

SAVED BY GRACE



# SAVED BY GRACE

The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling  
and Regeneration

Herman Bavinck

Edited, with an Introductory Essay by J. Mark Beach  
Translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman



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From 29 March 1901 through 2 May 1902, some forty articles were published in *De Bazuin* [*The Trumpet*], essays which sought to communicate greater clarity concerning the doctrine of immediate regeneration. These articles now appear separately under a somewhat modified title. May they, also in this form, ensure that difference of insight does no injury to the unity of the Confession and to the peace of the churches.

Herman Bavinck



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## INTRODUCTORY ESSAY<sup>1</sup>

HERMAN BAVINCK was born December 13, 1854, at Hoogeveen, the Netherlands. His father, J. Bavinck (1826–1909), was a prominent minister in the church of the Secession, which had seceded from the National Dutch Reformed Church (*De Hervormde Kerk*) in 1834. Herman was an extraordinarily gifted student, studying first at the Theological School of the Secession churches in Kampen, but transferring to Leiden University in order to become acquainted first hand with the modernist theology of J. H. Scholten and A. Kuenen and their more scientific approach to the discipline of theology. He earned a doctorate from Leiden in 1880, whereupon he was offered a teaching post at the newly founded Free University of Amsterdam. He declined that appointment and entered the pastorate at Franeker for a year, before accepting the appointment to teach at Kampen. Here he was to spend the next twenty years of his life, in spite of the Free University of Amsterdam again offering him a teaching position in the theological faculty in 1889. Finally, in 1902 Bavinck came to the Free University to occupy the chair of dogmatics vacated by Dr. Abraham Kuyper. He labored at the Free University until his death in 1921.<sup>2</sup>

Bavinck is often contrasted with his great contemporary and senior, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920). We may briefly observe, as has been noted by others, that whereas Kuyper was a man of broad vision and sparkling ideas, Bavinck was a man of sober disposition and clear concepts. Whereas Kuyper was more speculative, tracing out intuitively grasped thoughts, Bavinck was a more careful scholar and built on and from historical givens. While Kuyper is notable for his efforts to bring reform to the church and society, applying the principles of Calvinism to the social and political concerns of his time, even helping to orchestrate the first Christian political party in the Netherlands (the Antirevolutionary Party), Bavinck's strengths resided in examining some of the inadequacies of old answers and so demonstrating the need to press forward with new proposals. Finally, while Kuyper was mainly deductive, Bavinck

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<sup>1</sup> A different version of this essay, at some points abridged and at various points much expanded, can be found under the title "Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905," in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008).

<sup>2</sup> The most notable biography of Bavinck is R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966); also see V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921). For an analysis of aspects of Bavinck's life and especially his relationship to Abraham Kuyper, as well as the Ethical and Modernist theology that flourished in the Netherlands during the time that he labored, see Rolf Hendrik Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, Academisch Proefschrift, Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1961), 1–147.

was mainly inductive.<sup>3</sup> Without question, Kuypers was the more controversial of the two men, for Kuypers excelled at polemics and directed most of his theological work to a more popular audience. Bavinck, on the other hand, sought to gain a hearing for classic Reformed theology within the modern academic context, though he did write his share of popular works aimed at pastors and the laity.

In reference to Bavinck's writing, his chief work was his *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* in four volumes, first published in 1895–1901, with a second and expanded edition issued in 1906–11. (The English publication of this work is now complete under the title *Reformed Dogmatics* [2003–2008], translated by John Vriend, edited by John Bolt.) Bavinck also subsequently penned two abbreviated dogmatic works. The first, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de Christelijke Religie naar Gereformeerde Belijdenis* [The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to Reformed Confession] (1909), was a one volume, compressed dogmatics (659 pages), and was translated into English in 1956, and is still in print under the title: *Our Reasonable Faith*. The second dogmatic work that Bavinck wrote was *Handleiding bij het Onderwijs in den Christelijken Godsdienst* [Manual for Instruction in the Christian Religion] (1913), a short compendium of the previously mentioned work, consisting of some 251 pages. Other notable writings from Bavinck's pen include,<sup>4</sup> first from his time as professor at Kampen: *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (1888)<sup>5</sup>; *De Algemeene Genade* (1894)<sup>6</sup>; *Beginselen der Psychologie* (1897); *Schepping of Ontwikkeling* (1901); *De Offerande des Lofs* (1901)<sup>7</sup>; *De Zekerheid des Geloofs* (1901)<sup>8</sup>; and then from his years as professor at the Free University: *Godsdienst en Godgeleerdheid* (1902); *Hedendaagsche Moraal* (1902); *Christelijke Wetenschap* (1904); *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing* (1904); *Paedagogische Beginselen* (1904); *Het Christelijk Huisgezin* (1908); *The Philosophy of Revelation* (1908), which comprises the Stone Lectures he delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in that year; *Calvin and*

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<sup>3</sup> See T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde theologisch tijdschrift* 22 (1921): 101; also see Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 13–64; Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968), 130–133; Louis Praamsma, *The Church in the Twentieth Century: Elect from Every Nation*, vol. 7., trans. the author (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1981), 25–28.

<sup>4</sup> For a complete and detailed bibliography of Bavinck's writings, see Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 425–53.

<sup>5</sup> In English, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (November 1992): 220–251.

<sup>6</sup> In English, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (April 1989): 35–65.

<sup>7</sup> In English, *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after receiving access to the Table of the Lord*, 2nd ed., trans. John Dolfin (Grand Rapids: Louis Kregel, 1922).

<sup>8</sup> In English, *The Certainty of Faith*, trans. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980).

*Common Grace* (1909)<sup>9</sup>; and also *Modernisme en Orthodoxie* (1911); *De Opvoeding der Rijpere Jeugd* (1916); *Bijbelsche en Religieuze Psychologie* (1920). Many of Bavinck's articles were collected after his death and published under the respective titles *Verzamelde Opstellen* (1921)<sup>10</sup> and *Kennis en Leven* (1922). The volume here translated for the first time, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* [Calling and Regeneration] (1903), was composed during Bavinck's initial years at the Free University.

*Bavinck's Book on Calling and Regeneration*

This last mentioned work, to which we have given the English title, *Saved by Grace: the Work of the Holy Spirit in Calling and Regeneration*, offers in a more popular form Bavinck's treatment of God's gracious work in bringing fallen sinners to new life and salvation. This book, therefore, takes up questions with which every new generation of Reformed writers must grapple. Indeed, in dealing with the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of sinners, and in dealing with the means or instruments that the Spirit employs in order to accomplish His sovereign work, Reformed theologians have had to chart their way through a thicket of errors. On the one side is the error of undervaluing the use of means—of any kind—with the result that, in protecting God's sovereignty in performing the work of salvation, Word and sacrament, and the church's role in administering Word and sacrament, are denigrated and “the *means* of grace” becomes an empty phrase. On the other side is the error of overvaluing the use of means—the means of both Word and sacrament—with the result that divine agency in the work of salvation is transferred to means and the *means* of grace comes actually to denote the *agents* of grace.

The practical effect of each error is not difficult to predict or trace. In the first case people become passive, introspective, given to mysticism and quietism—as one waits for God to do his work; in the second case people forget that salvation is truly God's gracious work; Arminianism or semi-Pelagianism lurk nearby, and with it the temptation to treat Word and sacrament in a kind of *ex opere operato* fashion, i.e., by the mere faithful performance of the preaching of the gospel and the administering of baptism or the Supper, people are saved. This in turn breeds a kind of objectivism and sterile formalism, where *means* of grace accomplish, in themselves, the *work* of grace. The call to genuine faith and repentance can easily be shortchanged or ignored altogether.

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<sup>9</sup> This essay was composed in English, first printed in *The Princeton Theological Review* (1909) and subsequently published with a collection of three other essays in *Calvin and the Reformation*, ed. William Park Armstrong (London: F. H. Revell, 1909; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 99–130.

<sup>10</sup> In English, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society*, ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

Bavinck's little book seeks to protect the church from both sets of errors. The volume itself was, as Bavinck himself explains in his short preface, first a series of forty short articles published in the periodical *De Bazuin* [*The Trumpet*] from 29 March 1901 through 2 May 1902. In taking up the question of *immediate* or *unmediated* regeneration, Bavinck was not needlessly or fruitlessly burdening the church with a technical topic of obscurantist theology. He was seeking to bring unity to the recently formed church body, The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, the *GKN*). The formation of these churches came about in 1892 through the union of two distinct reformatory movements from within the Dutch State Reformed Church (*De Hervormde Kerk*), namely the *Afscheiding* of 1834 and the *Doleantie* of 1886.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Churches of the Secession*

The *Afscheiding* (or Secession) can be characterized as an ecclesiastical movement that attempted to effect reform within the State Reformed Church (*De Hervormde Kerk*) but came to exist as a separate denomination apart from it. The occasion for this effort to reform the church is a story in itself. For our purposes it is sufficient to assert that, fundamentally, this effort at reform sought to re-establish the church upon the foundations of the fathers, i.e., to affirm the Three Forms of Unity (the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort) as a living and authoritative confession of the church, and that these standards govern the church along with the old Dort Church Order. More broadly and generally, the *Afscheiding* sought to thwart the decaying effects of doctrinal liberalism and to reassert biblical authority in the face of its denial by liberal critics. The acids of the Enlightenment had eaten away at the vitality and purity of the churches. The *Afscheiding* sought to bring healing and reform to what was left. In so doing, it was concerned that a genuinely reinvigorated piety mark the church in its life and fellowship.

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<sup>11</sup> See L. Knappert, *Geschiedenis der Hervormde Kerk onder De Republiek en Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff & Co., 1911–12), II, 37–41, 298–313, 342–46; D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition: from the Reformation to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 79–98; Henry Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk in N. A.: zestig jaren van strijd en zegen* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids Printing Company, 1918), 18–50, 327ff.; idem, *The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1946), 24–37; James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 3–33; Hendrik Bouma, *Secession, Doleantie, and Union: 1834–1892*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1995); J. Veenhof, “Geschiedenis van theologie en spiritualiteit in de gereformeerde kerken,” in *100 Jaar Theologie: aspecten van een eeuw theologie in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1892–1992)*, ed. M. E. Brinkman (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1992), 9–27.

Among the principal leaders of this movement were Hendrik De Cock (1801–1842) and Anthony Brummelkamp (1811–1888).<sup>12</sup> Turbulent years were to follow for the Seceders, for they were persecuted from without by the state authorities and subject to disagreement and division from within by a series of doctrinal and practical disputes. In 1854 these churches reached a strong measure of concord; and that same year they founded a theological school at Kampen for the training of ministers. Herman Bavnick was appointed professor of Dogmatics at Kampen in 1882.

### *The Churches of the Grieving*

The *Doleantie* (or the Grieving) on the other hand represented the churches that had been ousted from the State Reformed Church after failing to bring reform to that ecclesiastical body during the period leading up to the mid 1880s. It was organized under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), and Kuyper's personality was very much woven into the identity of that group of churches. The *Doleantie* is perhaps best characterized as a second Secession. Both movements attempted reform within the State Church; and both failed to achieve the desired remedy.

Kuyper had founded the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880, besides pursuing his own ministerial labors in the State Reformed Church, working hard in publishing articles in both the ecclesiastical and political press, and working to bring doctrinal renewal in the *Hervormde Kerk* in the face of modernism and unbelief. The *Doleantie* itself emerged from the practical question whether those who denied the Reformed faith could be admitted to membership in the State Church. When the Amsterdam Consistory (the consistory having jurisdiction over all the churches in Amsterdam and its vicinity) refused to comply with the provincial board's decision that ordered acceptance of such members, some 80 members of the consistory were deposed from office, Kuyper among them. This episode took place in 1886, and brought about the formation of a new ecclesiastical body of *Doleerende Kerken* [Grieving Churches]. This movement soon spread far beyond Amsterdam.

### *The Union of 1892 and the Problems Leading to the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905*

The union of 1892 between the *Afscheiding* and the *Doleantie* was preceded by suspicion and difficulties. Some members of each group looked askance at the other, and some leaders in the *Afscheiding* distrusted Kuyper and disliked elements of his theology. Of particular concern in the union talks was the status of the theological school at Kampen and the theological faculty at the Free University of Amsterdam. Each

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<sup>12</sup> Other leaders included Hendrik Peter Scholte, Simon Van Velzen, Albertus C. Van Raalte, and G. F. Gezelle.

school was allowed its place and its identity, and students could be trained for ministry at either school. The union was accomplished in 1892 and adopted the name *De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) [The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands]. This union, unfortunately, proved to be less than harmonious from the start. Immediately some ministers and congregations of the *Afscheiding* left the union, returning to the churches that had not joined the merger, namely the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* [The Christian Reformed Church]. Meanwhile, within a decade of the union, some particular theological views of Kuyper had created enough disagreement and ecclesiastical rankling as to move Bavinck to enter the fray.

Bavinck's book, written shortly after he had taken up the chair of dogmatics at the Free University of Amsterdam in 1901 (as Kuyper's successor) was a mildly "anti-Kuyperian" work—that is, Bavinck stands, if ever so gently, against Kuyper on this particular point. (Bavinck had also previously completed the first edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* in four volumes [1895–1901].) The controversy, surrounding some features or accents of Kuyper's theology on regeneration and baptism, escalated. For example, L. Lindeboom, Bavinck's colleague at Kampen, asserted that Kuyper taught views not demanded by the Reformed confessions. It became clear that the matter would require synodical adjudication. In 1905 the Synod of Utrecht offered what might be termed "compromise" declarations or "pacifying" conclusions on four issues under discussion, though in each case Kuyper's particular views, far from being vindicated, are mildly censured.<sup>13</sup>

The committee that took up this matter included members of each group, "A" churches and "B" churches (*Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* respectively).<sup>14</sup> The presider of the committee was H. H. Kuyper, a fervent advocate of his father's views. That Utrecht sought to maintain unity among the churches is reflected in the committee's explanation of its work—two quotations in particular illuminate the mind-set of the committee, wherein they recommend that Synod not offer a definitive judgment on the disputed points. They explain that such was

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<sup>13</sup> For an English translation of the Conclusions of Utrecht, see the Appendix.

<sup>14</sup> This divided mindset of "A" churches and "B" churches continued to plague the GKN in its subsequent history, culminating in theological controversy that ended in the fracturing of those churches in 1944, with the deposition of Klaas Schilder and others. At the risk of over simplifying the matter, "A" churches, in general, wanted to preserve the theological heritage of the Secession, though doctrinal disagreement on covenant and baptism marked that heritage, while "B" churches, reflecting Kuyper's theological accents, emphasized the theological heritage of prominent strands of seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theology. The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905, sought to argue that both camps were within confessional boundaries and each "side" ought to guard against one-sidedness and allow the full revelation and accents of Scripture to be given their due. See the appendix for the full text of the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905; cf. E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, met een woord vooraf van Prof. Dr. K. Dijk (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946), 279–319.

... neither necessary nor desirable, because the differences involved, provided one guards carefully against all exaggeration, do not touch on a single essential point of our confession, a single fundamental dogma of our Church, but only concern a difference of understanding, a difference of presentation, a difference in terminology. Your committee regrets that some strong expressions, the use of unusual terms, and the emphasis on certain doctrinal formulations have given occasion for the action which presently disturbs our church. But it regrets equally that the impression is given to our church that this is a struggle against an actual departure from the precious confession made by our fathers, by which purity of doctrine is endangered and a new doctrine introduced into the Church. But for anyone who knows history it is plain that the disputed points may be found wholly or in part in the leading teachers of our Church, such as Calvin, Beza, Ursinus, de Brès, Gomarus, Voetius, Comrie, Holtius, etc., and that our churches in the golden age of Reformed theology never dreamed of accusing these men of departure from the Confession. . . .

The committee was of the conviction that the different views and the ensuing debate on the disputed points reflected a human trait to veer off into one-sidedness, which reveals a failure to maintain Scripture's full portrait.

If on the one hand men lay more emphasis on the sovereignty of God, on the eternity and immutability of God's decrees, on the omnipotent working of God's grace, and on the stability of the Covenant of Grace; while on the other hand men fix their attention more on the guilt of man, on the application of God's decrees in time, on the means which God uses in the work of grace, and on the personal appropriation of the blessings of the Covenant; both presentations find their ground in Scripture, they serve to complement each other in warding off all one-sidedness, and the elimination of one of these lists of propositions in the interests of the other would do damage to the knowledge of God, to the salvation of our souls, and to the practice of piety. Our Reformed Churches have therefore at all times and in all lands maintained *libertas profetandi* with respect to these differences. Thereby they have demonstrated how, in the defense of the Confession, a breadth of insight and approach serves to guard the churches against one-sidedness and to keep the way open to further developments in theology.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The Four Issues in Dispute at Utrecht 1905*

Specifically, four issues were in dispute: (1) the debate between supralapsarianism versus infralapsarianism; (2) justification from eternity; (3) immediate regeneration; and (4) presupposed regeneration (*vis-à-vis* infant baptism).

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<sup>15</sup> Both quotations are taken from John Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church History (Class notes)* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, n.d.), 29–30. The copy I am quoting from was issued in 1983.

In order to better understand Bavinck's contribution to the discussion on immediate regeneration (which he set forth just a couple of years before the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905), we do well to linger here briefly to glimpse Kuyper's specific stance on each of these issues, and then consider Bavinck's formulations which often modulate his predecessor's views.

#### Supralapsarianism versus Infralapsarianism

Regarding the debate between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, Kuyper, while having sympathies to certain features of the infralapsarian position, embraced supralapsarianism. Indeed, certain features of his theological thinking appeared to be consequential of this stance. But before we explore that avenue, it is important not to caricature Kuyper. He embraces supralapsarianism with some reserve, for he offers his own criticisms against it, which are direct and pointed. A dangerous construct is easily put upon the supralapsarian scheme, Kuyper warns, so that sin is deduced from God's decree and God is rendered culpable for human depravity. Supralapsarianism also evokes the idea that God creates a part of humankind for the express purpose of damning millions of souls to hell and destroying them eternally. Kuyper recoils from these conceptions and regards them as incompatible with God's "love" and "inscrutable mercies."<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, Kuyper believes that infralapsarianism is plagued with similar problems, for it relies on a kind of divine foreknowledge such that God knows what is in store for the humans he decrees to create, yet, God decrees to create them just the same.

Kuyper offers an illustration: Suppose there is a shipping company, and the owner has a ship with a crew of one hundred. He wants to send this ship to sea, but the night before doing so he gets a vision giving him certain knowledge that while at sea explosive cargo on the ship will ignite a fire and all the sailors will perish unless he take precautionary measures to protect or rescue his seamen. And, so, equipped with that certain knowledge and foresight, the ship-owner sends the ship to sea with its explosive cargo; but he resolves to make provision by giving life-jackets to ten of the sailors, concluding that the rest of the sailors will have to perish in the flames.

Kuyper argues that we are quick to judge such a man as barbaric, inhumane, and monstrous. We would all say about the ship-owner (since he knows that the cargo would explode and cause such a destructive fire, even if the sailors are at fault) is responsible to prevent such a tragedy; he

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<sup>16</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno: Toelichting op den Heidelbergschen Catechismus*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1892–95), II, 170–171. Also see Kuyper's "De Deo Operante" (Het Werken Gods) in *Dictaten Dogmatiek: College-Dictaat van een Studenten niet in den Handel*, met een woord vooraf van Dr. A. Kuyper, 5 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.), I, 114ff.; "Locus De Ecclesia" in IV, 38–44.



may not send the ship to sea with that cargo, or, at the very least, he must provide life-jackets to the entire crew.<sup>17</sup>

Infralapsarianism, then, Kuyper maintains, does not get us one step closer than supralapsarianism to solving the mystery surrounding the fall and God's decree. God knows with perfect certainty that if he creates man, he will fall—i.e., Adam and all his posterity; and God knows with perfect certainty whom he will save according to his good pleasure and inscrutable mercy. Thus, for Kuyper, we must leave unexplained what Scripture leaves unexplained, and the relation between God's eternal decree and the fall into sin, with its terrible repercussions, is impenetrable for us. This means that we cannot deduce the fall from God's decree, since that removes human guilt; nor can we deduce the decree from the fall, for then God's decree no longer exists and, in the end, we lose God as well.<sup>18</sup> "All schemes that have tried to find a solution for this mystery end either with a weakening of man's consciousness of sin and guilt, or with a weakening of the sovereignty and self-sufficiency of God."<sup>19</sup> Thus, given that dilemma, Kuyper takes up supralapsarianism as simply being more in line with the truth of Scripture, not as the solution to an impenetrable mystery. Scripture everywhere constrains us to recognize that the salvation of the elect is the fruit and result of God's eternal love, and that by virtue of election they are created, by virtue of election they are formed, and by virtue of election they shall be saved. The way of election—and this is what we must hold fast—precedes the fall and precedes the creation.<sup>20</sup>

Kuyper's followers generally adhered to the supralapsarian position, and if supralapsarianism is prone to fall into a doctrinal temptation, it is to so over-accent divine sovereignty as to minimize or under-accent or otherwise slight the use of means in the work of salvation.

Bavinck treats this topic at length in his *Reformed Dogmatics* under a chapter entitled "The Divine Counsel." He believes that this debate cannot be resolved by an appeal to Scripture. Both views are grounded finally on the sovereign good pleasure of God. The difference rests in this: the infralapsarian position seeks to follow a historical, causal order of the decrees, while the supralapsarian position follows the ideal, teleological order. Each view ends up needing aspects of the other, and neither view captures the whole truth of Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Thus, although the infralapsarian

<sup>17</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 171–72.

<sup>18</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 172.

<sup>19</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 172. Also see Kuyper's *De Vleeschwording des Woords* (Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1887), 202–24.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–2008), II, 384–92. Also see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 118–25; G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Hugo Bekker (Dutch edition, 1955) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 254–277; B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, revised ed. (1915, repr.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 23–29; 87–104; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 2nd

view seems less harsh and more modest, more gentle and fair, in fact it cannot account for reprobation as a matter of sin and unbelief; rather, infralapsarians must view reprobation, like election, as founded upon the inscrutable good pleasure of God. Moreover, in placing the decree of reprobation after the fall, infralapsarians face the difficulty of specifying the nature of the fallen sinners who are rejected, namely, as those reckoned in Adam and infected with original sin. Or also as individuals with all of their actual sins accumulating to them as well.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, the supralapsarian view faces its own set of problems, chief of which is that it conceives of election and reprobation in abstract terms, and makes the objects of the same “non-beings”—that is, “not specific persons known to God by name.”<sup>23</sup> Although this view does not try to justify God, and it forthrightly and immediately sets itself upon the good pleasure of God, it does so in a way that threatens to make election in Christ exactly parallel to reprobation for sin. That is,

it makes the eternal punishment of reprobates an object of the divine will in the same manner and in the same sense as the eternal salvation of the elect; and further, that it makes sin, which leads to eternal punishment, a means in the same manner and in the same sense as redemption in Christ is a means toward eternal salvation.<sup>24</sup>

Bavinck commends supralapsarianism for holding to the unity of the divine decrees, so that all things serve and are coordinated for an ultimate goal; and he lauds infralapsarianism for differentiating the divine decrees with respect to their distinct objects, so that not only a teleological but also a causal order is discerned. But he also observes that neither view can really capture God’s perspective, since God views the whole scene of the created order and its history in a single intuition; indeed, all things are “eternally present to his consciousness.” This means that “His counsel is one single conception, one in which all the particular decrees are arranged in the same interconnected pattern in which, *a posteriori*, the facts of history in part appear to us to be arranged now and will one day appear to be fully arranged.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the interrelationship and diversity of connections is so “enormously rich and complex” that our ordering of the divine decrees cannot replicate it. Moreover, the idea of predestination does not encapsulate the counsel of God, for God’s counsel is much richer than the eternal destiny of his rational creatures. Bavinck proposes that “common grace” be given a much more central place

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ed. (1879; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 200–13; 230–36; K. Dijk, *De strijd over Infra- en Supralapsarisme in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1912); A. G. Honig, *Handboek van de Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1938), 262–71.

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 385–86.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 387.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 387.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 392.

in connection with the divine decrees and God's counsel, for this involves the whole of cosmic history and enables us to understand that the creation is to be viewed "as a systematic whole in which things occur side by side in coordinate relations and cooperate in the furthering of what always was, is, and will be the deepest ground of all existence: the glorification of God." Bavinck likens the scope and compass of the divine decree pertaining to the world as a "masterpiece of divine art," in which every part, every detail, is organically interconnected and serves its purpose according to the eternal design of its sovereign author.<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to note that in the second edition of his *Reformed Dogmatics* (published after the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905), Bavinck supplements his discussion of the first edition, where he treats the inadequacy of supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, with two telling footnotes that reference Kuyper. In the first of these footnotes, Kuyper acknowledges that from a *human perspective* infralapsarianism seems preferable and inevitable, election being interpreted as election from the mass of fallen sinners, while from a *divine perspective* supralapsarianism seems preferable and inevitable, election being interpreted as election before creation and fall and governing the ordinance of creation. In fact, Kuyper himself admits that

all the polemics conducted by the two parties over this issue have not helped the church to take a single step forward, for the simple reason that both parties started out from opposing positions. The one stood squarely on the level ground below; the other loftily looked at the issue from a mountain summit. No wonder the two failed to understand each other. For that reason as well, it is absurd to say that a theologian of our time would be called a 'supralapsarian,' or to take the opposite point of view as the self-styled 'infralapsarian.' This is simply inconceivable, if for no other reason than that in our time this profound issue has assumed a very different form.<sup>27</sup>

Bavinck then refers to the decision taken by the Synod of the *GKN* at Utrecht in 1905 on this matter.<sup>28</sup>

A little later in this same discussion Bavinck appeals to Kuyper again in order to bolster his argument against making predestination to refer too narrowly to the election and reprobation of humans and angels. Over against this narrow perspective, Bavinck maintains that predestination pertains to all of world history, and world history may not be discarded after the consummation; on the contrary, it continues to have fruits for

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<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 392.

<sup>27</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 388–89, fn. 148. The quotation from Kuyper is taken from his *Gemeene Gratie*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam: Hōveker & Wormser, 1902–1904), II, 95–96. Note: these remarks, first printed in *De Heraut*, and then published with all the articles in the series in book form, predate the Synod of Utrecht 1905.

<sup>28</sup> See the appendix.

eternity.<sup>29</sup> Kuyper lends support to this view and asserts that earlier Reformed theologians did not adequately accent God's concern for all of creation, even as they neglected the use of common grace in constructing the doctrine of predestination itself.

If nothing else, whatever problems vexed theologians, pastors, and laypersons prior to the synodical decisions of Utrecht 1905, Kuyper's views ought not to be caricatured, and Bavinck, editing and revising his *Dogmatics* after Utrecht (the second edition appearing from 1906–1911), actually appeals to Kuyper to demonstrate the inadequacies of both supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, when each stand alone.

The Conclusions of Utrecht acknowledge that infralapsarianism is the presentation that the Three Forms of Unity follow, though supralapsarianism was never condemned; yet the warning is offered that “such profound doctrines, which are far beyond the understanding of the common people, should be discussed as little as possible in the pulpit, and that one should adhere in the preaching of the Word and in catechetical instruction to the presentation offered in our Confessional Standards.”

#### Justification from Eternity

As for justification from eternity, here Kuyper took up a clearly minority position within the history of Reformed theology. Here also is where his supralapsarianism had indeed “gone to seed” (something that can be traced in certain other Reformed supralapsarians as well). Simply stated, justification from eternity means that “the sinner's justification need not wait until he is converted, nor until he has become conscious, nor even until he is born.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas sanctification depends upon our faith, has to do with “the quality of our being,” and cannot be “effected outside of us,” justification depends “only upon the decision of God, our Judge and Sovereign” and is “effected outside of us, irrespective of what we are....” Kuyper judges this point to be essential for rightly understanding justification, for the justification of the sinner is never on the basis of the sanctification of the sinner.<sup>31</sup> Thus, since justification does not depend upon any virtue or merit or good work in the sinner, and since God is free and sovereign in his engagements with his human creatures, God is therefore free to declare one justified at any moment he pleases. “Hence the Sacred Scripture reveals justification as an *eternal* act of God,

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<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 390, fn. 152. Bavinck references Kuyper's *Gemeene Gratie*, II, 91–93.

<sup>30</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 2nd ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1927), 462; in English, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries; with explanatory notes by Henri De Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), 369. Both sources will be cited throughout this essay, first the original, followed by the pagination of the English translation in square brackets [ ]. Quotations are from the English translation unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>31</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 460 [367–68].

*i.e.*, an act which is not limited by any moment in the human existence.”<sup>32</sup> Kuyper even more strongly writes, “It should openly be confessed, and without any abbreviation, that justification does not occur when we become conscious of it, but that, on the contrary, our justification was decided from eternity in the holy judgment-seat of our God.”<sup>33</sup> Justification, then, is not something that depends upon the believing sinner’s awareness or knowledge in order to take effect in him; rather, it takes place “at the moment that God in His holy judgment-seat declares him just.”<sup>34</sup> Kuyper hastens to add that “this publishing in the consciousness of the person himself *must necessarily follow*,” which is the Holy Spirit’s work; he reveals to God’s elect, in the way of faith, the divine verdict of justification regarding them, *i.e.*, he “causes them to appropriate it to themselves.”<sup>35</sup>

Kuyper does not deny, but affirms, that Christ, as Son of God, prepares the way of salvation in his work of incarnation and resurrection, and so “brings about justification,” and God the Father acts as the judiciary who justifies the ungodly on that basis. Meanwhile, God the Holy Spirit unveils this justification to God’s chosen people. Thus, for Kuyper, Scripture teaches two positive truths, which on the surface appear to contradict one another, namely (1) that God “has justified us in His own judgment-seat *from eternity*; and (2) that we are justified *by faith* “only in conversion.”<sup>36</sup>

In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism Kuyper again addresses this topic, and again argues that the way of redemption, including justification, is grounded in the eternal counsel of God. The elect are *destined* to justification; and since God’s counsel is eternal the elect are justified, according to God’s counsel, from eternity. From eternity, in his eternal “telic-vision” (*eindaanschouwing*), they stand before him as righteous or justified.<sup>37</sup>

Kuyper acknowledges that in a certain sense justification is not an entirely accomplished fact so long as it is not appropriated by the individual; and since this appropriation only comes by way of faith, it can be said that God first brings about the justification of persons when he awakens them to faith. Nonetheless, this imparting of faith and subsequent declaration and appropriation of justification does not change what has always been the case according to God’s eternal decision, namely, that justification is from eternity.<sup>38</sup> Thus, from God’s point of view, the believer is justified from eternity, according to God’s own sovereign and eternal counsel. From the point of view of the objective ac-

<sup>32</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 462 [369].

<sup>33</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 462–63 [370].

<sup>34</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 463 [370].

<sup>35</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 464 [371].

<sup>36</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 463–64 [370–71].

<sup>37</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 333–34.

<sup>38</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 338.

complishment of the basis for justification for all the elect, then justification is accomplished at Christ's resurrection. And from the believer's point of view, when justification begins to be worked in him or her personally, then justification is when God places his hand of preparatory grace upon that person. But if the question is when do believers come to *know* themselves as justified, then the answer is when they believe, that is, when faith is effectuated in them. Finally, if it is inquired when the justification of believers will become a reality and known before the universe, then the answer is at the last judgment.<sup>39</sup> Kuyper thus articulates five senses in which we may conceive of justification.<sup>40</sup> Eternal justification, then, is the first sense that grounds all the others, since it has to do with the justification of the sinner in God's eternal decree.

In addressing this topic, Bavinck agrees that *in a sense* the sinner's justification has already taken place in the counsel of election.<sup>41</sup> He observes that this is a "precious truth" that no Reformed person will deny. However, he also asserts that that truth does not mean it is advisable to speak of an eternal justification, for "Scripture nowhere models this usage."<sup>42</sup> The Reformed have almost unanimously contested this doctrine. To be sure, justification is decreed from eternity, but that same sort of truth applies to everything that transpires in time; everything in the concrete history of this creation is decreed from eternity. There is nothing that escapes God's eternal counsel.<sup>43</sup>

Bavinck explains that the Reformed were compelled, in their opposition to neonomianism and antinomianism, to examine justification in a more conceptually penetrating way so as to avoid both of those errors. Thus they came to distinguish between an active and passive justification. The Reformed ward off neonomianism by arguing that faith is not a work that accomplishes forgiveness; and they fended off antinomianism in that they "almost unanimously rejected the doctrine of eternal justification."<sup>44</sup> Bavinck elaborates on the latter point:

Thus they commonly assumed that, even if one could with some warrant speak of a justification in the divine decree, in the resurrection of Christ, and in the gospel, active justification first occurred only in the internal calling before and until faith, but the intimation of it in human consciousness (in other words, passive justification) came into being only through and from within faith.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 340.

<sup>40</sup> For Kuyper's further elaboration on each of these, see *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 340–46.

<sup>41</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (1956; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 459.

<sup>42</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 216

<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 216

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 202–03; also see III, 583. 590–91.

<sup>45</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 203.

To demonstrate the cold reception that the doctrine of eternal justification received by most Reformed writers, Bavinck first references the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11, art. 4, which states that “God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.” Bavinck also cites various renowned seventeenth-century Reformed theologians who opposed the doctrine. But, interestingly, the Reformed writers who propagated the doctrine of an eternal justification, such as A. Comrie, J. J. Brahe, and Nicolaus Holtius, come from the eighteenth century, after the rise of pietism.<sup>46</sup> Antinomians were most prone to accept this doctrine and use it in their opposition to the neonomians. In any case, Bavinck refers to numerous Reformed writers who opposed this teaching, and to various Reformed confessions that make clear that justification is *by faith*, without conceiving of faith as a work that contributes to or cooperates with the verdict of justification.<sup>47</sup>

Bavinck explains that the Reformed were generally united in opposing neonomianism, but they disputed the nomenclature of a justification from eternity. Indeed, in the counsel of peace Christ offered himself from eternity to be our surety, to take our guilt upon himself, and to secure righteousness before God on our behalf and in our stead, to be appropriated by the means God ordains. However, to title this aspect of the divine decree “justification” involves an unacceptable equivocation of terms, for that accords to justification “a very different meaning than that which it had from ancient times....” Moreover, in doing this, proponents of eternal justification have “lost sight of the difference between the decree and its execution, between the ‘immanent’ and the ‘objectivizing’ act.”<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, even when it is considered in the decree, the satisfaction of Christ for his own is undoubtedly logically anterior to the forgiveness of their sins and the imputation of the right to eternal life. After all, those who reversed this order would in fact make Christ’s satisfaction superfluous and go down the road of antinomianism. . . . Even those among Reformed theologians who accepted a kind of eternal justification never claimed that the exchange between Christ and his church in the pact of redemption [i.e., the *pactum salutis*] already constituted full justification. But they considered it its first component and expressly stated that this justification had to be repeated, continued, and completed in the resurrection of Christ, in the gospel, in the calling, in the testimony of the Holy Spirit by faith and from its works, and finally in the last judgment. Accordingly, not one of them treated or completed [the doctrine of] justification in the locus of the counsel of God or the

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<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 203, fn. 98.

<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 203, fn. 99.

<sup>48</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 590–91.

covenant of redemption, but they all brought it up in the order of salvation, sometimes as active justification before and as passive justification after faith, or also completely after faith.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of these weighty criticisms, Bavinck adds these words, lest readers misunderstand his point:

It is of the greatest importance, nevertheless, to hold onto the Reformed idea that all the benefits of the covenant of grace are firmly established in eternity. It is God's electing love, more specifically, it is the Father's good pleasure, out of which all these benefits flow to the church.<sup>50</sup>

Bavinck, then, keeps in place the importance of grounding all the works of redemption in God's eternal counsel without advocating a full-blown doctrine of eternal justification.

Unfortunately, let it be observed, to speak of an "already" in relation to time and eternity and in connection with the divine decree is not properly speaking apropos, for the divine decree is not subject to temporal categories, like "already" and "to come." God's decree is his eternal and ever-present and active will, not merely a "whence" or a "back when"; it is his eternal will. Thus, while it is permissible to distinguish our justification as objectively pronounced in the resurrection of Christ and in the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 4:25; 2 Cor. 5:19) from our justification as subjectively appropriated in internal calling and the act of faith (as it is likewise permissible to speak of our justification as an eternal and gracious decision of God regarding his elect in time through Christ's righteousness in the way of faith), it is not helpful to accent the eternal aspect in any manner that renders time superfluous or treats the sinner's appropriation of Christ's righteousness by faith as anticlimactic. Such an error has Platonic tendencies.<sup>51</sup>

It is not difficult to see that to posit an actual justification from eternity (or eternal justification), without qualifying comments, is to commit a category mistake—the difference between God's decree and its execution. To be sure, the believing sinner's justification is decreed from eternity, even as the gift of faith wrought in God's elect is decreed from eternity, even as Christ's incarnation and the procurement of salvation are decreed from eternity. Indeed, everything that exists in time is decreed

<sup>49</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 591.

<sup>50</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 591. Cf. Bavinck's comments in his book *Our Reasonable Faith*, 459.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Bavinck's comments in his book *Our Reasonable Faith*, 459. It should be noted that holding to a supralapsarian position does not require an affirmation of justification from eternity. See, for example, Geerhardus Vos, *Systematische Theologie: Compendium* (Grand Rapids, 1916), 24, 98, who, though a supralapsarian, denies eternal justification. Thus concerning the question whether justification is from eternity, Vos offers a negative reply and says that while the decree concerning justification is from eternity, justification itself is not eternal. He offers specific arguments in rebuttal of eternal justification (pp. 98–99).



from eternity. Should we therefore speak of creation from eternity over against the believer's conscious faith that the cosmos is the work of God as creation? Or should we insist that the Son of God became incarnate from eternity (or was eternally incarnate) in distinction from the Son of God becoming incarnate in time or in distinction from the child of God believing in Christ as the incarnate One? Should we argue for an eternal atonement for sins before Christ atones for sins on the cross or before the believer has faith in Christ and his cross, that in distinction from having Christ's atoning work applied to us by the Holy Spirit in the way of faith? Finally, are we to speak of an eternal fall into sin—we were eternally sinners—in distinction from our sinning in time? Need we next maintain that the faith wrought in fallen sinners is an eternal faith?

All of this is clearly mistaken, and it is due to a category mistake or otherwise a radical voluntarist and nominalist commitment that makes the forgiveness of sins a matter of arbitrary divine fiat rather than a matter of the satisfaction of God's justice by means of the incarnation of the Son of God and his sacrificial death for the atonement of sin. In fact, the decree of God does not displace history; on the contrary, it gives us history. It does not make the events of history eternal—if they were eternal they would not be historical events in time—but it does mean that the temporal events of history are grounded in the divine will and dependent upon God's providence, ordinary and extraordinary, in order to come into existence and reach their end.

Indeed, it is necessary to say—given God's eternal decree—in whatever sense the language of an eternal justification can be pressed into a mold that has some semblance of orthodoxy, it is not particularly helpful; nor is it according to a Scriptural pattern of speaking. What is more, it is not even clear that it is necessary. What problem is remedied by speaking of an eternal justification? From Kuyper's own broader theological project, it is evident that he wants to make room for the justification of covenant children who depart this life as infants, such that though they never had come to any knowledge or consciousness of their justification, nonetheless they participate in God's forgiveness and acceptance prior to this being impressed upon their consciousness or their obtaining an experience of it. Justification is not dependent upon a human appropriation of it; rather, it is a reality because God, from his holy judgment-seat, sovereignly declares his elect justified, and so it is not dependent in any way upon anything in the sinner, neither conversion, the act of faith, or spiritual rebirth.<sup>52</sup> The consequence of this view, or the potential and feared consequence, was that the call to covenant obedience and the appropriation of Christ by faith would be short-changed or ignored altogether.

Let it be noted that to affirm Christ's eternal suretyship is one thing, eternal justification another; and to acknowledge that Christ objectively

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<sup>52</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 463, 462 [370, 369].

obtained for his own their justification through his redemptive work in history is very different from rendering history itself, and Christ's salvific work in history for the sinner's justification, secondary and anticlimactic, if not unnecessary. The demand and call to faith unto justification is part of the divine decree, i.e., it is part of God's eternal will, to be effected in history.<sup>53</sup> It is simply mistaken to evacuate history of significance *in order* to inflate the divine decree with a priority of importance.

As for Kuyper's oft repeated concern, within the broader context of his theology, that believing parents ought not to doubt the salvation and election of their covenant children who die in infancy, prior to their coming to a conscious act of faith and so also prior to their being conscious of their justification, we may offer an alternative remedy that surmounts the weaknesses of a doctrine of eternal justification—namely, that the children of believing parents are heirs of all the salvific blessings of the covenant of grace according to the divine promise, and therefore we need not wait for covenant children to reach maturity, and come to conscious faith, before reckoning them the recipients of God's saving work. On the contrary, on the basis of the divine promise, believing parents may properly regard their children, especially those who die in infancy, as God's elect and that God applies the saving work of Christ to them for eternal life (see Canons of Dort, I, art. 17).<sup>54</sup>

The Conclusions of Utrecht concede that aspects of this doctrine are confessionally permissible, yet they warn against two errors: (1) the error, in opposing this doctrine, that calls into question "Christ's eternal suretyship for His elect"; and (2) the error, in affirming this doctrine, that calls into question "the requirement of a sincere faith to be justified before God in the tribunal of conscience." Implicit in the first warning is that Christ "actually paid the ransom for us" in his suffering and death; and implicit in the second warning is that "we personally become partakers of this benefit only by a sincere faith."

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<sup>53</sup> It should be noted that there have been a few Reformed writers who endorsed eternal justification, such as Alexander Comrie, *Brief over de regtvaardigmaking des zondaars: door de onmiddelyke toerekening der borggerechtigheit van Christus* (Amsterdam: Nicolaas Byl, 1761), 92–94; 106ff., idem, *Verhandeling van eenige eigenschappen des zaligmakenden geloofs: zynde een verklaring en toepassing van verscheide uitgekijpte texten des O. en N. Testaments* (Leiden: Johannes Hasebroek; Amsterdam: Nicolaas Byl, 1763), 64, 75; nonetheless, it has always been a dubious position among the Reformed and can easily be exposed as confused. See, e.g., Francis Turretin's discussion and critique of eternal justification in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), XVI.ix. Also see the cogent critique of this notion as found in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 519–20.

<sup>54</sup> See Cornelis P. Venema, "The Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy: A Study of Article 1/17 of the Canons of Dort," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 57–100.

## Presupposed Regeneration as the Ground for Infant Baptism

Leaving aside, for now, Kuyper's views on immediate regeneration, his views on the fourth issue, namely *presupposed* or *assumed regeneration* (*onderstelde wedergeboorte*)—often translated as presumed or presumptive regeneration—had to do principally with the ground for infant baptism.<sup>55</sup> Kuyper argued that a principal ground for administering the sacrament of baptism to the infants of believers is that we may presuppose their regeneration on the strength of God's promise to them. Kuyper posited this idea, it seems, in order to combat what he regarded to be two errors, namely the error surrounding the idea of a *volkskerk* or national church on the one hand, which breeds presumption and religious formalism, producing congregations of baptized but unsaved persons; and the error of a certain type of Reformed pietism, where Methodistic tendencies prevail, such that the baptized are reckoned lost until they come to a conversion experience in their early adult years or later in life and can testify of that experience, offering a narrative of grace.

Kuyper's doctrine of an assumed or a presupposed regeneration, an assumption that forms the principal ground for the administration of baptism to infants, sought to run parallel with the assumption the church makes in administering baptism to adult converts, for the church baptizes adults with the assumption of their regeneration, certainly not with the assumption of their non-regeneration. What is more, in presenting this view, Kuyper departs from a view that he first presented in his work on the divine covenants (*De Leer der Verbonden*), published in 1885. In that work Kuyper uses an older writer as an authority, whom he describes as “discerning” or “perceptive,” namely Johannes Conradus Appellius (1715–1798).<sup>56</sup> Appellius certainly did not teach a presupposed

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<sup>55</sup> Note: the Dutch words Kuyper uses are *veronderstelling*, *onderstelling*, *veronderstellen*, *onderstellen* and are best rendered into English as presuppose or assume, rather than to presume, inasmuch as the last term has more of a negative edge, rendering the wrong connotation. Also it should to be strongly noted that a doctrine of “presupposed regeneration” is not at all an endorsement of, nor does it entail, a doctrine of “baptismal regeneration.” On baptismal regeneration, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 477.

<sup>56</sup> Appellius was an eighteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, who served four pastorates, the first at Jukwert, the second at Appingedam, where he also served as the rector of the Latin school, the third at Uithuizen, and then at Zuidbroek, where he spent the majority of his years, from 1751/2 till his death in 1798. H. H. Kuyper explains why Kuyper appealed to Appellius in this connection: inasmuch as most of the older Dutch Reformed theologians wrote in Latin, and most of their works were no longer readily available, Kuyper looked to those writers who wrote in Dutch and whose writings were of more recent vintage. Thus theologians like Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), Alexander Comrie (1706–1774), and J. C. Appellius presented themselves as writers familiar to the popular audience Kuyper was addressing, and whose works the common people could read. What is more, Appellius, more than the others, treated at length the doctrine of the covenant of grace and, with that doctrine, he also had a fulsome discussion of the sacraments, baptism being understood as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace (see *Kuyper-Bibliographie*, ed. J. C. Rullmann, 3 vols. [Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1929], II, 118–119; also G. Kramer, *Het Verband van*

regeneration; to the contrary, Appellius vigorously argued that the covenant itself was sealed only to the church in general, and the church consisted only of true believers. Thus the sacrament of baptism is sealed only to believers, and until a baptized person becomes a believer in the way of faith and repentance, he has no part of the promises. The promises belong to the baptized only *in becoming believers*. Appellius therefore taught that the ground for baptism is the promise of God, but he also taught that God does not seal the promise to the baptized child in baptism, nor is the promise sealed to the parents of the child; rather, the promise is sealed to “the church with which God has made his covenant concerning her seed.” This allowed for the idea of an empty baptism or an invalid baptism *with respect to the baptized child*, though baptism was always a valid baptism for the whole body of the saved, the church. Baptism, then, for Appellius, was a sacrament for the church in general, not for any covenant child in particular. Infant baptism likewise was not for the strengthening of the faith of the baptized child, for the child does not present him- or herself for baptism; instead, the church desires baptism and receives baptism in the body of that child. In this way Appellius made the faith of the church the ground of baptism; and in this way he could advocate a broad baptismal practice, yet baptism itself is not valid or applicable, in a sealing sense, to all the baptized.<sup>57</sup>

It was such sentiments that Kuyper, in the early 1880s, reproduced verbatim from Appellius, covering some ten pages. However, writing ten years later, he repudiates that position. Kuyper explains that the light concerning the mystery of baptism began to shine for him first in 1890 and he rejects his earlier naïve appeal to Appellius. He explains that he was nurtured in Ethical theology and had no teachers to direct him in the Reformed way. He had to venture on his own; and in addressing some practical matters on baptism in that earlier work, he too hastily used Appellius as a guide.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, when Kuyper was writing his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, later published as *E Voto Dordraceno*, 4 vols. (1892–95), he had abandoned his strict adherence to Appellius’s views and now advocated his doctrine of presupposed regeneration as the ground of infant baptism. This is reflected in his devotional book *Voor een Distel een Mirt* (1891), which treats the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper,

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*Doop en Wedergeboorte: nagelaten dogmenhistorische studie* [Breukelen: “De Vecht”, 1897], 351–354).

<sup>57</sup> The quoted pages of Appellius can be found in A. Kuyper’s *De Leer der Verbonden: Stichtelijke Bijbelstudien (Uit het Woord–Vijfde Bundel)* (1885; repr. Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 198–207.

<sup>58</sup> See C. Veenhof, *Predik het Woord: Gedachten en beschouwingen van Dr A. Kuyper over prediking* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, n.d.), 243–44, and 315 fn. 222. Veenhof cites Kuyper’s comments as recorded in “De Bazuin,” 15 November, 1895.

and public profession of faith.<sup>59</sup> Let it be observed, in Kuyper's advocacy of presupposed regeneration we need to distinguish between God's perspective and the human perspective, for God does not make assumptions; that is a human trait. We also need to distinguish between human assumptions based upon false information and human assumptions based upon reliable testimony or divine promise—Kuyper has the latter in mind. As such, presupposed or assumed regeneration (that being the believing parents' and the church's disposition and response to God's promise) is not making an ontic claim about the regenerative status of a baptized person or of a covenant child. Rather, assumed regeneration has to do with the posture that the church and believing parents take toward covenant children in light of God's promise unto them. This is a subjective disposition and a kind of epistemological posture.

Thus, given the divine promise, Kuyper believes that God is already efficaciously working salvation in the life of a covenant child; and this is why he insists that faith is the only proper reply to God's Word of promise. So, inasmuch as little infants are incapable of manifesting the evident signs of the new life and rebirth, the church proceeds to administer baptism to them with the assumption—a faith assumption—that God is already working regeneration in them, which is God's initial salvific work of blessing, and which subsequently, in time, blossoms forth into manifest faith and repentance.<sup>60</sup>

In Kuyper's view, for the church to baptize covenant infants without this assumption of faith is both mistaken and disobedient. Indeed, if believers trust God's promise and embrace the meaning of what is signified and sealed in baptism, they may not take an agnostic posture toward the salvific status of a covenant infant presented for baptism—neither affirming nor denying that God is working new life in that child. For, from Kuyper's perspective, it is nothing less than sinful, a form of unbelief, to fail to trust that God is already acting to effect salvation in the covenant infant—and that according to the content of the divine promise and the symbolic meaning of baptism itself. Consequently, and worse, for believing parents to present their covenant child for baptism, and for the church to baptize such a child, with the assumption that this child, in spite of the divine promise, is dead in sin and under the wrath of God, having no communion with Christ and no part in the washing of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, is a presumption of non-regeneration, and is tantamount to presenting an unbeliever for baptism. Therefore, intentionally to present any person for baptism who has no part of Christ is perverse, for baptism is the mark and sign of salvation, that one is a member of Christ, participating in the salvation he bestows, signifying

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<sup>59</sup> A. Kuyper, *Voor een Distel een Mirt: Geestelijke Overdenkingen bij den Heiligen Doop, het Doen van Belijdenis en het Toegaan tot het Heilig Avondmaal* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1891), 69, 72.

<sup>60</sup> See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 9–12.

and sealing forgiveness, rebirth, union with Christ, etc. For Kuyper, to baptize anyone, including covenant children, without the posture of faith and therefore the assumption of the recipient's regeneration is to baptize with a posture and disposition of unbelief—he wants nothing to do with it. Indeed, this is the cardinal point—Kuyper asserts that if we will not baptize our children under this assumption, then we ought to abandon the practice of infant baptism.<sup>61</sup>

Kuyper believes that the assumptive posture has practical benefits. He offers the illustration of a person who has two gems, but he does not have absolute certainty whether one or both of them are valuable diamonds or cheap glass. Without such certainty, he does well to regard both of them as expensive diamonds and to treat them accordingly—and so he protects them and keeps them safe from thieves, etc. Assuming both stones to be genuine diamonds means that the owner will not treat them as little, valueless pieces of glass. No, he will handle them as diamonds should be handled. Says Kuyper, likewise covenant children—although we do not have absolute certainty whether any given covenant child is a diamond or glass (elect or reprobate), we should regard them as diamonds and assume that the Holy Spirit is already working his regenerative grace in them and so take care of them accordingly.<sup>62</sup>

In expositing his view of presupposed regeneration, Kuyper employs the language of the Belgic Confession, art. 34, which teaches that the sacrament of baptism uses an outward washing with water to signify an inward cleansing through the blood of Christ, and that whereas ministers give us the sacrament and what is visible, the Lord gives what baptism signifies—namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing of our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort, etc.<sup>63</sup> However, Kuyper proceeds to assert explicitly that where these two features of the sacramental rite are not conjoined—that is, where God does not impart the thing signified as symbolized in the outward act of the minister, there we see the sacrament in *appearance* rather than in *reality*. This is simply to say, without the thing signified only an outward and visible sign is set forth, not the spiritual, invisible reality of Christ and his saving benefits.<sup>64</sup> When that is

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<sup>61</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 50, 67. Also see his *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 386–89 [299–301].

<sup>62</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 12. Kuyper also emphasizes the practical benefit for parents whose children die in infancy or at a tender age. Given the high infant mortality rate at the time in which Kuyper lived, this was a very relevant pastoral issue. See his comments in *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 6–7.

<sup>63</sup> See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 534–35, 538.

<sup>64</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535. This is not to be confused with his earlier view, which he subsequently repudiated, of *invalid baptism*. In fact, Kuyper's point here is standard Reformed theology, though Kuyper's terminology is less than felicitous. The Reformed have always distinguished “the sign” from “the thing signified,” though they are not to be separated from each other. No less in baptism than in the Lord's Supper, without faith and the Holy Spirit applying the thing signified to the heart, the recipients of the sacraments

the case, says Kuyper, then baptism has become “a lamp without light, a hearth without fire, a lung without breath, a heart without a beat.”<sup>65</sup> In short, if God does not act in the sacrament, the minister imparts nothing that has a spiritual benefit for the recipients—the water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion do not nurture anything to their souls. For only the Lord can nurture our souls with his grace, a fact that applies also to the preaching of the Word. Indeed, unless the Holy Spirit performs the inner, spiritual proclamation within our hearts, the outward preaching is impotent as to any saving benefit for the hearers. What all of this comes to, for Kuyper, is not difficult to sum up: the essence of a sacrament consists in this joint activity of both the outward rite performed by the minister and the inward grace imparted by the Lord himself.<sup>66</sup>

For his part, Kuyper believes that we ought to trust that God is acting in the sacrament, for sacraments function to nurture and confirm us in faith. Thus when the minister acts in administering the sacrament, we should believe that the Lord is likewise administering grace to the soul of the baptized child.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Kuyper believes that his doctrine is a faithful interpretation of the Form for Baptism, has ancient Reformed pedigree, and offers a much needed remedy to the blind ritualism that plagues the national church idea (*volkskerk*) out of which he came.<sup>68</sup>

receive the form or shell or husk or outward dimension of the sacraments, but not their substance, matter, truth, and salvific blessing, i.e., Christ and all his saving benefits. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 477–90, 533–35; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Hugo Bekker (Dutch edition, 1954) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 149–153. Cf. Belgic Confession, art. 35. Jan Rohls observes, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 211–12, 214, that the *Genevan Catechism* states that unbelievers “make it [i.e., the grace offered through baptism] of no effect by their perversity,” so that “none but believers feel its efficacy.” Likewise the Bremen Consensus says that children of Christian parents are not “to be regarded as unbelieving like the children of Jews and Turks, but as believing. For they believe according to their measure: that is, they have a seed of faith though the secret working of the Holy Spirit before, in and after baptism. Holy baptism seals and increases this seed of faith (M 770, 16–20).”

<sup>65</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535. This applies to the Lord’s Supper as well.

<sup>66</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535.

<sup>67</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 535.

<sup>68</sup> See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 51–53; 56–60. Also see Kuyper’s foreword to G. Kramer’s work *Het Verband van Doop en Wedergeboorte* (1897), a work that seeks to demonstrate the pedigree of Kuyper’s views by examining the views of numerous Reformed thinkers on this topic. Kuyper argues in his foreword that the Reformed doctrine of baptism cannot be understood without grasping also the views of their opponents, particularly the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans, each arguing for doctrines of baptismal regeneration, as well as the Anabaptists, who denied infant baptism altogether and conceived of baptism only as a believer’s testimony of faith. Calvin is the first and most authoritative voice for the Reformed in this regard, but subsequent Reformed authors had to wage further polemics against various opponents. In the course of time, Kuyper asserts, a certain stripe of pietism infected the Reformed tradition, corrupting both the doctrine of the church and of baptism, which stand or fall together. Thus the Reformed view that was forged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was compromised and lost in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the pietist onslaught.

It seems rather obvious that one of the weaknesses in Kuyper's doctrine of presupposed regeneration, as it stands, is that he makes a human response to the divine promise, which is necessarily subjective, *the ground* of infant baptism. The proper ground for infant baptism is principally the objective divine promise itself, along with the implicit command contained in that promise—namely, that the children of believing parents, as members of the covenant, ought to receive the sign and seal of the covenant, and ought to be baptized.<sup>69</sup> We could easily multiply both biblical and theological sources that confirm this point.<sup>70</sup> Suffice it to say that, for the Reformed, the ground for baptism (including infant baptism), in decreasing order of importance, is typically and principally (1) the command of Christ (Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16); (2) the divine promise of the covenant of grace (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; 10:47); (3) the analogy derived from circumcision (Col. 2:12); (4) the fact that covenant infants belong to the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:13; Luke 18:15); (5) the importance of the biblical affirmation that covenant children are holy (1 Cor. 7:14; Acts 10:47); (6) that no legitimate reason exists to prevent their baptism; and (7) that the church fathers confirm infant baptism.<sup>71</sup>

As for Bavinck, although he does not always mention Kuyper by name, he clearly opposed his predecessor's doctrine of presupposed regeneration *as the ground of baptism*. The right to baptism, for both adults and children, is derived from the covenant of grace, to which they are parties. "Not regeneration, faith, or repentance, much less our assumptions pertaining to them, but only the covenant of grace" forms the ground for baptism. There is "no other, deeper, or more solid ground" for baptism.<sup>72</sup> This does not preclude, however, that covenant infants can possess "the disposition (*habitus*) of faith." As Bavinck explains, the Reformed used a rich terminology to refer to this, such as: "the seed, the root, the inclination, the potency, the disposition, or the principle of faith, or the seed of regeneration, and so forth." In any case, the Reformed were in complete agreement on this matter, though the terminology varied. Key texts were Jeremiah 1:5 and Luke 1:35, both of which demonstrated that God can perform the work of regeneration from in-

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<sup>69</sup> Hence the language of the Form for Baptism used by most Reformed churches in the Dutch tradition: ". . . [covenant] children should be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant. . . ."

<sup>70</sup> For example, the Belgic Confession, art. 34, where we confess the following: "We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises made to our children"; also Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 74; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 637–40.

<sup>71</sup> Such is the order of presentation as set forth by Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, XIX.xii.2–11.

<sup>72</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 525.



fancy, even in the womb. The Reformed championed this doctrine and used it against the Anabaptists.<sup>73</sup>

The differences that emerged among the Reformed came, says Bavinck, when they began to reflect on the implications of the covenant membership of small children.

Since this has been such a disputed idea in Reformed theology, and since there is so much confusion about this matter, we do well to quote Bavinck's analysis at length. As he explains:

There were those who sought as long and as closely as possible to maintain the unity of election and covenant. They asserted, accordingly, that all children born of believing parents had to be regarded—according to the judgment of charity—as regenerate until in their witness or walk they clearly manifested the contrary, or that at least the elect children were usually regenerated by the Spirit of God before baptism or even before birth (à Lasco, Ursinus, Acronius, Voetius, Witsius, et al.). But others, noting the problems of experience, which so often tells us that baptized children grow up without showing any sign of spiritual life, did not dare to construe this regeneration before baptism as being the rule. They all without exception acknowledged that God's grace is not bound to means and can also work regeneration in the heart of very young children, but they left open the question whether in the case of elect infants that regeneration occurred before, during, or also, sometimes even a great many years, after baptism (Calvin, Beza, Zanchius, Bucanus, Walaeus, Ames, Heidegger, Turretin, et al.). This view won the day when the church [subsequently], by its neglect of discipline, fell into decay. Election and church, the internal and external side of the covenant, concepts formerly held together as much as possible but increasingly differentiated since the days of Gomarus, moved ever farther apart. In the church (*ecclesia*) one saw the formation of the conventicle (*ecclesiola*). Gradually, therefore, baptism was totally separated from regeneration, and, since people nevertheless wanted to continue this sacrament for their children, it was understood in one of the following ways: (1) conceived and justified as a sacrament of the church and a pledge of the children of believers in general; (2) as a confirmation of the objective conditional promise of the gospel; (3) as proof of participation in the external covenant of grace; (4) as a guarantee of an amissible rebirth—not one that was inseparable from salvation but one that was later to be confirmed by a personal faith; (5) as a pedagogical device that at a larger age spurs the baptized on toward genuine repentance.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 525. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559). 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xvi.17–22.

<sup>74</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 511. Lest Bavinck's point be misunderstood, he is not asserting that the view proposed by Calvin, Beza, Zanchius, etc. constituted a neglect in ecclesiastical discipline or led to it; he is only saying that when discipline waned in the church, this view more easily conformed to experience, and the other view (as defended by Voetius, etc.) created greater theological problems. As editor, I have inserted the "subsequently" in square brackets into Bavinck's text for clarity. Also see Herman Witsius, *Disquisitio Modesta et Placida de Efficacia et Utilitate Baptismi in Electis foederatorum Paren-*

According to Bavinck, whereas it is necessary for the church to exercise “a judgment of charity” in baptizing both adults and children, inasmuch as it is impossible to make “an infallible pronouncement” concerning the salvific status of all the baptized, nonetheless 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.”<sup>75</sup>

In Bavinck’s view, the doctrine of presupposed regeneration makes the ground of baptism a “subjective opinion.” Rather than rest baptism upon an opinion, the church must administer baptism “in accordance with the revealed will of God and the rule of his Word.”<sup>76</sup> Moreover, we must admit that baptism is often administered to those who fail to show the fruits of faith and repentance and do not walk in the way of God’s covenant. There is chaff among the wheat, vessels of clay amidst vessels of silver and gold; indeed, not all is Israel that is called Israel. Assuming the regeneration of all covenant infants does not make it so, and their regeneration cannot be proved in any case.<sup>77</sup>

In the Christian church, therefore, there is always room for the preaching of the gospel, of regeneration, faith, and repentance. The prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus all came to their people with that message, a people that after all was God’s own possession. The apostles too administered the Word not only to bring to expression the hidden life of faith; they also preached it as the seed of regeneration and as a means of making that faith effective.<sup>78</sup>

It is not Bavinck’s aim to deny that the Holy Spirit may regenerate covenant infants at His discretion and according to His sovereign mercy, but he does oppose making this assumption concerning the Spirit’s possible preceding operation as *the ground* for baptizing infants. He certainly affirms, in the language of the Form for Baptism, that just as the children of believers are without their knowledge conceived and born in sin, subject to eternal damnation, likewise without their knowledge “they can be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and endowed with the capacity to believe” (what Kuyper calls the seed or faculty of faith), and so likewise “they can also without their knowledge be strengthened in that capacity by the same Spirit.”<sup>79</sup> But when the Form for Baptism calls the children

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*tum Infantibus* (Utrecht, 1693), xxiv–lv; translated into English by William Marshall, edited and revised translation, with an Introduction by J. Mark Beach, “On the Efficacy and Utility of Baptism in the Case of Elect Infants Whose Parents Are under the Covenant of Grace,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 121–190

<sup>75</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

<sup>76</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

<sup>77</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

<sup>78</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 531.

<sup>79</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 532. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 543; idem, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382 passim [295 passim]. The Hungarian Confession speaks of a “seed of faith” (*semen fidei*) in children (M 422, 3ff.), as does the Bremen Consensus; see Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 214.

of believers “sanctified in Christ,” which is found in the first question put to the presenting parents, Bavinck disputes Kuyper’s view that this refers to an “internal renewal by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>80</sup> Instead, Bavinck argues for a covenant sanctification at this point, yet he simultaneously disputes how the Reformed doctrine of baptism was to devolve among the Reformed churches under the influence of pietism, a devolution that Kuyper attempted to remedy by ascribing a special grace to baptism—namely a disposition to seek the fellowship or communion of the saints as body of Christ.<sup>81</sup>

In fairness to Kuyper, however, the above criticisms should be modulated a bit inasmuch as Kuyper himself would not dispute the above mentioned arguments. As J. C. Rullman has observed, when controversy first emerged concerning Kuyper’s little book *Voor een Distel een Mirt* (1891), generating action at the General Synod of Middelburg in 1896, Kuyper subsequently clarified his view pertaining to the ground of baptism in *De Heraut* on 4 October 1896, in an article entitled “De Grond” (“The Ground”). Here Kuyper distinguishes four ways of thinking about the ground for baptism.<sup>82</sup> (1) If we speak of the ground upon which parents have the right (*het recht*) to request baptism for their children, then naturally for the parents the ground clearly rests in the divine ordinance of the covenant of grace. (2) If we speak of the ground upon which rests the right and duty of the church to administer baptism to the infants of its members, then the ground can only be, as before, God’s ordinance as set forth in the covenant of grace. (3) If, however, we speak of the ground upon which the ordinance in God’s name rests, then naturally the ground cannot be the covenant of grace, which God Himself established; rather, the ground can only be His sovereign good pleasure. And finally (4) if we speak of the ground upon which rests the spiritual reality of baptism administered to an infant (as we have done), then naturally the only answer can be that the spiritual reality of baptism rests on nothing other than *regeneration*.<sup>83</sup>

Thus Kuyper clearly affirms that the legal ground (*rechtsgrond*), as distinguished from a sacramental and a spiritual ground, for infant baptism rests in God’s covenant alone, for parents cannot know infallibly whether their child is regenerate. The church can judge only whether the child is born of believing parents and *in this fact alone*—that the child is

<sup>80</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 511. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 541 ff.; III, 51. Also see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, XIX.xx.9, where he maintains that the holiness referred to in 1 Cor. 7:14 is a “federal holiness,” which means they are regarded as “Christians and belonging to the church”—that in contrast to heathen children.

<sup>81</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 512–13. See Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, II, 463, 541, 553ff. Also see Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, 82–89; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 637–642.

<sup>82</sup> J. C. Rullman, *Kuyper-Bibliographie: Deel I (1860–1879); Deel II (1879–1890); Deel III (1891–1932)* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1923, 1929, 1940), III, 39–44, especially 43–44. Also see Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, 113–117.

<sup>83</sup> Rullman, *Kuyper-Bibliographie*, III, 44.

included in the covenant promise of God as seed of believers—the legal ground for the baptism of infants is established for the church; and this rests upon nothing other than the rule of the covenant.<sup>84</sup>

Unquestionably, Kuyper’s accent upon a presupposed regeneration as the ground for the baptism of infants was driven by a concern to safeguard the truth that the infants of believing parents are the objects of God’s saving mercies, even though they are not yet capable of the manifest signs of faith and conversion; and so, should they die at a tender age, believing parents may rest in the assurance that Christ’s work of salvation is for them, as baptism itself testifies.

The Conclusions of Utrecht reply to the Kuyperian doctrine of presupposed regeneration by saying that while it is correct to view the seed of the covenant as regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until they demonstrate the contrary, it is “less correct to say that baptism is administered to the children of believers on the ground of their presumed regeneration, since the ground of baptism is found in the command and promise of God.”

#### Immediate (or Unmediated) Regeneration

Finally, turning now to the question of immediate regeneration, and its relationship to divine calling—the chief subject of Bavinck’s book—Kuyper carefully staked out and vigorously argued for this view.

All the Reformed agreed that regeneration is God’s saving, sovereign work, and is effectuated within the life of an elect person at God’s gracious initiative and according to the Holy Spirit’s irresistible power. The dispute focused upon whether in performing this saving work in a spiritually dead person God acted with the use of means—*mediate* regeneration—or without the use of means—*immediate* or *unmediated* regeneration, i.e., unmediated by anything else, including the means of Word and sacraments (those instruments commonly called “the means of grace”).

Kuyper treats this topic at length in his book on the Holy Spirit; so we will focus our attention on that work, but also glimpse at his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism.

In expositing his doctrine of immediate or unmediated regeneration, Kuyper is careful to set forth a number of distinctions in an effort to clarify his view and protect it from misunderstanding. First Kuyper differentiates regeneration defined in the narrower sense and regeneration defined in the wider sense. The former refers to God’s exclusive act of quickening, whereby God “translates us from death into life, from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son.” This is regeneration understood as “*a starting-point*.” Here God “plants the principle of a new spiritual life” in the soul, and one is born again. The latter refers to

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<sup>84</sup> Kuyper, *Gemeene Gratie*, II, 215.

“the *entire* change by grace effected in our persons, ending in our dying to sin in death and our being born for heaven.”<sup>85</sup> This is how the term was used in early Reformed theology and the Reformed confessions, as in the Belgic Confession, art. 24.<sup>86</sup> Kuyper maintains that both uses of the term are legitimate, but he will be using the word, unless otherwise noted, in its narrower or more limited sense.

Kuyper next makes the broad distinction between first and second grace. *First grace* refers to “God’s work in the *sinner*” without his knowledge or volition; the sinner is absolutely passive, while *second grace* denotes “the work wrought in *regenerate* man with his full knowledge and consent.”<sup>87</sup> This *first grace*, then, has to do with “the *first implanting of life*.” Kuyper unfolds this idea:

[It is] evident that God did not begin by leading the sinner to repentance, for repentance must be preceded by conviction of sin; nor by bringing him under the hearing of the Word, for this requires an opened ear. Hence the first *conscious* and comparatively cooperative act of man is always *preceded* by the original act of God, planting in him the first principle of a new life, under which act man is wholly *passive* and *unconscious*.<sup>88</sup>

This, in short form, is what Kuyper means by *immediate* or *unmediated* regeneration, for the work of regeneration *in this sense* is directly infused into the soul of the fallen sinner by the Holy Spirit without any use of means.<sup>89</sup>

Kuyper distinguishes eight successive stages in God’s gracious work in the life of the sinner: (1) the implanting of the new life-principle; (2) the keeping of the implanted principle of life; (3) the call by the Word and Spirit, internal and external; (4) the call of God producing the conviction of sin and justification, two acts of the same exercise of faith; (5) the exercise of faith resulting in conversion (here the child of God becomes clearly conscious of the implanted life); (6) conversion merging itself with sanctification; (7) sanctification finished and closed in complete redemption at the time of death; and (8) glorification in the last day, when the inward bliss is manifest in outward glory, and the soul is

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<sup>85</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 378–79 [293]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 407–09.

<sup>86</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 378–79 [293]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 402–03; and also, III, 410–11, where Kuyper shows how the Canons of Dort sometimes use the word in the more limited sense.

<sup>87</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382, 429 [295, 339].

<sup>88</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 381 [294]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 409.

<sup>89</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 412.

reunited with its glorified body, and the enjoyment of the state of perfect happiness.<sup>90</sup>

For Kuyper, the salvation of deceased covenant infants is of principal concern.<sup>91</sup> The practical and theological concern is that covenant infants are the objects of God's salvific activity, which means that infant salvation must needs look different than the salvation of adults. In the case of infants God saves them by implanting a new life-principle in them. Kuyper borrows the language of older Reformed writers who called this the *faith-faculty* (*fides potentialis*), which is followed by the *faith-exercise* (*fides actualis*), and the *faith-power* (*fides habitualis*). The *faith-faculty* means that salvation does not begin with faith itself or the act of repentance; rather, God first plants life where none exists, giving "power to the powerless, hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead."<sup>92</sup>

Kuyper argues that this new principle of life (which is regeneration), can remain "dormant" (like being asleep) for quite some time before the Holy Spirit makes it sprout into manifest and conscious life. Until this happens, however, the Holy Spirit preserves it—"like seed-grain in the ground in winter; like the spark glowing under the ashes, but not kindling the wood; like a subterranean stream coming at last to the surface."<sup>93</sup> Indeed, this sprouting forth to manifest life is the work of the Spirit in the divine call of the gospel through the Word. This is where "means"—as in *means* of grace—come into play. The sprouting-to-life takes place in the person in whom the Holy Spirit, without the use of means, has already wrought the seed of life and the *faith-faculty* (*fides potentialis*), but now the Spirit uses means, namely the Word of God, to produce faith in their hearts, i.e., faith as *the exercise of faith* (*fides actualis*). "Hence the preaching of the Word and the inward working of the Holy Spirit are divine, correspondent operations." Concretely stated: "Under the preaching of the Word the Spirit energizes the *faith-faculty*, and thus the call becomes effectual, for the sleeper arises."<sup>94</sup>

When a capacity for faith, as one who has the new principle of life implanted in them, gives way to an exercise of faith (or what we would call actual faith), repentance and justification are the result of this inward and effectual divine call of the gospel. We could also say that *the acts of*

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<sup>90</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382–85 [295–297]. Cf. idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 446–52, where Kuyper treats conversion and sanctification.

<sup>91</sup> This pastoral concern drives his discussion in *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 5–12; also see his *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382, 386, 396, 409 [295, 298, 308, 320].

<sup>92</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 382 [295]; cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. edition, ed. Ernst Bizer., trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 540–42.

<sup>93</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 383, 403 [295, 313].

<sup>94</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 383 [296].

*faith*<sup>95</sup> are the result, and then this exercise of faith, actually believing and trusting in the Lord, results in conversion, i.e., the children of God actually become conscious that they are reborn and have new life in Christ. Thus “the implanting of the new life *precedes* the first act of faith, but conversion *follows* it.”<sup>96</sup>

Of course, in speaking of regeneration Kuyper, like any Reformed theologian, views the unregenerate person as not only “deaf and blind,” but worse, for “neither stock nor block is corrupt or ruined, but an unregenerate person is wholly dead and a prey to the most fearful dissolution.”<sup>97</sup> A fallen human being may be likened to a corpse: though he seems intact and whole, he is altogether corrupt and befouled with death. The unregenerate are “utterly unprofitable.” This is why “every operation of saving grace must be preceded by a quickening of the sinner, by an opening of blind eyes, an unstopping of deaf ears—in short, by the implanting of potential faith [*fides potentialis*].”<sup>98</sup>

Having made this point, Kuyper is concerned to show how the “act of regeneration” in this narrow, technical definition plays out differently with respect to covenant infants than in the case of adult converts. With respect to adults, there is little disagreement regarding how this comes to manifestation, for all agree that regeneration is not an act of moral suasion; fallen persons are neither workers nor coworkers in regeneration; rather, in bringing adults to faith and repentance, God acts *irresistibly* in their hearts, bringing them to new life, etc., making the unwilling willing; and this coincides with conversion. In the case of infants, however, regeneration and conversion do not coincide; nonetheless God makes little children the objects of his saving operations without this coincidence.<sup>99</sup>

Against the Ethical theologians who advocated a doctrine of baptismal regeneration, or at least a kind of sacramental regeneration, which relieved sinners of “inability” and afforded them “the opportunity to choose for or against God,” Kuyper argues that regeneration is not tied to the baptismal rite—that is, baptism does not regenerate infants or any other recipient of the sacrament. Baptismal regeneration, then, is emphatically and explicitly denied by Kuyper. As for regeneration itself, Kuyper is careful to state that it is not a tack-on or an additional component of man, as if a regenerate person is part old man and part new man. On the contrary, says Kuyper, the regenerate person is “one man—viz., the old man *before* regeneration, and the new man *after* it—who is

<sup>95</sup> On the “acts of faith,” see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Sources* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985], 22.

<sup>96</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 384 [296]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 415.

<sup>97</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 392 [304].

<sup>98</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 393 [305]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 415.

<sup>99</sup> See Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 393–98 [305–309]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 414, 416–18.

created after God in perfect righteousness and holiness.” The regenerate person is in principle changed and has a new nature; his ego or self is renewed, though he must still battle an old nature. As a new creature he is redeemed; he is not two things.<sup>100</sup>

This elicits the question “whether this regenerating act *precedes, accompanies, or follows* the hearing of the Word.” Kuyper believes that his answer to this question constitutes “the solution” to what some view as a controversy. “The Holy Spirit may perform this work in the sinner’s heart *before, during, or after* the preaching of the Word.”<sup>101</sup> Kuyper’s elaboration on this statement is not to be missed:

The inward call may be associated with the outward call, or it may follow it. But that which precedes the inward call, viz., the opening of the *deaf ear*, so that it may be heard, is not dependent upon the preaching of the Word; and therefore may *precede* the preaching.

Correct discrimination in this respect is of the greatest importance.<sup>102</sup>

Kuyper thus defines *three* distinct and successive stages when speaking of regeneration in the wider sense:

- 1st. Regeneration in its *first stage*, when the Lord plants the new life in the dead heart.
- 2d. Regeneration in its *second stage*, when the new-born man comes to conversion.
- 3d. Regeneration in its *third stage*, when conversion merges into sanctification.<sup>103</sup>

In the first stage, which is quickening, God works *without means*. In the second stage, which is conversion, God *employs means*, namely the preaching of the Word. In the third stage, which is sanctification, God “uses means in addition to ourselves, whom He uses as means.”<sup>104</sup> Kuyper is more than willing to speak of regeneration, as Scripture sometimes does and as the confessions sometimes do, in the most comprehensive sense of the restoration and renewal of corrupt man, involving the full scope of God’s redemptive work.<sup>105</sup> And speaking of regeneration in this comprehensive sense then allows the distinctions between quickening, conversion, and sanctification.

It is interesting to note that Kuyper does not think that all the minute distinctions he has employed in order to come to clarity on this topic ought to be proclaimed from the pulpit. Only conversion and sanctifica-

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<sup>100</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 401–03 [312–13]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 405, 421.

<sup>101</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407 [317].

<sup>102</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407 [317–18].

<sup>103</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407 [318].

<sup>104</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 407–08 [318–19].

<sup>105</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 408 [319].



tion ought to be the focus in preaching, since the preaching of the Word is “the appointed means to effect them.” But the work of theology can rightly have a broader aim than preaching—an aim that includes the refutation of error. Kuyper was facing opposition from the Ethicals, the Rationalists, and the Supernaturalists.<sup>106</sup>

In any case, to speak of regeneration as *quicken*ing is especially important concerning the salvation of little children, who cannot manifest the marks of conversion and sanctification. Without regeneration as *quicken*ing we face a “real danger” of branding covenant children as unsaved, concluding that “our deceased infants must be lost, for they can not hear the Word.”<sup>107</sup>

For Kuyper, then, quickening and conversion must be kept distinct, for conversion or the inward call is preceded by quickening, wherein the sinner receives hearing ears; and now being able to hear the Word, the Holy Spirit uses the Word as a means of grace. The passivity that characterized the sinner in quickening passes over into activity and a certain degree of cooperation on the sinner’s part. This latter aspect is what Kuyper calls “second grace.”<sup>108</sup>

The elect but unregenerate sinner can do nothing, and the work that is to be wrought in him must be wrought by another. This is the first grace. But after this is accomplished he is no longer passive, for something was brought into him which in the second work of grace will cooperate with God.<sup>109</sup>

Kuyper thus takes up the divine work of calling—a term that he is using in the narrow or limited sense of the call to repentance, i.e., the sinner being called out of darkness into light. This call issues forth primarily and officially from the preaching of the Word—though the Holy Spirit remains the real agent in this work, and both the preacher and the sermon are his instruments. That said, God is free to convey his Word in other ways as well. For Kuyper, the work of calling is the Holy Spirit’s work, and it “proceeds in and though the preaching of the Word, and calls upon the *regenerated* sinner to arise from death, and to let Christ give him light.”<sup>110</sup> As Kuyper speaks of it here, as the inward call, he is not talking about the outward call addressed to the unregenerate person, for the unregenerate do not have ears to hear.

In considering the operation of the inward call, Kuyper’s primary focus is upon already baptized persons—i.e., persons baptized as infants, whose regeneration is assumed and who need to come to conversion.

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<sup>106</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 408–09 [319].

<sup>107</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 409 [320].

<sup>108</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 428–29 [339].

<sup>109</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 429 [339].

<sup>110</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 432–34 [340–42]; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 432–33.

Moreover, this inward or effectual call is addressed to the elect, whereas the ordinary or outward call addresses the non-elect. The inward call is God's call and requires God's action, even where quickening has preceded it, for the regenerate—or quickened sinners—will not come of themselves.<sup>111</sup>

Kuyper views inward calling as a twofold work: (1) the first work is God coming with the Word, and the Holy Spirit performs an inward operation, making the seed of faith sprout to life in the work of preaching and hearing the Word; and (2) the second work follows wherein the preached Word effectively enters the very center of the sinner's heart and life, bringing with it an illumination of the understanding, such that he comes under the conviction of his sin, and conversion takes full effect.<sup>112</sup> Thus the Holy Spirit operates upon the converted person's will, in the words of the Canons of Dort: God powerfully enlightens the minds of his chosen ones "by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God" and "he also penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised," besides infusing "new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing. . ." (Canons of Dort, III–IV, art. 11). God does not treat us as blocks and stones or ignore our will and understanding; rather, he "spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and ... bends it back" (Canons of Dort, III–IV, art. 16). None of this "rules out or cancels the use of the gospel. . ." (Canons of Dort, III–IV, art. 17). Hence our wills yield to God, and love enters our souls.

The difference between regeneration and calling comes to this: "*re-generation* takes place independently of the *will* and *understanding*; that it is wrought in us without our aid or cooperation; while in *calling*, the will and understanding begin to act, so that we *hear* with both the outward and inward ear, and with the inclined will are *willing* to go out to the light."<sup>113</sup> Thus far Kuyper's view.

Bavinck's perspective on this question is set forth in the present volume. Since we offer a brief synopsis of the contents of Bavinck's book below, we will not explore his views, as presented in this volume, at this point. It is interesting to note, however, how Bavinck examines immediate regeneration in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

In a chapter entitled "Calling and Regeneration," Bavinck, in ways similar to Kuyper, maintains that Scripture allows us to speak of regeneration in three distinct ways:

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<sup>111</sup> Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 428–31.

<sup>112</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 431–33 [345–47]. Kuyper elaborates upon and explains the meaning of the sinner's cooperation in conversion in the chapter that follows this discussion, 434–40 [349–53]; also idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 424–26, 438.

<sup>113</sup> Kuyper, *Het Werk van den Heiligen Geest*, 434 [348]. Cf. idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, III, 426–28.

(1) as the principle of the new life planted by the Spirit of God in humans before they believe, (2) as the moral renewal of humans manifesting itself in a holy walk of life, and finally (3) as the restoration of the whole world to its original completeness. Thus rebirth encompasses the entire scope of re-creation from its very first beginning in the heart of people to its ultimate completion in the new heaven and new earth.<sup>114</sup>

For Bavinck, the first, restricted use of regeneration is not to be identified with external calling. External calling, which being distinguished as “a real call” (*vocatio realis*) refers to God’s call “through nature, history, environment, various leadings, and experiences,” and has as its medium the law as expressed in “the family, society, and state, in religion and morality, in heart and conscience,” obliges all humans to live according to God’s goodness and truth.<sup>115</sup> This call, however, is insufficient for salvation since it is absent Christ and the gospel. But when external calling is distinguished as “the verbal call” (*vocatio verbalis*), a call that comes to humans in the form of the revealed law and especially in the form of the revealed gospel, this is calling that summons persons to faith in Christ and to dependency upon God’s grace.<sup>116</sup> This is a universal offer of grace that is “seriously and sincerely meant” inasmuch as the gospel is preached to persons “not as elect or reprobate but as sinners, all of whom need redemption.” The universal offer, however, is “not to all people individually.” For Christ’s atonement is not a mere offer that has a universal scope; rather, it is effectual and secures “full, real, and total salvation,” according to the will and purpose of God. Therefore the call of gospel-preaching reaches its goal in the salvation of the elect, but the external call also reaches its goal for those who reject it. Moreover, this external call, though not a preparatory grace in an Arminian sense, is a “preparatory grace” if understood in the right way. God is the God of nature and grace, of creation and re-creation, and he uses both “the real call” and “the verbal call” to prepare his elect for redemption, though the implantation of spiritual life in regeneration remains God’s own immediate “creative work.”<sup>117</sup>

It is clear that not all persons to whom God addresses his operations in the external call respond in faith. The reason for this diverse response, Bavinck argues, may not be grounded in the human will, nor may it be founded upon some sort of doctrine of “congruism” or a merely morally suasive operation of divine grace. Instead, the diverse response is rooted

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<sup>114</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 53.

<sup>115</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 33–34; 76–77; also see Bavinck’s comments in *Our Reasonable Faith*, 407–09, where he identifies this sort of call with common grace and argues that by means of this proclamation of the law God curbs sin, represses human passions, and restrains the flow of iniquities. “A human society and a civic righteousness [are] made possible by it, and these in turn open up the way for a higher civilization, a richer culture, and a flowering of arts and sciences.”

<sup>116</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 34–35.

<sup>117</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 36–39; idem, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 415–17.

in “the nature of the calling itself”—that is, for the Reformed, it is rooted in the difference between external and internal calling or other such nomenclature.<sup>118</sup>

Bavinck argues for the biblical propriety of this distinction under five points. (1) All humans share the same spiritual and moral incapacity of original sin, and none are worthy of God’s kindness or saving operations. “Hence the difference that occurs among people after the calling is inexplicable in terms of human capacities.” Divine grace alone accounts for this difference. (2) The proclaimed Word of the gospel is insufficient in itself to change the fallen human heart. Without the secret operation of the Holy Spirit to effect regeneration in us, none would come to faith and salvation. (3) This means that the salvation is a divine work from first to last, “both subjectively and objectively.” “The calling is the implementation of divine election,” for God alone draws people unto himself. He makes us to will and to do according to his good pleasure. (4) This is why the Scripture calls this “rebirth,” and this is also why some notion of “moral suasion” does not capture the biblical portrait of God giving a person a new heart. (5) Last, “Scripture itself speaks of calling in a dual sense.” The Bible can speak of calling that is inefficacious and calling that is always efficacious as the realization of election.<sup>119</sup>

In addition, Bavinck pointedly asserts that the difference between the general call through creation and history and the special call through the preaching of the gospel differ not merely in degree “but in essence and kind.”<sup>120</sup>

In contrast to the Anabaptists who made regeneration reliant upon “an active faith and repentance,” and the Lutherans who took Titus 3:5 as supporting a doctrine of baptismal regeneration—but an “amissible” or losable regeneration—the Reformed carved out their own path. Rather than undervalue the church’s ministry and the means of grace, as the Anabaptists did, or overvalue the church and the means of grace, as the Lutherans did, the Reformed initially spoke of regeneration by faith.<sup>121</sup> That language of course was ambiguous, and inasmuch as small children and infants were incapable of such faith, the question arose whether they should be thought of as candidates for baptism and, even more, for salvation itself.<sup>122</sup> The Reformed, notes Bavinck, came to various answers in attempting to provide an affirmative answer to that query.

They grounded the baptism of the children of the church in the faith of the parents or of the church, in the faith children would exercise in the

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<sup>118</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 41–42; idem, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 413–15.

<sup>119</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 43–44. The reader is urged to consult these pages for Bavinck’s citation of Scripture, etc.; also see pages 46–53 for more of his presentation of the scriptural materials on regeneration.

<sup>120</sup> Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 411.

<sup>121</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 55–56.

<sup>122</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

future, or in a largely undefined covenant of grace in which children were included with their parents.<sup>123</sup>

Then, too, others appealed to those scriptural texts which indicate that the Holy Spirit is able to begin his sanctifying operations in the womb.<sup>124</sup> Coupled with this view,

Others based it on the reality, assumed to exist by faith in the promise of the covenant of grace, that the Holy Spirit had wrought in their hearts [i.e., in the hearts of covenant children] an established disposition of faith and hence of rebirth (in the narrow sense, as the very first life principle).<sup>125</sup>

Here Bavinck is speaking of Kuyper's stated position. But as Bavinck observes, "In the works of [Reformed] theologians, Calvin among them, several of these lines of argument occur side by side, and not one of them is made dominant."<sup>126</sup>

Bavinck proceeds to examine the doctrine of presupposed regeneration, a topic that we have already considered above. At this point we simply note Bavinck's acknowledgement that this doctrine rightly reckons with the fact that faith and repentance have to be understood in light of radical human depravity, and that the blessings of faith and repentance are produced by "a secret internal operation of the Holy Spirit." Regeneration, therefore, has to precede faith and repentance. But the weakness of this doctrine is manifest in light of divine election and practical experience, for not all covenant children who have been baptized, upon reaching maturity, reveal themselves to be regenerate. Therefore a restriction was forced upon this view in terms of divine election, such that "only elect children" may be said to be "as a rule regenerated before their baptism."<sup>127</sup>

Like Kuyper and many Reformed theologians before him, Bavinck affirms immediate regeneration in this first and formative sense, and so he affirms the distinction between "faith as capacity" and "faith as act." He likewise therefore affirms the distinction between "conversion in a passive and an active sense—in other words, between regeneration and repentance (faith), and in the order of redemption ... the former precede[s] the latter."<sup>128</sup>

Indeed, the Reformed were forced to clarify and refine their position on the Holy Spirit's operations in regeneration given that all forms of Pelagianism locate regeneration *after* faith and repentance. All Augustinians, on the other hand, place regeneration *before* faith and repentance.

<sup>123</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

<sup>124</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

<sup>125</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

<sup>126</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 56.

<sup>127</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 57.

<sup>128</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 65, 68.

This is a fundamental theological divide wherein human decision is finally determinative for the former view and divine decision is finally determinative for the latter view. Moreover, if original sin is true and if the children of believers are to be regarded as candidates for salvation, and if, being children not yet of the age of discretion (so that they are incapable of faith and repentance by means of the ministry of the Word), then regeneration must run ahead of faith and repentance. In short, faith as capacity must be granted before faith as act, and so sinners are first passive as recipients of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in order that they may subsequently be active as those experiencing rebirth and new life.<sup>129</sup>

Bavinck also notes that the word regeneration, in terms of theological formulation, has been understood in at least three senses: (1) as descriptive of "the transformation that begins in the human consciousness as a result of the believing acceptance of the gospel ..." (which he views as defective and prone to foster misunderstanding); (2) as descriptive, broadly conceived, of "the total renewal of a person," brought about by and coinciding with faith (this view, too, was prone to misinterpretation); and (3) as descriptive, narrowly or strictly conceived, of an infusion of new life prior to faith and repentance. Understood in this last sense, regeneration was distinguished from "the progress of regeneration," the latter reality being given such titles as repentance, renewal, and sanctification.<sup>130</sup>

Regeneration, then, conceived in the restricted sense, "does not include the growth and development of the new life but suggests the genesis or origin of that life."<sup>131</sup> Of course, in terms of theological formulation, this definition is more refined than the way Scripture usually speaks. But Reformed writers have always been aware of this, and in speaking of regeneration in this restricted sense they have distinguished between "the activity of God by which he regenerates, and the fruit of that activity in the person who is being regenerated; in other words, between active and passive regeneration."<sup>132</sup> The former is nothing else than "the efficacious call of God." The latter is our active engagement and response to that call, whereby we learn as God teaches, we follow as he draws, we accept as he endows, we blossom and flourish as he plants and waters and grants the increase.<sup>133</sup> But the former always precedes the latter, for this is simply to affirm that the grace of God in Christ is "grace that is full, abundant, free, omnipotent, and insuperable," which is "the heart of the gospel."<sup>134</sup>

It is important to observe that, for Bavinck, the blessings of regeneration are not divorced from Christ and the covenant of grace. Indeed, he

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<sup>129</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 66–68; idem, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 419–23.

<sup>130</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 76.

<sup>131</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 76.

<sup>132</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 77. For Bavinck's exposition of active regeneration, see IV, 87–95.

<sup>133</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 77.

<sup>134</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 87.

argues that the benefits of the covenant of grace are “applied and distributed only in the internal calling,” which from the human side of things means that these are “passively accepted” in regeneration. And so whether this regeneration “takes place in childhood, youth, or later, before or during the hearing of the Word, *logically it always precedes the act of really believing.*”<sup>135</sup> To press this point, Bavinck cites Maccovius who said that to hear the Word “salvifically” requires that one is regenerate.<sup>136</sup> As noted above, Bavinck readily grants that regeneration in the restricted sense, as the infusion of the principle of the new life, may ... precede faith.” Indeed, it can “occur in infancy before the awakening of consciousness, in or before baptism, even before birth.”<sup>137</sup> No door stands bolted and locked before God that would prevent him from effectuating his saving mercy, for there is “no heart inaccessible” to him.<sup>138</sup>

With his Spirit he can enter the innermost being of every human, with or without the Word, by way of or apart from all consciousness, in old age or from the moment of conception. Christ’s own conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb is proof that the Holy Spirit can, from that moment on and continually, be active in a human being with his sanctifying presence.<sup>139</sup>

Like Kuyper, Bavinck draws comfort from this doctrine. He appeals to the language of the Canons of Dort, I, art. 17, which bids godly parents not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls from this life at a tender age. Thus Bavinck explicitly affirms the doctrine of immediate regeneration, where regeneration is understood in the restricted sense, for this is simply to affirm that such a regeneration encompasses “in principle the whole person, initially renewing all of one’s capacities and powers, and later manifesting and confirming itself in all directions, in faith and repentance, in sanctification and good works.”<sup>140</sup>

Moreover, we would be derelict in presenting Bavinck’s views if we failed to observe that, for Bavinck, all the blessings of salvation are tied to the covenant of grace and are only bestowed upon a person unto salvation *in union with Christ*. This is not a small point for Bavinck; it ought to be “in the foreground of our consciousness,” for “all the benefits of salvation are secured by Christ and present in him....” In fact, Christ distributes all the blessings of the covenant of grace at his pleasure, which include regeneration or new birth, faith and repentance, reconciliation and forgiveness, renewal and sanctification.<sup>141</sup> All these saving gifts and blessings are received only “in communion with Christ,” for they never

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<sup>135</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123; *italics added*.

<sup>136</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

<sup>137</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

<sup>138</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

<sup>139</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 123.

<sup>140</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 124.

<sup>141</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 122.

exist independent of him and he himself secured them for his people. And all of these benefits are applied and distributed individually to persons “only in the internal calling,” “passively accepted on the human side in regeneration”; and in logical order “always precedes the act of really believing.”<sup>142</sup>

The Synod of Utrecht 1905 addressed this question in a manner that clearly mirrors Bavinck’s views. The Conclusions assert that the language of immediate regeneration can be used in a proper sense in order to distinguish the Reformed view from Roman Catholic and Lutheran errors, for the Word and sacraments do not themselves *effect* regeneration; that privilege and work is reserved to the almighty operations of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, “this regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit ... should not be in such a way divorced from the preaching of the Word as if these two were separate from each other.” As for covenant infants who die at a tender age, Scripture and confession teach us not to doubt their salvation; however, the case of infants ought not to compromise the clear biblical affirmation that “the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth, and that in the case of adults the regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit accompanies the preaching of the Gospel.”<sup>143</sup>

#### *Synopsis of Bavinck’s Treatment*

With this broad background in place, we are in a better position to appreciate Bavinck’s careful treatment of this last topic in the present volume. As Bavinck tells his readers, his book is intended to bring “greater clarity concerning the doctrine of immediate regeneration,” with the aim of facilitating peace in the churches, such that “difference of insight” need not devolve into a disunity of confession. For, indeed, serious disunity was manifesting itself among the churches at that time.

In blazing a trail through this debate, Bavinck’s book is a four part project. PART ONE is introductory and provides an orientation to the issues to be examined. Bavinck briefly sketches the concern of the opponents to the doctrine of immediate regeneration. First, according to the critics, this doctrine, coupled with the doctrine of presupposed regeneration, is said to undercut the call to repentance and the call to a life of faithful obedience. If one is presumed saved, then preaching no longer lays claim upon the human heart. The pulpit is emasculated. Meanwhile, and second, inasmuch as the followers of Kuyper followed him also in embracing supralapsarianism, this tended to turn the gospel into bad news for sinners—a message that is as much a sentence of death as it is an announcement of life. Third, when immediate regeneration is conjoined to the doctrine of eternal justification, the practical effect is to make salvation simply a matter of believers *becoming aware* of a grace

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<sup>142</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 122–23.

<sup>143</sup> In critique of Kuyper’s view, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 468–79, especially 470–72.



that long ago was bestowed upon and effected in them—that over against salvation as a living encounter with God in the call of the gospel. Finally, since immediate regeneration brought with it the notion of a seed of life implanted within the regenerated, a seed that can remain dormant for very many years without germinating and showing signs of life, the interval between regeneration and conversion—the latter being the actual coming of the sinner to faith and repentance—could likewise be very long, with the consequence that those with new life in them can live for many years as though completely dead in sin. This does not encourage a life of piety.

In order to evaluate these charges, Bavinck sets forth three principal questions, which in turn form the focus of Bavinck's study. The first question concerns the manner in which the Holy Spirit works within the human heart. Is this from a distance and through ordinary means or does the Holy Spirit draw close and directly impart the blessing of regeneration? The answer to this question distinguishes defenders of sovereign grace from defenders of free will. The second question inquires into the use of means, for if it is the case that the Holy Spirit directly effectuates spiritual rebirth in the hearts of fallen people, are all means to be excluded or regarded as redundant? The answer to this query sets proponents of the effectual use of means apart from Enthusiasts and Anabaptists who regard means as empty signs. The third question (assuming that the use of means is not detrimental to a proper view of the Spirit's work of regeneration in the human heart) concerns the connection between the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit and the role of means in this operation. In answering this question the Reformed distinguish themselves from Roman Catholics and Lutherans alike, both of which tie grace too exclusively and mechanically to the use of means.

In PART TWO Bavinck sketches what the immediate (or unmediated) operation of the Holy Spirit means. To begin, Bavinck introduces the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius on this first question. Bavinck shows how the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit, understood in the proper sense, is a trait common to all anti-Pelagian theology. While Augustine's doctrine of irresistible grace was never condemned in the Roman Catholic Church, it was weakened over the course of time with the increasing preference for semi-Pelagianism. The Reformed, of course, dispute all forms of Pelagianism. While they altogether agreed on the substance of regenerative grace and the sovereign work of God in awakening dead sinners unto life and faith, the Reformed were not completely united in how to describe the initial moment of the application of salvation, especially the relation between the external call of the gospel and the elect coming to rebirth and life. Clearly, this first coming to life had to be at God's initiative and completely his work. Fallen humans do not distinguish themselves from one another, for in salvation, initially, they are altogether "receptive and passive." An internal, hidden, effectual grace is acknowledged and confessed by all the Reformed—indeed, the internal

call is what this is. The nomenclature of “immediate regeneration” was, however, not yet common. But that does not mean this terminology is impermissible, for God does act immediately and directly upon a person to infuse him or her with new life. It is noteworthy that at this point Bavinck quotes Kuyper favorably inasmuch as Kuyper rightly champions Calvinism as the safeguard of the gospel of grace.

Bavinck next reminds his readers that the gospel of grace was once under attack through the teachings of the Remonstrants. He succinctly outlines some of the principal teachings of the Canons of Dort, especially under heads III–IV, wherein human depravity and irresistible grace are carefully treated. In doing so, Bavinck arrives at the answer to the first key question—namely, In what manner does the Holy Spirit work within the human heart?—that is, is this a direct and irresistible operation or does he make use of means? The answer is not in dispute: the Word of God in and by itself is insufficient for regenerating and bringing the sinner to faith and conversion, but must be accompanied by an internal grace, by the Holy Spirit’s work, which is internal, spiritual, supernatural, effectual, invincible, and irresistible.

PART THREE, which makes up the bulk of this volume, treats the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. Bavinck first shows how Augustine and the Reformed understood the means of grace; then he demonstrates how the language of calling and regeneration was understood at the Synod of Dort, and how various Reformed writers used these terms and that the terms had to be refined in order to refute Remonstrant views. Next Bavinck considers the Reformed conception of the covenant of grace and the church, setting the Reformed position in contrast to both Romish and Anabaptist notions. This leads to an examination of the moment of regeneration. Romish and Anabaptist errors are once more noted; the work of divine grace in covenant children is the focus of discussion, including covenant children who die in infancy. Here Bavinck carefully explores the views of Gisbertus Voetius on the regeneration of covenant infants, i.e., presupposed regeneration. Voetius was a very influential theologian of the seventeenth century, from whom Kuyper derived some of his own accents. Over against Voetius, Bavinck next introduces his readers to Jessaias Hellenius, a prominent eighteenth-century Reformed minister, who opposed Voetius’s advocacy of the regeneration of covenant infants. Bavinck appeals to Hellenius, in part, in order to show that the Reformed, though not reaching unanimity on this topic, still allowed distinct views. But more, Bavinck wants to expose the weaknesses of the presupposed regeneration view, for he argues that the doctrine of presupposed regeneration is not without serious theological and practical obstacles.

Specifically, Bavinck asserts that this view is speculative, “traversing a terrain of guesses.” It tries to know more than God has revealed in his Word; we simply cannot know when God ordinarily regenerates elect infants. Besides, the problem of undetected hypocrites within the fellow-

ship of the church cannot be eradicated, which means that unregenerate persons abide within the bosom of the church. Clearly, then, regeneration does not always precede baptism. The doctrine of presupposed regeneration, moreover, has no practical benefit and can produce genuine practical harm, for the preaching of the gospel is still indispensable for nurturing elect infants in the way of faith. Meanwhile, presupposed regeneration is vulnerable to promoting false assurance inasmuch as one is tempted to focus upon regeneration instead of faith; and this in turn encourages a nominal Christianity that is spiritually superficial. Likewise, presupposed regeneration might encourage the minister to confine the overtures of the gospel only to persons assumed to be regenerate, which, in effect, constitutes a premature reckoning, as if a person's destiny was decided at birth rather than at death. Preaching is thereby robbed of its seriousness. Finally, a doctrine of presupposed regeneration could be construed in a manner that forms an obstacle to the free and well-meant offer of the gospel.

Bavinck, however, is aware that a potent counter-argument can be set forth in favor of immediate regeneration, namely, that calling cannot precede regeneration because deaf people cannot hear and dead people cannot come alive. Thus, God must first grant the new life of regeneration to the sinner if he or she is to have ears to hear and eyes to see and a heart capable of receiving the gospel in faith. Without regeneration preceding calling, calling is in vain. Bavinck, of course, concedes this point but demonstrates that it is not strictly *apropos*. While Bavinck readily grants that God can work regeneration in the hearts of elect infants apart from their hearing and understanding the Word, uncertainty as to the actual moment of regeneration cannot be overcome. Bavinck carefully sorts out the Reformed opinion on this topic, showing why the Reformed in their dogmatics have always treated calling as first in the order of salvation. It is again important to note that the Reformed forged their position on the anvil of controversy, for they ever had to present their views over against Anabaptist errors.

The Anabaptists, of course, operated with the notion of assuming the non-regeneration of infants and small children, and therefore did not permit the baptism of infants. They denied *means* of grace altogether. The Reformed, however, tied regeneration to the Word of the gospel as a genuine means of grace. The Reformed also had a much more nuanced understanding of the spiritual state of covenant infants, a topic that Scripture addresses rather meagerly. To be sure, Scripture informs us that God is the God of believers and their children, that such children are included in the covenant of grace, and that therefore they have the right to the sign and seal of that covenant, and that they must also be nurtured in the ways of the Lord. But many questions remain unanswered. Do passages like Jeremiah 1:5 and Luke 1:15 teach that children are regenerated in the womb? Bavinck argues that such texts are not conclusive, and God is free in his operations toward his elect. Similarly, does 1 Corinthians

7:14 teach regeneration from infancy? Bavinck maintains that this text does not refer to a “subjective, spiritual renewal” but to “an objective covenant relationship.” Again, Bavinck does not deny that many covenant children are indeed regenerated in their youth and even prior to being baptized, nor does Bavinck wish to subvert in any way the comfort that believing parents ought to have regarding the election and salvation of their children who die at a tender age. Early regeneration is possible, but Scripture does not allow us to know beyond what it teaches; and we must resist being overly curious about such matters.

Bavinck also takes up a discussion of covenant adults and their spiritual state, and here Bavinck specifically takes up the work of preaching—both preaching unto the lost afar off and preaching to covenant members of the church. Whereas it is wrongheaded to treat covenant people as unbelievers, it is likewise wrongheaded to fail to call them to faith and repentance after the pattern of the Old Testament prophets, as well as John the Baptist and Jesus. Similarly, the apostolic letters refer to the covenant people as God’s elect and members of Christ, yet the churches could be infected with hypocrites not yet detected and with various forms of error and unrighteousness that require continual calls to faith and repentance. Scripture teaches us to regard one another as God’s people, but also to be aware that false brothers and sisters slip in as fakes, and they do not constitute the essence of the church.

This discussion clears the way for Bavinck to take up calling and regeneration in relation to the preaching of the gospel. Here Bavinck contrasts a Reformed understanding with a Methodistic approach. He also contrasts it with an approach which assumes that all in the church are saved and therefore they should only hear preaching that edifies—that over against a preaching that also exposes sin, hypocrisy, and, consequently, calls to faith and conversion. The ethical method of preaching inevitably leads to dead orthodoxy, says Bavinck. He believes both forms of proclamation are necessary in the church; otherwise one-sidedness is the result—the one-sidedness of presupposed regeneration and the one-sidedness of presupposed non-regeneration.

This is the answer to the second key question—does the direct operation of the Holy Spirit exclude the use of means? Bavinck maintains that though the Spirit’s work is internal and irresistible, the Reformed never called regeneration “immediate” in contrast with and to the exclusion of the Word as a means of grace, to which the Holy Spirit joins himself and makes effectual.

Finally, in PART FOUR of his book, Bavinck presents his discussion of the connection between the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. Here he treats the means of grace, with special attention given to the Word of God as the means of grace. It is under this part that Bavinck answers the third key question of his study, namely, what is the relation between the Spirit’s immediate operation and the use of means?

Bavinck regards this question as weighty and difficult. Dort reminds us that the supernatural operation of the Holy Spirit upon the human heart in regeneration is marvelous, hidden, and inexpressible. This does not, however, exclude the use of means in every respect, nor does it deny the power of means. This is not unrelated to the doctrine of divine providence, wherein the Creator/creature distinction is carefully preserved. The divine decree, too, is important since it shows us that God's ways with humans are integrated, involving means and ends, pathways and outcomes. The means that God uses for the sinner's redemption is not something we are capable of describing in fixed and clear formulations. Various formulations were attempted in the Middle Ages, including the physical operation view and the moral operation view. Rome adopted the former and rejected the latter view, while the Reformed endorsed the latter view and rebuffed the former.

Inasmuch as the Reformed regarded the Word as the principal means of grace, and inasmuch as they viewed the means of grace as possessing a moral operation, this entails that the Word as a means of grace, as a moral operation, refers to the external call of the Word, in both law and gospel. The divine Logos, of course, possesses more than a moral working power, but also a creating and re-creating power, which includes the speaking-power of God in creation and providence. However, when Scripture refers to the Word as the message contained in the Bible in the form of law and of gospel, then that Word, in itself, has power only as a moral operation—appealing, admonishing, persuading. In itself, and as such, it is not an agent. Without the agency of the Holy Spirit it functions as an external call; only with the agency of the Holy Spirit does it function as the internal call and therefore in a saving way.

The consequences of this observation are obvious: regeneration precedes the saving hearing of the Word, at least in sequence. Thus a distinction is required between how the Word operates in regeneration and how it operates in faith and conversion. In the case of adults, regeneration and conversion generally coincide; as for covenant infants, the Holy Spirit is free to regenerate them at a tender age before they are capable of manifesting the signs of new life in the acts of faith and repentance.

In any case, Bavinck shows that the Word has a role in regeneration, for external calling and internal calling are of one fabric. Although they are not always united with one another, such is more an exception than a rule; and the Reformed have always been concerned to keep them connected to each other. Indeed, regeneration is a fruit of the Holy Spirit and is usually connected to the instrumentality of the gospel proclaimed. This is not to deny that a distinction may be made between how the Word functions in regeneration and how it functions in faith and conversion. The Word is indispensable in the act of faith, for the Holy Spirit uses the Word as the means whereby a person proceeds from the capacity for faith to the act of faith. This is not to turn the Word into an agent—the Holy Spirit remains the agent who moves us to faith and trust in Christ—but it

is to affirm that the Word is a moral instrument in the Spirit's hands, supplying the believer with the language and the content of the message of the gospel and engaging the faculties of the believer in the way of faith and repentance. Meanwhile, with respect to regeneration, every Reformed person must acknowledge that the Spirit runs ahead and gives us ears to hear and eyes to see. The Spirit must first prepare the soil to make it good in order that the Word may be sown in good soil. To deny this is to succumb to the Remonstrant position. Nonetheless, the moral suaveness of the Word can still work simultaneously with the regenerating action of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the sinner. In short, regeneration may ordinarily occur under, by, and with the Word, but never through the Word, for the Spirit can and does regenerate apart from the Word, and the Word has no infused power in itself that can effect regeneration.

Rather than render preaching superfluous, preaching is shown to be God's chosen instrument for the work of salvation. The church is not only commanded to preach the gospel, but the parable of the sower powerfully exhibits its saving fruit. God attaches his promise to the proclaimed gospel; believers find assurance through the proclaimed gospel and are warned to examine themselves. God extends his promises to us in the proclaimed gospel, and also to our children. It is God's chosen instrument, his power to save those who believe; yet even in speaking of the power of the Word, we must remember that God, not the Word, is the agent of salvation.

Finally, the solution to the issue in controversy requires that we carefully appreciate the different ways that Scripture uses the term "regeneration." We must distinguish regeneration in the metaphysical sense from regeneration in the ethical sense, but we may not divorce them from one another, for the former is manifest in the latter. Little children, not yet reaching the age of discretion, are certainly the objects of God's saving operations, but as a rule and ordinarily God delights to make use of His own ordained means to bring us into a saving and fruitful relation to Him.

In closing out this summary of Bavinck's presentation, I put forward R. H. Bremmer's synopsis of Bavinck's position:

1. The calling of the gospel is of the greatest importance and may not, because of divine election, be a message restricted only to the elect.
2. Scripture speaks of regeneration in a threefold sense: (a) as the principle (*beginself*) of new life that is implanted in man prior to faith; (b) as moral renewal; and (c) as the restoration of all things.
3. Calvin and other Reformers, as well as the Belgic Confession, present faith as preceding regeneration. However, the order was later reversed especially for two reasons: (a) the struggle against the Anabaptists, such that it became necessary in regard to little children to speak of the implanting of a first principle of life; and (b) the struggle against the Remonstrants, such that it became necessary to accent the total depravity

of humans, which in turn required that God implant a first principle of life, wherein a person remains wholly passive.

4. Yet all of this may not lead to the conclusion that regeneration always precedes baptism with respect to elect children.

5. Baptized children are to be viewed and treated as elect and regenerated children, until the contrary is decidedly evident from their confession or life.

6. Bavinck distinguishes between the idea of regeneration in the broader sense (that of Calvin and the Reformers) and in a narrower sense (the giving of the faith-capacity or capacity of faith in the implanting [*instorting*] of the new life).

7. Regarding the latter, he again distinguishes between active regeneration (*regeneratio activa*) and passive regeneration (*regeneratio passiva*). Passive regeneration is the fruit of God's activity in man; active regeneration is identical to the internal call (*vocatio interna*).

8. Immediate regeneration is to be understood as the direct operation of God's Spirit in a person effecting regeneration, wherein neither man's understanding or will cooperates. It is an additional operation that accompanies the Word and gives the capacity of faith.

9. Since Dort, it is common for the Reformed to speak of regeneration as preceding faith.

10. In connection with the awakening of faith flowing from the capacity for faith bestowed in regeneration, the Word is described for the first time as means of grace "in the proper sense."

11. The first regeneration takes place under and with the Word, but not through the Word; as for children, the objective presence of the Word must be acknowledged.

12. The disposition (*habitus*) and nature (*qualitates*) given to man by regeneration owe their stability and durability to the Holy Spirit, who elevates the life implanted with regeneration above sin, destruction, and death.<sup>144</sup>

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Finally, a few words concerning the editing of this volume. The original Dutch version of this book consists of four chapters, the third chapter running for some 142 pages. With the goal of clarifying Bavinck's discussion for the modern English reader, I have used Bavinck's original chapters and their titles to break the present volume into four parts. This means that the sixteen chapter divisions as found in the current work, along with the titles of chapters, as well as all the headings, sub-headings, etc. within each chapter, are my fabrications and have been inserted into

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<sup>144</sup> Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 271-72. For Bremmer's whole discussion of Bavinck on regeneration, 261-72; cf. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, 185-94. Bavinck treats this entire topic of calling and regeneration, as well as faith and conversion, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 33-175.

Bavinck's text for the reader's benefit. In editing this work I have occasionally identified some Scripture references that Bavinck left unidentified; I have done the same with confessional references. In all such cases I have indicated this with the use of square brackets [ ]. Throughout this volume, I have sought to discover and expand on, or cite in full, his rather cryptic or abbreviated references to sources. As for the editor's notes, these are intended to orient the reader to names and ideas that Bavinck mentions which may be a bit obscure, with the goal that his argument and presentation will be rendered more accessible.

May God use Bavinck's book to bless a new generation of believers, and, for the first time, English readers. To His glory!

J. Mark Beach



# PART I

## INTRODUCTION



# 1

## *The Occasion and Rise of the Controversy*

### 1.1 The Purpose of This Study

AMONG REFORMED churches nowadays there is a difference of opinion of no small consequence concerning the order in which the benefits of the covenant of grace relate to one another and follow each other, in the mind of God as well as in their application to humanity.<sup>1</sup>

It is generally well known that in place of the ancient and usual representation of the order of salvation, another perspective has been proposed in recent years, one that at various points diverges from, and even conflicts with, the earlier view most generally prevalent.

Indeed, this newer representation of the order of salvation-benefits has found rather sudden and complete acceptance among many people. Despite this, because of weighty objections, others have been unable to agree with this newer view, and have seen it as conflicting with Scripture and Confession.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. note: See the Editor's "Introductory Essay" for the background to this debate, pages ix–lvi; also see Bavinck's thorough discussion of the order (or way) of salvation (*ordo salutis*) in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002–2008), III, 484–595, where he sets forth the Reformed approach to this question and its concern to champion salvation as wholly a gift of divine grace, the church itself empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring the gospel to the nations. Over against the errors of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, as well as mysticism, pietism, and rationalism, Bavinck demonstrates how the Reformed emphasized the centrality of communion with Christ as the presupposition of the order of salvation, and how the work of salvation and its application to the elect in history is grounded in the eternal intratrinitarian *pactum salutis* or counsel of peace between the Father and Son, with the Holy Spirit being the agent sent forth to administer this grace to sinners. By the turn of the century the diversity of viewpoints on the relationship between calling and regeneration had provoked discord within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, as reflected in Bavinck's citation of various incidents of opposition. See footnote 2 below.

<sup>2</sup> Trans. note: We have moved to this footnote the following material from the body of Bavinck's original text as not having immediate interest to a North American audience;

One can even say that this difference of opinion about the order of salvation-benefits was the basis for the ongoing brotherly quarrel about Maccovius and his theology.<sup>3</sup> People opposed the dry scholastic method of the Franeker professor, but far more than that—for no one objects to a genuinely scientific treatment in dogmatic theology—they resisted the substantive presentation of the truth as set forth by Maccovius in his teaching. Especially his teachings regarding supralapsarianism, justification from eternity, immediate regeneration, and the like, met with objection.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it seems that, though on the one hand these views seemed well protected by the armor of Maccovius, these views were nonetheless also opposed and rejected for the very reason of being associated with him.

All these points of dispute regarding the order of salvation seem to be under discussion even more vigorously throughout the churches, and they occasion difference of sentiment. When one visits a church, or receives letters from some church members, where the atmosphere is heavy with legitimate conscientious objection and serious concern, then the reality cannot be camouflaged that in all these doctrinal differences hardly any agreement has been reached at all.

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however, this material does show the nature of the disharmony that was in evidence during this period: “Rev. ten Hoor developed several of these objections already when he wrote in the *Vrije Kerk* [Free Church] an evaluation of the Encyclopaedie [Arrangement and Explanation of Theological Subjects] of Dr. Kuyper. The Consistory in Bedum thought these objections were so weighty that they submitted an appeal to the deputies for relations with the Theological Faculty of the Free University, which appeal was then discussed at the Synod of Middelburg in 1896, but was dismissed on the basis of formal and material considerations.

The appellants, however, were not convinced that they were mistaken, as became evident when Rev. T. Bos devoted several articles in the *Vrije Kerk* to the issues in question—articles that were published separately by Mr. Donner of Leiden under the title, ‘Nine Doctrinal Subjects, Simply Explained and Defended for Reformed People.’

Following him, came Mr. Huisman of Appingedam with a volume of 337 pages, in which he compared several fundamental truths of the Christian religion—examined in terms of God’s Word, the Confessions, Calvin and others of our Reformed fathers—with the views of Dr. Kuyper.

“Recently the pen was taken up yet again by Mr. J. H. Wessels of Utrecht, in order to investigate and evaluate on the basis of God’s Word the existing difference of opinion regarding the doctrine of the covenant.

“At the same time, articles were placed in the magazine of Prof. Lindeboom, entitled ‘What Does Scripture Say?’, by Mr. J. of M., articles which attempted to adduce proofs from Reformed theology for the claim that calling precedes regeneration.

“At the ministers’ conference held last year in Zwolle, the question of immediate regeneration was also discussed, and provided occasion for a lively debate.”

<sup>3</sup> Ed. note: Johannes Maccovius (1578–1644) studied at Franeker and became professor of theology at that institution in 1615. He is remembered for his extreme and polemical advocacy of supralapsarianism against Sibrandus Lubbertus and for the censure he received at the Synod of Dort for his speculative and philosophical approach to theology. He was also censured while a professor for his dubious lifestyle and morals. His chief works are *Collegia theologica* (1623) and *Loci communes theologici* (1650).

<sup>4</sup> Ed. note: These would be the very topics treated synodically in the Conclusions of Utrecht 1905. See the appendix, at the end of this work.

On the one side, people doubt whether anyone in our churches is teaching that, generally speaking, the regeneration of elect infants occurs before baptism, and they believe that surely such a view cannot be defended with certainty on the basis of Holy Scripture. At the same time, on the other side, many complain that much contemporary preaching of the Word seems almost to suggest that there are no unregenerate in the church any longer. It seems as though even when a person has continued living for years in an unconverted state, he must still be considered to be regenerated.

It seems that especially the objections being registered by the latter group are increasing in weight and in number. Ministers are no longer preaching discriminatingly—so goes the complaint of many nowadays. The godless are no longer being warned that they will fare badly. Sermons are no longer being preached with an urgency that communicates the message that anyone who is not regenerated by water and the Spirit will not see the kingdom of God. Preaching no longer lays it upon the listener's heart that it will profit nothing, though we have the name of Christian and are physically alive, if we are still dead in sins and trespasses. Many are convinced that to teach that baptism presupposes regeneration and that all who are baptized are to be considered regenerated inevitably robs the ministry of the Word of its essence and its power. Their overwhelming fear is that this teaching will lead many to build their houses on sand and to deceive themselves all the way into eternity.

Whether or not these objecting brothers and sisters are right, it cannot be denied that their reservations are very serious and arise among many believers from a pious conscience.

For that reason, all those complaints deserve to be heard with meekness. They are not coming strictly from the old "A" groups only, but just as frequently from the churches that since 1886 became reformed and are known mostly as "B" churches.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these complaints involve truths of very deep significance for theology and church, for the administration of the Word and Sacrament, for doctrine and life, for theory and practice.

Of all those truths, the doctrine of immediate regeneration occupies a central place, especially in Reformed theology.<sup>6</sup> In the closest possible connection to this teaching lies the relationship between Word and Spirit, between Scripture and church, between doctrine and life, between mind and heart. This teaching involves the most important question, namely, in which way and in which order the Holy Spirit applies the benefits obtained through the suffering and dying of Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Ed. note: See the Editor's "Introductory Essay" regarding "A" churches and "B" churches, page xiv, footnote 14.

<sup>6</sup> Ed. note: See the Editor's "Introductory Essay," pages xxxiii–xlvi, for a definition and brief explanation of the meaning of the terms "immediate" and "mediate" regeneration. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV, 80–84.

We intend to shed light on this doctrine in the following chapters, in a manner as objective, non-partisan, and straightforward as possible. We do so in the quiet hope that the historic Reformed presentation of this doctrine, not the particular view of one or another group, may receive the endorsement of all the brothers and sisters in our churches, and will help bring an end to our differences, or at least help reduce them.

## 1.2 The Supralapsarian Position

The order of the benefits of divine salvation, as formulated recently by many speakers and writers, which is now encountering objection, can be summarized briefly as follows.

God has from eternity purposed and determined, so it is formulated by advocates of the one side, to glorify His attributes of mercy and justice by means of the eternal salvation of a portion of His rational creatures, and by means of the eternal condemnation of another portion.

In order to reach this goal that had been established from before all things, God decided first to create such rational creatures, then to permit them together to fall into sin, and finally to bring to redemption the elect portion of humanity through Christ, and to prepare for eternal condemnation the other reprobate portion that was on the path of sin.

According to this view, supralapsarianism—which corresponds with the order required by this line of thinking, namely, that the establishment of the goal precedes the establishment of the means—deserves preference over infralapsarianism. It is indeed a harsh truth; but even if it might not be confessional, it is quite certainly scriptural.

As people occasionally formulate the matter, supralapsarianism is comparable to a physician who must inform the patient with a fatal disease of that fact, which in this case refers to the non-elect needing to be told the truth of their reprobation. It is like the judge who must inform the criminal convicted of a capital crime of his death sentence. Such a physician and judge must do this, of course, with tenderness in his heart, filled with sadness and moved by pity. That pertains, however, merely to the form and the manner, but not to the substance itself. Supralapsarianism is the announcement of the truth of reprobation to the reprobate.

Similarly, the announcement of the gospel is nothing else than making known to the elect their eternal salvation, bringing to light that which has existed already from eternity.

### 1.2.1 *Eternal justification and immediate regeneration*

For, as this view sees it, election and justification occur together.<sup>7</sup> The elect are justified initially not within time, but from eternity. Abra-

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<sup>7</sup> Ed. note: It should be noted that not all supralapsarians held to “justification from eternity,” though Abraham Kuyper and many of his followers embraced this doctrine, following Maccovius and certain eighteenth-century Reformed theologians. This doctrine was

ham, for example, was justified already before the foundation of the world. Within time he was justified only before the court of his own conscience and received personal knowledge of his justification.

This eternal justification, therefore, necessarily includes the Holy Spirit's regeneration within time. Among the elect who live under the administration of the covenant, this regeneration occurs as a rule very early in life, according to some. Most often the first seed of new life is implanted already in the mother's womb or immediately after birth. It is even possible—although this cannot be said with certainty—that someone is regenerated at the very same moment he is born. Just as with circumcision, so baptism is a sign and seal of regeneration.

Therefore this regeneration is possible before birth or immediately at birth, although one must distinguish between an immediate and a mediate operation of the Holy Spirit. According to the judgment of those who advocate this order of salvation, the *immediate* operation consists in the Holy Spirit implanting the seed of new life within the heart of the elect apart from or prior to the Word, whereby they are transferred from death to life. Some argue the claim that this immediate regeneration must precede the Word, since a deaf person cannot hear, a dead person cannot rise, a natural man cannot give ear to the summons of the gospel unto faith and repentance.

But if an elect person is regenerated in this manner, immediately, only by the Holy Spirit, apart from the Word, then God will see to it that sooner or later such a person will become acquainted with the gospel. Because he is regenerated he can now hear the gospel that is coming to him, can obey its summons, and can be rendered capable of faith and repentance. Upon the regenerated person who can hear, the Holy Spirit works *mediately, with and through the Word that is preached*.

### 1.2.2 *Immediate regeneration without immediate conversion*

But this is not yet to say concerning an elect person who was regenerated before or at the moment of birth, that when such a person becomes aware and hears the gospel, he also instantaneously accepts it in faith and turns to God with a true heart.

No, as this view teaches emphatically, the seed of regeneration can remain hidden in the heart without germinating, until a person is thirty, fifty, or even seventy years old. Many years can pass between regeneration and conversion.<sup>8</sup> Even though in the first moments of their existence

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controverted among the Reformed and received a "mixed" reception in the late nineteenth century by the revitalized Calvinism that Kuyper helped to form and to consolidate. Kuyper defends this doctrine, for example, in his book *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries; with explanatory notes by Henri De Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), 367–371. See the critique of this view by Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 517–520.

<sup>8</sup> Trans. note: Throughout this translation the Dutch word "bekeering" has been rendered, depending on the context, as either "repentance" or "conversion."

the elect are regenerated unto eternal life, they can nevertheless continue for a very long time unconverted and unbelieving—yes, they can even live in terrible sin and surrender to various forms of unrighteousness. Nevertheless, in His time the Lord brings to light, by means of the effectual internal calling, that reality which perhaps many years before had been worked by the Holy Spirit in the heart of the elect immediately and apart from the Word.

### 1.2.3 *Regeneration precedes calling*

Therefore, regeneration precedes calling, often within time, but in any case, in that order. Where there is no life, there is no possibility of faith and repentance in response to the summons of the gospel. For the regenerate who can hear, effectual calling makes the Word of God to be spirit and life.

The Word is not thereby creating anything new, but merely bringing to light what is already there. The Word acquaints the regenerated person with the new life that the Holy Spirit bestows upon him. The Word itself is not a seed of regeneration, as others claim with an appeal to 1 Peter 1:23, but the Word merely makes the seed of regeneration, that first seed of the new life, develop. Under the moistening dew of the Holy Spirit, the Word cultivates new life unto deeds of faith and repentance, makes this new life self-aware, and makes it bear fruit unto the glory of the Lord's name. The Word serves to make manifest those who are regenerated, both unto themselves and unto others.

Among the human race, therefore, the dividing line runs not between believers and unbelievers, since many regenerated persons can live for years in unbelief, but it runs between the regenerate and the unregenerate. Here on earth it is not faith, but regeneration that draws the line properly between the elect and the reprobate portions of humanity.

Both segments exist sharply alongside and over against each other. From regenerated humanity proceed another awareness, another insight, another perspective and evaluation of all things, another art and science.<sup>9</sup> For what has been implanted in the regenerate as a seed gradually surfaces within their consciousness. Even as faith and repentance develop from regeneration, so too the new life manifests itself gradually in its proper character and nature in every domain of human knowledge and activity. The regenerated person feels a different content impinging upon his consciousness. He sees and thinks and acts differently than the unregenerate, because he shares a different life.

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<sup>9</sup> Ed. note: See, for example, Abraham Kuyper's *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries, with an introduction by Benjamin B. Warfield (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), § 49, pp. 155–176.



#### 1.2.4 *The church as organism*

Therefore, finally, according to this formulation of the doctrine, the church as organism precedes the church as institution. The church as organism consists of reborn people who manifest their new life throughout the entire broad terrain of creation, in family, state, and society, or in science and art, and the like. Thus the church as institution is absolutely not the *whole* manifestation of the new life of the regenerate; rather, it occupies a very modest place that is limited on every side. It does not stand above family, society, and state, but among and alongside them, with a temporary, transitory, and clearly defined task.

That task consists in this: equipped by God with the means of grace, the church as institute transforms, under the operation of the Holy Spirit, the life of regeneration into deeds of faith and repentance. It presupposes the church as organism, which is regeneration, which is worked by the Holy Spirit apart from the Word before the heart is aware and which is therefore already presupposed at baptism. The church as institute calls the regenerate, who can now hear, unto faith and repentance.

As institute, thus, the church focuses upon only the regenerate. There is indeed an external call to the unregenerate, but this serves only to remove from them any excuse. The internal, effectual calling, which is paired with the external calling, is directed only to the regenerate. To these their calling is made known together with salvation, in which they share already from eternity; to the others, the church as institute merely declares judgment.

### 1.3 Three Key Questions

To distinguish is to learn. In the discussion of the doctrine of immediate regeneration it is of highest importance to take this seriously to heart. To neglect this entangles one in various difficulties and brings others into confusion, rather than clarifying their insight.

In connection with this doctrine, three questions need to be kept distinct.

First, in what manner does the Holy Spirit work within the human heart? Does He remain outside at a distance, and does He work in the human heart merely along those ordinary pathways to which we are bound in our interaction with other people, along the paths of understanding and volition, by word and example? Or does the Holy Spirit descend into the human heart such that nothing stands between Him and the inner being of the human person, and does He work within a person directly and irresistibly?

From this first question a second is to be distinguished. If the latter is the case, namely, if the Holy Spirit is present within a person immediately and performs His work directly, does not this direct operation exclude the use of means? If the operation of the Holy Spirit within the

heart is immediate, does that not entail the claim that the use of means is superfluous, unprofitable, yes, even mistaken and detrimental?

Finally, a third question arises: If the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit in the human heart does not make the use of means superfluous or detrimental, how must we conceive of the connection that exists between the immediate operation of the Spirit and the function of the means?

The answer to the first question draws the boundary between those who confess sovereign grace and those who defend free will. The answer to the second question distinguishes those who maintain the power of the means of grace, from all so-called enthusiasts who consider the means of grace superfluous or denigrate them to empty signs. And the answer to the third question distinguishes between the Reformed on the one hand, and on the other hand the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and others who restrict grace to, and confine it within, the means of Word or sacrament. The combination of the threefold answer assures the confessors of the Reformed religion a unique, distinct place among the churches of Christendom.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ed. note: Bavinck takes up and answers the first question in chapters 2 and 3 (pages 13–29); the second question in chapters 4–12 (pages 33–128); and the last question in chapters 13–16 (pages 131–167).