’s godhead and suffering, À Brakel mentions the relationship of Bridegroom and bride.

À Brakel uses the metaphor of marriage not only in his Christology, his soteriology and his anthropology, but also in his ecclesiology when he clarifies that Christ is the Bridegroom of his church and that Jesus cannot be separated from his bride. He also uses the image of the marriage with Christ to explain the structures of the church and its authority. In the context of ecclesiology, the function of the ring in marriage serves as a ‘model’ to clarify the function of the sacraments; the ring represents the absent Bridegroom, confirms his faithfulness and mediates his spiritual presence. Participating in the Lord’s Supper therefore, is understanding

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7 CRS 1:178, 184 (RG 1.6.37, 42).
8 CRS 1:308 (RG 1.10.3).
9 CRS 1:441-42, 445 (RG 1.16.20, 24); 3:486 (RG 2.26.3).
10 CRS 1:483 (RG 1.17.26).
11 CRS 1:499, 616 (RG 1.17.7, 22.34).
12 The sentence: ““Christ is the Bridegroom of the church, she being continually presented as the bride in the entire Song of Songs””, clarifies that À Brakel interprets the marriage in Song of Songs as the relationship between Christ and the church, CRS 2:19, 24 (RG 1.24.18, 23).
13 ““No kingdom, republic, home, or society can exist without order. This is also true for the church […]. The Lord Jesus is the only and all-sufficient Head of the church - her […] only Bridegroom””, CRS 2:107 (RG 1.27.1).
14 CRS 2:475, 480, 488, 539, 573-74 (RG 1.38.11, 38.20, 39.2, 40.16, 41.5).
and obeying the voice of the Bridegroom,\textsuperscript{15} and promising one’s faithfulness to the Bridegroom in the denial of the world.\textsuperscript{16}

When we look at the communion with Christ as the heart of the Christian church, we can see many examples of the concept of marriage being used again and again to interpret spiritual life.\textsuperscript{17} The image is well suited for describing the mutual relationship of Christ and the believer\textsuperscript{18} and for explaining that believers participate in Christ’s sonship with the Father.\textsuperscript{19} The concept is also used to clarify the benefits of Christ as justification and adoption.\textsuperscript{20}

These observations lead one to the hypothesis that the metaphor of the spiritual marriage is vital to any understanding of several key-aspects of the structure of À Brakel’s theology and spirituality.\textsuperscript{21} It is relevant to search for the place that this metaphor has in his work, because this topic was not explicitly explored in the research of À Brakel’s theology and spirituality.\textsuperscript{22}

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\textsuperscript{15} “‘As you arise to go to the holy table, arise as if you were a bride about to be married, doing so in response to the voice of the Bridegroom Jesus, calling out, “Rise up, My love, My fair one, and come away” (Song 2:10)’”, CRS 2:591 (RG 1.41.9).
\textsuperscript{16} CRS 2:598 (RG 1.41.39). Compare CRS 4:39 (RG 2.37.1). This (Zwinglian) aspect can be found in Calvin’s \textit{Institutes} 4.14.1 but is missing in the reformed confessions.
\textsuperscript{17} CRS 2:88-90, 94-95 (RG 1.26.2-5, 10).
\textsuperscript{18} CRS 3:25, 287 (RG 2.1.28, 15.7.4).
\textsuperscript{19} CRS 3:486 (RG 2.26.3).
\textsuperscript{20} CRS 2:404, 420 (RG 1.34.77, 35.4.3).
\textsuperscript{21} In the New Testament the head-body and the vine-branch metaphor is also used to describe the mystical union with Christ. À Brakel also refers to these concepts, especially the head-body metaphor, without using it as a theological interpretative framework. John Owen mentions the marriage metaphor too in William H. Goold (ed.), \textit{The Works of John Owen}, 24 vols., London/Edinburgh 1850-1855 (repr. London/Edinburgh 1965-1991), vol. 1, 340-41, but it seems that he prefers the vine-branch metaphor, \textit{Works} 1:367 and 3:414.
In this article, I investigate the key-function that spiritual marriage has in À Brakel’s theology in greater detail. The research-question posed in this article is, therefore: How can the metaphor of marriage provide a deeper understanding of Wilhelmus à Brakel’s theology and spirituality? In answer to this question, I first explore the use and understanding of the concept of the spiritual marriage in a historical context. I then go on to investigate the relationship between the marriage-metaphor and three theological themes in À Brakel, namely the doctrine of the covenant, the doctrine of the church and spiritual life. These theological themes were derived from the abovementioned investigation and seem particularly relevant in regard to the marriage metaphor. After this investigation, I close with some conclusions and considerations.

**Spiritual marriage in its historical context**

The Jewish canon included the Song of Songs which was interpreted as a description of the relationship between God and the people of Israël. This interpretation was adopted in the early Christian exegesis, although the relationship between the Bridegroom and the bride then was interpreted as the relationship between Christ and his church. Origen (ca. 185-253/254) is seen as the first Christian theologian who applied the metaphor of the marriage between Bridegroom and bride to the individual soul rather than exclusively to the church as a collective. In the relationship between Bridegroom and bride on the one hand the human nature of the Bridegroom was important and on the other hand the gradual mystical ascent of the soul to Christ. Augustine (354-430), however, applied the bride of Salomon’s Songs again to the church.

In the history of interpretation and application of the Song of Songs the collection of eighty-six sermons (*Sermones super cantica Religion* bring in 1700? Guiding Reformed believers between Confessionalism and Pietism’ has not yet been completed. The most deep and extensive treatment of À Brakel’s spirituality has been made by De Reuver, *Sweet Communion*, 231-58, but spiritual marriage was not the focus in this chapter.

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Canticorum) of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) is very well known. His way of interpretation can be understood as an Origen-revival.26 As an Origen, Bernard interpreted the bride in the Song of Songs as the individual soul27 without denying the application of the bride to the whole church. In the meditation on Christ’s humanity the soul could ascend to the contemplation of Christ’s godhead.

The image of the spiritual marriage was used by mystics such as Richard of St. Victor, the Beguines, Ruysbroec and John of the Cross. The time of the reformation was also characterised by a reorientation on Bernard; Calvin, for example, had a high appreciation of Bernard. In his interpretation of Psalm 45 the reformer accepted the typological exegesis in which Salomon is a type of Christ and the bride a type of church which indicates his understanding of Song of Songs even though he did not write a commentary on it. Calvin thus had a more ecclesiological understanding of the spiritual marriage than Bernard and also understood the relationship with Christ in an affective sense.28

In the history of the reformed tradition the tension between the ecclesiastical and the mystical exegesis was a constant. See Theodorus Beza (1519-1605) and Godefridus Cornelisz. Udemans (1581-1649) followed Augustine and Calvin’s ecclesiastical interpretation of Song of Songs and it was his interpretation that was also decisive in regard to the comments made in the Dutch and English authorised version of the bible.29 This method of interpretation changed between 1640 and 1680 when both mystical and prophetical interpretations developed. This latter interpretation can found in, among others, J. Coccejus (1603-1669), C.

26 Boot, De allegorische uitlegging van het Hooglied, 41-42; Verduin, Canticum Canticorum, 233.
27 Boot, De allegorische uitlegging van het Hooglied, 64-66.
28 I. Boot, De allegorische uitlegging van het Hooglied, 102-12. D.E. Tamburello has shown that an affective knowledge of, and communion with, Christ is common to Calvin and Bernard, Union with Christ. John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard, Louisville 1994, however Bernard’s piety is determined more by the experience of love and contemplation while Calvin’s ideas spring from the framework of faith. For more detail about the relationship between Bernard and Calvin, see also T. Schwanda, Soul Recreation. The Contemplative-Mystical Piety of Puritanism, Eugene 2012, 38-42.
29 For Udemans’ influence on the Dutch authorised version, see Verduin, Canticum Canticorum, 630-702, 732-34. For his influence on the English bible, see 715-20.
Vtringa (1659-1722), S. van Til (1643-1713), J. d’Outrein (1662-1722) and F.A. Lampe (1683-1729).\textsuperscript{30}

The mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs developed partly in reaction to the prophetical way of interpretation. This stream of thought in the Netherlands included theologians such as W. Teellinck (1579-1629), G. Voetius (1589-1676), J. Koelman (1632-1695), H. Witsius (1636-1708), A. Hellenbroek (1658-1731) and B. Smytegelt (1665-1739).\textsuperscript{31}

These theologians used aspects of Bernard to describe the several spiritual stages of the soul,\textsuperscript{32} although a more Trinitarian framework of faith than Bernard’s was employed to interpret the relationship between the Bridegroom and the bride, one in which the sealing of the Holy Spirit could also function.\textsuperscript{33}

This development was not limited to the Dutch reformed tradition, there was also an interest in using language to describe experiential faith in the puritan-reformed tradition and a conviction that there was a biblical-theological foundation for this description.\textsuperscript{34} In puritan England, pastors and theologians made use of the language and metaphors of Bernard, especially of the metaphor of spiritual marriage just as they did in The Netherlands.\textsuperscript{35} This is an indication that À Brakel’s use of the

\textsuperscript{30} Boot, \textit{De allegorische uitlegging van het Hooglied}, 260-87.


\textsuperscript{32} Compare this with the experiential Christian life of Bernard, De Reuver, \textit{Sweet Communion}, 27-60.

\textsuperscript{33} Boot, \textit{De allegorische uitlegging van het Hooglied}, 294.


\textsuperscript{35} Schwanda, \textit{Soul Recreation}, 35-74. Pages 54-72 describe how the concept of the spiritual marriage was used by the puritans. See also his “‘Sweetness in Communion with God’”, 40-41, 58, 60. R.J. Pederson treats the contemplative-mystical theology of Francis Rous in \textit{Unity in Diversity}, 118-59. Pages 147-150 are focused upon \textit{The Mystical Marriage}. D.E. Tamburello shows that both Bernard and Calvin use the metaphor of marriage, \textit{Union with Christ}, 106.
metaphor of spiritual marriage cannot be isolated from his own context and the international theological developments in the field of experiential piety.

The relationship between the covenant and the spiritual marriage

The original title of `À Brakel’s book is THE CHRISTIAN’S REASONABLE SERVICE in which Divine Truths concerning the COVENANT OF GRACE are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated as well as The Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments. It cannot escape our attention that the covenant of grace is the leading focus of this work, it can thus be stated that every part of this work is determined by the doctrine of the covenant.

The first part, or book, deals with the ‘Divine Truths of the Covenant of Grace’ and describes themes of a Christian theological work, such as the doctrine of God, Scripture, anthropology and sin, Christology, the covenant of works and of grace, church and sacraments, and the order of salvation.

A closer look at the Table of Contents clarifies that sin is treated in the framework of the breaking of the covenant of works, while the doctrine of Christ, the church, the order of salvation and the sacraments are treated as aspects of the covenant of grace.\(^{36}\) Christology is called the doctrine of the “Surety of the covenant”, the doctrine of the church is to be understood as the doctrine of the partakers of the covenant and the order of salvation is described as “the ways in which the Lord translates the partakers of the covenant in the covenant” or “the ways in which the Lord Jesus leads them to glory”, while the sacraments are referred to as the “seals of the covenant”.\(^{37}\)

The second book of The Christian’s Reasonable Service has a practical character and concerns the life of the partakers of the covenant.\(^{38}\) The life of God-fearing is treated here from the point of view of God’s law, prayer, Christian virtues, conditions of the soul and spiritual

\(^{36}\) The introduction in Chapter 17 is a good example of this: “‘We will now proceed to examine particular aspects of this covenant: 1) the Surety of this covenant; 2) the partakers of this covenant, the church; and 3) the way whereby the Lord translates them into this covenant, directs them in this matter, and leads them to its culmination – glory’", CRS 1:465 (RG 1.17.1). Compare the introduction in Chapter 24 (CRS 2:3, RG 1.24.1) with the one in Chapter 30 (CRS 2:191, RG 1.30.1).

\(^{37}\) CRS 1:446 (RG 1.16.25).

\(^{38}\) CRS 3:3, 28-31 (RG 2.1.1, 2.1.30-31).
affections.\footnote{À Brakel treats the issue as to whether the law was a covenant extensively, see CRS 3:40-52 (RG 2.45.10-20).} The third book explores the dispensations of the covenant in which the progress of God’s work with his church in the Old and the New Testament is explained according to the message of the book of Revelation in the Bible.

In the first and second of À Brakel’s books we recognize the two partners of the covenant, namely God and man. In the first book the accent is put on God’s acts in the covenant, while the second book provides more detail about the dipleuric side of the monopleuric covenant. The believer as a covenant-partner has to be faithful, full of love, obedient and seeking a communion with Christ in prayer.

It is easy to understand how the spiritual marriage, as an interpretative framework of the doctrine of the covenant, leads to the most complete understanding of the covenant and its several aspects in À Brakel’s theology. If we interpret ‘covenant’ as the ‘covenant of marriage’, the structures of his \textit{magnum opus} are evident. As a marriage, the covenant consists of the two parties of Bridegroom and bride. At the same time, the marriage is a super-personal relationship which bears the life of faithfulness and love.

The metaphor of the covenant of marriage is developed further in À Brakel’s approach. God in Christ is the promising heavenly Bridegroom, while the sinner is asked to enter the covenant. The entering sinner accepts the conditions of the covenant and gives himself up to the heavenly Bridegroom in faith and love. The mutual acquiescence is essential for the covenant.\footnote{CRS 1:442 (RG 1.16.22). Unlike marriage, God’s covenant does not depend on the parties, but is vested in Him alone, so it is unchangeable, CRS 4:286-96 (RG 2.56.15-22).} In this context, À Brakel distinguishes four aspects in the spiritual marriage: “1) God’s offer to the sinner to bring him into a covenant; 2) the allurement by way of offering numerous advantageous conditions; 3) the consent and acceptance of this offer; 4) the right - granted to the partaker of the covenant by virtue of being in covenant with God - to request, in faith and through prayer, those benefits which God has promised and upon which he now has a claim.”

This also makes clear that the member of the covenant is a real believer. The covenant and the promises are essentially only applicable to those people who have entered the covenant. We can also say that the essence of the covenant and the election concern the same people; À
Brakel, therefore, rejects an external covenant.\textsuperscript{41} This is confirmed by his understanding of the people of Israel in the Old Testament: “In a general sense God established this covenant with the entire nation, but not with every individual. Everyone was to truly enter into this covenant by faith.”\textsuperscript{42}

To enter the covenant, it is necessary to be conscious that God deals with human beings in a covenantal way. So, we are convinced “that man is permitted to have, can have, and indeed does have covenant dealings with God (…) Such covenant transactions with God yield more clarity, steadfastness, comfort, and consistent growth. We wish therefore to exhort everyone to proceed to transact with God in the consciousness of entering into a covenant with God, since the Holy Scriptures so clearly and frequently make mention of this.”\textsuperscript{43} The consciousness of entering into a covenant with God implies that the believer accepts Jesus and his benefits consciously, presents these to God, and pleads for salvation;\textsuperscript{44} believers can also wrestle against spiritual darkness by claiming God’s promises.\textsuperscript{45}

The invitation to enter this covenant of marriage is wide, spacious and lovely. This happens in the preaching of “The gospel, which is the offer of this covenant.”\textsuperscript{46} All unbelievers receive an invitation to marry the Lord Jesus. À Brakel continually urges his listeners not to deny this proposal, but to accept the heavenly Bridegroom.\textsuperscript{47}

In this context it is understandable that À Brakel rejects the notion of the Labadists i.e. that a believer had to deny every personal interest in his salvation,\textsuperscript{48} because this condition hindered souls in coming to Jesus.


\textsuperscript{42} CRS 1:462 (RG 1.16.44).

\textsuperscript{43} CRS 1:429-30 (RG 1.16.4).

\textsuperscript{44} À Brakel writes about praying in the way of the covenant, CRS 3:451-52 (RG 2.25.11).

\textsuperscript{45} CRS 3:475 (RG 2.25.30).

\textsuperscript{46} CRS 1:462 (RG 1.16.31.2). F.J. Los underlines the emphasis on the free offer of the gospel in À Brakel, \textit{Wilhelmus à Brakel}, 153.

\textsuperscript{47} CRS 1:439 (RG 1.16.17). Compare CRS 1:449 (RG 1.16.27).

\textsuperscript{48} CRS 3:8, 22, 399-400 (RG 2.1.12, 2.1.25, 2.22.6). On pages 495-97 (RG 2.26.3) À Brakel deals with Labadists without mentioning their name. In Volume 2 he refers to them 15 times, but not to this aspect of self-denial. For more detail of the aspect of self-denial, see also W. à Brakel, \textit{Leere en Leydinge der Labadisten ontdekt en wederleijt in een
As Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695), À Brakel stresses that people may seek Jesus to be saved, because Christ reveals himself as the saviour of sinners.\textsuperscript{50} From the perspective of marriage, it is self-evident that anyone who enters the covenant of marriage expects to be happy by entering this new state of life.

Believers are also invited to transact with God as a partaker of the covenant so that they might enjoy the blessings of the covenant.\textsuperscript{51} The continuing deepening of self-knowledge, in particular, manifests the necessity of Jesus more and more: “They frequently, if not a thousand times, receive the Lord Jesus by faith. They always believe that their reception of Him has not been as unreserved as it ought to have been and that it has not been with sufficient clarity and sincerity; it was not as wholehearted as it ought to have been. This receiving of Him is their daily food and therefore they repeat it over and over, not so much with the objective to be included in the covenant of grace, but with the objective to be more and more intimately united with Christ.”\textsuperscript{52}

If we do not understand this covenant-character of the gospel correctly, it will cause much spiritual darkness: “Those who flee to Jesus apart from the foundation of this offer, seldom attain assurance about their state, unless the Holy Spirit deals with them in an exceptional manner. This assurance will last no longer than the duration of the sweet


\textsuperscript{50} This implies that self-love can be valued. Augustin made self-love a theme, De Trinitate X, XIV. In Calvin the positive valuation of self-love has disappeared, W. Huttinga, Participation and Communicability. Herman Bavinck and John Milbank on the Relation between God and the World, Amsterdam 2014, 68.

\textsuperscript{51} CRS 1:450 (RG 1.16.28).

\textsuperscript{52} CRS 2:323-24 (RG 1.33.32).
consciousness of grace. When this dissipates, they again live in fear, and question their previous assurance and comfort.” The opposite is also true: F.J. Los tells us that insight into the covenant-structure of salvation has been a very great blessing to many people.

These examples clarify that the believer as the partner in the covenant has an essential place in spiritual life. From this perspective À Brakel stresses the responsibility of human beings: They have to make a firm resolution. They have to use the means of salvation, they have to exercise continually and be zealous in the service of the Lord. In these emphases, we can also detect the stress on the human subject of modernity. If the human will is the decisive faculty of the human soul, it is understandable that À Brakel’s theology and spirituality are very appealing.

Evaluating this research on À Brakel’s use of the covenant in the context of the research-question, we can conclude that the marriage-covenant is an important hermeneutic key to understanding his doctrine of the covenant. The metaphor of marriage explains and clarifies how the covenant is related to spiritual life, namely as the formal context of the intimacy of spiritual life. The metaphor also works the other way round: The use of the metaphor of the marriage underlines what a high privilege it is to have an intimate relationship with the heavenly Bridegroom. At the same time spiritual life is the central focus of À Brakel’s comprehensive

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53 CRS 2:613-14 (RG 1.42.26).
54 Los, Wilhelmus à Brakel, 115.
55 The position of the partaker of the covenant is also strong in the Westminster Confession, see W. van Vlastuin, ‘Personal Renewal between Heidelberg and Westminster’, in: Journal of Reformed Theology, 5 (2011), 49-67, especially 59-61, 63-64.
56 In the third volume of CRS, 6 (of the 11) references to choice concern the human choice and I found 12 references to ‘resolution’.
57 Ibid. 231 references to ‘means’, which usually referred to the instruments of salvation used by believers.
58 Ibid. 130 references to ‘exercise’.
59 Ibid. 22 references to ‘zealous’ and 52 to ‘earnest’.
60 Ibid. 10 references to the believer as a human subject. We can also perceive this sensitivity to modernity when À Brakel devotes a chapter to the doubts about the faithfulness of Scripture, prompted by the methodic doubts of Descartes, CRS 4:199 (RG 2.50.1).
61 CRS 4:68 (RG 1.32.22).
The relationship between the church and the spiritual marriage.

One of the most distinguishing features in the structure of À Brakel’s *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* is the place of the church. He treats ecclesiology after Christology and before the pneumatological order of salvation. This special place is all the more evident when we compare this structure with other dogmatic handbooks in the reformed tradition.

In the first book of the *Institutes*, Calvin dealt with the doctrine of the Father, in the second with the doctrine of the Son and, in the third, with the work of the Spirit. In the fourth book he discussed ecclesiology under the heading of “The external means or helps by which God invites us to fellowship with Christ, and keeps us in.” When the church is called the ‘means’, this creates an impression that the church is instrumentalised and functionalised, and that it is not an ultimate purpose in itself.

This approach seems representative of the reformed tradition. We recognize it in the Belgic Confession. First, the work of the Spirit in justification and salvation is treated, and then the church. William Ames (1576-1633) in *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* and Francis Turretin (1623-1687) in the *Institutes of Elencitic Theology*, as well as À Brakel’s contemporary Van Mastricht (1630-1706) in *Theoretico-practica theologia* also follow this order.

Against this background, À Brakel’s choice is remarkable. This raises the intriguing question: What were the reasons for ‘father Brakel’ to make this theological decision? To answer this question, we have to look rather more precisely at the structure of his ecclesiology. We remember that À Brakel, in his treatment of the covenant of grace, spoke about the Surety of the covenant, the partakers of the covenant and the way in which Jesus leads the partakers of the covenant. This means that ecclesiology is a doctrine about the partakers of the covenant. The conclusion of this observation is that the church cannot be seen as an

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instrument, but belongs to the covenant as such. Being a member of the covenant and being a member of the church are different sides of the same coin.  

This becomes the clearer when we realize that the church - as an expression of the covenant - is treated before Pneumatology. Placing the locus of the church before the many aspects of Pneumatology underlines the important place of the church in God’s acts. The church is the joy of the earth and the honour of Christ, while the virtues of believers are the jewels of the church. Another result of this approach is that the unity of the church is self-evident. There is indeed only one Christ and one covenant of grace, so that there can exist only one church: “We wish to establish at the outset that there are not two or more churches, but only one Christian church.”

The character of the church also coheres with the understanding that only real believers can determine the essence of the church. Chaff is not grain, so unbelievers cannot be understood as real members of Christ’s body. They are in its deepest essence hypocrites and the church cannot be understood as an addition of believers and unbelievers.

This position also offers À Brakel an opportunity to explain the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. À Brakel rejects the thought that the invisible church involves real believers and the visible church contains believers and unbelievers. This implies that there are two churches which are not identical and which contain different numbers. He accepts the distinction between the invisible and the visible church, but in another way. In times of reformation and revival the church is more

63 Compare CRS 2:11 (RG 1.24.12): “The church is founded upon the covenant. As the covenant is, so is the church.”
64 CRS 2:648 (RG 1.43, thesis 2.1): “Who can reflect upon the church without being ignited in love toward her? Of all that is found upon earth, she excels in glory, purity, and excellency [...]. The church is “[...] the joy of the whole earth” (Ps 48:2) and “[...] a praise in the earth” (Isa 62:7). It is the chief joy of God’s children - yes, it exceeds all that is joyful.”
65 CRS 4:87 (RG 2.41.9.4): “Meekness is a glorious ornament of the church. The church is the glory of Christ, and when she is glorious, God and Christ are glorified.”
67 CRS 2:8 (RG 1.24.8). Jesus is the Head of the Church, CRS 3:278 (RG 2.15.2).
visible than in times of decay and persecution. The visible church can become invisible and vice versa. Furthermore, he uses the concept of the invisible church to refer to the inner spiritual dimension of the church, which consists of repentance, love and faith. This dimension as such is not visible, but has visible expression in the public meetings of the church, the confession of the church and the use of the sacraments. The metaphor of marriage is very apt. Marriage has an inner dimension of love and faithfulness, while there is also a visible dimension in the public aspects of marriage. These two dimensions do not concern two marriages, but two dimensions of the same marriage.

In this way, À Brakel clarifies that the visible expression of the church is essential, because it is the public expression of the invisible faith. This implies that believers cannot miss or reject the visible church. The ungodliness of other members can never be a reason for separating from the church or withdrawing from the Lord’s Supper. Despite the decline of the church, believers have “The Duty to Join the Church and to Remain with Her.”

À Brakel deals with the criticism that this concept of the church leads one to conclude that we can achieve a sound church on earth which also implies that we can know who the real members of the church are. This criticism reminds À Brakel of the Labadists with whom he had struggled so intensely. It is also probable that, through this struggle he

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70 See À Brakels treatment of this issue, De scrupuleuse omtrent de communie des H. Avontmaals in een verdorvene kerke onderrechtet, Rotterdam, Reinier van Doesburg, 1690.
71 Many people in the church do not love Jesus. This is apparent in the swearing, gambling, eating and fornication, CRS 3:277-79 (RG 2.15.2). The church of the Netherlands is corrupt in morals and novelties, CRS 3:359 (RG 2.20.9). See also CRS 2:73 (RG 1.25.18-19); W. à Brakel, Trouwhertige Waerschouwinge, 46-81; the introduction in Leere en Leydinge der Labadisten; Los, Wilhelmus à Brakel, 207-14.
72 The title of Chapter 25, see CRS 2:55 (RG 1.25).
73 CRS 2:14 (RG 1.24.13).
74 Of the 15 references to Labadie and his followers, all but one refer to the church. See also W. à Brakel, Leere en leydinge der Labadisten, 12-13. Compare Los, Wilhelmus à Brakel, 54-60, 191-231. According to F.A. van Lieburg, À Brakel’s Redelijke Godsdienst led to the development of a labadistic subculture in the national church, ‘Redelijke Godsdienst’, 192.
arrived at his high estimation of the church. His response clarifies his essential difference with Labadism: “One ought not to identify the church by regeneration, but by the true doctrine, and the sanctification of the confessing members conjoined with this true doctrine. These two are identifiable, and wherever these two are present, the true church is to be found. Whether someone possesses these two in truth or in pretence is a personal matter, however, and is not to be a distinguishing mark for the church for others.” \(^{75}\)

This implies that it is not for the church herself to unmask the unbelievers in order to move them out of the church; the church is a community of believers who confess the real faith and we know that there are hypocrites among the confessors. We will never, therefore, realise a sound church on earth. There are times that the Spirit revives and reforms his church, but that is not an act carried out by human beings. \(^{76}\)

Because of this expectation of the Spirit, À Brakel can evaluate the unbelievers in the church as potential believers. \(^{77}\) Despite the fact that he thinks of covenant and church in the smallest possible circles, he is still a pastor in the church privileged by political authorities. Although he does not explain this factor theologically, he also understands the church as an instrument to bring unbelievers to faith. So, the church is not only a gathering of believers, but also a mother of believers who can bring people to faith. \(^{78}\)

\(^{75}\) CRS 2:14 (RG 1.24.13). À Brakel understands the purity of doctrine as the first mark of the church, CRS 2:29-34 (RG 1.24.34-35). He describes the holiness of the members of the church as its second mark. He also refers to the proper administration of the sacraments and the use of the keys of God’s kingdom, CRS 2:34-37 (RG 1.24.36-37).

\(^{76}\) À Brakel is familiar with the concept of the outpouring of the Spirit, CRS 2:29, 61, 73, 84, 483, 487, 651 (RG 1.24.35; 1.25.9, 19, 28; 1.38.25; 1.39.1; 1.43.5).

\(^{77}\) CRS 2:100 (RG 1.26.15).

\(^{78}\) These notions are expressed by Samuel Rutherford in his understanding of a national visible church according to the model of the Old Testament which is clearly distinguished from the invisible church, *The Due Right of Presbyteries, or A Peaceable Plea for the government of the Church of Scotland*, London, Richard Whittaker and Andrew Cook, 1644, 244-88. See also J. Coffey, *Politics, religion and the British revolutions. The mind of Samuel Rutherford*, Cambridge 1997, 167-68. Rutherford rejected “’the pure invisible church of the elect, and the mixed visible church of professors’” and he defended the Augustinian understanding of the visible church as a draw net, 205-206. The National Covenant of 1638 in Scotland was an expression of this broader and public understanding of God’s covenant. C. Graafland remarks that À Brakel holds - in agreement with Beza and Zanchius - to a pure church in the midst of an empirical broad
This implies that, with regard to spirituality, we can speak about an ecclesial spirituality. Spiritual life has its centre in the union and communion with Christ in the heart of the individual believer, but it is not individualistic, because it functions in the midst of the church. The church has a meaning above the personal life. It is possible to speak about the super-personal dimension of the church, implying that believers seek communion with each other. This includes also communion with the spirits of just men in heaven.  

79 Christians have a catholic spirit which they feel unites them with the children of God all over the world whom they pray for.  

80 In short, they “cherish the church above their chief joy upon earth.”

From the perspective of the research-question, we can conclude that the metaphor of marriage fits the understanding of the church. As a married couple acknowledges the public and super-personal dimension of marriage, so the church belongs to spiritual life. This means that spiritual life is not completely subjective but is carried by, and gets its stability from, the objectivity of the church. Or, from the perspective of marriage, it is self-evident that unbelievers do not share the essence of the church, namely the mutual spiritual relationship with Christ. The metaphor of marriage as an interpretative framework of the church also clarifies that understanding the outer presentation of the church does not mean one can understand its essence or the essence of its real members.

The relationship between spirituality and the spiritual marriage

We look again at the chapters which deal with the church. Chapter 24 is called: ‘Of the church’. The next chapter is called: ‘The Duty to Join the Church and to Remain with Her’. Followed by the chapter: ‘The Communion of Believers with Christ and with Each Other’. Chapter 27 deals again with the church: ‘The Government of the Church, and Particularly the Commissioning of Ministers’. The next chapter about the church bears the title: ‘The Offices of Minister, Elder, and Deacon’.

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national church, Van Calvijn tot Comrie, 3:345-47. So, despite some practical openness in À Brakel, exemplified by his call for a broader understanding of the church, unlike Rutherford and Augustine, theologically he connects the visible and invisible church.

80 CRS 2:100 (RG 1.26.15). Jesus, angels and believers love the church, CRS 3:518-19 (RG 2.27.22). It is God’s glory on earth.
Chapter 29 is the last chapter about the church: ‘Ecclesiastical Authority and the Use of the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven’.

We conclude that, in the heart of ecclesiology, we find a chapter about the communion with Christ and with each other which reveals in two ways how we have to understand the church spiritually. We can think from the perspective of the church and conclude that the heart of the church is determined by the communion with Christ and the other believers. We can also choose to think from the opposite direction - from the point of view of spiritual life and acknowledge that that functions in the midst of the visible church.

À Brakel explains that there is a union with Christ which can be experienced better than any union expressed in words could.\(^{81}\) This union with Christ is not a relationship as such, but something much deeper. Believers are one with Christ in reality. Here, the metaphor of the marriage is qualified by the indwelling of the Spirit and the uniting of faith.\(^{82}\) It must be remarked that the union with Christ as a person is primary with regard to participating in the benefits of Christ.\(^{83}\) It is here that the great difference between hypocrites and real believers appears. Real believers unite themselves with the person of Christ, while hypocrites are only interested in Christ’s goods. Meanwhile, believers have an existential life-union with Christ and share his nature, sonship, satisfaction, obedience, intercession, glory, Spirit, strength, benefits and his sufferings.\(^{84}\)

After designing this framework, À Brakel is able to use it to spiritually explore the communion with Christ that grows from the union with Him. From this point he developed his thoughts about the

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\(^{81}\) CRS 2:89 (RG 1.26.3).

\(^{82}\) The metaphor of marriage is used several times to clarify the mystery of the union with Christ, CRS 2:86-90 (1.26.2-5).


\(^{84}\) CRS 2:91-92 (RG 1.26.7), 333-34 (RG 1.33.43).
communion with Christ - making six aspects more concrete. First, this communion is practised in contemplation of the council of peace, Christ’s incarnation, suffering, dearth, resurrection and ascension in which the believer reflects on the love and willingness of Christ, in order to glorify Him and to enjoy Him. Second, communion with Jesus implies that “the heart of the believer goes out in love to Jesus, viewing Him as his own and as being his Bridegroom.” In the work of À Brakel we perceive this mystery of love on a regular basis. When he describes the difference between the hypocrites and the real saints, he refers to this love as the person of Christ. Remarkably enough, in the second book, after finishing a chapter about the love of God, he dedicated a special chapter to the love of Jesus (3.58) as an indication of the special place that Jesus has in his devotion.

A third aspect of the communion with Christ is “familiar discourse”. This intercourse with Jesus is very intense and intimate, because it touches the deepest affections. The next aspect of the communion with Christ is exercised “in dependence upon Him. In love she leans upon Him, entrusting to Him her soul, her body, and whatever she may encounter.” Communion with Christ is also practiced “by asking counsel. If something must be performed or refrained from, she will neither proceed blindly nor will she trust her own judgment.”

The last spiritual frame which À Brakel mentions, concerns the use of Jesus’ benefits, especially his strength: “By making use of His strength and all His benefits as her own. The believing soul knows that she may avail herself of Jesus’ benefits, that this is pleasing to Him, and that He has given them to her for that very purpose. If a sin has been committed, she will flee to the blood of Jesus [...]. If she is weak, she will take hold of His strength, and in union with Jesus will overcome all resistance, doing whatever is according to Jesus’ will.”

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86 Compare De Reuver, Sweet Communion, 238.
87 CRS 2:325 (RG 1.33.33). The language of Song of Songs, together with the Psalms is the most suitable for expressing spiritual experience, CRS 2:324 (RG 1.33.32). T. Schwanda mentions the special place of Song of Songs in puritan piety too, “‘Sweetnesse in Communion with God’”, 39, 58, 60.
88 In the warnings against pietists and quietists, À Brakel stresses that the real communion with Christ has his reconciliation as its central focus, CRS 2:684 (RG 1.43.25): “‘You will then perceive that all this lofty speech only relates to the Lord Jesus as King, or as an example for imitation, but not as High Priest in order to find reconciliation and
À Brakel deals extensively with the effects of the communion with Christ. It provides comfort in all the circumstances of life. It is the mystery which helps the believer to bear the contempt of the world. Because Christ is our wealth, communion with Him is the fountain in poorness. Communion with Christ gives the believer the strength to bear persecution and to experience the nearness of Christ in it. Furthermore, communion with Christ is the only remedy for the many sicknesses of our souls. This can be applied to the fear of death. Communion with Christ also functions in the framework of Christian hope. From the intercourse with Jesus we long for the last judgment, because it is then that we will see the full glory of the Bridegroom.

Finally, À Brakel advises that the communion with Christ should continue without decline. On the one hand, believers have to be careful not to distress Jesus, not to be careless, not to be overwhelmed by the fear of human beings, while, on the other, they have to make positive use of the duties such as faith, patience, prayer and wrestling with God on the basis of His promises. He has to be used to the communion with Christ and to be patient if it is difficult. In this latter last case, the Christian has to be conscious that faith is not only affective, but also rational.

His accent on the life of faith is remarkable. However affective the communion with Christ may be and must be, ultimately the believer cannot be led by it, but by the promises of the Word. Despite the fact

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89 CRS 2:92-94 (RG 1.26.9). The chapter on Christian contentment is also important, CRS 3:379-396 (RG 2:21).

90 CRS 2:96-97 (RG 1.26.11).

91 Compare CRS 4:267 (RG 2.55.3): “Some are not aware of the fact that spiritual life consists in the enjoyment of union with God through Christ, and that it manifests itself in the conscious yearning of the heart after God, in being united with His will, and in conducting ourselves as being in the presence of God. Instead, such only take notice of the emotions and the sensible motions within, and the clear revelations of God to the soul.” The original Dutch expression “‘verstandige uitgangen des harten naar God’” is somewhat clearer than its English translation: “conscious yearning of the heart”.’

92 CRS 2:97 (RG 1.26.11). Compare CRS 2:466-67 (RG 1.27.20). In spiritual darkness faithfulness is more important than sweet experience: “‘Love will indeed manifest itself in sweet affections, but in essence it consists in the will being engaged by the intellect […]. It is a much more courageous deed to remain faithful to Jesus in darkness and while being subject to internal strife, than when you enjoy many sweet frames and the comforts of the Spirit’”, CRS 3:363-64 (RG 2.20.9.4). It is the great error of pietists and
that he has written so much about the sweetnesses, he remarks that the full sweet communion with Christ will be kept for heaven and that the time spent on earth is a time to fight. Apparently, the sweetnesses in this life are the first fruits of the full harvest. Furthermore, during life on earth we have to live by faith and in the understanding that our full direct enjoyment of Jesus will be in the future.\textsuperscript{93}

The framework of faith in God’s Word does not detract from the fact that the spiritual relationship with Christ has an affective character. À Brakel employs a rich devotional language that includes joy, peace, communion, love, experience, etcetera. Space prevents a more detailed analysis beyond the following treatment of joy. Looking at the Table of Contents in the first book of the \textit{Christian’s Reasonable Service} one can see that the theme of joy is discussed as a special subject. Unlike others in his tradition, À Brakel treats the affective dimension of faith explicitly. In the second book about the life of the believers there are more chapters which are related to the affective dimension of spiritual life, but it is nevertheless remarkable that, in the first book about God’s act, the affective dimension is also present.

It is important to note that À Brakel starts this chapter about the affective dimension of faith by making the remark that human beings are created for joy.\textsuperscript{94} The unconverted feel the emptiness of their hearts and seek satisfaction in visible things such as houses, jewels, clothes, money, gardens, meals, status, relationships of wisdom, but these things cannot fill the heart.\textsuperscript{95} The believer understands the idleness of visible things and is conscious that satisfaction of the deepest needs can only be found in God. À Brakel says that we accept Jesus for justification, sanctification,

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Believers cannot expect immediate experiences like those that Stephen and Paul had, CRS 1:652 (RG 1.23.44). A. de Reuver sees a tension in the eschatological aspect of À Brakel’s spirituality, \textit{Sweet Communion}, 239 but he acknowledges that À Brakel is careful to clarify that this interaction is not beside or without the Word of God. We can say, however, that the character as \textit{viva vox} (living voice) of Scripture functions maximally.}
\end{footnotesize}

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Compare CRS 2:455 (RG 1.37.1). Compare CRS 2:601 (RG 1.42.1), 3:287 (RG 2.15.7.3).}
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\footnote{CRS 2:456 (RG 1.37.2).}
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peace, joy and felicity.\(^{96}\) Apparently, joy is not only a fruit of justification, but is described as being on the same level as justification. This means that the essence of salvation can be described as joy.\(^{97}\)

Joy in God is an immediate effect of true faith.\(^{98}\) But, because this joy is not only a privilege for some select believers,\(^{99}\) it distinguishes the real believers from the hypocrites. The true believers “cannot experience any happiness until they may in actuality partake of and enjoy communion with God in Christ. Their joys and sorrows are proportionate to whether they are far from or near to Him.”\(^{100}\) “This joy is very different from the faint glimmers experienced by temporal believers.”\(^{101}\)

For this reason, À Brakel recommends that the ‘normal’ believer should get used to God, so that joy in Him becomes a basic attitude of his life. Believers should also be conscious that the melancholic life does not honour God.\(^{102}\) The lack of joy leads to spiritual decline and darkness. In this situation, believers have to seek the warming of their souls again. They have to realize that God is happy with the happiness of his children.\(^{103}\) Above that, having joy in God is a great strength helping believers to withstand deceits.\(^{104}\)

Does the concept of spiritual joy imply that we do not take the old nature of sin seriously? The Rotterdam pastor said that this question reflected a life lived at the level of the covenant of works instead of the covenant of grace.\(^{105}\) Joy in God is not founded on human spiritual qualities, but on the qualities of Jesus Christ.

The focus on joy is not restricted to the chapter about joy. A study of words such as ‘joy’, ‘joyful’, ‘rejoice’, ‘sweet’, ‘delight’ and ‘felicity’ in the total body of À Brakel’s work reveals that these concepts are manifold;

\(^{96}\) CRS 4:210 (RG 2.51.4).
\(^{97}\) CRS 2:601 (RG 1.42.1). Compare 3:263 (RG 2.14.1), 266 (RG 2.14.3), 286-87 (RG 2.15.7); 4:29 (RG 2.35.7).
\(^{98}\) CRS 2:459 (RG 1.37.10.1).
\(^{99}\) CRS 2:461 (RG 1.37.12).
\(^{100}\) CRS 2:327 (RG 1.33.35.4).
\(^{101}\) CRS 2:329 (RG 1.33.35.4).
\(^{102}\) CRS 2:462 (RG 1.37.14).
\(^{103}\) CRS 2:463 (RG 1.37.16).
\(^{104}\) CRS 2:464 (RG 1.37.18).
\(^{105}\) CRS 2:465 (RG 1.37.19).
research in the digital edition revealed 2,416 references.\textsuperscript{106} Apparently, À Brakel can be called a ‘theologian of joy’. It is his conviction that believers can serve God with joy and, in this way, he proclaims the Christian life. This joy implies that, in God, all the needs of the human heart are satisfied, because in God is found the fullness of happiness,\textsuperscript{107} and a satisfaction with His all-sufficiency.\textsuperscript{108}

This means that the application of salvation is an affected heart. Believers should meditate long enough to be touched inside by the message of the gospel.\textsuperscript{109} In these meditations is real sweetness.\textsuperscript{110} Therefore, À Brakel distinguishes between intellectual understanding and the touch of the heart.\textsuperscript{111} This leads to an “experiential vision, presently experiencing and tasting the efficacy and sweetness of these incomprehensible perfections.”\textsuperscript{112} In the continuing reflection on the sufferings of Christ, believers increasingly apply the comfort of reconciliation: “Therefore be engaged in such reflection and rest not until you can rejoice in it.”\textsuperscript{113} In this way, there is special joy in Christ’s kingship.\textsuperscript{114} The reflection on Christ’ glorification, in particular, offers believers the possibility of satisfying the human soul.\textsuperscript{115}

From the perspective of the research-question we can conclude that the inner affective and joyful communion with Christ belongs to the heart of the spiritual marriage. The interpretative framework of the

\textsuperscript{106} Smalley, \textit{Satisfied with the Lord’s All-Sufficiency}, 2. A search was also made of the words ‘enjoy’, ‘happy’, ‘happiness’ and ‘satisfied’. The result was that there are several more concepts that relate to joy in À Brakel. Jeremiah Burroughs calls the satisfaction of the heart “‘the life and soul of all practical Divinity’”, \textit{The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment}, London, W. Bentley, 1651, 1, compare 79. In the puritan Edward Leigh we also find an explicit connection between the happiness in God and the happiness in believers, \textit{A Treatise of Divinity: Consisting of Three Books}, vol. 2, London, William Lee, 1646, 123-25.

\textsuperscript{107} CRS 2:93 (RG 1.26.8).

\textsuperscript{108} CRS 1:437 (RG 1.16.17).

\textsuperscript{109} CRS 1:612-13 (RG 1.22.32).

\textsuperscript{110} CRS 1:614 (RG 1.22.32).

\textsuperscript{111} CRS 1:653 (RG 1.23.38). I wonder whether the word ‘reflect’ is the right word for the Dutch ‘beschouwen’, because À Brakel understood ‘beschouwen’ as an aspect of the spiritual communion with Christ and the direct spiritual vision of Christ.

\textsuperscript{112} CRS 1:654 (RG 1.23.39).

\textsuperscript{113} CRS 1:620 (RG 1.22.38).

\textsuperscript{114} CRS 1:570 (RG 1.21.13).

\textsuperscript{115} CRS 1:653 (RG 1.23.38).
spiritual marriage helps one to understand the character of the spiritual communion better, whilst its application helps to urge believers to have an intimate relationship with Christ. Although À Brakel does not make this explicit, one could also imagine this interpretative framework being useful as an extra instrument against the Labadistic understanding of the disinterested relationship with the Saviour.

**Conclusions and considerations**

How can the metaphor of marriage provide us with a deeper understanding of Wilhelmus à Brakel’s theology and spirituality? Research into the major theological structures of his *magnum opus* has led to the following conclusions and considerations.

First, the metaphor of marriage provides a clearer understanding of the structures of À Brakel’s theology and spirituality; the covenant is then understood as the formal status of the spiritual marriage, the church as the external expression of the spiritual marriage and the affective communion with Christ as the inner heart of the spiritual marriage. Using the interpretative framework of the spiritual marriage reveals that there is a great deal of coherence between the dimensions of covenant, church and communion.

Second, the investigations of this article show the unique approach of À Brakel in using spiritual marriage as a concept that unites covenant, church and communion with Christ. While, in the contemplative-mystical tradition, the metaphor of the spiritual marriage was used to understand the intimate spiritual and affective communion with Christ, À Brakel applied the same concept to the structures of the covenant and church. It appears that he unites the ecclesiastical approach of Augustine, Calvin and Udemans on the one hand with the mystical approach of Origen, Bernard and the later reformed tradition on the other hand. This means that this research has clarified that À Brakel cannot be categorised exclusively as a mystical interpreter of the spiritual marriage.\(^{116}\)

Third, the spiritual marriage metaphor must not be made absolute. Absolutising it creates misunderstanding and bias because the metaphor becomes an aim in itself and several aspects of the Christian

\[\text{\tiny \(^{116}\) Compare Verduin, *Canticum Canticorum*, 742-43, 746.}\]
life are pressed into a system which does not honour the fact that spiritual reality cannot be completely summarised in a human concept.

Fourth, the use of the spiritual marriage as a key-metaphor to interpret À Brakel’s theology and spirituality also clarifies the relationship between, and the coherence of, his theology and spirituality. His theology was not intended to be a method of speculating about theological issues, but to serve spirituality. We can also conclude that À Brakel’s theology has a practical spiritual character.

Fifth, the research in this article can also help to clarify the relationship between the covenant and communion with Christ. As opposed to some interpretations which claim covenant-theology is opposed to communion-theology, the metaphor of spiritual marriage pleads for a union between the two and clarifies that an antithesis between these approaches is not necessary and cannot be generalised in the reformed-pietistic tradition.

Sixth, the suggestions for further research fit well with the themes in this article. The historical roots of À Brakel’s theology of the covenant could be investigated, for example. Is there any coherence with Herman Witsius and how might the influence of Coccejan on À Brakel be described? What is the historical root of À Brakel’s ecclesiastical

117 According to J.B. Torrance, in the Westminster Theology, union with Christ is opposed to the contract-thinking of the covenant, ‘Strength and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology’, in: A.I.C. Heron (ed.), The Westminster Confession in the Church Today, Edinburgh 1982, 44-48. T.F. Torrance agrees and adds that the covenant belongs to a logical-causal structure in order to execute God’s eternal decrees, Scottish Theology. From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell, Edinburgh 1996, 136-44. We find the same approach in J. Knight’s understanding of the differences in Massachusetts, Orthodoxies in Massachusetts, Harvard 1994. See the introduction: “‘When I read Richard Sibbes, John Cotton […], I find a passionate mysticism […], an emphasis on charity at odds with the logic of contract’”, 2.

approach of the spiritual marriage, in comparison with other reformed and puritan pietists?

An interesting, deeper investigation could be made with respect to the church: how did À Brakel derive his remarkable approach and what was his approach’s influence? A deeper analysis of the precise ecclesiology of À Brakel would also deepen the understanding of this theology and spirituality. Many questions surrounding the communion with Christ are worthy of further research too. What, for example, was its relationship with the Middle Ages in general, and with Bernard in particular? It would also be interesting to examine the relationship between puritan theology and spirituality, or contemporary spirituality. From a systematic-theological perspective researching how the communion with Christ relates to the communion with the triune God could produce interesting results. In addition to this current research on À Brakel, a fresh approach to his anti-intellectual affective concept of faith would be useful in furthering the academic understanding of À Brakel and serving the pastoral practice of the church today.

Summary
The author of this article was struck by the fact that Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) used the metaphor of the spiritual marriage at decisive moments in his magnum opus The Christian’s Reasonable Service. Together with some remarkable theological decisions in this work it led him to the hypothesis that the metaphor of the spiritual marriage – as an interpretative framework – could clarify À Brakel’s theology and spirituality. An investigation of À Brakel’s understanding of the covenant, the church and the communion with Christ in the framework of the spiritual marriage was therefore made. À Brakel’s use of these concepts was explored in more detail and it was concluded that the metaphor of the spiritual marriage helps one to understand the coherence in À Brakel’s theology and spirituality better. The covenant can be interpreted as the formal status of the spiritual marriage, the church as the external expression of the spiritual marriage, while the personal communion with Christ as Bridegroom and its satisfaction of the soul can be understood as the heart of the spiritual

119 Compare D.E. Tamburello for the spiritual marriage in Bernard, Union with Christ, 91.
120 According to I. Terlouw, the concept of a ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ in the evangelical movement has its roots in seventeenth century pietism, Real Faith. Performativity and Materiality in the Personal Relationship with Jesus of Evangelical Protestants, Delft 2015, 35, 67-68.
121 John Owen wrote about Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Edinburgh 1990 (reprint of 1850-53).
marriage. This is not to absolutise the metaphor of the spiritual marriage in À Brakel’s theology, but to use it as an instrument to clarify the relationships within the structures of his theology. It also helps the reader to understand the relationship between theology and spirituality and clarifies that applications of the spiritual marriage metaphor to the church and to the mystical union with Christ are not mutually exclusive.

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