COVENANT AND ELECTION IN THE THEOLOGY OF HERMAN BAVINCK

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IN THE HISTORICAL development of Reformed theology, the doctrines of election and covenant are indisputably among the most important for the way Reformed theologians have sought to provide a synthetic account of the teaching of Scripture. Though interpreters of the Reformed tradition have often mistakenly viewed these doctrinal themes as "central dogmas," which provide a basis for a closed system of doctrinal truths each of which is deduced from a basic principle such as God's sovereignty or the realization of God's saving purpose in Christ through the covenant of grace in its various administrations[1]—there can be no doubt that, in the long history of Reformed reflection upon Scriptural revelation, these two motifs have played a dominant role. By means of its emphasis upon free and sovereign election, Reformed theology has emphatically stressed the monergism of divine grace in the salvation of sinful human beings who bear God's image, but who have been "frightfully deformed" through the ravages of human sin and disobedience.[2] Nothing testifies more starkly to the truth that salvation is God's work from first to last than the theme of election. Furthermore, by means of its attention to the historical unfolding of God's gracious purposes in Christ throughout the course of the various administrations of the covenant of grace, Reformed theology has also been keenly aware of the historical texture of biblical revelation and

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[1] For critical assessments of and bibliography regarding the "central dogma" approach to the study of Calvin and the Reformed tradition, including a consideration of the "two traditions" thesis, which argues that the doctrine of the covenant was developed as a kind of theological counterweight to the doctrine of election, see Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 63-80; Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The 'Twofold Grace of God' and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 14-16; idem, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of 'the Other Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), esp. pp. 24-32; J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 22-60; Lyle D. Bierma, "Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions," *Westminster Theological Journal* 44/2 (Fall, 1983): 304-21; and J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980).

[2] This language is used by John Calvin to describe the consequences of the fall and human sinfulness. Cf. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadephia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.i-iii.

of the way the old covenant finds its fulfillment and realization in the work of Christ, the redeemer and Mediator of the covenant.

Despite the virtual unanimity of the Reformed theological tradition on the centrality of these themes of sovereign and merciful election and the historical administrations of the covenant throughout the history of redemption, the precise interplay between election and covenant has often been the occasion for considerable debate and controversy. Students of the history of Reformed theology in the Netherlands during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are well aware of the protracted discussions in the Reformed churches regarding this interplay, discussions that often took their point of departure from diverse appraisals of the significance of the sacrament of baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant promise. In some instances, divergent opinions regarding the nature of the covenant of grace, particularly in its relation to God's sovereign purpose of election, gave rise not only to theological controversy but ecclesiastical divisions and the formation of denominations whose identity was shaped by a particular view of the relation between election and covenant. If these divergences were to be represented in a somewhat schematic fashion, some theologians articulated the doctrine of the covenant from the standpoint of election, others approached the doctrine of the covenant from the point of view of the administration of the covenant in history and sharply distinguished the covenant from particular election. The significance of these different approaches became especially evident in the way the children of believing parents, who receive the sacramental sign and seal of incorporation into Christ and the promises of the covenant, were viewed. Should such children be regarded as possessing the grace of the gospel that the sacrament signifies or seals, unless and until they should fall away in unbelief and disobedience? Or should such children be viewed simply as recipients of an objective promise, which has attached to it a "condition" that may or not be fulfilled in them? Or should the children of believers be regarded to possess the grace of Christ only upon the occasion of their subsequent (to baptism) regeneration and conversion? Though these questions may seem unduly subtle or of little significance, they were raised throughout the history of the Reformed churches in a way that invariably linked theological formulation with homiletical and ecclesiastical practice.[3]

An awareness of the importance of the question of the relation between election and covenant in the Reformed tradition, and especially of the long history of controversy regarding this question among the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, provides the occasion for the subject addressed in this article. Herman Bavinck's handling of the doctrines of election and covenant is of special importance both for Reformed theology in general and for an understanding of the history of the period in which he played an influential role as theologian and churchman. Bavinck was a Reformed theologian of first rank at the end of the nineteenth

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[3] For a comprehensive treatment of this history, the debates regarding covenant and election, and the positions of various participants among the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, see E. Smilde, *Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946).

and the beginning of the twentieth century, and the author of an influential four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics.*[4] Among the topics Bavinck addresses in the course of his exposition of Reformed dogmatics, the doctrines of election and covenant have an especially important place. As with his handling of many theological topics, Bavinck's treatment of the themes of election and covenant displays an admirable grasp of biblical teaching, the history of theological reflection, the codification of the consensus of the Reformed tradition in church confessions, and the contemporary state of debates respecting these important themes. In these respects, an exposition of Bavinck's treatment of these doctrines promises to pay theological dividends for any careful student of Reformed theology. However, because Bavinck was also deeply involved in the ecclesiastical and theological debates of his period in the Netherlands, his treatment of the relation between election and covenant provides a kind of window into the history and controversies within the Reformed churches of the period. On this topic, as with so many others, Bavinck played a mediating and pacifying role. By seeking to offer a balanced and moderate statement of the consensual view of historic Reformed theology on this controverted subject, Bavinck also provides a model for handling these themes in the context of an ecclesiastical landscape at a later period that continues to wrestle with these questions in an often fractured and divided community of churches.

Our focus in this article will be upon Bavinck's theological formulation of the doctrines of election and covenant in general, and his treatment of the interrelation between them in particular. Though we will have occasion to note some of the connections between Bavinck's formulations and the debates of his time, this will not be our primary interest. Our primary aim will be to provide a summary and analysis of the way Bavinck formulates his understanding of election and of the covenant. For this reason, we will largely limit our appeal to Bavinck's treatment of these doctrines in his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics,* and in several other theological works that contribute to an understanding of his position. Primary among these works are Bavinck's own one-volume abridgment of his dogmatics, *Magnalia Dei,* and his extensive treatment of the debates regarding "calling and regeneration" in the Reformed churches of the Netherlands at the end of the nineteenth century.[5] In order to provide an accurate account and assessment of Bavinck's position, we will begin with a separate treatment of his handling of the doctrines of election and covenant. After we have offered a summary of Bavinck's understanding of

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[4] This work is now available in English translation with the title: *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008).

[5] *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903). This volume has been published in English translation with the title: *Saved by Grace: The Work of the Holy Spirit in Calling and Regeneration,* ed. J. Mark Beach, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008). Throughout this article, I will refer to the English translation of this work. However, references will also be given in parentheses to the Dutch original. For a treatment of the historical occasion for Bavinck's preparation of this volume, see J. Mark Beach, "Introductory Essay," in *Saved by Grace,* pp. ix–lvi; idem, "Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and 'The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905'," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 11–68; and Smilde, *Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop,* pp. 152-210, 247-56.

these topics, we will then turn to his exposition of the interrelation between them. In our consideration of Bavinck's view of the relation between election and covenant, we will move beyond an exposition of Bavinck's position in his principal works in dogmatics at only one point, namely, the significance of Bavinck's position and role in the evaluation of the ecclesiastical controversies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Reformed churches of the Netherlands. Since these controversies were provisionally settled in 1905, when the synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands adopted the so-called "Conclusions of Utrecht," Bavinck's contribution to the formulation of these "Conclusions" is of special importance to our topic.

1. The Doctrine of Election

Though our interest in this essay is primarily in the way Bavinck conceives of the relation between election and covenant, it is necessary to begin with a summary of Bavinck's distinctive treatment of each of these topics. Since the nature of the link between God's purpose of election and the realization of his redemptive purpose in the historical unfolding of the covenant of grace is our primary focus, our summary of these topics will be purposefully concise.[6]

1.1. *The Dogmatic Location and Nature of the Divine Counsel*

In the structure of his *Reformed Dogmatics,* Bavinck follows the traditional sequence of the doctrinal *loci.* After an introductory volume on theological *prolegomena,* which treats at considerable length the formal questions of the nature of theology as a science and the doctrine of divine revelation, Bavinck turns in his second volume to the doctrines of God and man. Within the sequence of topics treated in the doctrine of God, Bavinck considers the subject of God's eternal counsel or will only after a lengthy exposition of such topics as the knowability of God, the names of God, the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God, and the doctrine of the holy Trinity. This sequence of topics within the doctrine of God reflects a pattern in the tradition of Western Christian theology that dates back to the medieval period and the great *Summa Theologica* of

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[6] For older treatments of Bavinck's conception of election and covenant, see Smilde, *Een Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop,* pp. 152-210; R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1961), pp. 198-208, 244-8, 355-62; and Anthony A. Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant.* In the abridged, popular version of his dogmatics, *Our Reasonable Faith,* Bavinck does not devote a separate chapter to the doctrine of election, but briefly treats the "counsel of God" as the basis and source for all of God's redemptive and re-creative work in history by means of the covenant of grace. Within the eternal counsel of God, there are three related components: God's gracious purpose of election; the achievement of the redemption of the elect through the eternal "counsel of redemption" in which the Son is appointed to be the head and representative of his people in the accomplishment of their redemption; and the divine appointment of the Holy Spirit as the One who will work out and apply the redemption of Christ to those whom God purposes to save. Cf. *Our Reasonable Faith,* pp. 266-8. We will have occasion in what follows to consider Bavinck's view of the "covenant of redemption" and its relation to the doctrines of election and covenant.

Thomas Aquinas.[7] Though there have been exceptions to this rule in the Western theological tradition, Bavinck locates his consideration of the doctrine of God's counsel, including the election of his people to salvation in Christ, within the framework of the doctrine of God.[8] Any true knowledge of the living and Triune God, so far as it is derived from inscripturated divine revelation, must include a knowledge of the Triune God's eternal plan or counsel.

At the outset of his treatment of the divine counsel, Bavinck affirms a traditional distinction in Christian theology between the knowledge of God's being as such and the knowledge of God's works in relation to the creation. Even though all human knowledge of the Triune God must be derived from God's comprehensive revelation of himself through his works and words, we must distinguish the knowledge of God as he necessarily and eternally exists with all of his attributes, and the knowledge of God as he voluntarily chooses to act in respect to creation and history.[9] Human knowledge of God's names and attributes, as well as the "incommunicable attributes" of the Persons of the holy Trinity, each of whom is to be distinguished from the other though comprising one, incomposite and eternal Godhead, is knowledge of *who God is*. The knowledge of God's being is comprised of what can be known regarding God's "essential works" that are eternally and immutably true of who God is in the inexhaustible fullness of his Triune life. This knowledge of who God is concerns the "works of God as he is in himself" (*opera Dei immanentia ad intra*). For example, to affirm God's "holiness" is to affirm that God is necessarily, immutably, and eternally holy, quite apart from his holy works in relation to the creation he chooses to call into existence and sovereignly rule. By contrast, the doctrine of God's eternal counsel and will belongs, broadly speaking, to the knowledge of *what God does in relation to the entire creation and history.* In distinction from the "purely immanent works of God," we may speak of God's external works or his works as he "goes outside of his being," in a manner of speaking, in order to reveal himself through his creation and providence.[10] Furthermore, these "external works of God" (*opera Dei externa*) are of two distinct kinds: "the works of God *ad intra* (inward) and the works of God *ad extra*

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[7] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1A.22.2 (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947), pp. 122-23.

[8] John Calvin, e.g., treats the topic of predestination toward the end of Book III of his *Institutes* (III.xxi-xxiv), which describes the communication of God's grace in Christ to believers by the Holy Spirit through the Word of the gospel. In the theology of Karl Barth and the tradition of neo-orthodoxy, it is usually argued that the traditional location of the doctrine betrays an approach to the knowledge of God that is "abstracted" from his revelation in Jesus Christ. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. II/1: *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 76-93. For critical evaluations of this claim that the location of the treatment of the doctrine of predestination is of material significance for its theological formulation, see Richard A. Muller, "The Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology: Issue or Non-Issue?," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (November, 2005): 184-210; and Paul Helm, "Calvin, the 'Two Issues,' and the Structure of the *Institutes*," *Calvin Theological Journal* 42 (2007): 341-8.

[9] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:342.

[10] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:342. The technical language Bavinck employs to distinguish these works or "operations" of the Triune God is common to the tradition of Reformed theology. For definitions of the traditional understanding of these terms, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), pp. 211-13.

(outward). The former are usually designated as 'decrees' and are all included in the one, eternal 'counsel of God.' These decrees establish a connection between the immanent works of the divine being and the external works of creation and re-creation."[11] In the strict sense, therefore, the doctrine of God's eternal counsel is based upon what the Scriptures teach regarding the works of God that have to do with God's purpose or plan for creation and re-creation, but that remain inward or are to be distinguished from their realization in the course of the outworking of God's counsel.

According to Bavinck, the divine counsel and decrees of God possess three characteristics. First, all the ideas or components of the divine decrees are "derived from the fullness of knowledge that is eternally present in God."[12] God knows all things, whether "actual" or "possible." His knowledge is as inexhaustible and rich as his own being. What God knows about creation, providence, and re-creation, therefore, is his knowledge of what will become "actual" by virtue of his free decision, but this knowledge is not as exhaustive as his knowledge of himself and all that which is possible. Indeed, compared to the latter, God's knowledge of what belongs to his decrees, however rich and comprehensive it may seem to us, is but a "sketch, a summary, of the depths of both God's wisdom and knowledge."[13] Second, all of God's decrees are based upon "his absolute sovereignty" and freedom.[14] God is under no compulsion so far as his divine counsel is concerned. In his self-sufficiency, God does not need the world or find himself compelled to call the creation into existence in order to enrich himself. In this connection, we must sharply distinguish God's "knowledge of himself," which is necessary to who he is, and God's "knowledge of the world," which is based upon his freedom to determine how he will act in respect to the creation and history. And third, a distinction must be drawn between God's decrees and their realization in history. There is a difference between what God in his counsel determines, and what must necessarily follow in the course of the realization of his counsel in history. Even though God's decrees are free and sovereignly determined, when it comes to their realization in the course of history, we must affirm that "in due time they will be realized."[15]

1.2. *The Doctrine of Predestination*

Subsequent to his introductory comments on the dogmatic location and nature of God's counsel, Bavinck offers a brief summary of Scriptural teaching regarding God's decrees and the historical dispute between an Augustinian and Pelagian conception of God's counsel. In this summary, Bavinck observes that the New Testament provides a more clear and precise disclosure of the doctrine than the Old, though the teaching of the entire Scripture is consistent regarding the sovereign

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[11] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:342.
[12] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:342.
[13] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:343.
[14] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:343.
[15] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:343.

purposes of God and their realization in the course of creation and re-creation. He also notes that the Augustinian doctrine of God's divine counsel has been the predominant and preferred view throughout the history of the church. Though this view was modified in a "semi-Pelagian" direction during the medieval period of scholastic theology, it was restored to greater purity by the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, during the sixteenth century, only to be abandoned or corrupted by later Lutheran and Arminian constructions.[16] One interesting and revealing feature of Bavinck's handling of the history of dogmatic reflection on the decrees of God is his careful reflection on the historic debate among Reformed theologians regarding the order of the decrees, whether "supra-" or "infra-lapsarian." In Bavinck's consideration of this debate, he does not directly address the contemporary debate within the Dutch Reformed churches on this question, a debate that was closely linked with the name of Abraham Kuyper, who was a vigorous proponent of the supra-lapsarian position. However, the extensiveness of Bavinck's comments on this complicated topic is likely to be explained against the background of the contemporary debates in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands.[17] In Bavinck's judgment, there are arguments, pro and con, that can be adduced for both positions, though Bavinck himself opts for a position that views the complex components of God's counsel in their organic unity rather than in terms of their logical or temporal precedence.

For our purpose, the most significant part of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the divine counsel is his definition of the nature of God's decree(s) in general, and his respective definitions of election and reprobation. Bavinck broadly defines the decree or counsel of God as "his eternal plan for all that exists or will happen in time."[18] Despite the important differences of understanding that have marked the history of theological reflection upon God's counsel, Bavinck notes how all Christian theology acknowledges to a greater or lesser degree that history unfolds in accordance with God's sovereign plan or will. Neither pantheism,

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[16] See *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:343-61, for Bavinck's survey of the Scriptural teaching regarding the divine counsel, as well as the historical debates between Augustinian, Pelagian, and semi-Pelagian formulations of God's decrees.

[17] "Supra-lapsarianism" is the view of the logical order of the elements of God's decree of predestination that places the decree to elect and not elect "before" (therefore, *supra* or "above") the decree to permit the fall; "infra-lapsarianism" is the view that places the decree to elect and not elect "after" (therefore, *infra* or "under") the decree to permit the fall. The first appeals to the principle that "what is first in intention is last in execution" (*quod primum est in intentione, ultimum est in executione ultime*). Bavinck's careful discussion of the differences between supra-lapsarianism and infra-lapsarianism, which includes a delineation of the relative merits and demerits of each view, likely reflects the debates of his period that were often associated with the name of Abraham Kuyper, who favored the supra-lapsarian view, though not without some qualification. For a discussion of the historical setting of Bavinck's handling of this topic, including Kuyper's position on this question, see Beach, "Introductory Essay," pp. xvi-xx; idem, "Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and 'The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905'," 17–21; and Smilde, *Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop,* pp. 131-34. It is instructive to note that Bavinck shares Kuyper's criticism of the older views of the elements in God's decree of election, namely, that they did not give special place to God's purpose in creation but subordinated creation entirely to God's purpose to save the elect.

[18] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:372.

which identifies what occurs in history with the being of God, nor deism, which views the world's history in relative independence from God's will, are satisfactory viewpoints from the standpoint of historic Christian theism. The counsel of God must be viewed to comprehend "all things that exist or will occur."[19] To exclude anything from the scope of God's eternal counsel would compromise God's independent existence and work as the Creator and Lord of all things. Whatever transpires in creation and in the whole subsequent course of providence and re-creation must be encompassed within the decree of God. Moreover, the decree of God reflects the nature of its Author, such that we should think of this decree as "the eternally active will of God, the willing and deciding God himself, not something accidental in God, but one with his being, as his eternally active will."[20] The entire cosmos and its history represent the outworking of the divine counsel. Like the artist who can only "execute his vision in stages," so God executes his one, complex counsel in a series of temporal phases that reveal his nature and purpose.[21]

Within the broad framework of this general definition of God's counsel, Bavinck distinguishes between the decree so far as it pertains to all creatures and as it pertains to the destiny of humans and angels. In the traditional language of theology, the former and general counsel of God pertaining to all things was termed "providence," while the latter and more particular counsel of God pertaining to humans and angels was termed "predestination."

> While the name does not matter so much, what is important is that the decree of God encompasses all things, not just the determination of the eternal state of rational creatures (predestination), but the ordering and ranking of all things without exception. Predestination, accordingly, was not something considered in isolation, but was a part of God's decree for all things and only a particular application of it.... Predestination is providence insofar as it concerns the eternal destiny of humans and angels.[22]

The doctrine of predestination, therefore, sets forth the Scriptures' teaching regarding God's plan to save or not to save human beings who bear his image or angels. Though Pelagianism has historically denied predestination as a component of God's all-comprehensive counsel for fear that it undermines the genuine freedom and responsibility of the creature, Bavinck maintains that Pelagianism is at odds with Scriptural teaching, the history of Christian theology, and human experience. However difficult the problem of the relation between God's counsel and creaturely responsibility, we must maintain that "by the infinitely majestic activity of his knowing and willing, [God] does not destroy but instead creates and maintains the freedom and independence of his creatures."[23] Pelagianism finally amounts to a denial of the Christian doctrine of creation,

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[19] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:373.
[20] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:373
[21] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:374.
[22] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:375.
[23] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:377.

since it asserts that the creature may call into existence an act that is strictly unrelated to God and his will. Moreover, since the Pelagian doctrine of freedom posits an act that is unrelated to God's will or determined by any antecedent factor(s), it also undermines the foundation for God's "foreknowledge." Even God is incapable of knowing in advance an act that is absolutely indeterminate. In Pelagianism, "God's decree has become completely conditional and has lost its character as will and decree. It is nothing more than a wish whose fulfillment is totally uncertain. God looks on passively and adopts an attitude of waiting; humans decide. Caprice and chance sit on the throne."[24]

Since predestination refers to God's counsel pertaining to the salvation or non-salvation of humans and angels, Bavinck argues that it must be understood to include both reprobation and election. Since divine election constitutes the culmination of God's purposes in predestination, Bavinck treats reprobation first and then concludes his treatment of the doctrine of the divine counsel with a consideration of election.

In his consideration of the doctrine of reprobation, Bavinck emphasizes that it is supported by the frequent testimony of Scripture that God's works out his will and purpose in all circumstances, including such circumstances as sin, unbelief, death, and eternal punishment. In all circumstances and events, even in the unbelief and condemnation of sinners who do not find salvation in Christ, God is actively accomplishing his inscrutable, wise and just purposes. Despite the apparent attraction of a Pelagian denial of a decree of reprobation, which expresses God's purpose not to save some human beings or angels, Reformed theology must accept the teaching of the Word of God that the will and hand of God are expressed in everything that happens. Without pretending to offer a solution to every problem, or a simple explanation of what appears dreadful to human insight, Calvinism "invites us humans to rest in him [God] who dwells in unapproachable light, whose judgments are unsearchable, and whose paths are beyond tracing out."[25] Even the non-salvation of some must be regarded as an outworking of God's eternal counsel. However, Bavinck also observes that the decree of reprobation does not fit within the will and counsel of God in the same manner as the decree of election. The power and will of God in the decree of reprobation may not be affirmed at the expense of a proper view of God's justice. After all, we know from Scripture that, though sin is "not outside the will of God, it is definitely against it."[26] Though sin may not be the "efficient or impelling cause of the decree of reprobation"—if it were, all sinners would be reprobated—it is "the sufficient cause and definitely the meriting cause of eternal punishment."[27] The decree of reprobation undoubtedly has, as do all things, its ultimate cause within the will of God; but the act of reprobation never takes place apart from sin and culpability on the part of those who are not saved. There is not an exact parallel, therefore, between God's decree of reprobation and his decree of election.

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[24] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:382.
[25] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:395.
[26] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:396.
[27] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:396.

Unlike the work of reprobation, the work of election is one in which God takes particular delight. In his purpose to grant salvation to some wholly and exclusively upon the basis of his grace, God acts in a manner that mirrors his perfections and achieves his culminating and consummate purpose. In reply to the Pelagian objection that particular election is unjust, Bavinck notes that all would be lost were salvation a matter of justice. "But now that election operates according to grace, there is hope even for the most wretched. If work and reward were the standard of admission into the kingdom of heaven, its gates would be opened for no one…. Pelagianism has no pity."[28] The sheer grace of divine election is the only basis for hope on the part of sinners who are incapable, because unwilling, to embrace Christ for salvation. Furthermore, though it is often objected that election undermines the invitation of the gospel to respond to Christ in faith and repentance, Bavinck observes that no one has the right to conclude that they are outside the reach of God's electing grace. "No one has *a right* to believe that he or she is a reprobate, for everyone is sincerely and urgently called to believe in Christ with a view to salvation. No one *can* actually believe it, for one's own life and all that makes it enjoyable is proof that God takes no delight in his death. No one *really* believes it, for that would be hell on earth."[29] When it comes to the objects of God's decree of election, Bavinck observes that they are Christ and those who belong to his body, the church. Christ is appointed within the decree of election to be the Mediator and Redeemer of all those who are his members by faith. For this reason, the knowledge of election is always joined to faith in its embrace of the gospel promise in Christ. Moreover, it is not God's goal to elect simply an "aggregate of individuals" who are saved through the mediation of Christ. The goal and outcome of God's decree of election is nothing less than a renewed humanity in union with Christ. The elect represent in the purpose of God the realization of a new and glorified humanity in whom the entire organism of the human race is contemplated. In his decree of election, God loves not a loose collection of individuals but an organism that represents and consummates his love for the whole world.[30]

2. The Doctrine of the Covenant

In Bavinck's view of the divine counsel, it is evident that predestination and election have to do with God's eternal purpose to save his people in Christ, and that God's intention is no less than the redemption of a new humanity within the context of his comprehensive work of re-creation. The doctrine of the covenant, in distinction from that of election, focuses upon the manner in which God accomplishes his purposes for human beings in the course of history before and especially after the fall into sin. Bavinck treats the doctrine of the covenant primarily in two places in his dogmatics. The first occasion for a consideration of the covenant between the Triune God and human beings follows Bavinck's

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[28] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:402.
[29] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:402.
[30] *Reformed Dogmatics* 1:404.

consideration of the creation of man in God's image. The covenant is not to be regarded as a post-fall means whereby God restores fallen sinners to fellowship with himself. Rather, the covenant is the divinely appointed instrument whereby from creation onward the Triune God chooses to enjoy communion with his image-bearers in the course of the historical unfolding of creation under human stewardship and dominion. The second occasion, which provides a considerably more lengthy treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of grace, is Bavinck's introduction to the doctrine of the person and work of Christ. As was true of our summary of Bavinck's handling of the doctrine of election, our summary of his doctrine of the covenant will only identify the most important features of Bavinck's view. Once we have a clear sense of Bavinck's respective doctrines of election and covenant, we will be in a position to take up the critical issue of their interrelation.

2.1. *The Covenant with Adam ("Covenant of Works")*

Bavinck introduces his discussion of the covenant before the fall into sin between the Triune God and all of humanity in Adam by noting that, in the original state of integrity, Adam did not possess the image of God in isolation from the organic unity of the human race. Nor did Adam possess immediately the image of God in the fullest sense. In the Scriptural conception of humanity, a clear distinction is evident between Adam and Christ, the second or last Adam. Even in the state of his original integrity, the first Adam did not yet possess the fullness of life that is only secured through Christ in the final state of glory. "As such, Adam, by comparison to Christ, stood on a lower level. Adam was the first; Christ the second and the last. Christ presupposes Adam and succeeds him. Adam is the lesser and inferior entity; Christ the great and higher being. Hence, Adam pointed to Christ; already before the fall he was the type of Christ. In Adam's creation Christ was already in view."[31] This relationship between the first Adam and Christ, the last Adam, is of special importance to a proper understanding of the original covenantal relationship between God and humanity. Only through the work of Christ, the second Adam, does the fullness of God's dwelling and communion with humanity (which was first given in the original covenant relationship between God and man before the fall) find its eschatological realization and fulfillment.

In his introductory comments on the pre-fall covenant relationship, Bavinck observes that the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant is based upon several Scriptural and theological themes that have deep roots in the history of Christian theology. In the Scriptural representation of Adam's relationship with God before the fall, it is apparent that Adam's condition was "provisional and temporary and could not remain as it was. It either had to pass on to higher glory or to sin and death."[32] When Adam was placed by God under a probationary command of obedience, he was threatened with death in the event of his transgression and he was si-

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[31] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:564.
[32] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:564.

multaneously promised a reward of life in the event of his obedience to this command. The reward of eternal life that was set before Adam is consistently regarded throughout the Scriptures as the goal and outcome of the original covenant and as well the covenant of grace. Even though the express language of "covenant" is not used in the Genesis account of Adam's relationship with his Triune Creator, Bavinck notes that it may be termed a covenant in Hosea 6:7, and it is certainly the case that the apostle Paul draws a clear "parallel" between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21. Just as the disobedience of the first Adam brings condemnation and death to the whole human race whom he represented as covenant head, so the obedience of Christ brings justification and life to those whom he represented as covenant head in the covenant of grace. In the history of Reformed theology, the formulation of the relationship between God and Adam in terms of the idea of covenant was largely based upon theological reflection that sought to do justice to this parallel between Adam and Christ. Though Christian theology did not always recognize the implications of this parallel for the formulation of the original relationship between God and Adam as a covenant relationship, it was always implicit in the long-standing tradition since Augustine of distinguishing Adam's state before the fall and the believer's state in Christ after the fall. The Augustinian distinction between Adam's ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and not to die (*posse non mori*) before the fall, and the inability to sin and die (*non posse peccare et mori*) that is bestowed upon the elect out of grace in Christ, requires the formulation of a pre- and post-fall covenant.[33]

In the history of Reformed theology, the pre-fall covenant between God and humanity in Adam has been variously designated. Sometimes it is termed a "covenant of nature," since this covenant required obedience to the moral law of God that man knew by nature and was able to obey by virtue of the created gifts and integrity with which he was originally endowed. However, it is most commonly designated a "covenant of works," since the eternal life promised in the covenant was only able to be obtained "in the way of works, that is, in the way of keeping God's commandments."[34] Bavinck admits that the terminology of a pre-fall "covenant of works" is not employed in the Reformed confessions as it is in the Westminster Standards. The absence of this terminology does not alter the fact that all of the elements or components of the doctrine are present "materially" in Articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession, in Lord's Days 3 and 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism, and in Chapter III/IV of the Canons of Dort. In these confessional articles, clear testimony is provided of the original state of humanity in Adam, the obligation of perfect obedience to the law of God, the promise of life upon condition of such obedience, and the consequence of Adam's sin and fall for the whole human race. Because Adam transgressed the covenant, he forfeited for himself and all his posterity any possibility of eternal life in unbroken and unbreakable communion with God. Now the only way to ob-

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[33] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:566-7.
[34] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:567.

tain such life is through faith in Christ, the last Adam, who alone is able to grant the fullness of glorified life to those who belong to him. In Bavinck's estimation, the fact that the Scriptures do not explicitly term the pre-fall state as a "covenant" relationship should not deter Reformed theologians from employing this term. In the Scriptures, it is common to speak of "covenant" as the "fixed form in which the relation of God to his people is depicted and presented."[35] Therefore, however much the word may be in dispute, it ought to be acknowledged that the "matter is certain" (*de vocabulo dubitetur, re salva*).[36]

After his introductory comments on the propriety of viewing the original pre-fall relationship between God and man as a covenant, Bavinck offers several significant arguments for regarding all of the Triune God's dealings with his image-bearers as covenantal in nature. The doctrine of a pre-fall covenant of works expresses a truth that is basic to the whole teaching of Scripture, namely, that "[a]mong rational and moral creatures all higher life takes the form of a covenant."[37] Whether in marriage, family, business, science or art, human social relationships and interaction invariably take the form of covenants in which there is mutual obligation and inter-communion. This is no less true of the highest and all-embracing relationship that obtains between God as Creator and man as his creature and image-bearer. Indeed, there is no possible way whereby human beings could enjoy blessedness in fellowship with God other than by way of a covenant relationship. In the first place, the "infinite distance" that obtains between God as Creator and man as creature confirms that there is no possibility of communion with God without covenant. In order for God to commune with his image-bearer, not only as a "master" to "servant" but also as "father" to "son," he must "come down from his lofty position, condescend to his creatures, impart, reveal, and give himself away to human beings."[38] In the second place, the idea of covenant always implies a relationship of mutual obligation and commitment. As a mere creature, however, man does not possess of himself

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[35] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:560.

[36] In his defense of the doctrine of a pre-fall "covenant of works," Bavinck stands within the mainstream of historic Reformed theology on the continent of Europe as well as in the Presbyterian tradition. For examples of the consensus view of the tradition, as well as studies of the development and significance of the doctrine, see Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 27-36, 97-101; idem, *The Larger Catechism,* Q. & A. 10, 18, 36, 72, 135; Caspar Olevianus, *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism,* trans. and ed. Lyle D. Bierma (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), pp. 9-10; Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Casper Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 112-20; idem, "Covenant or Covenants in the Theology of Olevianus," *Calvin Theological Journal* 22 (1987): 228-50; Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 276-304; Paul Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983): 65-81; Rowland S. Ward, *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and The Creation Covenant* (Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003); Johannes Cocceius, *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento* Dei (1648), par. 11 & 12.; Willem J. Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 248-68; John Ball, *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace* (London, 1645), pp. 14-27; John Preston, *The New Covenant, or the Saints Portion* (London, 1629), pp. 313-40; Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992-1997), 1:569-83, 2:169-216; Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (London: R. Baynes, 1822), 1:41-82.

[37] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:568.

[38] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:569.

any "rights" before God. The creature may never place the Creator in his debt or under obligation, unless God first freely and graciously grants him rights within the context of a covenant relationship. "There is no such thing," Bavinck argues, "as merit in the existence of a creature before God, nor can there be since the relation between the Creator and the creature radically and once-for-all eliminates any notion of merit. This is true after the fall but no less before the fall."[39] In the pre-fall covenant as well as the covenant of grace after the fall, God grants, by virtue of his condescending goodness and unmerited favor, rights and privileges that would otherwise be beyond his reach. And in the third place, Bavinck argues that the idea of covenant corresponds to the nature of man as a moral and rational creation, whom God treats and with whom he interacts in a way that respects the unique capacity of his image-bearer to respond to God in the way of free and heartfelt obedience.[40] In all of his dealings with his image-bearers, God never treats human beings as he would an irrational or inanimate object. The beauty of the covenant is that it provides a framework within which a fully personal and responsible engagement may transpire between God and human beings, which is analogous to the engagement of a husband and wife, or a parent and child.

Bavinck argues, in the concluding section of his consideration of the pre-fall covenant, that Reformed theology alone has adequately captured the biblical understanding of this covenant. In historic Roman Catholic theology, the doctrine of man's state before the fall included the idea that God as Creator added to man's natural state the "free gift" (*donum superadditum*) of original righteousness and the promise of eternal life. Though this idea bears some formal resemblance to the Reformed understanding of the covenant of works and rightly acknowledges that eternal life remains an "unmerited gift of God's grace," it differs from the Reformed view by its radical distinction between nature and grace and particularly by its reintroduction of the idea of "condign merit" in the context of

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[39] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:570. Bavinck rejects the idea of "merit" in the relationship between the creature and the Creator, particularly the traditional Roman Catholic distinction between two kinds of merit, "condign" and "congruent" (*meritum de condigno, meritum de congruo*). "Condign" merit is true or full merit and is based upon the good work of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer. "Congruent" merit is a half-merit or human work that does not truly merit God's grace, but receives its reward on the basis of God's generosity. See Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms,* pp. 190-2. Bavinck does not deny, however, that, whether we use the term "merit" in this context or not, the creature does have a right to the promised inheritance by virtue of the conferral of this right through the divinely initiated covenant relationship. Though Bavinck shies away from using the terminology of "merit" in the pre-fall covenant relationship, his position is consistent with earlier writers of the Reformed tradition who spoke qualifiedly of a kind of "covenanted merit" (*meritum ex pacto)*. Bavinck does not hesitate to employ the language of "merit," however, to describe the obedience of Christ as the last Adam, who fulfills all of the obligations of the law on behalf of his people and thereby justly procures their covenant inheritance. For a summary of the traditional Reformed view that Bavinck affirms, see Francis Turretin, *Elenctic Theology,* 1:569-86, esp. 2:712-24. Turretin allows that we may speak broadly and improperly of "merit" in the relationship between Adam and God, if we mean only to say that, by virtue of the covenant relationship, Adam's obedience would justly secure his inheritance of eternal life.

[40] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:570-1.

man's free cooperation with God.[41] In the Reformed conception of the pre-fall covenant, greater recognition is given to God's sovereign initiative in the "monopleuric" origin of the covenant relationship and in his gracious promise of eternal life. In the Reformed view, man as creature remains wholly dependent upon his Creator and finds a greater blessedness of glorious communion with God only in the way of obedience to the moral law of God. Moreover, unlike the traditional view of Lutheran theology, namely, that Adam possessed in his original state of integrity the "highest possible blessing," the Reformed view never exaggerated the original state of Adam. In the Reformed conception, which alone does justice to the emphasis upon covenant as the means of communion and blessing for man in relationship to God, salvation in Christ brings more than the restoration through the forgiveness of sins of fallen man to his original state.[42] Rather, through the work of the last Adam, all who belong to him by faith and participate in the blessings of his saving work are granted the fullness of glory in the immutable and indefectible state that is eternal life. Only in the Reformed conception do we find a proper understanding of the parallel between the first Adam and Christ. In the Reformed doctrine,

> Christ does not [merely] restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life.[43]

An interesting feature of Bavinck's treatment of the doctrine of the pre-fall covenant is that he concludes with the same emphasis previously noted in his consideration of the doctrine of election. Just as God's purpose of election terminates not upon an aggregate of individuals but upon the whole organism of a new humanity in Christ, so God's intention in the covenant he establishes with humanity in Adam is to bring the whole of humanity to their appointed destiny in unbroken and glorious communion with himself. The image of God, which Adam possessed but in a less-than-perfect or consummate form, is only fully expressed in the whole human race in its organic unity. Adam was not created alone or as an isolated individual, but he was created and ordained by God to be the

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[41] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:571-2. Though Bavinck closely links God's purpose of creation and the pre-fall covenant, he shares the majority opinion of the older writers that this covenant involves a distinct "voluntary condescension" on God's part and is not simply inherent in the Creator-creature relationship. See, e.g., Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* 1:574-78; and Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants,* 1:41-82. For a survey of this topic, including the identity of some Reformed theologians (e.g. Ursinus) who did not clearly distinguish creation and covenant, see J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant,* pp. 56-60.

[42] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:572.

[43] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:573. For a similar emphasis upon the significant difference between the Reformed and Lutheran views of the original state of man, see Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), pp. 242-5

covenant representative of the whole human race. God's journey with mankind begins with Adam, but this beginning is not to be confused with God's intended goal, which was that his image would be perfectly expressed only in his "fully finished image." "Only humanity in its entirety—as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation—only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God."[44] The whole of humanity was by God's ordinance united both juridically and ethically in the first Adam. Therefore, by virtue of Adam's sin and fall, the entire human race has come under the judicial sentence of condemnation and death, and all of Adam's posterity have inherited a sinfully corrupted human nature. This also provides an explanation for the unity of God's covenant with humanity, whether before the fall in the first Adam or after the fall in the last Adam. Christ, who is the one Mediator of the covenant of grace, is the "antitype" of the first Adam. By virtue of Christ's mediatorial work of perfect obedience to the Father and substitutionary endurance of the penalty of violating the law of God, all those who belong to Christ by faith constitute the new humanity in which God's original and abiding purpose is realized. In Christ believers are restored to union and communion with God, and upon the basis of his entire and perfect obedience are granted the title and inheritance of eternal life in consummate blessedness. Thus, Bavinck concludes that "[t]he covenant of works and the covenant of grace stand and fall together. The same law applies to both."[45] In the overarching purpose of God, Christ is the appointed Mediator who redresses all of the consequences of Adam's sin and transgression, and procures for believers the fullness of their covenant inheritance, which is life in unbreakable and perfected communion with the living God.

2.2. *The Covenant of Grace*

The way Bavinck concludes his treatment of the pre-fall covenant between God and all humanity in Adam, provides a natural link with his subsequent treatment of the covenant of grace in the context of an extended consideration of the Person and work of Christ as Mediator in the third volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics.* Rather than viewing the work of Christ merely as a remedy in the post-fall situation for the consequences of Adam's sin, Bavinck views the work of Christ as the realization of God's original intention for covenant communion with his image-bearers. Through Christ, the last Adam and the only Mediator of the covenant of grace, fallen human beings are restored to covenant fellowship with God and obtain the consummate blessing of indefectible life in the community of Christ's body, the church. By means of the salvation of the elect in union with Christ, all of the great and encompassing purposes of God in creation and in redemption reach their fulfillment and goal. Before we turn to Bavinck's particular handling of the relation between God's pur-

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[44] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:577.
[45] *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:579.

pose of election and the covenant he establishes with his people in Christ, therefore, we need to consider at this point the principal elements of Bavinck's conception of the covenant of grace.

As the language of "covenant of *grace*" clearly indicates, the first principal feature of this covenant in its historical manifestation is that it reveals God's favor and disposition to enter into renewed communion with undeserving and fallen sinners. Through the sin and disobedience of Adam under the pre-fall covenant of works, all of his posterity have been plunged into ruin and despair. There is no way back to communion with God by the covenant of works. However, God in his undeserved grace takes the initiative, immediately after the fall into sin, to restore his fallen image-bearers to union and communion with himself. In this the uniqueness of the Christian religion is exhibited over against all forms of paganism. Rather than the fallen creature working to enter into communion with God, the great emphasis of biblical teaching rests upon the initiatives of God's grace in coming to his fallen creatures to redeem them from the consequences of their sin and misery. "[I]n Scripture the grace of God comes out to meet us in all its riches and glory. Special revelation again makes God known to us as a Being who stands, free and omnipotent, above nature and has a character and will of his own."[46] Because Adam transgressed the law of God and forfeited for himself and his posterity any right under the original covenant to obtain the inheritance of life in communion with God, the grace of God after the fall always comes to expression in the form of a *new* and *gracious* covenant that "arises, not by a natural process, but by a historical act and hence gives rise to a rich history of grace."[47]

Following a long-standing tradition in Reformed theology, Bavinck appeals to the account of God's dealings with Adam after the fall in Genesis 3, especially verse 15, as the first and embryonic revelation of the covenant of grace in history. Indeed, though the terminology of covenant is not found in this passage, it contains in seed-form something of a foreshadowing of the entire history of the covenant of grace and its ultimate realization in Christ, the true "seed of the woman," who would finally crush all opposition to and enmity against God. When God comes to Adam after the fall, he pronounces his curse to be sure, but he does so in the context of a promise of blessing that triumphs over human sin. Through the fall into sin, Adam and Eve, in a manner of speaking, "covenanted" with Satan, the archenemy of God.[48] Through the "mother promise" of Genesis 3:15, however, God declares that he will break the bond of fellowship between Satan and the seed of the woman, his people, and join this people to himself in an irrevocable communion of life and bless-

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[46] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:197.

[47] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:197.

[48] In the history of the development of Reformed covenant theology, Caspar Olevianus was among the first to distinguish this "covenant with the Devil" from the "covenant of grace" that God first established with Adam after the fall. See Caspar Olevianus, *De Substantia foederis gratuiti inter Deum et electos …* (Geneva: Eustathius Vignon, 1585), pp. 10, 253. See Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus,* pp. 120-2, for a discussion of this theme in Olevianus. Characteristically, Bavinck's description here as elsewhere closely corresponds to traditional views.

ing. In doing so, "God graciously annuls it [the covenant between Adam and the power of evil], puts enmity between the seed of the serpent and the woman's seed, brings the seed of the woman—humanity, that is— back to his side, hence declaring that from Eve will spring a human race and that that race, though it will have to suffer much in the conflict with that evil power, will eventually triumph."[49] In the promise made to Adam, God assures him of the continued propagation, development and salvation of the human race. When Adam embraces this promise with childlike faith, God reckons his faith to him as righteousness. And so begins the course of redemptive history, which is the history of God's work of salvation in Christ and by means of the covenant of grace.

Though it is not germane to our purpose to provide a complete account of Bavinck's tracing of the covenant of grace throughout history, it is significant that Bavinck, also following the tradition of earlier Reformed covenant theology, gives special attention to the meaning of the language of "covenant" in the Scriptures. Contrary to the trajectory of critical biblical scholarship in his day, which often argued that the theme of covenant emerges for the first time at a late point in the history of Israel, Bavinck maintains that the idea of the covenant emerges at the inception of God's work of redemption. Upon the basis of a careful analysis of the usage of the Old Testament term for "covenant" (*berith*), Bavinck concludes that, when it refers to God's covenanting with his people, it contains three principal features: "an oath or promise that includes the stipulations agreed upon, a curse that invokes divine punishment upon the violator of the covenant, and a cultic ceremony that represents the curse symbolically."[50] When God enters into covenant with his people, he establishes a relationship of fellowship with himself that, by virtue of the accompanying oath of self-malediction, places his people "under the protection of God and so achieves a kind of indissolubility."[51] To the question whether the covenant relationship is a kind of mutual "agreement" between parties (bilateral) or a sovereign disposition or grant (unilateral), Bavinck answers that it depends upon how we view the nature of the covenant parties. Since the covenant of grace is initiated and sovereignly secured on God's part, it must be regarded as entirely unilateral in its origin and administration. God graciously bestows his covenant blessing upon his people, imposes simultaneously the obligations of the covenant, and upholds the covenant in faithfulness in spite of the faltering and unfaithfulness of his people.

> In this firmness and steadiness of the covenant of grace lies the glory of the religion we as Christians confess.... If religion is to be a true fellowship between God and humanity, fellowship in which not only God but also the human partner preserves his or her independence as a rational and moral being and along with his or her duties also receives rights, this can come into being by God's coming down to humans and entering into a covenant with them. In this action God obligates himself with an

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[49] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:199.
[50] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:203.
[51] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:203.

oath to grant the human partner eternal salvation despite his apostasy and unfaithfulness but by the same token, the human partner on his or her part is admonished and obligated to a new obedience, yet in such a way that 'if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins we must not despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin,' since we have an everlasting covenant of grace with God.[52]

Because the covenant of grace is unilateral in origin and ultimately rendered effective unto salvation by virtue of God's abiding faithfulness, the most common rendering of the Hebrew term in the Septuagint is *diatheke* ("disposition") and not *suntheke* ("agreement").[53] This linguistic convention confirms that the covenant is ultimately a sovereign bestowal of God whose faithfulness ensures the inviolability of the covenant relationship and guarantees that its promises will be realized in spite of the frequent infidelity of God's people. In this connection, Bavinck also observes that, though the language of the covenant is only infrequently rendered by the term, "testament," which suggests the guarantee of the reception of an inheritance upon the death of the testator, the biblical understanding of the covenant of grace includes the idea of a "testamentary disposition." In the sovereign working of God, Israel's unfaithfulness did not prevent the God of the covenant from gathering in her place "the spiritual Israel, which according to God's election was gathered from all peoples, receives the goods of salvation from the Son as by a testamentary disposition, stands in a child-Father relation to God, and expects salvation from heaven as an inheritance"[54]

After his general treatment of the central importance and nature of the covenant of grace to the biblical understanding of redemption, Bavinck devotes the remainder of his consideration of the doctrine of the covenant to five topics: 1) a survey of the history of the development of the doctrine of the covenant in Christian, and particularly, Reformed theology; 2) a relatively brief description of the doctrine of a "covenant of redemption" (*pactum salutis*); 3) the distinction between the covenant of grace in its broader and narrower sense; 4) the unity and differences between the various administrations of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history, especially the difference between the "old" and "new" covenant; 5) the relation between the pre-fall covenant of works and the post-fall covenant of grace; and 6) the relation between election and covenant. For the purpose of our summary of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant, some of these topics are of greater importance than others. Since the next section of our article will focus directly upon Bavinck's understanding of election and covenant, we will reserve our comments on this topic until that point. Furthermore, since they do not have special importance to our interest, we will omit a consideration of Bavinck's interpretation of the history of covenant theology and the differences between the old and new covenants.

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[52] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:204-5. The words in quotation marks are taken from the Form for Infant Baptism, used in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands since the sixteenth century.

[53] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:205.

[54] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:206.

2.2.1. The "Covenant of Redemption" (*Pactum Salutis*)

Within the context of his evaluation of the history of covenant theology, Bavinck takes up the subject of what Reformed theologians termed the "covenant of redemption" or *pactum salutis.* Bavinck observes that Reformed theology, more than the Roman Catholic or Lutheran theological traditions, has distinguished itself historically by the way it fully developed the biblical conception of God's covenant. In the course of its reflection upon the way God initiated and administered the covenant of grace throughout history, Reformed theology also pursued the question in what way this covenant should also be regarded to belong to God's eternal counsel. For Reformed theology, with its characteristic interest in the all-comprehensiveness of God's eternal counsel, it is not enough to view the covenant of grace merely in terms of its execution and administration throughout history. The question has to be raised regarding the background and foundation of the historical covenant of grace within the eternal counsel of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The answer of historic Reformed theology to this question was given in the form of its distinctive formulation of the doctrine of an eternal, intra-trinitarian covenant between the three Persons of the Trinity, which constitutes the basis for the realization of this covenant in time.[55]

In his reflection upon the doctrine of the "covenant of redemption," Bavinck affirms the essential components of the traditional formulation, though he also expresses some misgivings regarding what he terms the "scholastic subtlety" of some of its expressions.[56] In spite of some questionable appeal to Scriptural texts such as Zechariah 6:13 and the use of extra-biblical legal categories drawn from the realm of traditional jurisprudence, Bavinck affirms that the principal components of the traditional doctrine express a scriptural idea. Within the life and communion of the three Persons of the Trinity, we may posit the existence of a compact or agreement (a true *suntheke* or mutual concurrence of will and purpose) between the Father, who appoints the Son to be the Mediator of his people whom he chooses to give to him, and the Son, who willingly subjects himself to the Father's will, and the Spirit, who promises to furnish the Son with the power and gifts to accomplish his mediatorial task. In this "pact of salvation" between the three Persons, we witness, according to Bavinck, the "relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom. Here, within the Divine Being, the covenant flourishes to the full."[57] Whereas in the doctrine of the decrees of God, the unity of the Trinity is particularly emphasized, the doctrine of the "covenant of re-

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[55] Among original and secondary sources on the development of the doctrine of an eternal intra-trinitarian "covenant of redemption" in Reformed theology, see Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Casper Olevianus*, pp. 107-39; idem, "Covenant or Covenants in the Theology of Olevianus," 228-50; Johannes Cocceius, *Summa Theologiae ex Scripturis repetita* (1662), chaps. 31-43; Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius,* pp. 218-44; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:177-8; Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man,* 1:281ff.; Richard A. Muller, "Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 11-66.

[56] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:213.

[57] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:214.

demption" articulates the manner in which God is pleased to realize his purpose of redemption in fully Trinitarian categories. The work of salvation, which is accomplished through the instrument of the covenant of grace in its historical execution, is a work in which each of the three Persons of the Trinity performs, in accordance with the covenant between them, a distinctive task. In the same way that the work of creation involved the respective and unified operations of the three Persons of the Trinity, so in the work of re-creation each Person fulfills a particular role upon the basis of the eternal covenant of redemption. Thus, we should not regard the historical administration of the covenant of grace as a kind of *ad hoc* remedy for the redemption of the elect, but rather as the realization in time of what the three Persons of the Trinity eternally resolved to accomplish.

> The pact of salvation ... further forms the link between the eternal work of God toward salvation and what he does to that end in time. The covenant of grace revealed in time does not hang in the air but rests on an eternal, unchanging foundation. It is firmly grounded in the counsel and covenant of the triune God and is the application and execution of it that infallibly follows.[58]

As this statement of Bavinck's understanding of the covenant of redemption indicates, we should not think of this covenant and the covenant of grace as though they were *two* covenants.[59] Rather, we should regard the covenant of grace as the covenant of redemption coming to fruition in the course of the history of redemption. It is no accident of history that God the Father should send his Son in the fullness of time to fulfill the promises of the covenant of grace made prior to his incarnation. Nor is it an accident of history that the Son should choose to assume human flesh and undertake his work as Mediator. Nor is it an accident of history the Spirit should furnish Christ with the gifts required to the fulfillment of his office as Mediator, or apply the benefits of Christ's mediation to the elect. All of the respective operations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the accomplishment of God's saving purpose stem from and express what was eternally covenanted between the Persons of the Trinity in the *pactum salutis.* Because the covenant of grace in its historical execution is founded upon this intra-trinitarian compact, it can be understood in its unity and diversity. Furthermore, as an expression or execution of the eternal covenant of redemption, we can also affirm the inviolability and effectiveness of the covenant as the God-appointed instrument of redemption. The redemption that the covenant

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[58] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:215.

[59] The close link between the "covenant of redemption" and the "covenant of grace" is also underscored in Bavinck's *Saved by Grace*, p. 77 (108): "The covenant was established already in eternity with Christ as the Surety of His own. It did not come into existence for the first time within history. The covenant is rooted in eternity. Rather, the covenant existed at that point also in truth and in reality between the Father and the Son, and therefore immediately after the Fall the covenant could be made known to man and be established with man. Therefore, that covenant of grace, existing from eternity to eternity, functions within history as the instrumentality of all the redemption, the route along which God communicates all of His gracious benefits to man."

of grace effects for the covenant people of God, is a redemption that is of, from, and through God. Just as there is one God and Father of all who truly belong to the people of God, so there is one Son and Mediator, as well as one Spirit. Communion with the Triune God, which is the goal to which the covenant of grace is ordained, is possible only upon the basis of the work of all three Persons in perfect unity and Trinitarian diversity.[60]

2.2.2. The Relation Between the Pre- and Post-Fall Covenants

Following his discussion of the covenant of redemption, Bavinck briefly argues that the historical execution of the covenant of grace should not be viewed too narrowly, as though it terminated solely upon the salvation of the elect. In the Scriptural representation of the covenant of grace, the first use of the term "covenant" occurs in connection with the "covenant of nature" that God established in the context of the worldwide flood in the days of the patriarch, Noah. The breadth of the promise that God makes in conjunction with the event of the great flood is a reminder, in Bavinck's judgment, that God's purposes of redemption are as wide in their compass as creation. The whole of the cosmos and all of the nations directly benefit from God's purpose to redeem his people from among the whole of the fallen human race. The creation is preserved, the nations are enabled to prosper and develop, human culture advances, and the human sciences are advanced—all within the framework of God's overarching purpose of re-creation. With the redemption of his people in Christ, which is the principal goal of the covenant of grace in history, God is also working in such a way as to renew and enlist the fruits of humanity's fulfillment of the cultural mandate in the accomplishment of his great purposes of redemption. In Bavinck's own words, "[n]ature and grace, creation and re-creation, must be related to each other in the way Scripture relates them.... Common grace and special grace still flow in a single channel."[61] God's purpose of redemption, accordingly, is, as we have previously noted, a purpose to redeem a new humanity and that purpose does not exclude, but includes, the re-creation of the cosmos. Re-creation, including the redemption of a covenant people, does not repudiate nature, but perfects it.

Of special importance to Bavinck's insistence that the covenant of grace is founded upon an eternal covenant of redemption and that it perfects rather than abandons God's work in creation, is his handling of the question of the relation between the pre-fall covenant of works and the post-fall covenant of grace. We should not view the covenant of grace as though it were at odds with, or in some fashion contradicts, the so-called covenant of works. The covenant of grace, rather, "was from the moment of its revelation and is still today surrounded and sustained on all sides by the covenant of nature God established with all creatures. Although special grace is essentially distinct from common grace, it is intimately

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[60] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:215-6.
[61] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:216.

bound up with it."[62] In order to appreciate the relation between these covenants, we need to have a clear understanding of the differences and similarities between them.

The essential difference between the pre-fall and post-fall covenants is evident in that the latter is purely and only an expression of God's grace. All the blessings of the covenant of grace are to be understood in the strictest sense as "undeserved and *forfeited* blessings."[63] Though the covenant of works was indeed an expression of God's grace and favor toward humanity, which conferred covenant rights that man as creature did not deserve, it was nonetheless a covenant that required perfect obedience to the law of God as the way to blessing and eternal life. In the covenant of works, man is treated as a responsible creature who is able to do what the law of God requires and thereby obtain the blessings of the covenant. The forfeiture of the blessings of this covenant occurs as the result of Adam's sin and disobedience, and fully accords with divine justice in the face of disobedience to God's holy and righteous law. Indeed, in Adam the entire human race stands under the abiding obligation of perfect obedience and the sanction of condemnation and death on the basis of his failure to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law. "God stands by the rule that those who keep the law will receive eternal life. He posits this in his law, attests it in everyone's conscience, and validates the statement in Christ. But human beings broke the covenant of works; now they are no longer able to acquire life by keeping it. By the works of the law no human being can be justified."[64] Contrary to the "legalistic" character of this pre-fall covenant, we must understand the post-fall covenant to be purely "evangelical." Everything that was forfeited under the terms of the pre-fall covenant is obtained and guaranteed in the post-fall covenant by the provisions of God's grace in Christ.

> In distinction from and contrast to the covenant of works, God therefore established another, a better, covenant, not a legalistic but an evangelical covenant. But he made it, not with one who was solely a human but with the man Christ Jesus, who was his own only begotten, much-beloved Son. And in him, who shares the divine nature and attributes, this covenant has an unwaveringly firm foundation. It can no longer be broken: it is an everlasting covenant. It rests not in any work of humans but solely in the good pleasure of God, in the work of the Mediator, in the Holy Spirit, who remains forever. It is not dependent on any human condition; it does not confer any benefit based on merit; it does not wait for any law keeping on the part of humans. It is of, through, and of grace. God himself is the sole and eternal being, the faithful and true being, in whom it rests and who establishes, maintains, executes, and completes it. The covenant of grace is the divine work par excellence—his work alone and his work totally. All boasting is excluded here for humans; all glory is due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[65]

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[62] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:225.
[63] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:225 (emphasis added).
[64] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:225.
[65] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:225-6.

The essential difference between the pre- and fall-covenants, therefore, is that in the covenant of grace every blessing that is bestowed through Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, is an undeserved and assured blessing that answers to what was lost and forfeited (demerited) under the covenant of works.[66] There is an important difference between a covenant that is based upon grace in the sense of unmerited favor and a covenant that is based and rendered effective by grace *in the sense of favor shown to undeserving sinners who have forfeited every covenantal claim upon that favor.* According to Bavinck, this difference between the covenants before and after the fall does not mitigate the fact that in both the law of God is fully upheld. Because God is unchangeably holy and righteous, the demand of his holy law is maintained not only before the fall under the covenant of works but after the fall in the administration of the covenant of grace. No human being can find favor with God without doing what the law of God requires; this is as true in the covenant of grace as it was in the covenant of works. Therefore, in the covenant of grace, God does not act capriciously or arbitrarily. He always acts in a way that maintains and upholds the righteous requirements of his holy law. Indeed, after the fall into sin, the whole human race comes to stand "under the law" in two respects: first, all remain obligated to do what the law requires in order to be pleasing to God; and second, all now come under the law in terms of its liability and penalty. After the fall into sin, the requirement of perfect obedience in order to obtain eternal life remains, but it has now been complicated by the additional requirement that payment be made for the debts or demerits that disobedient sinners now owe God for their sins. "After the fall, therefore, God lays a double claim on humans: that of the payment of a penalty for the evil done and that of perfect obedience to his law (satisfaction and obedience)."[67]

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[66] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:225.

[67] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:226. In this understanding of Christ's mediatorial work, Bavinck reflects the traditional Reformed view of Christ's "active" and "passive" obedience, which together constitute the imputed righteousness that is the basis for the justification of believers. The purpose of this distinction was not to divide Christ's obedience into two chronological stages (the first being his earthly ministry, the second being his sacrificial death upon the cross) or even into two parts, but to distinguish two facets of the one obedience of Christ. Christ's active obedience refers to his life of conformity to the precepts of the law; Christ's passive obedience refers to his life of suffering under the penalty of the law, especially in his crucifixion (Rom. 5:12-21; Phil. 2:5ff.; Gal. 4:4). For traditional presentations of this distinction and its significance for justification, see Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* 2:646-59; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), pp. 379-82, 513ff.; and James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997 [1867]), pp. 314-38. For a perceptive comment on the link between the traditional Reformed view of Christ's "active obedience" and the original obligations of the pre-fall covenant of works, see Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service,* trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), p. 355: "Acquaintance with this covenant [i.e., the covenant of works] is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will very readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect." On the theological significance of the covenant of works for the traditional Reformed view of the abiding obligations of God's law and the mediatorial work of Christ as the last Adam, see Richard A. Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of the Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel," *CTJ* 29 (April, 1994): 75-100.

Because the covenant of grace fulfills and meets the abiding obligations of obedience that were first stipulated in the covenant of works, it restores God's people to favor with God and secures their inheritance of eternal life in communion with him. Christ, as the Mediator of the covenant of grace, is the "anti-type" of Adam in the covenant of works. Adam, the original covenant head of the human race, is "exchanged for and replaced by Christ," who is the covenant head of the new humanity.[68] Only within the history of Reformed theology has this correspondence and relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace come to full development. In the historical development of Reformed theology, it was soon recognized that Christ's work as Mediator of the covenant of grace obtained that righteousness and life for his people that was no longer able to be obtained through the covenant of works. Moreover, it was also emphasized that the covenant of grace, so far as Christ's work is concerned, was for Christ a covenant of works. Christ's entire obedience and sacrifice constitute the basis for restoring his people to favor and fellowship with God in a way that fully accords with the demands of God's righteousness. In the further explication of the doctrine of the covenant, Reformed theology also argued that the work of Christ in the covenant of grace was itself the fulfillment of the eternal "counsel of peace" (*pactum salutis*) in which Christ was appointed and willingly assumed the office of Mediator. Some in the tradition of Reformed theology went so far as to identify the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, and argued that, in the strictest sense, these two were essentially identical. By virtue of the foundation of the covenant of grace in the covenant of redemption, we may conclude that the covenant of grace is properly a covenant between God and Christ and "in him with all his own."[69]

In his evaluation of these developments in the history of Reformed theology, Bavinck hesitates to identify without qualification the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace. His hesitation to do so is of particular significance for the question of the relation between election and covenant. Since Bavinck's commentary on the relation between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace is of particular significance to this question, it is worth quoting at length.

> Indeed, there is a difference between the pact of salvation and the covenant of grace. In the former, Christ is the guarantor and head; in the latter, he is the mediator. The first remains restricted to Christ and demands from him that he bear the punishment and fulfill the law in the place of the elect; the second is extended to and through Christ to humans and demands from them the faith and repentance that Christ has not, and could not, accomplish in their place. The first concerns the acquisition of salvation, is eternal, and knows no history; the second deals with the application of salvation, begins in time, and passes through several dispensations.[70]

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[68] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:226-7.
[69] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:227.
[70] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:227.

We will have occasion to consider further the implications of this important comment in our next section, when we take up directly Bavinck's conception of the relation between election and covenant. However, it is clear that this comment is of direct significance for this question. In Bavinck's understanding, the covenant of redemption, which expresses the purpose of the Triune God to save the elect and to do so by means of the different operations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, expresses the divine counsel or plan for the salvation of the elect. In the covenant of redemption, the "parties" are the Triune God and all the elect in Christ; the non-elect are not party to or directly contemplated in the covenant of redemption. In the covenant of redemption, Christ fulfills as guarantor all the "conditions" and demands that must be met in order to accomplish the salvation of the elect. However, in the covenant of grace, which represents the historical execution in time of God's counsel of redemption, the situation is more complicated. Though Christ is the Mediator of the covenant of grace and secures all of its blessings for his own people, the parties of this covenant are the Triune God and his covenant people (believers and their children, as well as all whom the Lord calls to himself) who are obliged in the covenant to respond to God's grace in the way of faith and obedience.[71]

Lest this distinction between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace be misunderstood, Bavinck adds that there remains a fundamental unity and connection between them. Just as Adam was the covenant representative and head of the human race before the fall, Christ is the covenant representative and head of the new humanity after the fall. Unlike the first covenant, which could not secure the covenant inheritance of eternal life, the second covenant, because it is based upon the sure and perfect work of Christ as the covenant head and representative of his people, guarantees and infallibly secures what it promises. "The covenant [of grace] is certain as a testament; it is a covenant of testaments and a covenantal testament. It involves no principle and is relatively immaterial whether one highlights the duality or the unity of the pact of salvation and the covenant of grace, provided it is clear that in the pact of salvation Christ can never even for a second be conceived apart from his own, and that in the covenant of grace believers can never even for one second be regarded outside Christ."[72]

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[71] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:227-28. Cf. *Our Reasonable Faith,* pp. 270-5.

[72] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:228. Due the the unity and distinction between the eternal "covenant of redemption" and the historical execution of this covenant in terms of the "covenant of grace," Bavinck vacillates in his use of the language of Christ as the "head and representative" of his people. In the "covenant of redemption," Christ is certainly the "head and representative" of the elect. The situation is more complicated in respect to the covenant of grace, however, since this covenant in its historical manifestation may be viewed in two ways: either in terms of its substance and reality (in which case, it is a covenant that obtains between the Triune Redeemer and all the elect who truly belong to Christ by faith) or in terms of its administration (in which case, it is a covenant that obtains between the Triune Redeemer and all believers together with their children, not all of whom are elect). See footnote 88 below on the related distinction that Bavinck makes between the covenant in its "outward" administration and in its "inward" reality.

3. The Relation Between Covenant and Election
in Bavinck's Theology

Bavinck's comments on the relation between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace provide a natural bridge to the conclusion of his consideration of the doctrine of the covenant in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. In this conclusion, Bavinck presents a brief, but carefully articulated, statement of his conception of the relation between covenant and election. In a compact and nuanced manner, Bavinck articulates this relation in terms of what we have summarized thus far regarding his doctrines of election and covenant. Before we offer several concluding observations regarding Bavinck's conception of election and covenant, we need to analyze with care the way Bavinck argues his case in this section. After our summary and analysis of Bavinck's explicit treatment of the relation between covenant and election, we will also consider a closely related topic, namely, the complex issue of the relation between election, covenant, and the promise that is signified and sealed to believers and their children in baptism. This latter topic is directly relevant to and illustrative of Bavinck's viewpoint, and is taken up in the last volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics* and in his important collection of essays on "calling and regeneration" that were published in 1903.

3.1. *Covenant and Election in the* Reformed Dogmatics

Bavinck opens his discussion of the inter-relation between covenant and election by observing that the doctrine of the covenant maintains "in a marvelous way … God's sovereignty in the entire work of salvation."[73] The covenant of grace surpasses the covenant of works "to the degree that Christ exceeds Adam."[74] Because all three Persons of the Trinity are intimately involved and at work in the accomplishment of the work of re-creation, the covenant of grace effectively accomplishes and secures the salvation of those whom God in his counsel is pleased to save. Nothing can frustrate the sovereign plan and purpose of God the Father, the representative and mediatorial work of God the Son, and the effectual application of that work to those who belong to Christ by faith. In the entirety of this great and majestic work of the Triune God, it is God who works and graciously procures the salvation of his people. Viewed in this manner, the doctrine of the covenant, as much as the doctrine of election, underscores the monergism of divine grace and the glory of God's saving purpose and work. Covenant and election, each in its own manner, disclose the truth that salvation is God's work from beginning to completion.

However, after this opening note that covenant and election both underscore the truth of salvation by grace alone, Bavinck proceeds to distinguish them in terms of the way human beings are engaged by the grace of God. In terms of the doctrine of election, we may say that God's image-bearers are utterly "passive" and purely the beneficiaries of God's

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[73] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:228.
[74] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:228.

gracious purpose. In terms of the doctrine of the covenant, however, this is not the case. At this point, Bavinck recalls his earlier discussion of the nature of the covenant as a suitable instrument for God's dealings with rational and moral creatures who bear the divine image. In the covenant of grace, God treats human beings as responsible partners who are placed in a relationship of fellowship with himself that is mutual and personal.

> Admittedly, the two are not so different that election is particular while the covenant of grace is universal, that the former denies free will and the latter teaches or assumes it, that the latter takes back what the former teaches. But the two do differ in that in election humans are strictly passive but in the covenant of grace they also play an active role. Election only and without qualification states who are elect and will infallibly obtain salvation; the covenant of grace describes the road by which these elect people will attain their destiny. The covenant of grace is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity.[75]

Though it is true that Christ acts as head and representative of his people in the covenant of grace, it is not true that Christ's work effaces the responsible partnership of those who belong to him by faith. Since Christ is not only the head of the covenant but also its Mediator, those who are embraced by the covenant of grace are obligated and placed under the demands of faith and repentance. Without the human response in the way of faith to the covenant promise, together with its corresponding demand, it is not possible to speak of a covenant relationship between God and his people in Christ. According to Bavinck, this is the reason Reformed theologians have not hesitated to speak of the "conditions" of the covenant. Even though the language of "conditions" requires careful definition and statement, it properly reflects the nature of the covenant of grace as it is administered in the course of the history of redemption.[76]

Bavinck endeavors to articulate this difference between election and the covenant by distinguishing those senses in which the covenant is "unilateral," even "unconditional," and "bilateral" or "conditional." When viewed from the perspective of God's gracious initiative and bestowal of its saving blessings, the covenant is undoubtedly a work of God's grace.[77] God not only establishes the covenant and gathers his people to himself,

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[75] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:229.
[76] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:230.
[77] In *Our Reasonable Faith,* p. 273, Bavinck offers a clear distinction between election, as one element of the eternal "counsel of redemption," and the manner in which God determines to accomplish and apply that redemption in terms of the *pactum salutis,* which undergirds the realization of redemption in time: "Election is not the whole counsel of redemption, but is a part, the first and principal part, of it. Included and established in that counsel is also the way in which the election is to be actualized—in short, the whole accomplishment and application of redemption.... In other words the counsel of redemption is itself a covenant—a covenant in which each of the three Persons, so to speak, receives His own work and achieves His own task. The covenant of grace which is raised up in time and is continued from generation to generation is nothing other than the working out and the impression or imprint of the covenant that is fixed in the Eternal Being. As in the counsel of God, so in history each of the Persons appears. The Father is the source, the Son is the Achiever, and the Holy Spirit is the one who applies our salvation."

but he also provides all that is needed for their salvation through the work of Christ, which is effectually applied and communicated to them by the Holy Spirit. In these respects, even the so-called "conditions" of the covenant, faith and repentance, are not to be viewed as anything other than the fruits or evidences of the work of God's grace in his own. God graciously gives to his people through Christ and by the Spirit what he rightly demands of them in the covenant of grace.[78] Nevertheless, in the "administration" of the covenant by Christ, those with whom God covenants are placed under the obligations of faith and obedience and the covenant "assumes this demanding conditional form."[79] The covenant of grace, which is indeed unilateral and proceeds from God and is rendered effective by him, "is destined to become bilateral, to be consciously and voluntarily accepted and kept by humans in the power of God."[80] In his description of the bilateral form of the covenant of grace, Bavinck argues that the covenant accentuates human responsibility, engages the whole person, and treats people, not as "inanimate objects" but as whole persons in the fullness of their created integrity. Thus, the covenant of grace, in a manner quite distinct from the doctrine of election, simultaneously accentuates divine sovereignty and human responsibility. In the covenant relationship, God's people come into their own and flourish in the way of life and fellowship with God. In this way, "[t]he covenant of grace declares that God's honor and acclaim is [sic] not won at the expense but for the benefit of human persons and celebrates its triumphs in the re-creation of the whole person, in his or her enlightened consciousness and restored freedom."[81]

Another related difference between election and covenant, in Bavinck's estimation, is that election focuses primarily upon particular persons whom God knows by name, whereas the covenant focuses upon the Person of Christ, the second Adam, in whom the entire organism of the human race is redeemed through the formation of a new humanity. "Election calls attention especially to individuals," whereas the covenant reminds us that the elect-in-Christ constitute the whole organism of a new humanity that is being gathered to God, not one individual at a time, but organically and in the historical line of the generations.[82] The doctrine of election has a narrower focus than the doctrine of the covenant. If we were to stay within the boundaries of God's purpose of election, we might conclude that God's purposes terminate merely upon the salvation of a company of individuals. However, when we understand

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[78] In a striking comment in *Our Reasonable Faith,* p. 272, Bavinck observes that, if the covenant of grace is viewed in isolation from the doctrine of election, it will be understood finally as a kind of "covenant of works," that is, as a covenant that depends upon the human fulfillment of its conditions: "After all, when the covenant of grace is separated from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and becomes again a covenant of works. Election implies that God grants man freely and out of grace the salvation which man has forfeited and which he can never again achieve in his own strength. But if this salvation is not the sheer gift of grace but in some way depends upon the conduct of men, then the grace of grace is converted into a covenant of works. Man must then satisfy some condition in order to inherit eternal life."

[79] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:230.

[80] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:230.

[81] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:230.

[82] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:230.

God's purpose within the setting of the historical administration of the covenant of grace, we must conclude that God's purposes terminate upon nothing less than a new humanity, indeed the "whole of creation." "The covenant of grace is the organization of the new humanity under Christ as its head, as it links up with the creation order, and, reaching back to it, qualitatively and intensively incorporates the whole of creation into itself."[83] When we consider the rich and historically complex reality of the covenant in its various and distinct administrations, we observe that the divine work of redemption does not proceed contrary to the creation's structure and fabric, but takes the creation into itself and moves forward in a manner that respects the nature of human life and historical development.

The final, and perhaps most important, portion of Bavinck's consideration of the relation between covenant and election, introduces a traditional distinction in the history of Reformed theology between the *historical administration* of the covenant of grace and the *saving communion* that this covenant effects for some, though not all, who fall under the covenant's administration in history. Though Bavinck's comments on this distinction are tantalizingly brief and suggest that he is not altogether satisfied with some historic formulations of it, it is of special importance that he nonetheless embraces a form of this distinction to explain the relation between covenant and election. According to Bavinck, not all those who come under the administration of the covenant of grace in the history of redemption truly and savingly belong to Christ through faith. "It is self-evident," he observes, "that the covenant of grace will temporarily—in its earthly administration and dispensation—also include those who remain inwardly unbelieving and do not share in the covenant's benefits."[84] Historically, Reformed theologians have attempted to account for this reality by employing distinctions between an "internal" and an "external" covenant, between "covenant" and "covenant administration," or between an "absolute" and a "conditional" covenant.[85] The purpose of these distinctions was to explain the difference between those who are embraced within the covenant relationship in its historical administration (all believers and their children, all who belong to the "visible" church) and those who simultaneously experience in a genuine way

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[83] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:231.

[84] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:231.

[85] This distinction is a common one in the history of Reformed theology, though it is variously articulated. Though it is sometimes alleged to imply two different covenants, Bavinck clearly opposes this implication and speaks rather of "two sides" of the one covenant. For examples of the use of this distinction, which is virtually equivalent to that between the "visible" and "invisible" church, see Zacharias Ursinus, *The Larger Catechism,* Q. & A. 118-40; Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus,* pp. 66-7, 74-5, 105, 112; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* 2:205-16; Witisius, *The Economy of the Covenants,* 1:281-91; and L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology,* pp. 284-90. Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant,* pp. 129-34, 228-38, argues that Bavinck does not develop this distinction in as clear and thorough a manner as Geerhardus Vos. Though this criticism is warranted, all of the elements articulated in Vos' treatment of the distinction are present throughout Bavinck's writings. For Vos' handling of this distinction under what he terms the "dual aspect" of the covenant, see G. Vos, *Dogmatiek,* vol. 1, part. 1 (Grand Rapids: mimeographed, 1910), pp. 102-38.

the salvation in Christ that the covenant communicates. Bavinck affirms this distinction, though he resists the tendency of some Reformed theologians to overstate it and "assume the existence of two covenants, one with the elect and the true believers, the other with external, not genuinely believing members of the church."[86] In Bavinck's conception, we should not view this distinction as though it warranted the conclusion that there are two separate covenants. Rather, this distinction allows us to express the undeniable truth that these two aspects of the one covenant of grace never wholly overlap or "coincide" in this world. Not all who belong to the covenant in its broad and administrative sense are, strictly speaking, among the elect who alone are savingly joined to Christ and beneficiaries of his saving work in the way of faith. Nevertheless, we should not view this distinction in a way that "splits apart" or places these aspects "side by side" each other. Only God knows infallibly who are his and he alone will definitively separate the genuine from the ingenuine members of the covenant in the day of judgment. In the meantime, though it is true that some are only "in" the covenant (*in foedere*) while others are also "of" the covenant (*de foedere*), we should proceed according to "the judgment of love" and regard those who are embraced within the covenant as "allies" so long as the "walk in the way of the covenant."[87]

The importance of this distinction between the covenant in its administration and the covenant in its saving outcome will become more apparent in our next section, which treats Bavinck's handling of the relation between election, covenant and the sacrament of baptism. Here it is sufficient to note that it addresses the heart of the difficult question of the relation between election and covenant. In Bavinck's view, the circle of election and the circle of covenant, at least in its historical administration, do not coincide, though they do overlap significantly. Since God is pleased to realize his purpose of election through the instrumentality or "channel" of the covenant of grace, there is the closest and most intimate relation between them. However, since not all who are embraced within the historical administration of the covenant receive its saving blessings in the way of faith, we are compelled to acknowledge that the circle of the covenant is wider than the circle of election.[88] Furthermore, the ultimate explanation for this perplexing circumstance, namely, that not all of those who fall under the covenant administration receive its saving blessings, must be found in God's purpose of election, in accordance with which God grants faith to some but not all.

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[86] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:231.

[87] *Reformed Dogmatics* 3:232.

[88] Cf. *Saved by Grace,* p. 149 (215-6), where Bavinck speaks of the "external and internal sides of the covenant of grace": "According to the saying of Augustine, there are sheep outside and wolves inside the sheepfold of the church of Christ upon earth. The external and internal sides of the covenant of grace do not correspond fully to each other. There are many who according to our estimate belong within the dispensation of the covenant of grace and nevertheless do not share in the essence and the spiritual benefits of that covenant. In connection with the means of grace, the sign and the thing signified are not always united with other."

3.2. *Election, Covenant and Infant Baptism*

Thus far our treatment of Bavinck's view of election and covenant has been largely based upon what he teaches explicitly regarding these subjects in his principal theological writings, the four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* and his popular summary of his dogmatics in *Our Reasonable Faith.* However, further light is shed upon Bavinck's conception of the relation between the doctrines of election and covenant in his reflection on the implications of this relation for the administration of the sacrament of baptism, especially to the children of believing parents. As we observed in our introduction, Bavinck labored in the context of an ecclesiastical environment, the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, that had witnessed during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries a protracted series of controversial debates regarding these implications. Though it is not our purpose to provide an account of this history, or even of Bavinck's role in these debates, it is instructive to witness the way Bavinck handles this subject, not only in his formal work on Reformed dogmatics, but in his 1903 book on "calling and regeneration" (Eng. trans.: *Saved by Grace*). In this volume, which was based upon a lengthy series of articles in the church periodical, *De Bazuin* (*The Trumpet*), Bavinck aimed to contribute to a resolution of some of the primary differences that had emerged within the Reformed community of which he was a member.

At the risk of over-simplifying these debates, it should be observed that they arose within an ecclesiastical and pastoral context, and were especially directed to the way the doctrines of election and covenant play a role in understanding the significance of the baptism of children. The recurring question that emerged in the debates of Bavinck's time was: how should we regard the children of believing parents who receive the sign and seal of the covenant promise in Christ through the sacrament of baptism? Among Bavinck's contemporaries, two broad answers were given to this question that represented very different emphases so far as the doctrines of election and covenant are concerned.

Some theologians, proceeding from the standpoint of election, maintained that such children should be assumed to possess the fullness of God's grace in Christ, which the sacrament visibly signifies and seals. Since God's promise is addressed in the strictest sense only to the elect, who alone are granted in accord with God's purpose of election what the sacrament attests, those who receive this promise in baptism should be assumed to possess all the benefits of salvation in Christ that flow from divine election—regeneration, conversion, union with Christ and its accompanying benefits of justification, sanctification and perseverance. In its most rigorous form, theologians who virtually identified covenant with election sometimes expressed themselves in such a way as to suggest that the ground or reason for the baptism of such children is their assumed election and regeneration. Moreover, since the promise of grace that baptism visibly confirms actually belongs only to the elect, these theologians included some who drew the conclusion that the baptism of non-elect children was an "unreal" or only an "apparent" baptism. This tendency to proceed from the standpoint of election in the understanding

of the administration of the covenant (identifying covenant with election) was associated with the theological views and formulations of Abraham Kuyper, Bavinck's contemporary and predecessor as professor of dogmatics at the Free University in Amsterdam, and those who were influenced by him.[89]

Other theologians, proceeding from the standpoint of the covenant in its administration and preferring to keep the doctrine of election "out of purview," maintained that we should view the baptism of the children of believers only in terms of the objective administration of the covenant. All baptized children ought to be regarded in the same way and upon the basis of the promise of the covenant that was communicated to them sacramentally in their baptism. This does not warrant the assumption that all such children are elect, since the promise that baptism attests is "conditional" in the sense that it requires faith on the part of its recipient. Nor does it warrant the idea that the baptism of the children of believing parents is grounded upon the assumption of the (election and) regeneration of such children. When the church baptizes the children of believing parents, it does not proceed upon the basis of any assumption (or "presumption") regarding their regeneration, but upon the basis of the Scriptural teaching regarding the administration of the covenant. In this approach, all the children who are baptized should be regarded in the same manner, namely, as those who have received the visible sign and seal of the covenant promise in Christ, which obliges them to respond in the way of faith. Viewed from the standpoint of the covenant's administration, such children either prove to be faithful to the covenant in the way of faith and obedience, thus receiving the salvation that is promised them in Christ, or prove to be unfaithful in the way of unbelief and disobedience, thus coming under the curse of the covenant. If we regard such children simply from the standpoint of the covenant promise and its obligations, we will avoid the temptation to speculate regarding the election and regeneration of such children. On this approach to the question of the status of covenant children who have been baptized, it is possible not only to emphasize the "conditional" nature of the covenant relationship but also speak appropriately of those who become "covenant

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[89] For sketches of this approach and its proponents, see Smilde, *Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop,* pp. 118-151, 211-22, and 303-19; and J. Mark Beach, "Introductory Essay," pp. xxvii–xxxvi; idem, "Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and 'The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905'," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 41–52; 63–67. Though proponents of this approach, especially Kuyper, were often interpreted to teach either a doctrine of "baptismal regeneration" or the baptism of the children of believers upon the basis of their "assumed regeneration" (in the Dutch: *veronderstelde wedergeboorte*), this is not necessarily the case. What this approach encouraged is a strong confidence that the grace of Christ, which is signified and sealed to the children of the covenant in baptism, properly belongs to such children unless they should grow up to show themselves to be unbelieving. It also emphasized the "unconditionality," in the strict sense, of the covenant promise, since this promise properly belongs only to the elect. In North American Reformed church history, this approach with its tendency to view the covenant strictly in terms of the doctrine of election, is represented by the Protestant Reformed Churches. For a theological defense of this approach, see Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), pp. 283-336, 682-700; and idem, *Believers and Their Seed,* trans. Homer Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing House, 1970). For further comment on the language of "assumed" or "presumed" regeneration, see footnote 103 below.

breakers" through their failure to live by the terms of the covenant relationship. Among advocates of this approach to the question, some emphasized more the reality of the objective promise that the sacrament of baptism attests, others emphasized more the obligation of such baptized children to undergo a conversion experience subsequent to their baptism.[90]

Admittedly, this is only a very schematic representation of the viewpoints that were expressed among Bavinck's contemporaries. Within the broad framework of these two tendencies—one viewing the covenant from the standpoint of election, the other viewing the covenant strictly in terms of its historical administration—there were many variations and permutations on these two divergent views. Rather than trace out the diversity of opinions that were expressed in these debates, we will summarize Bavinck's most important comments on these questions in his 1903 volume and in related sections of the fourth volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, which in its second and final edition was published some years later. In his 1903 work, *Saved by Grace*, Bavinck comments on the debates of the period, particularly on some of Abraham Kuyper's views regarding the question whether regeneration or the new birth by the Holy Spirit is effected with or without the use of the means of grace (Word and sacraments). In the course of his lengthy and, at times, highly complex and theologically careful handling of this question, Bavinck makes several points that are directly related to his conception of the relation between election and covenant. These comments include especially his understanding of the following subjects: 1) the priority of the covenant relationship in the salvation of God's people, which requires that we understand "calling" to precede "regeneration" in the ordinary sequence of the "order of salvation" (*ordo salutis*); 2) the special circumstance of the election and salvation of children of believing parents who die as infants, which requires that we recognize that regeneration may sometimes occur without the ordinary use of the "means of grace"; 3) the relation between the baptism of covenant children and their regeneration; and 4) the propriety of preaching to covenant members in a way that summons them to conversion and self-examination.

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[90] For sketches of this approach and its proponents, see Smilde, *Een eeuw van strijd over verbond en doop,* pp. 7-64, 223-45, 286-302. Smilde's account of the history of the Reformed churches of the "Secession" tradition (1834) illustrates that already in the early years of these churches a number of controversies on the subject of election, covenant, and infant baptism were occasioned by proponents of this approach. Among the older sources that represent this view and that are cited by Smilde, see K. J. Pieters and J. R. Kreulen, *De Kinderdoop volgens de beginselen der Gereformeerde Kerk, in haar gronden, toedieningen en praktijk* (Franeker: T. Telenga, 1861). In the history of North American Reformed churches, this approach and its tendency to view the covenant strictly in terms of its historical administration is best represented by the Canadian Reformed Churches. For historical and theological presentations of this approach, see Klaas Schilder, *The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant,* trans. T. Van Laar (www.canrc.org); Jelle Faber, "American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism," in *Extra-Scriptural Binding: A New Danger* (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance, 1996), pp. 38-41; J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Australia: Free Reformed Churches, 1985); and J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election* (Pella, IA: Inheritance Publications, 1995).

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3.2.1. Calling Ordinarily Precedes Regeneration

The first occasion for Bavinck to comment on covenant and election in *Saved by Grace,* arises in connection with his consideration of the historic Reformed view of the covenant of grace and the church. Reformed theologians have traditionally placed "calling" before "regeneration" in the "order of salvation" because this best conforms to the nature of the covenant and its obligations. In the Reformed understanding of the covenant, the children of believing parents receive the means of grace, the Word and sacrament, upon the basis of their gracious inclusion within the church. Though the sacrament of baptism is not the basis for membership in the covenant community, it is an important attestation of such membership. Consequently, while the baptism of the children of believers visibly signifies and seals their incorporation into the covenant of grace, Reformed theologians never viewed the sacrament to be "absolutely necessary to salvation." The grace of the Holy Spirit can and may be communicated to such children, even when they may not have received the sacrament of baptism. However, in order to confirm that God is pleased to embrace the children of believers within the covenant, they receive the sign and seal of this covenant in baptism and are placed thereby under the obligation to respond in the way of faith and obedience to the covenant promise. In Bavinck's words,

> God is so good that in His electing and in the dispensing of His grace, He follows the line of generations and receives into His covenant both parents and their seed together. So the children of believers are to be viewed as holy, not by nature but through the benefit of the covenant of grace, in which they together with their parents are included according to God's arrangement.[91]

Therefore, in the ordinary communication of God's grace in Christ, the covenant of grace with its appointed means of Word and sacraments is the instrument through which God is pleased to save his people. Because the covenant obliges believers and their children to respond in faith to the means of grace, including the sacrament of baptism, Reformed theologians have historically insisted that the calling of the gospel normally precedes regeneration. All members of the covenant community are summoned through the Word and sacraments to believe the gospel promise and to walk in obedience before God.

While Bavinck argues that the covenant in its administration requires that calling ordinarily precedes regeneration in the order of salvation, he also observes that regeneration, which in its narrow sense is a work of the Holy Spirit alone, is absolutely necessary in order to enable members of the covenant community to respond appropriately in the way of faith and repentance. No member of the covenant community could respond to the gospel summons in the way of faith, unless God graciously grants what the Word and sacrament require. This indisputable truth is of particular significance to the question of the relation between

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[91] *Saved by Grace,* p. 68 (95).

election and covenant. According to Bavinck, we must recognize that God's purpose of election is realized by means of the administration of the covenant, and that this purpose is inseparably joined to the covenantal means that God has appointed. Though not all who are placed under the administration of the covenant of grace are ultimately saved, God does grant his grace in the way of the covenant.

> Faith is not a condition *unto* the covenant, but a condition *within* the covenant: the route to be followed in order to become partaker and to enjoy all the commodities of that covenant. Yet faith itself is already a fruit, a benefit of the covenant, a gift of God's grace and thus a proof that God has received us in His covenant. For God bestows all the gifts of His grace in and along the pathway of the covenant.[92]

In this statement, which is illustrative of Bavinck's view of the close, yet distinct, nature of election and covenant, Bavinck seeks to affirm the way God realizes his saving purpose through the administration of the covenant of grace. In the administration of the covenant, a relationship is established between God and believers together with their children. Only in the way of the covenant, which requires faith and obedience, does God grant salvation in Christ to his people. However, the doctrine of election must always be invoked in order to give a Scriptural account of the way salvation in the covenant is entirely God's work of grace from beginning to completion.

3.2.2. The Election and Salvation of Covenant Infants

The second occasion for broaching the subject of election and covenant in *Saved by Grace* is of particular significance. In the history of Reformed theology, special attention has been devoted to the difficult pastoral and theological question of the election and salvation of the children of believing parents whom God calls out of this life in their infancy. In the *Canons of Dort*, a specific article is devoted to this question (I/17), which declares that the "godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation" of such children.[93] In his comments on this subject, Bavinck observes that the "uniform confession" of the Reformed churches affirms the salvation and election of the children of believing parents who die in their infancy. However, he also adds that there were two opinions regarding the significance of this confession. Some theologians, noting that not all the children who come under the administration of the covenant are elect children, stopped short of expressly declaring "with full certainty that all covenant children dying in infancy belonged without exception to the elect."[94] Others adopted what Bavinck terms a "broader

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[92] *Saved by Grace,* pp. 76-7 (108). For a similar argument, see *Our Reasonable Faith*, pp. 272-3.

[93] For an extensive treatment of Article I/17 of the *Canons of Dort* in its historical context, see Cornelis P. Venema, "The Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy: A Study of Article I/17 of the Canons of Dort," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 57-100.

[94] *Saved by Grace* , p. 83 (117).

position." In this position, such children should be viewed strictly in terms of the promise of the covenant and on this basis as having been received by God in grace and "become a partaker of salvation at death." Because such children were incapable of violating the covenant or rejecting its promise, they should be regarded as elect children who are the objects of God's saving purpose in Christ. In his comments on this second approach, it becomes apparent that it is the one Bavinck prefers. However, Bavinck adds that the statement of this confession in the *Canons of Dort* is presented in a "subjective" or pastoral manner, encouraging parents not to doubt the election and salvation of their children. Furthermore, the confession does not speak abstractly, but aims to encourage "godly parents" who may be tempted to doubt God's grace toward their children in a circumstance of special distress. In these comments on the Reformed confession, Bavinck clearly distinguishes between election and covenant, observing that some who are embraced within the covenant may not be elect in the strict sense, since they forfeit the covenant's blessings through unbelief and impenitence. At the same time, Bavinck underscores the intimate link between election and covenant, when he embraces the historic Reformed view regarding the election of the children of godly parents who die in their infancy. Though Bavinck distinguishes election and covenant, he also seeks to hold them together in the most intimate unity.

3.2.3. Baptism and Regeneration

The relevant comments on election and covenant that we have considered thus far are of direct importance to one of the principal issues Bavinck addresses in *Saved by Grace,* namely, the relation between the baptism of children of believing parents and their regeneration. We have already observed that Bavinck appeals in this work to the doctrine of the covenant in order to support the traditional order between calling and regeneration in the salvation of believers. Since the covenant is the ordinary instrument whereby God achieves his saving purpose, the means of grace consist of the Word and sacraments, each of which obliges its recipients to respond in the way of faith and repentance. Though no one is able to believe or repent without the grace of regeneration, ordinarily the call of the covenant comes before the work of regeneration. Furthermore, in his reflection on the election and salvation of the infant children of godly parents who die before they are capable of responding to the call of the gospel, Bavinck defends the traditional view that such children are regenerated without the use of the ordinary means of grace. Though the regeneration of those who are saved ordinarily takes place within the covenant through the use of the Word and sacraments, the unusual circumstance of such children reminds us that regeneration is ultimately a work of the Holy Spirit and there is a place for speaking of an "immediate" regeneration. In Bavinck's handling of these subjects, he clearly affirms that regeneration may occur prior to, and even in the case of elect infants, apart from the ordinary use of the means of grace. The distinction between "immediate" and "mediate" regeneration, accordingly, is a necessary one, and has been commonly employed by Reformed theologi-

ans. Though this distinction may be abused in a way that inappropriately separates regeneration from the Spirit's use of the means of grace, it is necessary to preserve the exclusive role of the Spirit in authoring the new birth.

Though Bavinck recognizes the need to speak of "immediate" regeneration in the case of the elect infants of believing parents and in order to preserve the Spirit's exclusive role in authoring the new birth,[95] he is very circumspect in his analysis of the relation between regeneration and the baptism of the children of believers. In the history of Reformed theology, many theologians regarded regeneration to occur before or even at the time of the baptism of such children. They did so upon the basis of their understanding of the covenant promise that baptism confirms, and the close link between the covenant and God's purpose of election. When God promises to grant salvation in Christ to those with whom he covenants (believers and their children), we may be confident that the children of believers possess the grace that the sacrament signifies and seals. In the older tradition of Reformed theology, accordingly, it was common for Reformed theologians to draw this inference from the baptism of the children of the covenant.[96]

In his consideration of this question, Bavinck offers a number of observations regarding how we should view the relation between the baptism of covenant children and the question of their regeneration. First, Bavinck concurs with the historic consensus of Reformed theology that baptism, though a sacrament that attests the need for and reality of regeneration by the Spirit of Christ, does not effect regeneration. The doctrine of baptismal regeneration fails to distinguish between the work of the Spirit in regeneration and the use of the sacraments as a visible confirmation of the gospel promise. It also ascribes to the sacrament an intrinsic power that it does not possess, and that is contradicted by the fact that some baptized persons do not (at or subsequent to their baptism) embrace the covenant promise in the way of faith and repentance. Second, Bavinck argues against the tendency of some of his contemporaries, including Kuyper, to suggest that the ground for the baptism of such children is their "presumed regeneration." According to Bavinck, we do not baptize the children of believing parents on any other ground than the command of God, who stipulates that such children are members of the covenant and therefore ought to be baptized.[97] And third, Bavinck

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[95] Bavinck also notes that "immediate" regeneration obtains in the case of all persons who are "incapable of receiving the external calling through the ministry of the Word, such as deaf mutes and the like" (*Saved by Grace,* p. 69 [96]).

[96] *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:511. *Saved by Grace*, pp. 85ff. (120ff.).

[97] See *Reformed Dogmatics* 4:531: "[the] basis for baptism is not the assumption that someone is regenerate, nor even that [there is] regeneration itself, but only the covenant of God." Bavinck adds that we should not base the baptism of such children upon "subjective opinion" but "in accordance with the revealed will of God and the rule of his Word." Despite Bavinck's criticism of Kuyper at this point, he does affirm the long-standing Reformed view that, in accordance with the "judgment of charity," we ought to regard the baptized children of believing parents to possess the grace promised them unless there is evidence forthcoming to the contrary (*Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:511). It is instructive that Bavinck also took a different view of the language in the traditional baptism formulary, that the children of believers are "sanctified in Christ" and ought to be baptized. Whereas Kuyper took this language to refer to

mildly criticizes Abraham Kuyper's emphasis upon the "assumed regeneration" of such children. Not only is such an assumption an uncertain basis for the baptism of the children of believers, but it is also one that may encourage speculation about such children that desires "to know more than God has revealed in His Word."[98] Since we do not know whether within the freedom of God the regeneration of such children precedes, accompanies, or follows their baptism,[99] we should exercise caution in regard to the assumptions that we make respecting them. What we do know regarding these children is that they are included with the covenant of grace, that they should accordingly receive the sign and seal of their inclusion in baptism, that they are called to respond to God's gracious promise in the way of faith and obedience, and that God graciously works by the Spirit of regeneration to enable them to respond appropriately. Though we have good reason to be confident that God will grant regeneration to such baptized children, and though we may not unduly separate baptism and regeneration for this reason, we should avoid the temptation to speculate on this subject or say more than we are warranted to say on the basis of Scriptural teaching.[100]

3.2.4. The Propriety of the Call to Conversion and Self-Examination

In the course of his reflection on the relation between baptism and regeneration in *Saved by Grace,* Bavinck critically evaluates two problematic views that were expressed by his contemporaries. In Bavinck's assessment, each of these views was one-sided and tended to encourage a lack of balance in the way the preaching of the gospel was carried on within the context of the administration of the covenant of grace.[101] On the one hand, some theologians so emphasized the assumed regeneration of all baptized members of the covenant community that they undermined the legitimate call to conversion and self-examination that is issued through the preaching of the gospel. In this view, the preaching of the call to conversion, if it is urgently pressed upon the children of be-

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"internal renewal by the Holy Spirit," Bavinck took it to refer to an inclusion within the administration of the covenant. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:511; Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno: Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1892-1895), 2:541ff; and J. Mark Beach, "Introductory Essay," pp. xxxii-xxxvi; idem, "Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and 'The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905'," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 45–51; 66–67.

[98] *Saved by Grace,* p. 91 (130).

[99] *Saved by Grace*, p. 89 (127): "... even as God merely according to His pleasure has chosen certain people unto salvation, He is also entirely free to regenerate them at whatever time pleases Him."

[100] Cf. *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:511, where Bavinck notes that there was an historical occasion for the hesitation among Reformed theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to link closely baptism and regeneration. With the "neglect of discipline" in this period (cf. "nominal" Christianity), it became more problematic to affirm very confidently the "unity of election and covenant" or the link between regeneration and baptism. This perceptive observation on Bavinck's part illustrates the close interplay between historical context and theological formulation.

[101] Bavinck identifies a kind of "Methodistic" or pietistic preaching that does not proceed upon the basis of the covenant in addressing the covenant community (including children), and a kind of overly-presumptive preaching that proceeds from the assumed regeneration of the covenant community and its members. See *Saved by Grace,* pp. 119-28 (172-87).

lieving parents, may tend to suggest that the regeneration and salvation of such children are in doubt until and unless they respond properly to the gospel call.[102] On the other hand, some theologians so separated the administration of the covenant and the sacrament of baptism from the reality of the work of the Spirit in regeneration that they undermined the legitimate confidence that believers may have in the promises of the covenant to them and their children. Rather than presume the salvation and regeneration of the children of believing parents, this view tends to presume the non-salvation and non-regeneration of such children until evidence of the work of God's grace in their lives is forthcoming. At the risk of considerable simplification, the first of these views proceeds in preaching from the standpoint of the "presumed regeneration" of all baptized members of the covenant; the second of these views proceeds from the standpoint of the "presumed non-regeneration" of such members.[103] In the first view, the circle of the covenant is virtually identified with the circle of election. In the second view, the circle of election tends to be viewed as a relatively small one within the much broader circle of the covenant in terms of its historical manifestation. According to Bavinck's argument in *Saved by Grace*, neither of these two views does justice to the relation between election and covenant.

In evaluating the first of these views, Bavinck maintains that it fails to distinguish adequately the sacrament of baptism, which by God's command is to be administered to all the children of believers, and the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, which we know from Scripture and experience is not granted to all such children.[104] This first approach also fails to reckon seriously with the fact that some baptized members of the covenant community do not respond in the way of faith and obedience to the covenant's promises and obligations. Due to the important distinction between the covenant and election, we may not assume that all members of the covenant in its historical administration are elect and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Corresponding to the nature of the covenant in distinction from divine election, there remains a place in the preaching of the gospel, even when it addresses those who are members of the covenant, to emphasize the urgent need for true conversion. Furthermore, since it is possible for baptized members of the covenant community to fail to respond in the way of faith and repentance to the overtures of the gospel, the preaching of the Word should include a call to "self-examination" on the part of those who are embraced within the

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[102] *Saved by Grace,* pp. 90-4 (129-35).

[103] The language of "presumed" or "assumed" or even "presupposed" regeneration translates the Dutch expression, *veronderstelde wedergeboorte*. When this language is used to reflect the position of A. Kuyper and others, it suffers from two misleading implications: that advocates of this language teach a doctrine of "baptismal regeneration" and are being unduly "presumptuous" in the way they view baptized children. Neither of these implications, however, adequately captures the point that Kuyper and others were making when they used this language. For a further comment on this terminology in Kuyper's writings, see J. Mark Beach, "Introductory Essay," pp. xxvii–xxxii, esp. fn 55; idem, "Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and 'The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905'," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 41–45, esp. footnote 131; 51–52.

[104] *Saved by Grace*, pp. 117-8 (169-70).

covenant.[105] Because the circles of election and of the gathered community of the church do not perfectly coincide, it is always legitimate, even within the context of the covenant people of God, to call all members of the covenant to true conversion in the way of genuine faith and repentance. Likewise, it remains legitimate, even pastorally obligatory, to warn the members of the covenant community, professing adults and baptized children alike, to examine themselves to see whether they are truly in the faith and possess the grace promised in the gospel.[106] The proper administration of the covenant of grace leaves no room for any kind of complacency or easy presumption that all members of the covenant community are regenerated and truly saved through faith in Christ.

While for these reasons Bavinck demurs from an exaggerated emphasis upon the close connection, even identity, between election and covenant (presumed regeneration), he also cautions against the kind of pietism that approaches all the baptized children of believers as though they were unregenerate unless we see evidences of true conversion in them. Undoubtedly it is permissible, even necessary, to address all members of the covenant community with the earnest summons to faith and repentance. However, Bavinck cautions against the "pietistic" tendency to separate baptism and regeneration in such a way that the non-regeneration of baptized children is virtually assumed until evidence to the contrary is forthcoming. Since there is an intimate connection between God's purpose of election and his bestowal of the grace of Christ through the instrumentality of the covenant, we ought to regard baptized children to be regenerate as a kind of "judgment of charity."[107] Although it is undeniable that the visible community of the church, which includes all professing believers and their children, includes some who are not elect or genuinely saved, we should nonetheless address the people of God from the standpoint of the covenant promise and regard them to consist of "God's beloved, God's elect, called to be saints, believers...."[108]

In his consideration of the complex debates of his time, therefore, Bavinck steers a steady and moderate course between the more extreme views of some of his contemporaries on the relation between election and covenant.

4. Concluding Observations

Now that we have considered Bavinck's treatment of the doctrines of election and covenant, not only in his principal theological writings but in his 1903 treatise on "calling and regeneration," we are in a position to draw some conclusions regarding his position. These conclusions are based upon the exposition of Bavinck's theology that we have provided in the foregoing, and will accordingly be stated in a relatively concise manner. Each of them aims to capture the principal themes and characteristic formulations of Bavinck's theological position.

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[105] *Saved by Grace,* pp. 126-7 (184-6).
[106] *Saved by Grace,* pp. 127-8 (185-7).
[107] *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:511.
[108] *Saved by Grace,* p. 117 (169).

First, throughout his exposition of the doctrines of election and covenant, Bavinck exhibits a consistent pattern of theological reflection and method. Upon the basis of a deep and rich acquaintance with the Scriptural data, the Reformed confessions and the history of Reformed theology, Bavinck articulates in a fresh and creative way the broad consensus of historic Reformed theology on these topics. The characteristic features of Bavinck's theological work are clearly evident in his treatment of these principal themes of Reformed theology. Though it would be unfair to say that Bavinck offers only a repristination of the traditional consensus or received opinion of Reformed theology on these topics, it is certainly true that, at every point, Bavinck remains within the broad center of what might be termed "catholic" Reformed theology. In Bavinck's treatment of election and covenant, there are points where he offers a correction or modification of some feature of Reformed theology. For example, he eschews the alternatives of "supra-" and "infra-lapsarianism" in his doctrine of predestination, and he shares Kuyper's critical observation that, in the traditional understanding of God's decrees, insufficient emphasis was given to God's positive purpose for the creation in its original state and in its consummate glory. However, throughout his exposition of these doctrines, especially within the context of debates among his contemporaries, Bavinck proves again and again to be a kind of "mediating" figure who resists the one-sidedness and lack of synthetic unity in theological formulation that often marked their divergent positions. Scriptural fidelity, confessional sympathy, historical consciousness, antipathy to simplistic solutions—these qualities mark Bavinck's theological labor and constitute, as much as the distinct positions he espouses, an important aspect of his legacy as a Reformed theologian.

Second, whereas some interpreters of the Reformed tradition have maintained that the doctrines of election and covenant represent two divergent modes of Reformed theology, Bavinck's handling of these doctrines exhibits a keen awareness of their comprehensive unity and interrelation. Though election and covenant are distinguished, they both express, broadly, one of the principal motifs of Reformed theology, namely, that the redemption or recreation of a new humanity through the work of Christ, the Mediator, is a work of sheer and sovereign grace. The Triune God's work of redemption or recreation is rooted in eternity, and finds its source in the living, eternal and active will of God to redeem a new humanity in Christ, the last Adam. The eternal counsel of God embraces all things, not only the redemption of fallen sinners through the work of Christ, but also the recreation and glorification of the entire creation. Predestination is the dimension of the Triune God's eternal counsel that pertains especially to the redemption of the elect. Though distinct from election, the doctrine of the covenant pertains to the divinely-appointed manner whereby this elective and redemptive purpose will be achieved. In Bavinck's conception of the interrelation between election and covenant, it is important to observe that the covenant of grace in its historical execution in time is itself rooted in the intra-trinitarian "covenant of redemption." Each of the three Persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—compacted together (or mutually concur in

will, purpose, and appointment) from all eternity to secure the redemption of the elect through the mutual "operations" of each. The covenant of grace in its historical administration is no "accident" of history. Nor is it an "afterthought" in the eternal counsel of the Triune God. From the beginning of the history of the covenant, even before the fall into sin, until its consummation, the Father purposed to commune with his people through the Son of his good pleasure; the Son purposed to humble himself in his incarnation and the fulfillment of his office as Mediator; and the Holy Spirit purposed to communicate the manifold benefits of Christ's mediation to his people. The covenant of grace in its historical expression is tethered to its basis and foundation in God's eternal counsel of peace (*pactum salutis*). Thus, in Bavinck's theology, it is unthinkable that election and covenant could be played off against each other, or that the doctrine of the covenant could provide an alternative, more historical, mode of expressing the monergism of Reformed soteriology.

Third, in his formulation of the doctrine of the covenant, Bavinck embraces and defends the historic Reformed doctrine of a pre-lapsarian "covenant of works" and a post-lapsarian "covenant of grace." He also affirms a distinction between the covenant of grace in its historical realization, and the foundation of this covenant in the intra-trinitarian "covenant of redemption" or *pactum salutis.* In his reflection upon these distinct features of a biblical and Reformed theology of the covenant, Bavinck exhibits a sophisticated grasp of the Reformed tradition and resists tendencies among some Reformed theologians to overemphasize the differences between these distinct phases of the covenant on the one hand, or to overstate the uniformity between them on the other.

In Bavinck's estimation, the doctrine of the covenant expresses a central theme of biblical religion, namely, that the Triune God created human beings in his image and for the purpose of being placed in a life-relationship of communion with him. Only the doctrine of the covenant does justice to the nature of man as a rational and moral creature, capable of enjoying union and communion with the living God in service to him and in the exercise of dominion over the creation. The doctrine of the covenant also underscores the goodness and grace of God, who initiates the covenant, stipulates its requirement of perfect obedience, maintains it in justice and truth, and grants the creature covenantal "rights" before him. In his articulation of the pre-lapsarian covenant, Bavinck simultaneously affirms that it was graciously initiated and bestowed by the Triune God, and required perfect obedience in order for humanity in Adam to attain to the fullness of life in consummate and unbreakable communion with God.

An especially significant feature of Bavinck's formulation of the doctrine of the covenant is the way he carefully articulates the relation between the pre-lapsarian "covenant of works" and the post-lapsarian "covenant of grace." Whereas in the pre-fall covenant, Adam was the head and representative of the organism of humanity, in the post-fall covenant Christ is the head and representative of the organism of the new or re-created humanity. Within the unfathomable depths of God's eternal purposes for creation and recreation, the first Adam was a "type"

of the last Adam, and the original aim of God was to be realized only through Christ. There are significant features of unity and inter-relationship, therefore, between the pre- and the post-fall covenants. Both are rooted in God's unmerited favor and goodness. Both promise the consummate blessing of eternal life in communion with the Triune God. Both require human beings to find favor with God only in the way of perfect obedience and fidelity. But there are also significant and undeniable differences between them. The "last Adam," Christ, is greater than the first and secures infallibly for his own the covenant blessing of eternal life. The grace shown before the fall to undeserving human beings is surpassed in the grace of Christ, which is shown after the fall to undeserving sinners who have willfully forfeited in Adam any and every claim upon God's favor. Furthermore, the obligations of obedience that must be met in order for sinful human beings to find favor with God now include, not only perfect obedience to the abiding stipulations of God's moral law ("active obedience"), but also a perfect satisfaction of the penalty for disobedience ("passive obedience"). The glory of the covenant of grace in its historical unfolding is that it perfectly and infallibly achieves God's covenant purposes for his people in union with Christ, the last Adam. Christ's mediatorial work includes the meeting of these obligations on behalf of his people. In Bavinck's conception of the covenant, we must distinguish between the pre- and post-fall covenants, but not in such a way as to separate them. Even the "covenant of works" is taken up into and made to subserve God's gracious purpose for the redemption of humanity in Christ, which entails the realization of the eschatological goal of the covenant, the inheritance of eternal life.

In the same way that Bavinck distinguishes without separating between the pre- and post-fall covenant, he also insists upon the distinct, yet inseparable, relation between the "covenant of redemption" and the "covenant of grace." On several occasions, Bavinck notes that these should not be construed as *two* covenants, but as the same covenant viewed from the perspectives of God's eternal counsel and the realization of that counsel in time. The importance of recognizing the unity between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace lies, in Bavinck's judgment, in the way the latter ultimately depends upon God's grace and faithfulness for its effectiveness. Unless the Triune God undertakes to accomplish all that is required in the covenant of grace for the redemption of the elect, the covenant of grace can easily be transfigured into a new kind of "covenant of works." Since the covenant of grace in its historical administration takes an explicitly *conditional form*, obliging believers and their children to walk before God in the way of faith and obedience, it might be inferred that the salvation of those with whom God covenants finally depends upon their faithfulness in fulfilling these conditions. Contrary to this inference, Bavinck insists that the "conditions" of the covenant of grace are ultimately met upon the basis of God's eternal counsel of redemption. In the covenant of grace, God gives to believers and their children in the line of the generations the blessings that have been obtained for them by Christ and that are conferred upon them through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The covenant of grace is, there-

fore, *unconditional,* when viewed from the standpoint of God's eternal purpose and gracious disposition in the "covenant of redemption." However, the covenant of grace is also "conditional," when viewed from the standpoint of the covenant people's obligations to respond in faith and live out of the blessings of the covenant in Christ. Viewed from the standpoint of the certain realization of God's purpose to grant his people eternal life in fellowship with Christ by the Spirit, the covenant of grace has a "testamentary" character. It is a divine gift or disposition whose fruition and blessing ultimately depend upon God's gracious initiative and faithfulness to his promise. When viewed from the standpoint of its administration in the history of redemption, the covenant of grace has the character of a *mutual* fellowship or friendship between two parties, the Triune Redeemer and his covenant people (believers and their children).

Fourth, Bavinck affirms with some qualification a long-standing distinction between the covenant in its *historical administration* and the covenant in *its reality and substance* as saving fellowship with the Triune God. In the history of theological reflection on the doctrines of election and covenant, this distinction, though variously expressed, was employed to account for the fact that not all members of the covenant community enter into the blessings of the covenant that result from Christ's work as Mediator and head of his people. The circle of election and the circle of the covenant, at least in terms of its manifestation in history, do not coincide, even though they significantly overlap. Some members of the covenant community in the broad sense of the "visible church" prove to be unbelieving and impenitent. Other members of the covenant community enter into the fullness of the blessings of the covenant in the way of faith, which is ordinarily produced in them by the Holy Spirit through the use of the Word and sacraments of the covenant. At this juncture, Bavinck resists the temptation to go in one of two directions in understanding the relation between election and covenant. On the one hand, he does not identify election and covenant, and thereby exclude from the covenant those who are not "children of the promise" in the strict sense (Rom. 9:6). It is possible for those who are embraced by the covenant to fail to respond properly to its obligations of faith and obedience. In this way, some members of the covenant community "break" the covenant relationship and thereby come under the greater judgment of God for sinfully forfeiting the privileges that were theirs under the covenant. On the other hand, Bavinck also rejects any approach that would isolate the covenant in its administration from the doctrine of election. In Bavinck's judgment, when the covenant is separated from election in this manner, it quickly devolves into a relationship whose effectiveness and blessings ultimately depend upon the human party's faithfulness. Contrary to these apparent solutions to difficult theological and pastoral questions, Bavinck maintains the close inter-connection between election and covenant. The doctrine of election preserves the doctrine of the covenant from falling into a form of synergism. The doctrine of the covenant preserves the doctrine of the election from devolving into a form of "fatalism" that leaves no room for human responsibility. Though it is somewhat simplis-

tic to formulate Bavinck's position in these terms, it might be argued that Bavinck views the doctrine of election to underscore God's sovereignty in salvation, and the doctrine of the covenant to underscore human responsibility in the conferral of salvation.

And fifth, within the framework of his comprehensive understanding of the doctrines of election and covenant, Bavinck endeavors to chart a careful course between the opposing views of his contemporaries on the question of the significance of the baptism of the children of believing parents. Unlike some who suggested that the children of believers should be baptized on the assumption of their election and regeneration, Bavinck clearly insists that the only basis for the baptism of such children is the Scriptural teaching that they are proper recipients of the covenant promise. Since God is pleased to include the children of believers in the covenant relationship, thereby honoring the created order and the significance of the line of the generations, the church properly administers the sacrament of baptism to them as a sign and seal of the covenant promise. Such children are included within the covenant of grace and therefore ought to receive the sign and seal of its promise in the sacrament of baptism. Moreover, because Bavinck conceives of the covenant as the pathway whereby God's eternal counsel of redemption is executed, he also affirms the long-standing view of Reformed theologians that there is a close link between the sacrament and the grace that the sacrament confirms. Though Bavinck opposes as "speculative" any attempt to determine whether regeneration occurs before, during, or subsequent to baptism, he does emphasize that the children of believers ought to be regarded as genuine beneficiaries of the covenant of grace unless they should prove obstinate in unbelief and disobedience. The confidence we may have in the election and salvation of such children is based upon the promise of the covenant and the faithfulness of God to that promise.

However, since we also know from Scripture and by experience that not all those who come under the administration of the covenant enter through faith into the enjoyment of its saving benefits in Christ, we are also obliged, in Bavinck's view, to urge with all seriousness that covenant children (indeed, all members of the covenant community) respond to the gospel call in the way of genuine faith. Because the circle of election and the circle of the covenant do not wholly coincide, there is always room within the administration of the covenant for a serious summons to conversion and self-examination, lest the covenant relationship become the occasion for undue complacency or presumption. Upon the basis of his comprehensive understanding of election and covenant, Bavinck characteristically seeks to avoid the errors of those who identify election with covenant and those who exclude election from their formulation of the covenant. Thus, in his contribution to the debates among his contemporaries on the subject of election, covenant, and infant baptism, Bavinck makes careful use of his comprehensive theology of election and covenant.

Though there are many lines of intersection between Bavinck's reflection on election and covenant and ongoing debates in the Reformed community in North America, we will resist the temptation to tease them

out in this article. Our purpose remains a modest one, namely, to offer an analysis of Bavinck's handling of these doctrines in his principal theological writings and in the context of the debates of his time. This purpose is not incompatible, however, with the further task of addressing these important themes of Reformed theology in the contemporary context. Our observations regarding Bavinck's contribution to a Reformed understanding of these themes in his day suggest that an acquaintance with his theology may be, among others, a good place to become acquainted with the rich tradition of Reformed reflection on them. Such acquaintance is a necessary prelude to further reflection on these topics in the context of contemporary debates.