

Wilhelmus à Brakel's Understanding of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*: Faith as Voluntary Trust in God and Habituation in Christian Life

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One of the chief concerns of pastors and theologians during the post-Reformation era was the nature of saving faith and its relation to the assurance of salvation. Reformed theologians conceived faith as the sole instrument of receiving salvation. They wanted to clarify that the act of faith does not originate in human beings, and they wanted to affirm that righteousness is not imputed through the act of believing. In contrast with Reformed theologians, Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), a leading figure of the Counter-Reformation movement, hesitated to proclaim faith as the receiving instrument of justification. Arminians argued faith as a work or principle of good work, while the Reformed believed that faith was the only instrument for receiving justification.¹ While the Reformed devotees believed faith to be a gift of God that enabled believers to rest upon Christ with their will and heart, Arminianism believed faith to be a human act of believing as a means of acquiring justification.² This tendency on the

1. Jacob Arminius, *The Works of Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall (Auburn, Buffalo: Derby, Miller and Orton, 1853), 1:363–65 (articles XXVI), 2:474; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:114; Henri A. Krop, “Philosophy and the Synod of Dordt. Aristotelianism, Humanism, and the Case against Arminianism,” in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt (1618–1619)*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2011), 62–63; James T. Dennison, Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 1–4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), *Canons of Dort*, 3–4.2.6; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 11.2; John V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 218–22.

2. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 14,1–2; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 20–21; *Canons of Dort*, 1.1.5–6, 2.2.4; Arminius, *The Works of Arminius*, 1:365–66 (articles XXVII); Aza Goudriaan, “Justification by Faith and the Early Arminian Controversy,” in *Scholasticism Reformed: Essays in Honour of Willem J. van Asselt*, ed. Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot, and Willemien Otten (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 155–78, see particularly at 156–58, 163.

understanding of the nature of saving faith led Reformed theologians to conceive the ideas of *actus fidei* (act of faith) and *habitus fidei* (habit or disposition of faith).

The idea of conceptualizing faith as both an act and a habit originates in Thomistic theology.³ Reformed (orthodox) theologians employed the concepts of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei* to understand the active and passive role of human agents in salvation. Reformed theologians preferred to argue for *habitus fidei* in opposition to the Arminians.⁴ But there was both continuity and discontinuity on the understanding of the nature of faith among the Reformed theologians. Since *actus fidei* offers a nuanced concept of faith in which salvation is received through human actions and works, many Reformed theologians, particularly Dutch ones, tended to understand faith exclusively as *habitus fidei*.⁵ However, not all Reformed theologians understood faith as *habitus*, and some emphasized *actus fidei* over *habitus fidei*, including Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), one of the important figures in the *Nadere Reformatie* (c. 1600–1750).⁶ Hence, it is notable to investigate continuity and discontinuity on the understanding of the nature of faith among Reformed theologians.

While Reformed theologians contended on the distinction between *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*, the discussion of the distinction between *actus*

3. Tad W Guzie, "The Act of Faith According to St. Thomas: A Study in Theological Methodology," *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 29, no. 3 (1965): 239–80; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 1948), 2a2ae 2.1.

4. Maarten Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56, no. 2 (2003): 187; Bavinck, *RD*, 4:114.

5. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:114; Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York, London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1900), 396; Alexander Comrie, *Stellige En Praktikale Verklaring van Den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* (Minnertsaga: J. Bloemsmas, 1856), 386; Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum* (Ultrajecti, 1648), 2:499; Joel R. Beeke, "Gisbertus Voetius: Toward a Reformed Marriage of Knowledge and Piety," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 235–36; Besides Dutch theologians, English and Scottish theologians including Robert Rollock (1555–1598), John Davenant (1572–1641), John Preston (1587–1628), John Owen (1616–1683), and Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) understood faith as an infused habit. See John V. Fesko, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Justification and Infused Habits in Reformed Soteriology," in *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 253–55.

6. The term *nadere* is difficult to translate into English. *Nadere Reformatie*, however, is being translated as "continuing reformation," "further reformation," and "second reformation."

and *habitus* has received minimal attention in the literature.⁷ Furthermore, few studies have been conducted in English on *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*.⁸ Although several studies have explored the concept of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*, à Brakel's understanding of faith and his accentuation of *actus fidei* have not been deeply investigated.

This paper explores à Brakel's understanding of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei* in his theology, assessing the reasons that drove him to accentuate *actus fidei*. His understanding of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei* is dubious when he explains the nature of faith as a disposition. Despite his preference for *actus*, he did not utterly discard the concept of *habitus*.⁹ He attempted to strike a balance between *actus* and *habitus* by arguing that faith is a voluntary trust in God that must be continued throughout the Christian life. While he strongly stressed his argument based on *actus fidei*, he continued to rely on the concept of *habitus* in his discussion of faith and sanctification. À Brakel strongly affirmed the necessity of an active confession of

7. Many studies have been done on *habitus fidei*, but there are fewer studies on the distinction between *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei* than the studies on *habitus fidei*. For studies on *habitus fidei*, see Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," 172n3.

8. Recently, Maarten Wisse wrote an article that surveys the historical concept of *habitus fidei* and compares the Reformed view of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*. He observes the distinction between the habits and acts of faith and provides a theoretical basis for pastoral practice. Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," 172–89. Gerrit van den Brink also compares the concept of *actus* and *habitus* in the theology of Alexander Comrie (1706–1774) and John Cotton (1585–1652). By investigating Comrie's interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Q. 20, van den Brink finds similarities between Comrie and Cotton. Although he did not explore the view of à Brakel, van den Brink's article is noteworthy to understand the surrounding debates on the concept of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei* in Reformed theology. Gerrit A. van den Brink, "The Act or Habit of Faith? Alexander Comrie's Interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism Question 20," in *Reformed Orthodoxy in Scotland: Essays on Scottish Theology 1560–1775*, ed. Aaron Clay Denlinger (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 253–69. Joel Beeke surveys the distinction between *actus* and *habitus* in Reformed orthodox theologians, and he proposes à Brakel as a representative theologian who accentuated *actus* over *habitus*. He also compares the views of Comrie and Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) regarding *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*. Beeke observes that the Puritans were inclined to stress *actus fidei*, while Dutch theologians tended to accentuate *habitus fidei*. Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 147, 188–89, 284–85, 370. See 285n29. "Specifically, they [the debate between van Thuyen and Driessen] were being influenced by à Brakel's heavy accent on faith as an act (*daad*) at the expense of the principle (*habitus*) of faith."

9. Wilhemus à Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service.*, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Book, 2012), 2:266; K. Exalto, "Genadeleer en Heilsweg," in *Theologische Aspecten van de Nadere Reformatie*, ed. T. Brienen (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993): 151–208, see at 180.

faith, and he stressed *habitus* in terms of fitting habituation instead of the capacity to believe. Therefore, an investigation of the historical context of the seventeenth-century Netherlands must be undertaken to understand à Brakel's perspective. The distinction between the two concepts considers the theological controversies related to the Arminians and the historical context and pastoral concerns of à Brakel. There was both continuity and discontinuity among *Nadere Reformatie* theologians and post-Reformation Reformed theologians on the view of faith. Some accentuated *actus fidei*, but others emphasized *habitus fidei*. Therefore, it is noteworthy to investigate how à Brakel emphasized *actus fidei*.

Understanding *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*

The concept of and distinction between *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei* were derived from the theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).¹⁰ Although the concept of habit originated in Aristotelian philosophy, Aquinas adopted it into his theology. Initially, the concept of *habitus* consisted of two characteristics: disposition, and habits formed by repeated actions. In this mode, habit as a disposition forces one's will to perform certain actions, and these actions could become the habit of a person who acts in repetition. Aristotle stressed the concept of habit (*hexis*) as a state or disposition of human action obtained by repeatedly acting in a certain manner.¹¹ Furthermore, habit can be acquired and developed over time through training.¹² Habit also consists of the characteristics of inclination and disposition.¹³ The concept of habit initiates the disposition and inclination of the will to operate upon the heart to perform certain actions.¹⁴ Bonnie Kent has noted that "a *hexis* or *habitus*... is a durable characteristic of the agent inclining to certain kinds of actions and emotional reactions, not the actions and reactions themselves. Acquired over time, habits grow to be 'second nature' for the individuals."¹⁵ In brief, the Thomistic view of *habitus* indicates a duplex

10. Aquinas, *ST*, 2a2ae 2.1–8.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 73 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926): 1103a14–19; Christopher Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen* (London: Routledge, 2013), 70–71.

12. Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," 175–76.

13. Aristotle, *NE*, 1103a14–25; Muller, *PRRD*, 1:355.

14. Aquinas, *ST*, 1a2ae 51.1; Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 225.

15. Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues Ia-IIae, Qq. 49–70," in *Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 116.

nature of habit.¹⁶ On the one hand, habit is acquired by repeated action over time. On the other hand, habit is also a disposition, and an operative power of the will produces one's actions. These distinctions of habit led Christian theologians to distinguish between acquired habit and infused habit. Aquinas and other theologians understood infused habit as a gift from God that allowed people's impotence to attain good habits before God.¹⁷ Reformed theologians acknowledged habit as both a God-given disposition and a product of repeated action.¹⁸

Aquinas explored the logic and order of faith in regard to *habitus fidei* and *actus fidei*. He explained that disposition acts as a habit and that one's habit is known by actions.¹⁹ Following the Aristotelian understanding of habit, Aquinas also conceived habit as having the characteristics of both disposition and repeated actions. In sum, habit as a disposition produces an act of faith, and the continuation of the act produces a particular habit of faith. Thus, faith must be actualized in believers. The act of faith is related to the will and the rational power of the soul. One must know the object of faith, and one must consent to what one knows about faith. The act of faith, as a God-given disposition, agrees (*assensus*) with divine truth.²⁰

Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), a proponent of *actus*, explored the logic and order of the nature of faith. He defined faith as an act, and he listed the nature of saving faith in the following order: (1) seminal faith, (2) the disposition or state of faith, (3) habitual faith, and (4) actual faith.²¹ A reciprocal relationship could illuminate the relationship between *habitus* and *actus*, yet considering *habitus fidei* in the seed or seminal form and disposition as a predecessor to *actus fidei* is easier.

16. Thomas Aquinas interpreted Aristotle's view of habit in the context of grace. Aristotle, *NE*, 1103a19–25; Aquinas, *ST*, 1a2ae 1.1; Cleveland, *Thomism in John Owen*, 77–78; Jean Porter, "Virtues and Vices," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 266–67; Fesko, "Aquinas's Doctrine of Justification and Infused Habits in Reformed Soteriology," 249–66.

17. Aquinas, *ST*, 1a2ae 51.4; Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," 176.

18. Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," 176; Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum*, 2:499; Muller, *PRRD*, 1:355–59.

19. Aquinas, *ST*, 2a2ae 4.1–2.

20. Aquinas, *ST*, 2a2ae 2.1; 2.9–10.

21. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 2:7. Van Mastricht understood faith as an act of believing. See Van Mastricht, *TPT*, 2:4.

Theologians during the *Nadere Reformatie* made a *habitus-actus* distinction in their views of faith. Following Aquinas, Reformed theologians understood *habitus fidei* as having the disposition or capacity to have faith and *actus fidei* as the act of actualizing the operation of faith. *Habitus fidei* was conceived as a seminal form and disposition for belief, yet repeated actions also produce habit. According to Muller, “a person does not simply know a fact—he must first be *disposed* to know it.”²² Furthermore, *habitus fidei* signifies that faith is not a natural capacity within people; instead, God gives them the grace to have faith that has the potency and ability to make the act of believing possible.²³ According to this concept of *habitus fidei*, the general working of the Holy Spirit on faith and regeneration may precede any human act and habits.²⁴ Certainly, *habitus fidei* does not precede God’s grace, nor does it prepare for the act of faith; rather, God bestows grace upon people to assent to the truth revealed by God.²⁵ In other words, one cannot have sufficient knowledge of salvation and sincerely believe in God if God has not granted the disposition to do so. Reformers also affirmed man’s impotence to know and believe the divine truth. Therefore, *habitus fidei* refers to the passive receiving of divine truth.

In contrast to *habitus fidei*, *actus fidei* is the act of actualizing the operation of faith, through which the intellect and will appropriate and assent to the object of faith. This concept refers to the person who has already been regenerated through God’s Word and Spirit and who exercises these powers in the acts of believing and loving.²⁶ The actualization of faith consists of three aspects of faith known as *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). One must have knowledge of salvation, assent to that knowledge, and trust in Christ. While *habitus fidei* was understood as a seminal form of faith and entailed the disposition to have faith, *actus fidei*

22. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:356.

23. Van den Brink, “The Act or Habit of Faith?” 254; Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 134.

24. T. Brienens, *Theologische Aspecten van de Nadere Reformatie* (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1974), 185.

25. Joseph R. Laracy, “A Comparative Analysis of the Actus Fidei in Neo-Scholastic and Transcendental Thomism: An Investigation of the Theologies of Johann Brunsmann, SVD and Pierre Rousselot, SJ,” *Journal of Religion and Theology* 3, no. 3 (2019): 37.

26. Bavinck, *RD*, 4:114, 150; Muller, *DLGTT*, 21–22, 134. Muller writes, “The act or *actus* of faith, although it may be defined as an operation, is not an activity in the sense of a deed or a work, but an operation in the sense of an actualization in which faith comes to be faith or, in other words, moves from potency to actuality.” See Laracy, “A Comparative Analysis of the Actus Fidei in Neo-Scholastic and Transcendental Thomism,” 37, 39–41.

is actualized faith that transitions from *habitus* to action. In other words, *actus fidei* signifies the activeness of believing, and *habitus fidei* refers to the passiveness and seminal form of believing.

Historical Context of the Netherlands in the à Brakel's Context

As a result of the Great Revolt in 1572, the church in the Netherlands successfully continued the reformation of the medieval church.²⁷ The Reformed church was settled in the Netherlands by the end of the 1580s, and the followers of the Reformed church significantly grew by the 1600s. However, the process of reformation was difficult, as it confronted many challengers from the Arminians and Counter-Reformation, including Anabaptists and Catholics.²⁸ The confessionalization of Reformed faith theologically triumphed over the Arminians at the Synod of Dort (1618–19), and this victory imparted superiority to the Reformed church “over its rivals in public life, education, publishing, welfare, and preaching to large congregations.”²⁹ However, the process continued to progress as the life and culture of Dutch society was entirely different from the Reformed faith. Reformed devotees recognized the need for further reformation of the Dutch church.³⁰ Their main method of reform was carried out through preaching, which was centered upon the Bible and Reformed confessions.³¹ Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) was one of the well-known leading figures of this reform movement, known as the *Nadere Reformatie*, which emerged from the tension between sound doctrine and its application.³² Although Dutch Reformed theologians thought their doctrine was sound and biblical, they recognized the gap between the Reformed doctrine and the impious Christian life. As a counterpart to English Puritanism, *Nadere Reformatie* theologians sought “to foster biblical and God-glorifying experiential piety and ethical precision

27. C. Graafland, W. J. op 't Hof, and F. A. van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie: Opnieuw een poging tot begripsbepaling,” *Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie* 19 (1995): 123.

28. Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 361–449; Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 123–24, 132–33.

29. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 653.

30. Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 125–26.

31. Brienens, *De Prediking van de Nadere Reformatie*, 200–203; C. Graafland, “Schriftleer en Schriftverstaan in de Nadere Reformatie,” in *Theologische Aspecten van de Nadere Reformatie*, ed. T. Brienens (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1993), 29.

32. Arie de Reuver, “Wat Is Het Eigene van de Nadere Reformatie?” *Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie* 18, no. 2 (1994): 146–47.

in the life of individuals, churches, and the entire nation.”³³ The *Nadere Reformatie* was a reformation movement aimed at reforming Christian life, church, and society.³⁴ *Nadere Reformatie* theologians exhorted Christians through Bible-centered preaching and the Reformed confessions, hoping that their audience would have personal experience of the Christian faith and piety.

While the Synod of Dort brought great privileges to the Reformed church, the ensuing outcome did not mean that Calvinism conquered the Netherlands. Calvinists were still few regardless of their dramatic growth, and a considerable portion of the population began to be attracted to Reformed Christianity.³⁵ The Synod of Dort was decided inside the church, while the influence of Calvinism in the Netherlands was outside the church. The Reformed church confessed its faith in light of Calvinism, and it began to influence society. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the number of Reformed Christians grew significantly, and approximately one-third of the Dutch population identified as Reformed once the state accepted the Reformed church as the national church. However, in the Reformed church a considerably large number of inauthentic churchgoers or “lovers” of the Reformed religion existed.³⁶ According to Willem van Asselt and Paul Abels, such churchgoers “were people who would listen to the Sunday sermon but would not or could not (yet) confess because they could not endorse Reformed doctrine unconditionally and did not wish to accept a far-reaching involvement of the church in their daily activities (discipline or censorship).”³⁷

Furthermore, while civil magistrates and cultural elites were interested in studying theology, the Cartesian movement had created a broad intellectual milieu, which led many in Holland “not to make much of religion,” which led them to leave the religious faith.³⁸ Van Asselt and Abels note, “The increase in the number of complaints about apostasy to other religions in the second half of the [seventeenth] century shows that the large group

33. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 383–413, see particularly at 383–85; Cornelis Pronk, “The Dutch Puritans,” *The Banner of Truth*, no. 154–55 (July–August 1976): 3.

34. Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 108–10.

35. Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 125.

36. Willem J. Van Asselt and Paul H.A.M. Abels, “The Seventeenth Century,” in *Handbook of Dutch Church History* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 282–83.

37. Van Asselt and Abels, “The Seventeenth Century,” 282.

38. Van Asselt and Abels, “The Seventeenth Century,” 291; Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 925; Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 129–30.

of people not united to any church or religion had been greatly reduced.”³⁹ Apostasy and spiritual dryness of Christians were important concerns for Reformed devotees.

Although the Synod of Dort limited the Arminians's preaching to their congregations, thereby leading to a decrease in their power, the Arminians took control of the government of Holland in the 1640s as Dutch society began to depart from the Reformed faith.⁴⁰ The *Nadere Reformatie* addressed the theological controversy related to the Arminians and admonished against adultery, prostitution, drunkenness, frivolity, ribaldry, ostentation, and the violation of the Sabbath.⁴¹ While the provinces of the Netherlands supported the Reformed church, the Dutch society was considerably different from the expectations of the representatives of the *Nadere Reformatie*.⁴² The Reformed devotees had faced the challenges posed by Arminianism, and they felt the need to exhort Christians with no pietistic experience of Christianity, weak professions of faith, and morally corrupted lives.

À Brakel was sensible to the historical and ecclesiastical context of the Dutch church and society, and he deliberated the moral corruption of the Christians. He spoke against sexual sins that were widely practiced in the Netherlands. In his discourse on the seventh commandment of the Decalogue, he listed the sins that are prohibited. He spoke against sexual sin and common situations in society that may lead to sexual sin, warning against adultery, incest, sodomy, fornication, polygamy, premarital intercourse, verbal unchastity, lustful thoughts, dancing, and idleness.⁴³ These corrupt lifestyles engendered a lack of faith among Christians, and even the Reformed church did not represent an ideal Christianity.⁴⁴ Therefore, the Labadists, a seventeenth-century Protestant religious community that emphasized spiritual purity of the church, criticized the moral corruption of both the ministers and members of the church. Labadists left the church and became separatists, intending to become a pure community that

39. Van Asselt and Abels, “The Seventeenth Century,” 292.

40. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 462–65, 474, 661; Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 125.

41. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 475, 661, 682, 692.

42. Van Asselt and Abels, “The Seventeenth Century,” 281–82; Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 125, 145.

43. À Brakel, CRS, 3:206–13; Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, “Wilhelmus à Brakel's Biblical Ethics of Spirituality,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 8, no. 2 (2016): 114–16; Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 145.

44. Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, “Nadere Reformatie,” 147.

sought the perfection of the visible church.⁴⁵ Labadists sought to reform both private and public life with an intense asceticism and with chiliastic tendencies. Labadists were dissatisfied with spiritual declension and moral corruptions in the church, forming a community separated from the world. Due to their extreme view of separation, Labadist gatherings were officially prohibited throughout the Dutch Republic.⁴⁶ Initially, à Brakel was attracted to Labadism, but later he criticized the doctrinal and spiritual aspects of the Labadists.⁴⁷

In contrast to the Labadists, à Brakel stressed that God was the keeper of His church. Although corruptions fluctuated within the visible church, à Brakel claimed that the church's existence did not depend on sinful people's piety or corruption. Rather, the church existed by God's grace and is founded on His covenant.⁴⁸ The Labadists and their critics proved that moral decline was evident in the church.⁴⁹ In opposition to the Labadists, à Brakel observed that purity of doctrine was the first mark of the church, and the holiness of the members was its second mark. He believed that the objective of true believers is to discern and experience divine truth in their hearts.⁵⁰ À Brakel also observed that both the unregenerated and the regenerated exist in the visible church.⁵¹ In this manner, he believed that many are called, but few are chosen. If one is elected, then one should experience and practice faith rather than merely attending the church. For this reason, à Brakel accentuated *actus fidei*, and, in line with the goal of *Nadere Reformatie*, he emphasized the importance of heartfelt experience of the faith.

45. Fred van Lieburg, "Warning against the Pietists: The World of Wilhelmus à Brakel," in *Enlightened Religion: From Confessional Churches to Polite Piety in the Dutch Republic*, ed. Joke Spaans (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 351.

46. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 669–71.

47. Willem van Vlastuin, "Inleiding," in *Redelijke Godsdienst* (Apeldoorn: De Banier, 2016), 11–45.

48. À Brakel, CRS, 2:23–25, 60–63, 71–72, 83; Van Lieburg, "Warning against the Pietists," 351.

49. Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, "Nadere Reformatie," 126–27. See Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Leere en Leydinge der Labadisten* (Reinier van Doesburgh, 1685). He also criticized several doctrinal and spiritual aspects of the Labadists.

50. À Brakel, CRS, 2:14, 29–37, 315; Willem van Vlastuin, "Spiritual Marriage: A Key to the Theology and Spirituality of Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711)," *Journal for the History of Reformed Pietism* 2, no. 2 (2016): 27–53.

51. T. Brienens, *De Prediking van de Nadere Reformatie*. (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1974), 119.

It is noteworthy to examine why à Brakel placed a strong emphasis on *actus fidei*. There were agreements and disagreements among *Nadere Reformatie* theologians and even among the post-Reformation Reformed theologians. While both groups of theologians agreed that faith is a gift of God and a received instrument of salvation, their concerns caused disagreements in their views of faith. Those who accentuated *actus fidei* considered faith as active confessions and the outcome of the sincere heart. In contrast, those who underlined *habitus fidei* were afraid of Arminianism, and they thought defining faith as an act leaves room for an Arminian understanding of the faith. Hence, many Reformed theologians conceived *habitus fidei* at the expense of *actus fidei*, but some theologians, notably à Brakel, held *actus fidei* due to their pastoral concerns.

In discussing personal experience of faith and salvation, Reformed theologians carefully examined the Reformed views of assurance of salvation and the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), following discussions of *actus fidei* and *habitus fidei*.⁵² While it is probable that his experience of moral corruptions and lack of faith in the church led à Brakel to underline *actus fidei*, there was discontinuity and discord among the *Nadere Reformatie* theologians. In other words, regardless of the moral corruptions and lack of faith in the church, *Nadere Reformatie* theologians had disagreements in their views of faith.

For continuity, *Nadere Reformatie* theologians agreed upon faith as a gift of God and a receiving instrument of justification.⁵³ For them, justification was grounded in God's grace, and they believed that good works were insufficient to receive salvation. However, there were disagreements in the *actus-habitus* distinction.

On the one hand, à Brakel, Van Mastricht, Johannes Verschuur (1680–1737), Francis Turretin (1623–1687), Herman Witsius (1636–1708), and William Ames (1576–1633) upheld *actus fidei* as they emphasized the activeness of faith, believing faith to be one of the fundamental principles of living in the presence of God. For them, saving faith was an act, and *habitus* was insufficient.⁵⁴ Because many were staying in the church instead of being the church, à Brakel wanted to exhort Christians to actively confess their

52. Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, "Nadere Reformatie," 134–35.

53. C. Graafland, *De Zekerheid van Het Geloof* (Amsterdam: Bolland, 1977), 197; Brien, *De Prediking van de Nadere Reformatie*, 185.

54. Adriaan Cornelis Neele, *Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706): Reformed Orthodoxy: Method and Piety* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 110, 119; Van Mastricht, *TPT*, 2:3–4, 7.

faith in Christ.⁵⁵ À Brakel believed that faith precedes justification, and he exhorted believers to join and remain in the church.⁵⁶

Strong emphasis on *actus fidei* is commonly seen in those who believe that Christians ought to live unto God. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) worried about the voluntaristic and subjective approach in which the context of faith disappeared in the emphasis on *actus fidei*.⁵⁷

55. Though they argued *actus fidei* slightly differently, it is evident that they emphasized *actus fidei* in their accentuation of Christians' sincere obedience to the Lord. Van Mastricht understood faith as a receiving act (*actus fidei*) that comprehends the person and work of Christ. He realized how papists, Remonstrants, and Socinians understood faith as work in the matter of justification, so he claimed that Reformed theologians should reject faith as a work or an act of obedience in receiving justification. See Van Mastricht, *TPT*, 2:3–6, 18; Neele, *Petrus van Mastricht*, 118–20. Verschuur asserted faith as the key principle of the Christian life, for the righteous shall live by his faith (Hab. 2:4). To him, faith enabled Christians to participate in the covenant of grace, and the Lord preserves the faithful. For faith is living and true; justifying faith brings the act as its fruit. See Johannes Verschuur, *Waarheid in Het Binnenste, of, Bevindelijke Godgeleerdheid in Veertien Zamenspraken, Benevens Eene Heilige Oefening, of, Alleenspraak Der Ziel En Eene Belijdenispredikatie*, trans. Hendrik Nieuwhuis (Appingedam: H. C. Mekel, 1862), 163–64. Turretin understood faith as man's answer to the call of God. He defined faith as a direct and reflex act of humans, consisting of knowing, assenting, and trusting. He rejected any notion of synergism for he affirmed the impotence of the corrupted faculties of man. He recognized the danger of defining faith as an act, nevertheless he carefully discussed dangerous arguments of synergism and argued *actus fidei*. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 15.4.13–16, 15.5.1–6, 15.5.10, 15.5.13–21, 15.6.1–35, 15.7.1, 15.8.1–14, 15.10.1. Witsius stressed that faith is a certain complex thing that consists of various acts. He recognized that there could be various kinds and degrees of successful acts. He observed that the act of faith could exist in incomplete forms and faith in Christians could be shaken by circumstances. But true Christians will triumph with their faith in Christ, and so Witsius exhorted Christians to have the assurance of faith in Christ. See Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank, vol. 1 (London: T. Tegg & Son, 1837), 337, 340–42, 348–53. Ames also argued imperfection of *habitus*, and so he understood faith as the first act of the Christian life whereby Christians live to God in Christ. See William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 81–82 (Book 1.3.6, 1.3.18).

56. Willem van Vlastuin, "Rechvaardiging," in *Reformatie, toen en nu. Over rechtvaardiging, Schriftgezag en vreemdelingschap*, by Willem van Vlastuin, P. de Vries, and R. van Kooten (Apeldoorn: Labarum Academic, 2018), 38; Willem van Vlastuin, "The Fruitfulness of a Paradox: The Doctrine of the Covenant in Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) Reapplied" (International Conference Researchgroup BEST, Apeldoorn, March 30, 2017); forthcoming; à Brakel, *CRS*, 2:55.

57. Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 396. Kuyper noted that à Brakel's view of faith came from a slight deviation of Ames from Calvin and Beza, and that à Brakel's view of faith inclined too much toward subjectivity. Kuyper observed that à Brakel's view of faith was "right in opposing the petrified dogmatism of his day. But when he systemized his

On the other hand, Comrie and Voetius stressed the more passive aspect of faith by accentuating *habitus fidei*. While they were also concerned about the historical/spiritual and doctrinal context of the church in the Netherlands, they were aware of the Arminian notion of faith being work, and they thought it safer to underline *habitus fidei* rather than *actus fidei*.⁵⁸ Comrie observed that those who always spoke of faith as an act or acts distorted question twenty-one of the Heidelberg Catechism.⁵⁹ For Comrie, true faith was not in the act or acts but in the habit or capacity to believe. His understanding of faith was closely associated with his doctrine of justification, and he understood the *habitus* for sinners as utterly passive in receiving God's salvation.⁶⁰ Willem van Vlastuin has argued that Comrie placed justification completely outside of man to underline *sola gratia*.⁶¹ According to Beeke, Comrie emphasized the implanting work of the Holy Spirit upon godless and faithless sinners. Comrie believed that faithless sinners were justified by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and nothing in the sinner deserved God's grace. Hence, implanting the *habitus* could be considered both foundational and sufficient for salvation, for imputation of righteousness implied nothing from the sinner.⁶² For Comrie, justification

opposition he went too far in that direction." See Neele, *Petrus van Mastricht*, 111–13, 135; Johannes Cloppenburgh, *Theologica Opera Omnia* (Amsterdam: Gerardus Borstius, 1684), xii.2, xxxii–liv, 1045–50.

58. Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (New York, London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1900), 395–96.

59. Alexander Comrie, *Heidelberger Catechismus* (Amsterdam: Nicolaas Byl, 1753), 447; Kuyper, *The Works of the Holy Spirit*, 393. But Cloppenburgh observed that the Heidelberg Catechism saw faith as an act of the will consisting of *fiducia*. There were various views and interpretations of the Heidelberg Catechism. While Comrie interpreted faith in Heidelberg Catechism Q. 21 as *habitus fidei*, Zacharias Ursinus explained faith as doing. Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Elm Street Printing Company, 1888), Q. 21.

60. Exalto, "Genadeleer En Heilsweg," 184–85, 196–97. In light of Thomistic scholasticism, Comrie stated that there must be a *habitus* first; only then *actus* could be followed as an outcome and practice of faith. He avoided the notion of "preparations" in receiving salvation, for the notion of preparation could give a nuance of synergism.

61. Van Vlastuin, "Rechtvaardiging," 39.

62. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 284–291, see particularly at 286. Similar to Comrie, Voetius also argued that the *habitus* itself could be considered as faith. He said, "This [principle] cannot be called faith except by analogy and improperly by metonymy of the cause or of the principle: formally this is no more faith than a seed is a tree, or an egg a chicken, or a bulb a flower." Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum*, 2:499, quoted in Bavinck, *RD*, 4:114. Though *habitus* itself is considered as faith, Voetius believed that *habitus* could be more advanced in the exercise of piety. According to Voetius, the acts of faith have different

and God's saving work precede one's faith. The Holy Spirit works upon the elect so that the elected believer will have disposition of faith. Hence, while the *actus* is necessary and consequently follows as the aftereffect of *habitus*, *habitus* itself is sufficient for salvation, though believers will have work (*actus*) as fruit.⁶³ In other words, as Beeke observes, "anyone who lacks the capacity (*habitus*) will never be able to exercise believing or seeing (*actus*). The *habitus* is foundational, and the *actus* is dependent upon it, though it necessarily follows."⁶⁴ Kuyper also noted, "Hence the reality or sincerity of the imparted faith does not depend upon the acts of faith, but the sincerity of these acts depends upon the reality and sincerity of the faculties or habit from which they spring."⁶⁵

Furthermore, Comrie hesitated to speak of the *actus fidei* as defining faith as work or act of the Christian because it might imply that faith is primarily a human response, an Arminian definition of faith.⁶⁶ Comrie understood that *actus fidei* indicates a human role in salvation whenever an active role was assigned to faith. Therefore, understanding the nature of faith as *actus* implies a heretical error made by Arminianism.⁶⁷ Certainly, Comrie was also worried about those who emphasized works righteousness in receiving justification (i.e., Pelagians, Remonstrants, Roman Catholics, and Neonomians). He thought that every work of humans is unclean and

degrees, and the acts of faith could be incomplete; further acts of faith could be confused with sanctification. Hence, he observed *habitus* itself could be considered as faith. See Voeitus, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum*, 2:499–501.

63. Van Vlastuin, "Rechtaerdiging," 38–39; Alexander Comrie, *The Abc of Faith*, trans. J. Marcus Banfield (Grand Rapids: Zoar, 1978), 32l; Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 288–89; Comrie, *Heidelberger Catechismus*, 561.

64. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 285. See Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 393–94.

65. Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 393–94.

66. Exalto, "Genadeleer En Heilsweg," 197; Wisse, "Habitus Fidei: An Essay on the History of Concept," 184; Bavinck, *RD*, 4:114, 150; Van Vlastuin, "Rechtaerdiging," 39; Graafland, Hof, and van Lieburg, "Nadere Reformatie," 127–28; C. Graafland, "Alexander Comrie (1706–1774)," in *De Nadere Reformatie. Beschrijving van Haar Voornaamste Vertegenwoordigers*, ed. T. Brienen ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), 337–39; Comrie, *Heidelberger Catechismus*, 39–40, 428–29, 447; Alexander Comrie, *Brief over de Regtvaardigmaking Des Zondaars* (Ede: Westfriesche Boekhandel, 1990), 144–45.

67. Graafland, "Alexander Comrie," 339. Coming from England and Scotland, Comrie knew about the Marrow Controversy and a danger of neonomianism. See Van den Brink, "Comrie En Het Antinomianisme," 133; Dirk Baarsen, "Owen in Een Nederlandsch Gewaart: Enkele Opmerkingen over de Receptie van de Geschriften van John Owen (1616–1683) Door Alexander Comrie (1706–1774)," *Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie* 38, no. 1 (2014), 36, 41, 45.

imperfect, so the act of faith does not deserve righteousness and merit.⁶⁸ Though he was not antinomian, he was inclined to put his position close to the antinomian position, for he repudiated any role of human action in receiving justification.⁶⁹ To him, faith was merely a receiving instrument or pipe that connects the source to the fountain.⁷⁰

There were agreements and disagreements among Reformed theologians. Though à Brakel was considered a representative theologian who was often compared with Comrie, à Brakel was not the only one who accentuated *actus fidei*. There were disagreements and discontinuity among the *Nadere Reformatie* theologians and among the post-Reformation Reformed theologians. Reformed theologians and Reformed confessions tended to follow *habitus fidei* rather than *actus fidei*, as accentuating *habitus fidei* avoided the notions of works righteousness in salvation.⁷¹ The difference between Comrie and à Brakel was whether the nature of saving faith was enough with the habit and disposition of faith or whether the faith must be confessed and actualized in the Christian walk of faith.

Furthermore, while à Brakel was sensitive to historical and ecclesiastical circumstances, it does not mean that Comrie was not aware of these as well. Rather, their focus and theological reasoning were different. Comrie opposed Arminianism, while à Brakel opposed spiritual declension in the same church. Theological disharmony does not mean that one is not Reformed; instead, they emphasized their point of view according to their chief concerns—whether it was to exhort Christians or to avoid the Arminian notion of understanding faith as work.

68. Van den Brink, "Comrie En Het Antinomianisme," 133–35; Comrie, *Heidelberger Catechismus*, xxxvi–xxxviii, xl–xli.

69. While van den Brink asserts Comrie as a doctrinal antinomian, Baarssen and van Vlastuin argue that Comrie is a Reformed Orthodox theologian, instead of antinomian. See van den Brink, "Comrie En Het Antinomianisme," 112–56; Dirk Baarssen and Willem van Vlastuin, "Alexander Comrie Als Orthodox Gereformeerd Theoloog: Een Onderzoek Naar Antinomisme in Comries Theologie," *Documentatieblad Nadere Reformatie* 35, no. 2 (2011): 132–59.

70. Van den Brink, "Comrie En Het Antinomianisme," 133, 135–37; Comrie, *Heidelberger Catechismus*, xxxvi; Baarssen, "Owen in Een Nederlandsch Gewaat," 42–44; Baarssen and Van Vlastuin, "Alexander Comrie Als Orthodox Gereformeerd Theoloog," 138–39, 143–145; Comrie, *Brief over de Regtvaardigmaking Des Zondaars*, 31, 44–46, 151.

71. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 14.1–3; *Canons of Dort*, III–IV.1.11–14; Bavinck, *RD*, 4:114–15; Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 396. Comrie observed the faith in the Heidelberg Catechism Q. 21 as referring to *habitus fidei*, but there are various views. See n59 of this article.

À Brakel's Understanding of the Nature of Faith and *actus fidei*

As a pastor–theologian, à Brakel intended for his writing to edify his congregation.⁷² Regarding the membership of the church, à Brakel believed that faith must be active. According to à Brakel, a significant difference exists between being *in the church* and being *of the church*.⁷³ An external call, a historical or temporal faith, external holiness, or external participation do not constitute true membership of the church.⁷⁴ À Brakel warned against cheap grace, and he exhorted Christians to promote spiritual life and experiences in their confession of faith in Christ.⁷⁵

In his discussion of faith, à Brakel rigorously illustrated four different types of faith: historical, temporal, miraculous, and saving.⁷⁶ For à Brakel, historical and temporal faith were not sufficient to be considered as saving faith, and miraculous faith only existed in the time of the apostles. Historical faith pertained to the knowledge of the history of the Word of God and concerned a mere knowledge (*notitia*) of the Word of God. Temporal faith, of course, is merely assent to the truth. Though temporal faith generates some affections of the soul and motivates external behavior, it does not unite one with Christ unto justification and sanctification. Based on these shortcomings, historical and temporal faith are insufficient for salvation. The third type, miraculous faith, is a heartfelt conviction generated by the immediate and supernatural operation of God. This faith was especially prevalent in the days of Christ and the apostles.

Moreover, according to à Brakel, miraculous faith ceased after the time of the apostles. Therefore, he believed that the fourth category of faith was the only sufficient faith that could be considered as saving faith. À Brakel focused on saving or justifying faith in his discussion surrounding the nature of faith. To him, saving or justifying faith must consist of three aspects of faith: *notitia*, *assensus*, and, particularly, *fiducia* (trust). While historical and temporal faith consist of *notitia* and *assensus*, respectively, they

72. Joel Beeke and Bartel Elshout, "Preface," in *Christian's Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), xx–xxi; à Brakel, CRS, 1:cxiii–cxv.

73. À Brakel, CRS, 2:14.

74. À Brakel, CRS, 2:7.

75. Willem van Vlastuin, *Catholic Today: A Reformed Conversation about Catholicity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 189; Van Lieburg, "Warning against the Pietists," 350–54.

76. Verschuur, *Waarheid in Het Binnenste, of, Bevindelijke Godgeleerdheid*, 165–66. Verschuur also stressed the same points to emphasize his view of *actus fidei*.

do not exhibit *fiducia* in Christ. À Brakel, therefore, claimed that true saving faith and the act of faith must have *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*.⁷⁷ For à Brakel, faith entails an active belief and trust in God.⁷⁸

À Brakel did not discard the concept of *habitus fidei*, because he believed that the capacity and disposition to believe existed in peoples' hearts. However, à Brakel's understanding of *actus* and *habitus* in his view of faith was ambiguous when he spoke of faith as propension. While he understood faith as an act, his language often implies that faith is the capacity to believe or disposition to believe. He asserted that "unless a person is in such a frame, he will not be desirous to come [to faith]."⁷⁹ He also understood the nature of faith as a propensity and disposition, proclaiming that

the genus or very nature of faith is that it is a *propensity*. Propensities complement the functioning of the intellect and the will. Such propensities are either acquired by much exercise, or *implanted* in the soul of man by God. The latter is true for faith, hope, love, etc. All of man's activity to obtain faith is not in the least degree sufficient to enable him to acquire faith. God initially gives it, God preserves and increases it, and God finishes it.⁸⁰

À Brakel stressed that faith is essentially inclination, and thus, there is a disposition of faith. On the surface, this sounds like à Brakel is teaching *habitus fidei*—as a capacity and disposition to believe. Nevertheless, when we consider à Brakel's view of faith as a whole, his understanding of faith was more heavily weighted toward *actus fidei* rather than *habitus fidei*. God grants the disposition to believe, but that disposition alone is not enough. Faith must be enforced by actual confession. À Brakel noted that "God justifies man by faith, and thus once upon the first act of faith, but is made as frequently and as often as man exercises faith in Christ unto justification. This is not an assurance that they are justified once and for all, but it constitutes an actual and daily act of forgiveness."⁸¹ When no sincere voluntary confession of faith occurs, one cannot be considered a genuine Christian. For à Brakel, professing Christian faith and trusting in God were not merely a disposition or a capacity; instead, it was the actual and sincere act of trusting in God.

77. À Brakel, CRS, 2:263–65.

78. À Brakel, CRS, 2:265.

79. À Brakel, CRS, 2:297.

80. À Brakel, CRS, 2:266.

81. À Brakel, CRS, 2:358.

The reason that à Brakel used such expressions of the first act of faith is notable. He asserted that receiving an act of faith is followed by hearing the Word, and he avoided the notion of the natural capacity of people to exercise their trust in God.⁸² He posited that “prior to the first act of faith, man is spiritually dead, irrespective of how many preparatory exercises he may have had.”⁸³ Based on this condition of total depravity and the incapability of people to achieve salvation, à Brakel rejected the notion of the seed of faith or faith in seminal form.⁸⁴ For à Brakel, “if the seed of faith were to be the beginning of faith, they would actually possess it already,” even before their actual confession of faith.⁸⁵ Prior to regeneration, men are spiritually dead, so it is inappropriate to consider a seed of faith having existed in men. À Brakel asserted that one receives faith only by hearing (Rom. 10:17, Gal. 3:2).⁸⁶

Furthermore, à Brakel claimed that even the elect are not saved unless they exercise faith for the first time.⁸⁷ One must come to Christ through the act of faith that is accompanied by conviction.⁸⁸ The first act of faith is closely associated with regeneration, and the first act of faith is the mark that distinguishes Christians from unbelievers.⁸⁹ À Brakel observed affectations in the church, and he argued that a believer is best known by his personal experience of conversion, prayer, belief in Christ, struggle with faith, the subtle delusions and assaults of Satan, the sealing work of the Holy Spirit, and the mortification of sin.⁹⁰ Then, this first act must be repeated throughout the Christian life. Therefore, Christians will have habits of faith, but such habits follow the first act of faith.⁹¹ In this way, à Brakel accentuated *actus fidei* rather than *habitus fidei*. In other words, à Brakel declared that Christians

82. À Brakel, CRS, 2:293.

83. À Brakel, CRS, 2:245.

84. À Brakel, CRS, 2:268.

85. À Brakel, CRS, 2:268.

86. À Brakel, CRS, 2:268–69.

87. À Brakel, CRS, 2:247–48.

88. À Brakel, CRS, 2:245.

89. À Brakel, CRS, 2:261.

90. W. Fieret, “Wilhelmus à Brakel,” in CRS, 1:xxxiv; See à Brakel, CRS, 2:72, 297. À Brakel was concerned with sinners and called them to faith. He lists such sinners including “murderers, adulterers, fornicators, unjust persons, thieves, drunkards, you who revel in sin, gamblers, dancers, you criminals who have been given over to yourself, liars, backbiters, perjurers (p. 297).” See Jonathan Holdt, “Wilhelmus à Brakel’s Use of Doctrine in Calling Sinners to Repentance and Faith,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 2 (2011): 275–78.

91. À Brakel, CRS, 2:244–45.

are regenerated by sincere confessions of the faith (or, at least, confession is the mark of the sincere faith) and sustained by repeated confession of faith.

À Brakel's view of *actus fidei* was more crystalized when he understood the nature of faith as trust.⁹² He affirmed *fiducia* as the sufficient component of saving faith. According to à Brakel, even unbelievers could have temporal faith with knowledge and assent, but they fall short unless they trust and confess their faith in Christ. He further argued that faith is an act of will, which "consists in a heartfelt trust to be brought to salvation by Christ."⁹³ In discussing the marks of saving faith, à Brakel regarded saving faith as sincere trust in Christ.⁹⁴ À Brakel used Agrippa and Simon Magus as examples of having faith, but he mentioned that their faith was temporal and insincere.⁹⁵ Faith is not merely knowing or assenting; instead, faith is believing and trusting in God and His promise.

Furthermore, faith is trusting in God "as being true, omnipotent, and faithful," and it strongly moves the heart of the believer.⁹⁶ Such a faith, which commences with the first act of faith, is exercised throughout the entire life of a Christian. For this reason, though he accentuated the act of faith, à Brakel's view of faith was not merely a formal act, but it advocated that faith is founded on the truth that bears the fruits of the Holy Spirit. À Brakel asserted that "salvation is thus promised upon the fruits of faith (cf. Matt. 5:3–16).... Therefore, to believe in God is to believe as God has commanded us to believe. When faith is called a *brief of the truth*, this does not pertain to the formal act of faith, but it indicates that faith is founded upon truth."⁹⁷ Therefore, the act of faith is not a formal act of receiving and confessing Christ. Rather, the act of faith refers to the voluntary participation and heartfelt trust in God and His promise. Thus, à Brakel stressed the act of faith as a sincere trust of the heart in Christ, and he considered such an act of faith to be sufficient for saving faith.⁹⁸

Although à Brakel accentuated *actus fidei*, he did not regard *actus* as the cause of salvation; rather, he understood it as a receiving instrument of salvation.⁹⁹ He argued that "faith, as the means whereby the righteousness of Christ is received, which unites itself to Christ, and by which one

92. Graafland, *De Zekerheid van Het Geloof*, 191.

93. À Brakel, CRS, 2:278, 282, 286.

94. À Brakel, CRS, 2:315.

95. À Brakel, CRS, 2:321.

96. À Brakel, CRS, 2:285.

97. À Brakel, CRS, 2:284.

98. À Brakel, CRS, 2:323ff.

99. À Brakel, CRS, 2:667.

is translated into Christ, was counted unto him for righteousness; that is, not the act of faith, but the righteousness of Christ of which he became a partaker of faith."¹⁰⁰ The righteousness of Christ is eventually the object of faith that justifies Christians. À Brakel's accentuation of the act of faith does not mean that the human act of trust can attain salvation. Rather, salvation is attained through the active receiving of Christ as prophet, priest, and king.¹⁰¹ À Brakel also mentioned that "faith cannot be considered as a work, but must rather be viewed as a means.... Faith must thus be viewed as a means—and not as a work—whereby the believer receives the righteousness of Christ as his own righteousness.... The act of faith cannot be understood any other way but as a being united with that which one receives, since the very nature of faith consists in receiving."¹⁰² In addition, he also rejected the notion of faith as work. Since à Brakel understood faith as the act of will and not of the body, he did not consider faith as work.¹⁰³ He further stressed that true faith is distinguished from works, arguing that "works and faith are contrasted with each other."¹⁰⁴ Since true faith is the foundation of good works, he avoided viewing faith as works. Rather, good works are the fruits and characteristics of faith.¹⁰⁵ When he spoke of the act of faith, à Brakel never undermined faith as works to receive salvation. Instead, he understood faith as a gift of God that leads man to assent to and trust in divine truth and commandment.

The historical context of the Netherlands sheds light on why à Brakel emphasized *actus fidei* over *habitus fidei*. While many people stayed in the church and were devotees of the Reformed faith, they did not sincerely dedicate and confess their faith in Christ. As a result, à Brakel highlighted that the first act of faith for Christians is repeated in the daily exercise and experience of believers.

À Brakel's View of *Habitus Fidei* in Christian Life and Sanctification

For à Brakel, "faith cannot exist without holiness for faith purifies the heart."¹⁰⁶ In other words, true faith is evident in believers' holiness and

100. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:354.

101. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:326.

102. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:375.

103. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:270.

104. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:275.

105. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:276.

106. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:329.

good works. À Brakel argued that temporal believers are motivated by their desire to perform good works, but the sanctification of true believers succeeds faith.¹⁰⁷ True believers wholeheartedly, unreservedly, and continually trust in Christ.¹⁰⁸ This ongoing voluntary act of trust repeatedly formulates habits of faith in Christians. Although à Brakel hesitated to state that *habitus* is the disposition and capacity to believe, he understood *habitus* in terms of fitting habituation of the voluntary trust in Christ.

À Brakel used the phrase “the first act of faith” to refer to *actus fidei* as a way people receive salvation. The use of “first” implies that an ongoing, repeated action of faith occurs. À Brakel asserted that *habitus* was fitting habituation through repeated actions in the Christian life and sanctification. For à Brakel, a true and saving faith always consists of a heartfelt trust, inclination, and disposition to believe in God.¹⁰⁹ In this manner, he understood faith as *habitus fidei* or *habitus credendi* (a disposition to believe).¹¹⁰ Faith does not culminate in a singular action; it consists of continuous, habitual practice. Furthermore, à Brakel acknowledged different degrees of faith and intermission of faith among Christians by noting that

many are slow of heart to believe and frequently neglect the exercises of faith. Intermissions are frequent and of long duration, albeit that faith is not entirely absent, for faith does not cease. Sometimes it occurs that the godly are overwhelmed and are swept away by the lusts of flesh, laziness, or lack of desire. Sometimes it is due to discouragement, fearing that they will prove to be no partaker of Christ, or at times due to the violent assaults of Satan.¹¹¹

Since the faith of Christians could be weakened, à Brakel exhorted Christians to increase their faith in Christ.¹¹² The act of faith produces the habit of faith, and *habitus* consists of both disposition and accommodated actions or fitting habituation. À Brakel implored Christians to “elevate your heart to a higher level of godliness, which consists in having the glory of God as your objective in your entire conduct. Focus continually upon this goal so that by continual exercise you may attain to a habitual tendency in this

107. À Brakel, CRS, 2:331–33.

108. À Brakel, CRS, 2:305, 325.

109. À Brakel, CRS, 3:3–4.

110. Muller, PRRD, 1:355–57.

111. À Brakel, CRS, 2:304.

112. À Brakel, CRS, 2:305.

respect."¹¹³ À Brakel acknowledged that those who have true faith possess a new disposition of the heart to exercise their trust in God, and this new habit and disposition of the heart drives Christians to holiness.¹¹⁴

À Brakel acknowledged the impotence of people's effort to attain salvation, and he asserted that a person "must habitually endeavor to discern his impotence."¹¹⁵ The habitual tendency is not only related to sanctification but is also associated with mortification. Christians habitually recognize their sinfulness, and they habitually grow in grace. However, the habitual tendency toward holiness never arises in people through their own effort. Rather, habitual grace is infused at the moment of regeneration, and it is confirmed by the act of receiving Christ.¹¹⁶ À Brakel stressed the repetitive nature of the exercise of faith by proclaiming that "by the act of receiving Christ, one's spiritual state and inner peace are more and more confirmed."¹¹⁷ The repetitive act of receiving Christ produces habits of trusting in Christ. Believers in Christ have a new heart and a habit inclined to follow the Word of God and "to perform thy statutes always, even unto the end (Psa. 119:97, 103, 14, 15, 111–12)."¹¹⁸ He also professed habitual grace in the work of regeneration and sanctification. He noted,

However, no one can understand rightly (except the person who has such a disposition), what manner of heart disposition this holiness is and the manner in which holy deeds flow forth out of this disposition, just as no virtue can be rightly known except by those who practice it. Since holiness is the image of God, how then can anyone know holiness who does not know God?¹¹⁹

The Holy Spirit infuses habitual grace so that Christians have a habitual disposition and tendency toward godliness and Christ.¹²⁰ Thus, a disposition toward holiness, which is infused by the work of the Holy Spirit, is necessary for the believer.

The habitual tendency is also a key to spirituality for à Brakel. God infuses habitual grace on believers so that Christians can incline their

113. À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:255.

114. À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:16–17.

115. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:607.

116. À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:5.

117. À Brakel, *CRS*, 2:244.

118. À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:15.

119. À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:17.

120. À Brakel, *CRS*, 3:332, 421.

hearts to keep God's commandment. Christians do not walk in their faith alone, but God upholds them with His hand.¹²¹ À Brakel believed that the spiritual strength of a Christian is found in the faculties of the soul, which may be fortified habitually. He clarified that

It [spiritual strength] is not a physical activity...but rather an activity of the soul. It is not merely an activity of the intellect, observing this virtue in its beauty, but all faculties are active. It is not an activity which is occasionally engaged in, but rather it is a *propensity*, a habitual disposition and competence, which initially is infused by God, but which is exercised by the influence of the Holy Spirit, and by much exercise improves and becomes stronger.¹²²

Since God offers habitual grace, the true believer's spiritual life never disappears, and he never again comes under the dominion of sin. Though temptations, trials, and afflictions are present, believers continually mortify their sinful habits and are transformed by renewing their minds.¹²³

For à Brakel, true believers must have a habitual tendency toward goodness and God. He stated, "First, a person who desires to be justified in his conscience ought to endeavor to have a view of his sinful heart—and of the sinful manifestation of this heart in thoughts, words, deeds, and activities, along with the manner of this manifestation."¹²⁴ Elsewhere he wrote,

The genus or very nature of faith is that it is a *propensity*. Propensities complement the functioning of the intellect and the will. Such propensities are either acquired by much exercise or *implanted* in the soul of man by God. The latter is true for faith, hope, love, etc. All of man's activity to obtain faith is not in the least degree sufficient to enable him to acquire faith. God initially gives it, God preserves and increases it, and God finishes it.¹²⁵

Such a faith is a matter and disposition of the heart. One must have a habit of faith, and perfection and holiness spring from this habit and disposition of faith. À Brakel emphasized that "There is a *personal* righteousness resulting from the perfection and holiness of one's disposition and deeds."¹²⁶ However, this disposition or habit is not acquired through human action;

121. À Brakel, CRS, 2:635; 3:6.

122. À Brakel, CRS, 3:331–32.

123. À Brakel, CRS, 3:5–6.

124. À Brakel, CRS, 2:406.

125. À Brakel, CRS, 2:266.

126. À Brakel, CRS, 2:370.

rather, it is given at the moment of regeneration. He explained this concept by noting, "When God calls someone internally, he will acquire a disposition which is entirely and essentially different from that which could be produced by nature or preparatory circumstances."¹²⁷ When one sincerely exercises trust in God, God grants him a habitual disposition to follow God. In this manner, Christians have a habitual inclination toward God to keep His law.¹²⁸

Conclusion

Though many Reformed theologians upheld *habitus fidei* instead of *actus fidei* because *actus fidei* might imply the acceptance of Arminianism, it is noteworthy to look at the continuity and discontinuity among the *Nadere Reformatie* theologians and post-Reformation Reformed theologians on their view of faith. As Kuyper and Bavinck noted, it was safer to emphasize *habitus fidei*, but what à Brakel said was not incorrect.¹²⁹ It is important for us to consider the historical context of the seventeenth-century Netherlands and what impacted à Brakel and other theologians to accentuate *actus fidei*.

The distinction between *actus* and *habitus* is based on how people receive salvation. *Habitus fidei* is considered a person's capacity and disposition to attain salvation, and *actus fidei* is a person's sincere and voluntary trust in God. Although à Brakel did not repudiate the concept of *habitus* in his view of faith, he heavily accentuated *actus*. For à Brakel, the concept of *habitus* was a more fitting habituation formed by repeated action rather than a seed and disposition to believe. Like other theologians of his time, he accentuated *actus fidei* as the active response of man to God's grace. Though à Brakel emphasized *actus*, he did not intend to take a Neonomian view, nor did he intend to conflate *actus fidei* with sanctification. À Brakel did not repudiate the concept of *habitus* in his view of sanctification. In fact, à Brakel emphasized *actus fidei* because he was concerned about pastoral ministry.

Furthermore, his view of faith must be understood in light of the historical background of the seventeenth-century Netherlands, and his argument for *actus fidei* does not signify that à Brakel is not a Reformed theologian. In opposition to the churchgoers in the Netherlands, à Brakel claimed that one must actively assent to and voluntarily trust in Christ. While he recognized *habitus fidei* as the disposition to believe, he stressed

127. À Brakel, CRS, 2:210–11.

128. À Brakel, CRS, 3:81.

129. Bavinck, RD, 4:114; Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 396.

that *habitus fidei* itself is not enough for saving faith. Consequently, the act of faith presupposes the habit and disposition of faith, while the habit is reinforced by repeated action.

Even when à Brakel accentuated *actus fidei*, he concurrently attributed faith as the receiving instrument and the means by which people receive salvation. Instead of the voluntary will and trust that receives salvation, the righteousness of Christ is partaken of by faith. Moreover, à Brakel explained how infused habit and disposition facilitate the Christian life. Believers must have voluntary trust in God at the first moment of regeneration, and the habituation of faith must be enacted throughout the Christian life. Thus, Christianity is not a one-time commitment to faith; rather, it is a life-long commitment to living fittingly for God.